

REVIEW OF DELIVERY OF INFORMED TRAVELLER REQUIREMENT OVER THE CHRISTMAS AND NEW YEAR PERIOD

Background

1. The primary constraint on the ability of passengers to plan their journeys, book tickets (including reduced price advance purchase tickets) and reserve seats at a reasonable time before travelling is the changes that are required to be made to the established timetable to allow Network Rail to take possession of lines in order to maintain, renew and enhance the network.

2. Condition 9 of Network Rail's Network Licence, issued by the Secretary of State and enforced and amended by ORR, requires Network Rail to:

“plan its renewal, maintenance and enhancement of the network in a timely and efficient manner to enable it to specify its requirements for temporary changes to the national timetable (except in respect of changes arising from emergencies or severe weather conditions) so that the procedures to revise the national timetable in respect of such changes can be completed not less than 12 weeks prior to the date of any such change”.

This obligation is supported by complementary requirements in the licences of train operators.

3. In 2004, in response to Network Rail's non compliance with Condition 9, ORR required Network Rail to commit to a plan and timetable for the recovery of compliance. Network Rail's recovery plan and timetable envisaged restoration of compliance in stages, culminating in the full 12 weeks notice of changes to the timetable for week commencing 24 September 2005 being provided by 2 July 2005.

4. For the Christmas and New Year period 2004 Network Rail committed to achieve the revision of the established timetable in its Train Service Data Base (TSDB) (from which, among other things, the train operating companies' (TOCs) passenger information and reservation computer systems are populated) four weeks in advance. Because Christmas and New Year fell at weekends, the holiday period for many passengers, in effect, spanned three timetable weeks (w.c. 18 December 2004, 25 December 2004, and 1 January 2005) and it was very likely that some passengers would seek to book tickets and make reservations across this period.

5. For the Christmas and New Year period ORR received reports from Network Rail and the Association of Train Operating Companies (ATOC) regarding, respectively, the revision of information in the TSDB and the opening, by TOCs, of trains for reservations and the sale of advanced purchase tickets. In addition ORR received extensive briefing from Network Rail on the crash of TSDB (see below) and other system problems.

Overview of actual delivery

6. Network Rail had achieved revision of timetables four weeks in advance by the end of October 2004 and in the run up to Christmas revision of timetables continued pretty well on target, albeit TOCs had shown that there were problems with errors in some revisions. The issue of errors is dealt with below.

7. Network Rail took the decision not to make any special arrangements for the Christmas and New Year period but to continue strictly as per its recovery plan. Network Rail's view was that to do otherwise would unduly impact on the overall recovery timetable, particularly given that the dates for revision of timetables for Christmas and New Year fell relatively early in the recovery programme, while experience with Network Rail's new train planning software (Trainplan) and the re-organised train planning centres was still limited. This meant that if timetables for each timetable week were only revised by four weeks in advance many passengers would only be able to arrange round-trips two weeks in advance.

8. Revision of timetables for w.c. 18 December 2004 for all TOCs was completed by four weeks in advance. 100% of the TOCs sampled by ATOC, bar Virgin West Coast (VWC) and Virgin Cross Country (VXC), had all services open for reservations etc. three weeks in advance. Only 75% of VWC and VXC services were open by three weeks in advance.

9. Revision of timetables for w.c. 25 December 2004 for all TOCs, bar First Great Western (FGW) and Trans Pennine Express (TPE), was completed by four weeks in advance. Revision of FGW and TPE services was completed by three weeks in advance. 100% of TOCs sampled by ATOC, bar First North Western (FNW) and Arriva Trains Wales (ATW), had all services open for reservations etc. by four weeks in advance.

10. Revision of timetables for w.c. 1 January 2005 for all TOCs, bar FGW, FGW Link (FGWL) and Heathrow Express (HEX), was completed by four weeks in advance. Revision of FGW, FGWL and HEX services was completed by three weeks in advance. 100% of TOCs sampled by ATOC, bar FNW, had all services open for reservations etc. by four weeks in advance.

11. For some operators, notably Great North Eastern Railway (GNER), revision of services for all three weeks was completed earlier (around seven weeks in advance).

Errors in revised timetables

12. An important issue in the run-up to Christmas and over the holiday period was the extent of the errors in revised timetables. Some TOCs pointed out that there were extensive errors in revised timetables that required considerable work to rectify before they could have confidence in the data in their own retail systems. The consequence of this was that there were delays in making information available to passengers and opening services for reservation and the sale of advance purchase tickets.

13. ORR held extensive discussions with Network Rail and ATOC regarding the issue of errors and Network Rail itself undertook a large degree of investigation into their existence and cause. Network Rail accepted that the accuracy of revised timetables was not of an acceptable standard and that there was no systematic process for checking the accuracy of revisions.

14. The net effect of this situation was to present some passengers with incorrect information and to delay the opening of trains for reservation and purchase of cheaper tickets. Even in ideal circumstances around two days are lost following the revision of timetables by Network Rail while data populates the various retail systems. However, because of the errors further

days were being lost before all services were considered accurately entered in TOC systems.

15. Network Rail has recognised the issue of errors in timetable revisions as the next key piece of work to be undertaken alongside the more general improvement in the timing of timetable revisions and has now instituted new checking processes.

Crash of TSDB

16. At 16.00 hrs on 16 December 2004 as part of a wider Network Rail main computer failure, TSDB crashed. TSDB was restored by 11.20 hrs on 17 December 2004.

17. The TSDB crash had three major consequences:

- (a) work done on the revision of timetables just prior to the crash was lost and work done subsequently was delayed, slowing the work of the Network Rail train planning centres;
- (b) data within TSDB was considerably corrupted, with revisions that had been made lost and services that had been removed reinstated. This was exacerbated by the extensive revision of Christmas timetables, notably by TOCs south of the Thames;
- (c) other downstream systems such as those affecting train running systems were affected, requiring extensive manual correction; and
- (d) the TSDB and Trainplan systems became out of synchronisation such that it was very difficult to ascertain what data was actually in TSDB.

18. Given the uniqueness and complexity of the TSDB failure, it appears that, in a number of cases, it took some time to ascertain the full extent of the corruption of data, particularly in downstream systems, such as the National Rail Enquiry Service's (NRES) internet enquiry facility. In consequence passengers were accessing incorrect information for some time before notices were posted on the NRES and TOC websites and enquiry staff alerted. This problem was exacerbated by the need for Network Rail to concentrate on manually restoring data in train running systems essential to the day-to-day operation of trains.

19. Aside from general confusion caused there were a considerable number of examples of passengers arriving for non-existent trains, including on Christmas Eve, Christmas Day, Boxing Day and New Year's Eve who had to be provided with taxis or hotel accommodation.

20. Network Rail held an investigation into the matter (both in terms of the cause of the original main computer failure and in terms of the down stream TSDB problems) and it is expected that recommendations for preventing a future occurrence of the problem and for better recovery will be made.

National Reservation System

21. During the Christmas shutdown ATOC introduced a new retail system, the National reservation System (NRS) which is fed from TSDB. It was reported in some of the press that there had been a number of problems with

the introduction but ATOC's view is that introduction was successful and the new system is demonstrating the benefits promised.

Key messages

22. Two key messages arise from this review of the delivery of the Informed Traveller requirement over Christmas and New Year:

- (a) the primary measure of delivery of the Informed Traveller requirement is not when timetables are revised by Network Rail, but when that information is made available to inform passengers and to allow them to make reservations and buy advanced purchase tickets; and
- (b) the accuracy of revised timetables is crucial, not simply so that passengers have access to correct information, but also in ensuring that TOCs have sufficient confidence in them to use them for making services available for reservation and the sale of advance purchase tickets.

23. These two messages lead to the need for the following actions going forward:

- (a) Network Rail must develop in co-operation with train operators an agreed measure of an acceptable level of accuracy for timetable revisions and put in place the necessary systems and procedures in place to ensure delivery of that;
- (b) Network Rail must ensure that the time in advance that timetables are revised is sufficient to enable full notice periods to be available to passengers; and
- (c) Network Rail must review the resourcing of its Train Planning Centres to ensure it has sufficient skilled resource to address the quality issues, complete the catching up necessary to advance the date at which timetables are revised and still effectively deliver its other timetabling obligations.