

In the passenger seat

Reserve and go: the way forward?



Anthony Smith is keeping an eye on Cross Country's initiative allowing passengers to book Advance tickets up to 10 minutes before the time of travel - it could and should be a good thing

Value for money and affordability are real issues for passengers. Cheaper Advance fares are liked by passengers but you must fix precise travel times. If you don't, and want to buy on the day, then fares - especially in the peak - can seem very pricey by comparison. So Cross Country's initiative which allows passengers to book Advance ticket up to 10 minutes before the time of travel (rather than the night before) should be a good thing.

Take, for example, the last through-train of the day from Birmingham to Newcastle. If I'm buying today for travel tomorrow Cross Country currently offers an Advance Single for £46 for the 7.30pm from New Street. Under the current rules these can only be purchased up to midnight the day before travel, so if I leave it until the day itself Cross Country must charge the Off-Peak Single at £101.30 - even if the market will really only bear £46.

Changing the rules will allow a train company to reduce the price almost to the point of departure where spare seats would otherwise go unused.

The downside from a passenger point of view is the potential that from time to time you'll have sat down in a seat which at the time said 'not reserved', but somebody then reserves it and you don't notice. Having a seat almost literally pulled out from under you will not make for happy passengers.

We have highlighted that this needs to be extremely well run, with train managers reserving seats for people who are sitting in unreserved ones wherever possible. Cross Country has said it will be able to do that in real time through its ticket machines and that staff will be encouraged to do it. Also, if a train is already busy the train manager will be able to suspend further ticket sales and reservations.

There are inevitably going to be situations in which somebody comes along and says 'that's my seat'. But, we came to the conclusion - having strongly urged Cross Country to monitor and manage this effectively - that the upside for passengers in getting cheaper tickets closer to departure is something worth having and mustn't be lost without at least giving it a go.

If it does not work on a large scale then the scheme will have to be modified. It might be possible for Cross Country to continue selling against a quota based on available capacity, but not issue a seat reservation once the train has set off - thereby removing the downsides but keeping the passenger benefit (and their commercial benefit).

Is it new? Yes and no. Cross Country has had 10 minute reservations for some time (it was a franchise commitment) -

as distinct from ticket sales. The company has been trialling - not on a massive scale, but it has been - 10-minute sales with reservation more recently. In neither case are we aware of major issues with seats being reserved 'from under you', but that doesn't mean it's not an issue at the margins. So we will continue to watch this development closely. It will be interesting to see if other train companies follow suit. **RP**

Anthony Smith is the chief executive of Passenger Focus