improving public transport through technology

Managing Customer Information during Driver Shortages

(Notes from a Working Group)

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Status of this document

This document is Released.

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1 Introduction

1.1 About this document

1.1.1 This document has been produced for the Real Time Information Group (RTIG) to help understand how customer information systems can better be managed during the current driver shortage.

1.1.2 This document identifies a number of actions that may help the industry longer term with managing high volumes of short notice changes and cancellations.

1.2 Background

1.2.1 We held a working group discussion in January 2022 to work out how customer information systems, for example real time systems, can be managed to provide customers with reliable and accurate information during the current driver shortage.

- What information do customers want and need?
- How can operators, authorities and suppliers work together?
- What support is needed to make it as easy as possible?

1.3 Acknowledgements

1.3.1 RTIG is grateful to the participants involved in the discussion.

2 Problem & Impact

2.1 The problem

2.1.1 A high number of short notice journey cancellations and timetable changes are currently being experienced. How can customer information systems, for example real time systems, be managed to provide customers with reliable and accurate information?

2.2 Impact

2.2.1 Three examples of the impact of the problem are:

- Real time on on-street displays has been switched off because they cannot be kept up to date.
- On street printed timetables are being left out of date because they are changing too frequently to be able to keep up to date.
- Information in different channels is inconsistent with some being updated, but not others.

3 Cancellations and Short Notice Changes

3.1.1 Operators do not want to cancel journeys and try to avoid short notice changes to timetables wherever possible. Timetable changes are preferred to cancellations as they provide some certainty for customers even if they are made with shorter notice than normal.

3.1.2 One county has stopped providing RTI on their on-street displays because there were too many cancellations to be done manually.

3.1.3 Cross journey predictions are a particular problem for customers that need careful management to ensure accurate information is provided.

3.1.4 Customers expecting a bus to arrive because they were being presented with a prediction because the earlier journey was running but the journey the customer was waiting is cancelled. Or an earlier journey is cancelled which feeds into later cross journeys being shown as cancelled but the later journeys are running.

3.1.5 It may be appropriate to turn cross journey predictions off during times of high number of cancellations and re-instatements.

3.1.6 Other authorities are using large numbers of messages to inform people about short notice changes.

3.1.7 Whilst some authorities can display cancellations on signs where the information is provided in the incoming feed from operators the consistency of this poor as it is dependent on operator staff to have the time available to cancel them early enough to be useful to the public.

3.1.8 In some areas where a cancellation is made in an incoming feed this removes the departure from the display rather than a cancelled message appearing.

3.1.9 Some real time systems don’t appear to be able to handle re-instatement of journeys if they have been previously cancelled.

3.1.10 Customers find contextual information about why something has changed or is cancelled helpful. Rail passengers have become used to incident attribution.

3.1.11 Attribution is difficult on displays particularly LED but can be done in general messages on the bottom line.

3.1.12 Many operators are using social media to inform customers of cancellations and changes, mainly twitter and Facebook.

3.1.13 Journeys are cancelled in lost mileage systems, but often after the event. Likewise they may be cancelled in real time systems after the event to ensure performance reporting is as accurate as possible. These are done retrospectively because of the lack of resources to achieve it live.

3.1.14 There are many different systems where a cancellation needs to be entered, for example one operator has to enter them into:

- Passenger Information system(s)
- Real Time system
- Ticket Machine
- Lost Mileage system
- Spreadsheet

3.1.14.1 How can the number of places a cancellation is entered be reduced?

3.1.15 Links from lost mileage systems to real time may be useful as it reduces duplication of a task but only if the data is entered before the journey start time, but generally how can the number of places a cancellation is entered be reduced?

3.1.16 Some northern metropolitan areas are using SIRI SX for disruption information using the TfN (now DfT) disruptions tool.

3.1.17 GoAhead are working with Oxfordshire to reduce the number of systems for cancellations.

3.1.18 Consistency of information the customer is vital, trust is lost when different systems say different things, the fewer places to add a cancellation the less risk to something being forgotten.

3.1.19 The Transport for North disruption system, now managed by DfT could help. Currently not available to operators, but could it be?

- What would it take to make it able to handle individual cancellations?

3.1.20 This would then make BODS the single national source of truth.

3.1.21 Small operators need more support and encouragement with basic BODS compliance. Adding value may increase likelihood of adoption.

4 For longer term updates when should systems be updated?

4.1.1 Operators are introducing short term timetable changes to reduce the likelihood of needing to cancel on the day. Journey planners and real time systems take time to update and therefore can be using out data timetables for periods of time.

4.1.2 Authorities finding it challenging to keep up to date with covid timetable changes and getting complaints about out of data information.

4.1.3 Some apps and systems can be updated with new timetables very quickly, others have longer lead times.

4.1.4 One major operator is working with a 6 week look ahead for driver availability to allow for better planning with their journey planner running on weekly updates, producing a timetable on Thursday to go live on Sunday.

4.1.5 Some Authorities during the early days of Covid stopped printing on street timetables and directed customers online as it was too costly and took too long to update the paper.

4.1.6 Need to remember that not everyone is online so paper and telephone information is still important.

4.1.7 Out of date information needs to be removed as it is misleading and reduces trust with long term impacts.

4.1.8 The current timetabling challenges are not just lack of drivers but also sickness (not just Covid) and funding.

4.1.9 The return to normal lead time for registrations from 28th February should slow down the rate of change, but with the uncertainty over financial support may mean continued timetable changes.

4.1.10 There are some technologies such as e-ink that can help keep timetables up to date, but these are not quick or cheap to implement at scale.

4.1.11 Making it clear to customers where a printed timetable on street may not be accurate is important. It is recommended that information is caveated with something like “timetables subject to change, please see online or call traveline for latest information”.

4.1.12 Maintaining confidence is important and takes time to build up so important that it is not lost.

5 Standards

5.1.1 How long a change to requirement for BODS would take to implement?

5.1.2 Adoption of standards is normally driven by procurement requirements or legislation.

5.1.3 Authorities are recommended to include suppliers in discussions about deliverables and reporting requirements for Enhanced Partnerships as soon as possible to ensure the requirements can be delivered in a timely manner.

5.1.4 There is widespread adoption of SIRI VM (for live vehicle data) and SM (for stop based prediction data) and some adoption of SX (disruptions) and ET (Estimated timetable / real time).

5.1.5 There is interest in collecting the different use cases and user stories for disruptions in one place and providing guidance on implementation of SIRI SX and other standards to meet the requirements. Perhaps something RTIG can do?

5.1.6 SIRI ET is being used by some operators and suppliers to provide live data including cancellations.

5.1.7 Cancellations are also supported in SIRI SM and VM.

5.1.8 There is a lack of awareness which forms of SIRI support cancellation and how to represent the information. Advice on implementation would be helpful particularly ET.

6 Recommendations

6.1.1 During the discussion some recommendations were identified:

6.1.1.1 It is recommended that printed information is caveated with something like “timetables subject to change, please see online or call traveline for latest information”.

6.1.1.2 Authorities are recommended to include suppliers in discussions about deliverables and reporting requirements for Enhanced Partnerships as soon as possible to ensure the requirements can be delivered in a timely manner

7 Actions:

7.1.1 During the discussion some actions were identified:

7.1.1.1 Could the DfT disruptions tool be extended to operators and made to handle journey cancellations? RTIG to ask DfT

7.1.1.2 RTIG to run a project to collect use cases and user stories for disruptions and update existing guidance.

7.1.1.3 There is a lack of awareness which forms of SIRI support cancellation and how to represent the information. Advice on implementation would be helpful particularly SIRI ET. RTIG to produce a guidance note.