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Dear Sir/Madam,

Response to consultation on ‘Amending licences to give passengers the information they need to plan and make journeys’

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on this consultation.

This is a personal response to the consultation from Richard Fairhurst. I am a developer for OpenStreetMap.org and long-standing advocate for open geographical data. I am also an experienced traditional cartographer whose maps have been published in national newspapers and several books; my ongoing railway atlas project, the ‘New Adlestrop’, is widely used across the rail industry.

Context

You will be aware that there has been significant movement among bodies that receive some public funds to offer data under ‘open’ licence terms – that is, available for use without payment, and without further restriction other than attribution (giving credit to the original provider).

For example:

- Ordnance Survey (partly public funded, partly self-funded) has extensive, regularly updated datasets under the ‘Ordnance Survey OpenData’ brand.
- British Waterways (partly public funded, partly self-funded) is preparing to open up much of its data.

There are also several transport datasets which have been released openly:

- NaPTAN is an open dataset of bus stops, railway stations etc.
- The National Public Transport Gazetteer is a related open topographic dataset.

New licences have been developed to facilitate the release of this data. The Ordnance Survey datasets are released under the Open Government Licence. Other organisations are considering the (compatible) Open Data Commons licences, already in wide use internationally.

The Coalition Government has already expressed its intent to offer rail passenger information under these principles, with Francis Maude saying: “I know it’s presently private, but we are looking to change that. My presumption is in favour [of making it free].”

ORR should therefore require that, in line with current good practice, passenger information is released under ‘open data’ principles.

Benefits

Underlying this recommendation are two principles:

1. The core business of Train Operating Companies is to carry more passengers, more efficiently, at decreasing cost to the taxpayer. The non-core business of selling data provides lower rewards than the increased ridership that flows from applications of open data.
2. TOCs and a small set of selected licensees are not, and can never be, the only organisations that communicate information to passengers. When the consultation asks “whether there are any gaps that should be filled” (§11), it need not be incumbent on TOCs to fill the gaps themselves, but rather to provide the opportunity for others to fill them.

In other words; increased ridership is best served by making information on rail travel easily accessible by the greatest number of people; this, in turn, requires the data to be opened up beyond the traditional packagers of data (National Rail Enquiries, thetrainline, TOC websites, etc.).

Open data encourages an ‘ecosystem’ of services, each catering to a particular audience in a particular way. For example, the release of open mapping data, first by OpenStreetMap and now by Ordnance Survey, has led to an explosion in the number of websites, phone apps, and PC software helping people to travel more efficiently in the ways they want. Cyclists now have GPS sets with cycle routes highlighted, and online route-planners to safely guide them around town. Community groups have online travel guides to their local environmental facilities.

All of this has only been made possible by open data, which allows people to bring their great ideas to fruition without needing to raise funding for data purchase and prove the idea in the market first. When the only geographic data available was the Ordnance Survey’s commercial products, such projects did not exist; now, they are unstoppable. Indeed, the Ordnance Survey’s programme to promote such uses, GeoVation, is many times over-subscribed.

Many projects that benefit from open data are volunteer-run, provided at no charge to the end-user. But open data can benefit commercial providers, too. Indeed, the ‘Onward Travel Information’ posters recently commissioned by ATOC use OpenStreetMap’s open data to provide better information (such as nearby walking routes) than that available from other sources.

It is impossible to second-guess the exact uses to which open passenger information would be put. Indeed, this is the strength of open data – summed up in OpenStreetMap’s mission statement as “creative and unexpected uses”. However, if you feel sample ideas would help elucidate the principle, I have written ten sample ones in an informal style at www.systemeD.net/blog/index.php?post=17.

The Cabinet Office’s ‘Making Public Data Public’ and Power Of Information Taskforce initiatives offer further information on theory and practice.

Suggested change

The following change would have the desired effect:

Replace heading of condition 2.9 with “Access to information [*delete ‘for enquiry services’*]”.

Replace body of condition 2.9 with “The licence holder shall grant access to information it holds on the planned and actual movement of passenger trains on its network to the public, without charge, under a recognised Open Data licence. [*delete rest of condition*]”

Yours faithfully,

Richard Fairhurst