Jacqueline Starr
Chief Executive
Rail Delivery Group
First Floor North
1 Puddle Dock
LONDON EC4V 3DS

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Dear Jac

"Sold out" trains

You are probably aware that Transport Focus has significant concerns about passengers seeing "sold out" or "not available" in ticket retailing/information systems, and other consequences of trains being declared reservation only in retail systems terms.

Our concerns are three-fold:
- A sold out/not available train is incompatible with Britain's 'walk up' railway
- The potential that passengers are misled into making decisions they would not otherwise have made, including paying a higher fare than necessary and wrongly concluding that they cannot travel at all
- That, because there is no distinction in the data available to retailers, passengers cannot be sure if a sold out/not available train is full or if tickets for it have not yet gone on sale

Examples of bullets two and three are given the in the appendix to this letter.

We have been working with the Smarter Information Smarter Journeys (SISJ) programme for some time and I am pleased to say that progress is being made. For example, on point 3 train companies agree that a solution should be found, although RDG's assistance in securing funding to implement it would be appreciated.

However in striving for progress on the other two points, we are encountering resistance from some long-distance operators. To be clear, Transport Focus does not want to see overcrowded trains any more than the operators do. But that should not be at the cost of passengers believing they are unable to travel on a train when 'walk-up' tickets are in fact valid. The industry should be providing prospective passengers with information about busyness that lets them make an informed decision to purchase or not for a particular train. On a 'walk up' railway, the industry should not be making that decision for people.

Crucial to allowing passengers to make an informed choice is data to drive messaging in ticket retail/information systems. The thinking is therefore that long-distance operators should, as some do now, require ticket sales to be allocated to a particular train, with either a seat reservation or a counted place. However, unlike now, there would be no upper limit on the number of counted places available, and so 'sold out' or 'not available' would not show.

Instead, as more and more tickets are sold for a particular service, warnings in journey planners about busyness would get increasingly firm in encouraging use of an alternative train – and they might ultimately get quite blunt about the likelihood of even getting on the selected service. The idea is that real time data from the Rail Availability & Reservation Service (RARS) on the number of counted places already allocated would trigger the increasingly tough messages at predetermined (but configurable by operators) levels of sales. A suggestion that at the bluntest level passengers should be required to confirm that they are purchasing with that understanding is worth exploring. Operators have been clear that they would require an obligation on all retailers, operator and independent, to display such messages when relevant trains show in journey planner results.

Transport Focus supports the suggestion from operators that ticket vending machines could be modified not to interface with RARS, so allowing sales at stations on 'sold out' trains, and that websites could then draw that option to passengers' attention. This should be progressed as quickly as possible. However, although a helpful short-term sticking plaster, we do not believe "you can't buy a ticket for this train on an app or website but you can at the station" is a tenable long-term position.

In conclusion, we would welcome RDG's assistance in seeking to unblock solutions to address these important consumer issues. I understand that you have a new Schemes & Services Board which meets for the first time next month. Perhaps this would be a suitable issue for that body to consider?

I look forward to hearing from you and, of course, if you would like clarification on anything in this letter, please ask.
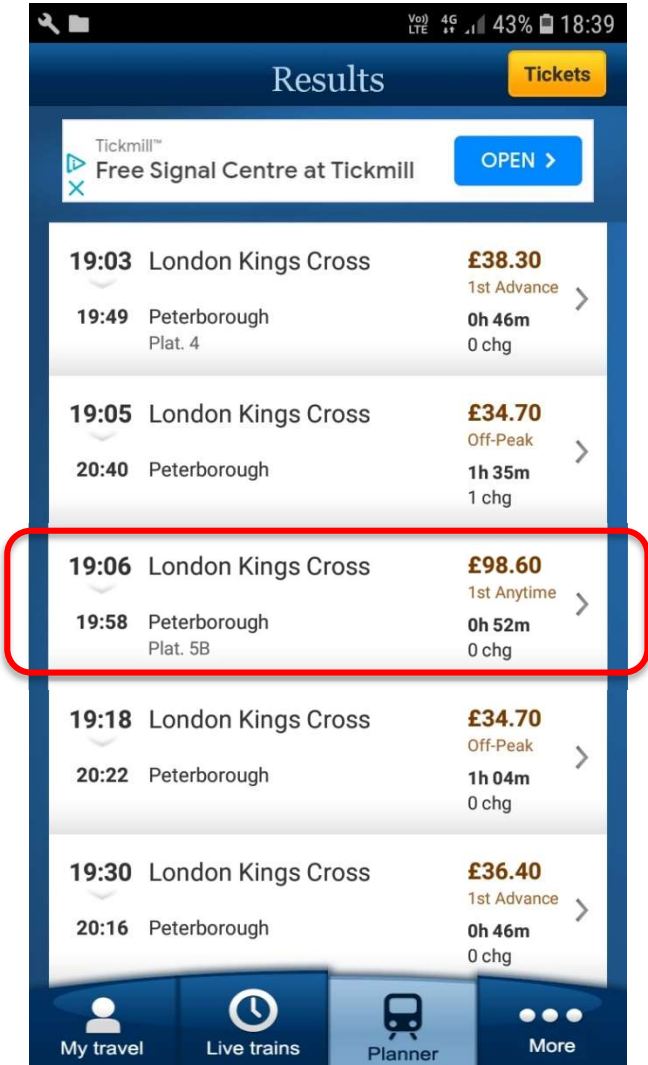

Yours sincerely

Guy Dangerfield
Head of Strategy

APPENDIX

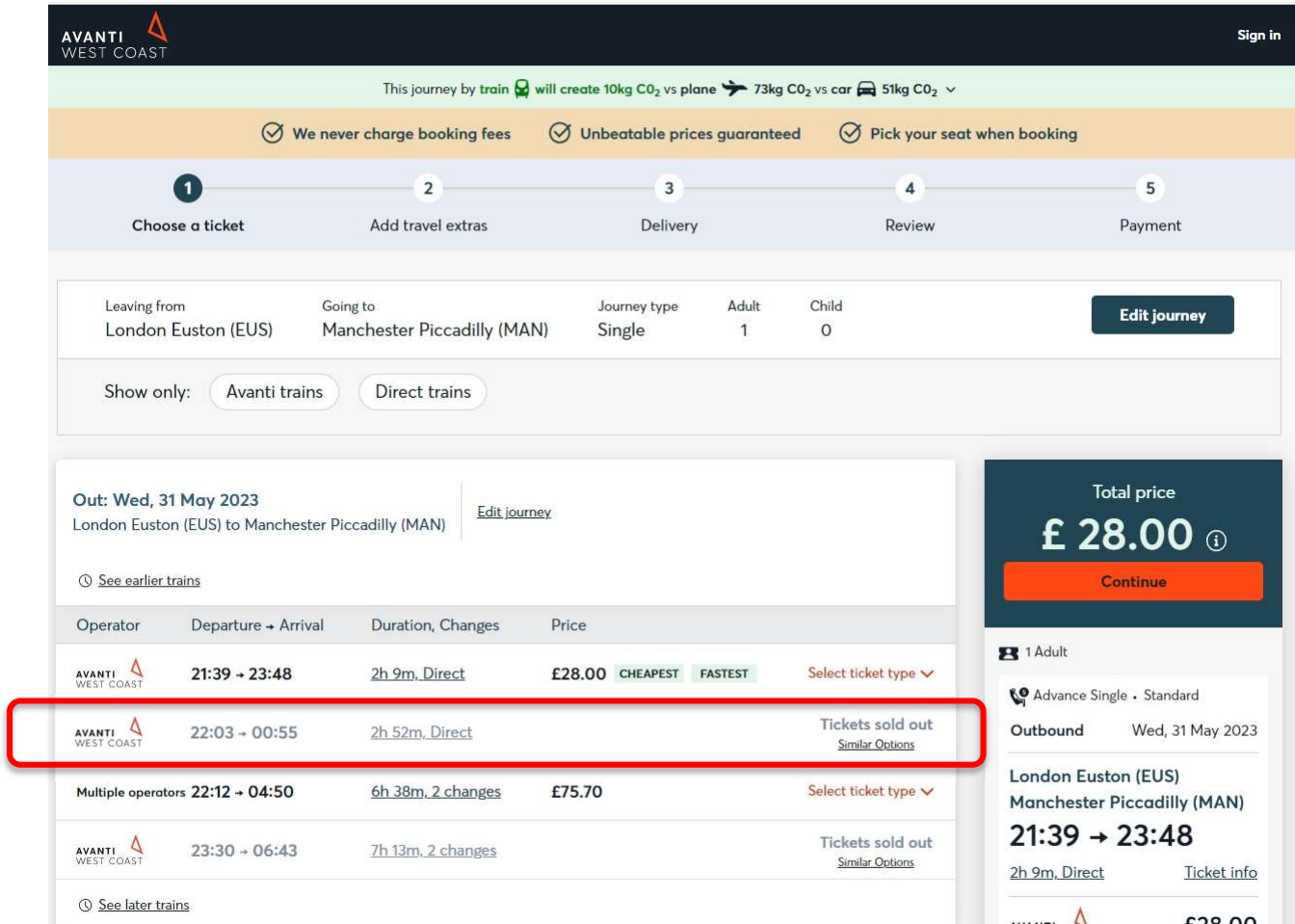**Example of bullet two – misleading information that could lead to overcharging**

In the screenshot below, the cheapest ticket available on the 1906 departure is the First Class Anytime single at £98.60 – on a train where the 'walk up' Standard fare of £42.20 is valid.

Screenshot taken 13 April 2023, 18:39

Example of bullet three – misleading information that could lead to an unnecessary hotel booking or a decision to drive instead

In the screenshot below, while it is highly unlikely that the 2203 Euston to Manchester on 31 May 2023 has sold out already, that is what it says.

Screenshot taken 21 April 2023, 11:38