Plain English Campaign

Assessment of compensation information provided by train-operating companies

10 March 2016

About us

In 1979, Chrissie Maher OBE officially introduced Plain English Campaign by shredding hundreds of incomprehensible official documents in Parliament Square. Since then we've fought for clarity and accessibility in all forms of written communication, and against jargon, gobbledygook, legalese and corporate gibberish.

Since our launch we've introduced numerous world-famous accreditations. These include the Crystal Mark (which appears on more than 22,000 documents worldwide), the Internet Crystal Mark, the Book Mark and the Approved by logo. We've also recently introduced our latest accreditation, the App Mark.

We fund all our campaigning work with our commercial services. We provide the world's leading editing and proofreading service, rewriting and offering advice on documents from a wide range of clients. We review and improve, for example, terms and conditions, medical-information leaflets, benefit claim forms, information on public services, business letters, guidance from regulators, utility bills, insurance policies, health-and-safety guides and instruction manuals.

We also run several highly successful training schemes, both in-house and at city-centre locations across the UK.

Our work has led to vast changes being made by, for example, local and national government, financial companies, health authorities and pharmaceutical companies. We continue to try to make sure that information meant for the public is fit for purpose. We regularly comment, in the press and on our social-media pages, on contentious matters relating to public information, from pension-scheme changes to banking services, and from controversial consultancy issues to lack of government transparency.

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About the project

In December 2015, Which? sent the Office of Rail and Road (ORR) a 'super-complaint'. This raised concerns that most passengers who had experienced delays did not know about, or apply for, the compensation they are entitled to.

As a result of the super-complaint, the ORR asked us to assess:
- how easily information about compensation can be found on each train-operating company's website;
- the clarity of the information provided on the train-operating companies' websites and in written materials that were made available; and
- how accessible, clear, understandable and user-friendly compensation claim forms are.

During our assessment we also considered:
- whether the relevant webpages, and any associated documents we had received, provided the information passengers need to make a claim; and
- how claims can be made, and whether there are any unnecessary barriers.

The ORR also asked for our recommendations on improvements that could be made.

The ease of finding information, and the clarity of information provided, varied between the 23 train-operating companies, but we identified many common issues and areas that needed to be improved. These are set out in part 1 of this report.

Part 2 of this report sets out our recommendations for how to raise awareness of compensation arrangements and improve the clarity of the information provided.

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The outcome of our assessment

Part 1 – Common issues identified
While assessing the websites of, and information provided by, the 23 train-operating companies, the following issues often arose.

- With many of the websites it was difficult to navigate to the appropriate information. We had to make educated guesses, guesses that other people may not make.

- A lot of the answer spaces were individual character boxes, or separate lines (predominantly for addresses). Such answer boxes are difficult to fill in.

  Concerning answer spaces that have individual boxes for each character, people often have difficulty with these boxes as they are unsure about whether or not to insert spaces, line breaks, punctuation and so on.

  Concerning address boxes, it is best to provide one large, lined box rather than separate boxes, one on top of the other. Some addresses are not made up of, for example, three address lines, then a town or city, then a county, so asking for this information in separate boxes can confuse people.

- The vast majority of forms used asterisks to indicate fields that had to be filled in. Asterisks are often overlooked or misinterpreted, and the effect can be messy. Asterisks are not needed if forms only ask for the necessary information. Also, as a prompt usually comes up if a required field has not been filled in, asterisks are not necessary.

- The online forms asked claimants to upload a scanned copy or photo of the ticket, yet often offered little or no guidance on how to do this. Also, a claimant would usually have completed most of the form before reaching the field about uploading an image. If the claimant was unable to do this, they would have wasted time filling in the rest of the form.

- Some of the companies provided a printable form or an online form rather than both. Some people may not have the knowledge, equipment or confidence to submit a form online, some may not be able to easily visit a manned station, some may not have a printer, some may not have a scanner. There needs to be provision for all scenarios.

- The lengths of delays were generally quoted in minutes. Most people do not track time in minutes, they use hours and minutes. Hours should be used from one hour onwards.

- We often found that the information provided by an individual company was incomplete or contradictory. This was most common in the case of information relating to compensation for season-tickets holders.

- Many of the websites and forms used BLOCK CAPITALS. An important part of reading is recognising the shape of letters and words. Because block capitals do not have ascenders and descenders, and are relatively similar widths, they are more difficult to read. They cause a particular problem for those with poor eyesight or reading difficulties, and should be avoided.

- Although it is often necessary to use the 24-hour clock in timetables, where space is at a premium, it should not be used in text. Most people do not use the 24-hour clock as a matter of course and they need to perform a short mental calculation to work out that, for example, 1600 is 4pm.

- Forms should be as brief and uncluttered as possible, but they often asked for information that may not be necessary. For example, if the ticket is provided with the form, why does the claimant need to give the ticket number?

- Again, concerning answer spaces on forms, there was often insufficient contrast between the background colour and the white answer spaces.

- Many of the principles of plain English – using everyday words, avoiding passive text, personalisation, cutting out superfluous word, using an appropriate tone etc – were not consistently followed.

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Part 2 – Our recommendations – good practice

After considering the train-operating companies' websites and communications, we have the following recommendations. We are aware that a company's ability to follow these recommendations depends on factors such as, among other things, industry regulations, corporate identity, system capabilities, presence in communities and, of course, budgets.

Availability of information

- Information needs to be available through several channels in order to suit all audiences. So information leaflets and forms should be readily available at stations and online.

- Customers should be made aware of the entitlement to compensation, and where they can get more information, through posters at stations and on trains.

- On-train announcements about entitlement to compensation could be given on delayed trains.

Websites

- On websites, the necessary information should be reached within three clicks.

- Ideally, the home page would include a tab relating to compensation or, failing that, 'Customer services' or 'Customer Online'. Under the relevant tab on the home page, there should be a link to information on compensation for delays.

- Customers should not have to click backwards and forwards between pages to find all the necessary information. All the information a customer needs about compensation should be given on one page.

- The compensation pages should offer links to an online form and a printable form.

- As well as providing links to claim forms, the customer should be informed of the literature available at stations and on request.

Information provided in leaflets and web pages
- All necessary information should be provided without having to refer the customer to different documents or sections of a website.

- Information should be provided in a logical order – when compensation is due, how much is paid, how compensation is paid, how to claim, what happens once a claim has been made.

- Needless to say, all information should be provided in plain English.

Forms
- Forms need to be as uncluttered as possible, with only the minimum amount of guidance. By the time the customer is filling in the form they should have already received all the information they need.

- Have good contrast between the background and the answer boxes, and the background and the text.

- Have plenty of white space so the form is not too daunting.

- Tick boxes should appear after the relevant text, not before it.

- Forms should ask only for the information that is needed to process a claim.

- Needless to say, forms should be produced following plain English principles.

Standardisation and templates

- Standardised paragraphs could be provided to train-operating companies. Of course, these would need to allow companies to make changes if, for example, they offer more compensation than is required.

- Templates of forms could be provided. There would need to be different options for companies offering a wider selection of tickets, and for the different treatment of season tickets.

- A standardised poster could be available for companies to add their own branding to.