

Coronavirus: principles for amending transport timetables

In the coming days and weeks it is likely that public transport timetables will be reduced, reflecting both lower demand during lockdown and staff shortages because of illness and self-isolation. This is pragmatic and reasonable provided that the remaining service still meets the needs of those who must still travel.

The following are some principles to take into account when revising timetables.

1. Network planning

- Coordination: where several companies serve the same market, efforts must be made to coordinate timetables rather than make reductions to each operator's timetable in isolation. This could include bus 'covering' for rail and vice versa.
- Consistency of approach: a situation where one operator offers a Saturday service, another a Sunday service, and a third a modified weekday service is confusing to passengers.
- Relaxation of ticketing rules to give consumers a better choice of services. For example:
 - Relaxing operator-specific restrictions (the ability to use any operator's service).
 - Relaxing time restrictions when services are withdrawn. For example, if the first off-peak service is withdrawn then allow passengers with off-peak tickets to board the previous one rather than having to wait for the next scheduled off-peak service.

2. Timetables

- Frequency: the service frequency provided must be sufficient to meet demand, but also be regular enough to maintain reasonable access to essential services (for example healthcare and supermarkets).
- Capacity: as well as reflecting levels of demand, capacity should also take into account the need for passengers to social distance. This is likely to require a degree of over-provision.
- First/last/night services: while demand will inevitably be less at such times, the needs of key workers must not be overlooked. Some people will still need to get to work/home outside of core hours. Existing first and last services should be maintained – a Sunday service frequency may be OK, but Sunday service start-up and close-down times may not be. On rail, if the first or last train cannot run because of staff shortages, a scheduled replacement bus should be provided.
- Saturday and Sunday: service patterns must again recognise the needs of key workers and of providing access to socially necessary services.
- Stopping patterns: in most instances inserting additional stops to enhance overall connectivity should take priority over journey time/speed.
- Resilience: focus on providing a robust service that can be reliably provided given likely staff sickness.

3. Connections

- While recognising that services cannot be held indefinitely for the arrival of the late running incoming service, there should be greater use of discretion by operators. The decision whether to hold a connection must take into account the frequency of the service (for example if the next train is an hour later, it is important to hold connections for longer).
- Rail connections should be held in the following circumstances:
 - On branch lines where the outgoing train's main purpose is to pick up passengers from the main line. Running a service on time but empty is of no use to passengers.
 - Where it is a connection with the last service of the day.
- When services are to be withdrawn, or long-standing connections broken, efforts must be made to ensure ongoing connectivity for those places most affected.

4. Accessibility

- Any move to hub-and-spoke service patterns must ensure that the key interchange points selected are accessible.
- Revised timetables must indicate where disabled access is available.

5. Communication

- Where feasible, effort should be made to engage users and/or representative bodies. This could include asking agencies/representatives for evidence on which to base decisions and creating mechanisms to review/react to any unintended consequences arising from the changes.
- All changes must be well publicised using a variety of channels.
- Consistency: every effort should be made to ensure that there is a 'single source of the truth' on timetable information rather than different channels giving different information.
- Push/publicise 'live-running' sources of data.
- Where a train is withdrawn from the timetable on which passengers have already bought tickets, efforts should be made to get in touch with those passengers beforehand. Don't let passengers turn up and then find out about the cancellation.