

Buying Advance tickets on the day of travel: what do passengers think?

Summary report



Foreword

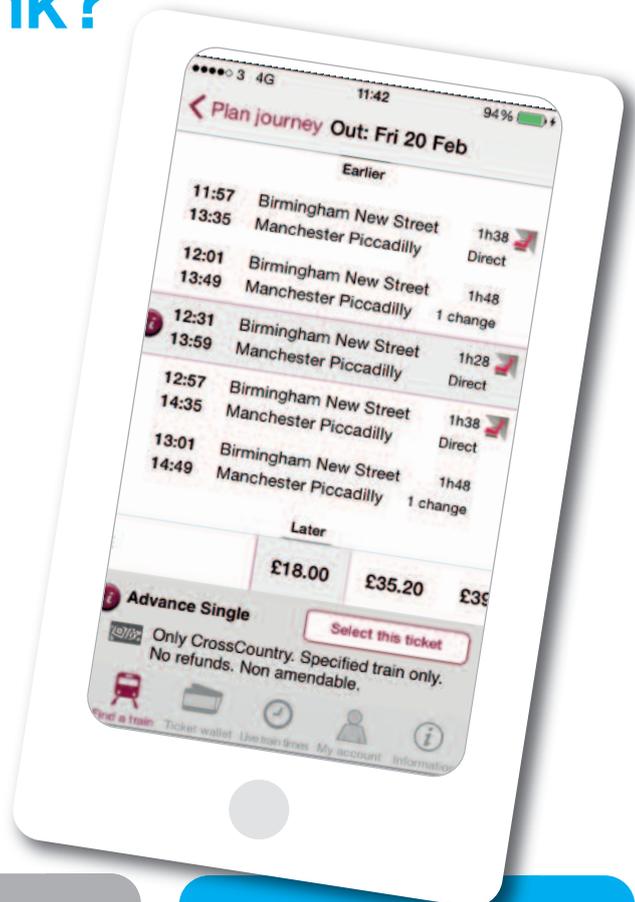
from Anthony Smith,
chief executive

Passenger Focus would like to see public transport as easy to use as possible, and for passengers to get the best value tickets that they can.

Advance tickets are popular with rail passengers, as they can offer significant savings for those who are prepared to specify which train they will travel on.

At the same time, we know that the different types of tickets, what they are called, and the restrictions can sometimes be confusing for passengers.

We welcome the introduction of a greater choice of tickets for passengers. Making Advance tickets available on the day of travel means passengers will be able to pay less for their journeys in some instances.



Background

Advance tickets are cheaper than other rail fares, and mean the passenger must travel on a specified train at a specified time. These tickets are usually sold until the day before the journey, if they are still available - as there are a limited number per train.

CrossCountry undertook a pilot for the sale of Advance tickets until up to 10 minutes before a journey, if they are still available for a particular train. The tickets are known as Advance Purchase On the Day (APOD).

What we wanted to find out

- What was the experience of APOD users during the trial on CrossCountry?
- What do passengers think of the idea; what are their queries or concerns?
- What is the impact of APOD on other passengers – especially relating to last-minute seat reservations?

How we did it

Fieldwork in June-July and October-November 2014. Both included:

- Short questionnaire given to passengers on CrossCountry trains (1919 responses in the first wave and 1200 in the second)
- In-depth interviews. In the first phase we spoke to 40 passengers including APOD users, those interested in APOD and those potentially affected. In the second phase we spoke to 24 APOD users.

Key findings

How relevant are APOD tickets?

Participants in the research were asked why they bought the tickets they did. Price and value for money were key factors in ticket purchase for all passengers in the research, regardless of age, journey purpose and other characteristics. Flexibility is an important consideration for passengers taking a fifth of all journeys and is more important for business travellers than for leisure passengers.

As such the APOD concept aligns well with existing passenger behaviours, providing a combination of lower price and greater opportunity for last-minute decisions.

When participants were presented with the APOD concept

(if they were not already aware of it), it was generally very popular. The majority of passengers in both waves of research could see themselves using such a ticket (see pie chart below for results).

Younger people travelling for work reasons were more likely to consider these tickets, and with older and leisure passengers less likely to do so. This fits in with the way people buy tickets at the moment, with younger and commuters/business travellers being more likely to purchase on the day or only a few days in advance, and older and leisure passengers more likely to purchase further in advance. So APOD seems most – though not exclusively – likely to appeal to and benefit younger and/or business travellers.

"It's company policy to find a good value fare, and some of the train prices are just extortionate. You can travel to Newcastle for €29 but it can cost €97... If I am arranging a meeting in Newcastle I will make it for later in the day. I have adapted the way I buy tickets to get the best prices."

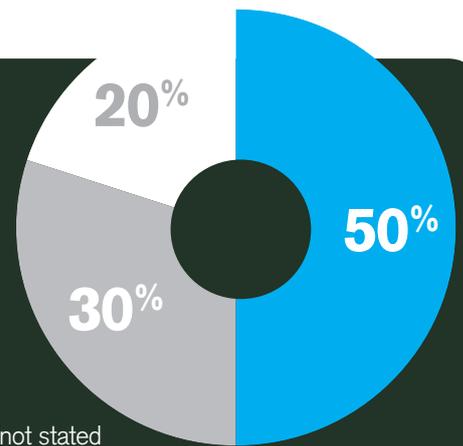
Frequent business traveller, APOD user, summer 2014

50%

of passengers could see themselves **definitely using an APOD ticket** ...

Consideration for using APOD in future

- Probably not/definitely not/don't know/not stated
- Possibly would
- Definitely would



Base: All respondents Summer and Autumn (3119)

"...I just hung around the station, I didn't mind waiting around for a few hours... not everyone can afford quite expensive tickets, I am still at school, not in a full time job so difficult for me to afford the 'proper price'. It's great to have the option to get a cheaper ticket."

Infrequent leisure traveller, summer 2014

"I go for the cheaper option just to save money. Even if it means staying in Newcastle or Edinburgh a few hours more than I want to, if it means I can save money then I will do so."

Mid-frequency leisure traveller, autumn 2014

Figure 1: What types of journeys is APOD most attractive for?

Discussions with rail passengers revealed five key journey types. Of course, individual passengers may fall into different groups on different occasions:

1 Advance planners driven by price, but some ability and/or willingness to pay extra for a more convenient journey time if needed

Will still seek value for money by booking in advance where possible, but the APOD concept appreciated for more flexibility when booking in advance is not possible.

"It would leave me to decide at a later stage what I might do... It takes the pressure off to book earlier, it comes to flexibility and choice."

Frequent business traveller, summer 2014

2 Advance planners driven by cost, with little ability/willingness to compromise on price

Appreciate APOD in principle, but unlikely to be affected. Leaving to last minute too great a risk of cheaper fares not being available. APOD may be used very occasionally for 'emergencies'.

"I would not necessarily use it frequently, but... say you needed to get home for a family illness or something, [it's good] to know I have that safety net."

Mid-frequency leisure traveller, student

3 Advance planners driven by a desire or need for organisation

Unlikely to be affected by APOD at all.

"It makes no difference to me at all. The next time I travel by train I would still book it as far in advance as I can. So I had a ticket at the time I wanted to go."

Infrequent business traveller, summer 2014

4 Spur-of-the-moment travellers, able and/or willing to pay more for last minute decisions to travel

Travel and purchase habits unlikely to be greatly affected by APOD, but may occasionally alter plans slightly to use APOD, and if available are likely to be more satisfied with their journey from better value for money.

"I would still go as I make that journey to see my partner, but yes of course it would be great if it happened to be cheaper."

Frequent leisure traveller, summer 2014

5 Spur-of-the-moment travellers who are only willing to pay up to a point

If rail is judged to be expensive, this group may decide not to travel at all or may use cheaper options such as car or coach; as such APOD may prevent 'losing' these journeys.

"If someone gets called on a train journey at a day's notice, they might assume, 'a train is going to be so expensive, I'll go by car'. But if they knew ... they may do this and not use their car."

Mid-frequency leisure traveller, summer 2014

Nearly a quarter of passengers surveyed bought their ticket on the day of travel and a further 11 per cent the day before. In total, at least a third of passengers could benefit from APOD.

To consider before rolling out APOD more widely

Although the concept of APOD is generally popular, passengers in the research did have some concerns and queries. These should be addressed when considering if it is to be rolled out further. These fell into two themes:

Issues around consumer understanding and opinion

Raising expectations

Raising expectations for cheaper fares and managing disappointment if sold out.

Complexity

Further complexity to an already-confusing ticket system with wide variation in passenger understanding. For example, some passengers already do not understand the difference between an Advance ticket and buying other types of ticket 'in advance'. APOD adds another layer of complexity to this with the offer of an Advance ticket which is not purchased in advance.

Lack of trust

Doubts that tickets will genuinely be cheaper than normal walk-up fare. Distrust of the rail industry – “why are they doing this; do they have an ulterior motive?”



Overcrowding

Some passengers queried whether APOD would create the potential for more overcrowding on board.

Many of these types of concerns can be addressed and alleviated by clear communication and explanation of what APOD is, where it's available and which networks are rolling it out. This need for effective explanation suggests communicating through channels where the idea can be laid out straightforwardly but with some detail, such as newspaper articles, moneysaving websites, newsletters and so on.

Technical issues

Getting the ticket

Several participants assumed that mobile phones could be used to store APOD tickets, linked to the nature of the concept as catering for on-the-go lifestyles. If this is not to be the case then expectations will need to be managed. Others were concerned about queuing for collection at ticket machines, particularly if the ticket was bought very close to departure. This should be monitored.

Exclusivity of online/app purchase

Many accepted this as 'the way things are going', but some felt strongly it was unfair. The expectation is that the same fares will be available offline.

Management of seat reservations

See next section





Managing seat reservations with APOD fares

On the whole, the seat reservation system works well from passengers' perspective. Most people understand it and find their seats easily, and people usually cooperate when asked to move.

"If the train is not busy, I don't mind sitting somewhere else. And it depends who they are. There was an elderly gentleman sitting in my seat and I didn't ask him to move. But I have asked a businessman to move."

Mid-frequency leisure traveller, student, summer 2014

It is already possible to reserve a seat on the day (ROD), when the train has left its starting station, which can affect other passengers. APOD is likely to result in this happening more often but most passengers recognised there wasn't a great deal that could be done about it and saw it as a relatively small issue.

Passengers' comments suggest some ways to mitigate possible issues:

- APOD users may deal with seat reservations differently. There is potential to encourage more considerate behaviour by alerting APOD users to the possible impact their reservation may have on others
- ticket inspectors and customer service staff are expected to be able to deal with passenger disputes, so it is important they are prepared for this
 - there is some expectation that the system will simply bed in over time, but clear communication around which seats are available is crucial
 - reservation systems need to be kept up to date for each seat
 - dedicated coaches for 'may become reserved' or 'non-reservable' seats. These are already in operation during the pilot, and this solution feels logical to passengers providing the differences are made clear
- APOD without mandatory seat reservations, but with the ability to reserve through ROD

"I don't think someone would intentionally sit on a seat - it is a breakdown of communications that causes that to happen. They should help people to understand the process more but I am not sure how you do that."

Infrequent leisure traveller, summer 2014

"In time people will get used to it but to start off there will be some hiccups."

Frequent business traveller, APOD user, summer 2014

The future of APOD tickets

From a passenger perspective, it makes sense to roll APOD out to other services where Advance tickets are already sold. At least one in three passengers could benefit.



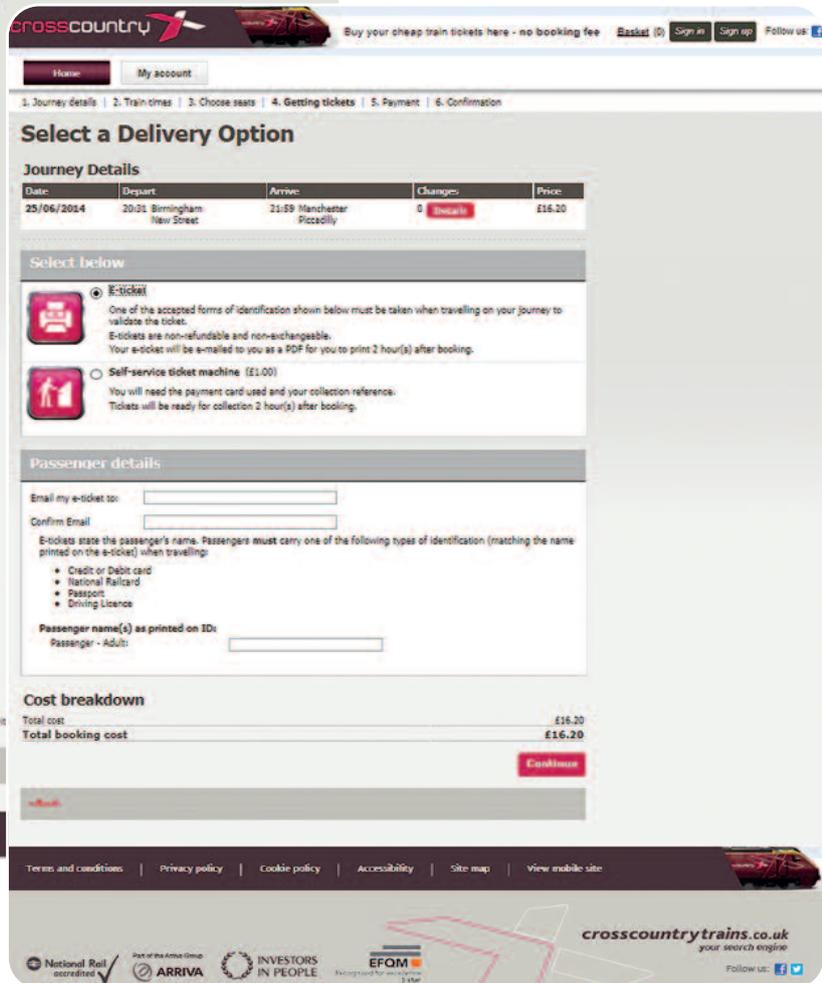
Apart from a few snags, the scheme is reported to have worked well to date and there are obvious **benefits to passengers:**

- ability to be a little more spontaneous without being penalised, including making unplanned trips affordable by rail
- opening up cheaper Advance fares to a slightly wider market – especially younger business travellers who are currently less able to take advantage of these fares
- habits may not change dramatically – people tend to buy in advance or at the last minute for a reason and APOD will only impact around the edges of this – but perceptions of value for money are likely to be more positive among those able to take advantage
- in conjunction with apps and M-tickets, APOD is a good fit with ‘on the go’ lifestyles.

There are also **potential benefits to the industry, including:**

- opportunity for a good news story around fares, providing expectations are managed well
- possible increase in number of journeys taken overall
- potential to spread last-minute travellers a little more across the day
- adding momentum to apps and M-tickets, in turn boosting positive perceptions.

It's worth communicating the move, both for a good news story and for passenger information. We suggest making APOD prominent at point of purchase, by direct email and social media alerts, through joint marketing with Railcards and coverage in news and consumer media.



There are some **concerns and issues**, some of which are already being addressed in the pilot:

- Potential problems around seat reservations, time-delays and ticketing. Clear communication, technical reliability and staff training will be crucial. There is an expectation from some passengers that ticketing will become fully mobile.
- Public understanding of the existing

ticket landscape is varied. APOD could increase confusion if not supported by clear information and made very easy.

- Cynicism around the industry and prices generally – the tone and content of any communications matter.

- Concern about overcrowding – reassurance on seat reservations.
- Access to all – restriction to digital channels in the pilot is acceptable, but with wider roll-out this could feel unfair, and could potentially cause bad press.

Following the trial the Secretary of State for Transport has now told Cross Country that it can sell these tickets permanently, and will consider requests from other train operators wishing to introduce them.

Passenger Focus welcomes this development.

This research is part of the joint Department for Transport/Passenger Focus smarter-travel research programme. It was undertaken by BDRC Continental.

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This is the latest project in our joint programme with the Department for Transport exploring passenger needs from smart ticketing.