



Smart ticketing in Norfolk: what do passengers think?

Summary report



Foreword

from Anthony Smith, chief executive

Passenger Focus works hard to make public transport easy to use, and to make sure passengers get the best value when they travel. When smart ticketing is done well, it can enhance the relationship between bus companies and their customers.

Smart ticketing can make bus travel more convenient and better value for passengers. It can also deliver real benefits to operators, such as a reduction in cash handling and better information about the journeys their buses and passengers make.

It is encouraging to see new smart ticketing schemes being introduced for passengers. We are pleased to be involved in understanding the Norfolk pilot on buses, ensuring that the passengers' views are taken into account throughout.



How we did it

In 2013:

- six focus groups with **bus passengers** in Norwich, Downham Market and Wells-next-the-Sea
- Telephone interviews with 11 **bus operators**
- Telephone interviews with 10 **NCC staff**

In 2014:

- 12 detailed interviews, 102 unplanned interviews with **passengers**
- online survey – 392 passengers (**holdall® users**)
- 14 **NCC staff members** consulted
- 25 informal interviews with **bus drivers**.

Background

Norfolk was chosen as the location for a Department for Transport (DfT) pilot where smart ticketing equipment and support would be provided for bus operators who had not chosen to get it themselves.

Norfolk County Council (NCC), with support from multiple suppliers, introduced the 'holdall®' smart card on its Norwich Park and Ride buses in April 2014 and plans to extend this to other services in the county.

What we wanted to find out

- what did bus passengers, bus operators and local authority staff think about smart ticketing before the launch of holdall®?
- how was the actual introduction of holdall® on buses from all three viewpoints?
- what lessons can be learned from the holdall® pilot so far – for Norfolk when it expands the scheme and for other schemes across the country?

All projects can be found on our website at www.passengerfocus.org.uk/research/smarter-travel

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

Key findings

Before the pilot started

Operators' views before the pilot

Operators were generally aware of smart ticketing before they found out about the Norfolk pilot. Some felt it was not relevant to their business either because they did not feel they were a large enough operator, did not have enough fare-paying passengers or did not think their passengers would use it. Some had already

held discussions with Norfolk County Council and were keen to find out more.

Some operators were extremely positive about ITSO smart technology, and even those that didn't consider it relevant to them recognised (in the main) that it is a positive thing for 'other operators' even if not for them. But there were some concerns.

Concerns

Cost is the clear issue for operators. The cost of the machines is recognised as the biggest outlay, but also other areas such as IT and the cards are a consideration

Some of the bus routes can be described as 'marginal' by operators and therefore any increased cost, even if the machine was paid for, could push services from being profitable to not

Benefits

Being 'cashless' and becoming more efficient, as well as improving bus travel overall in Norfolk

Bus drivers were considered to be a beneficiary of the scheme with fewer cash-paying customers to deal with and related duties such as 'cashing up'

There was some doubt that it would bring any increase in revenue, whilst costs may increase. There were also mixed views from operators about how their passengers would react to smart ticketing, as these quotes illustrate:

Positive

"It's easier for them, they don't have to worry about the money side"

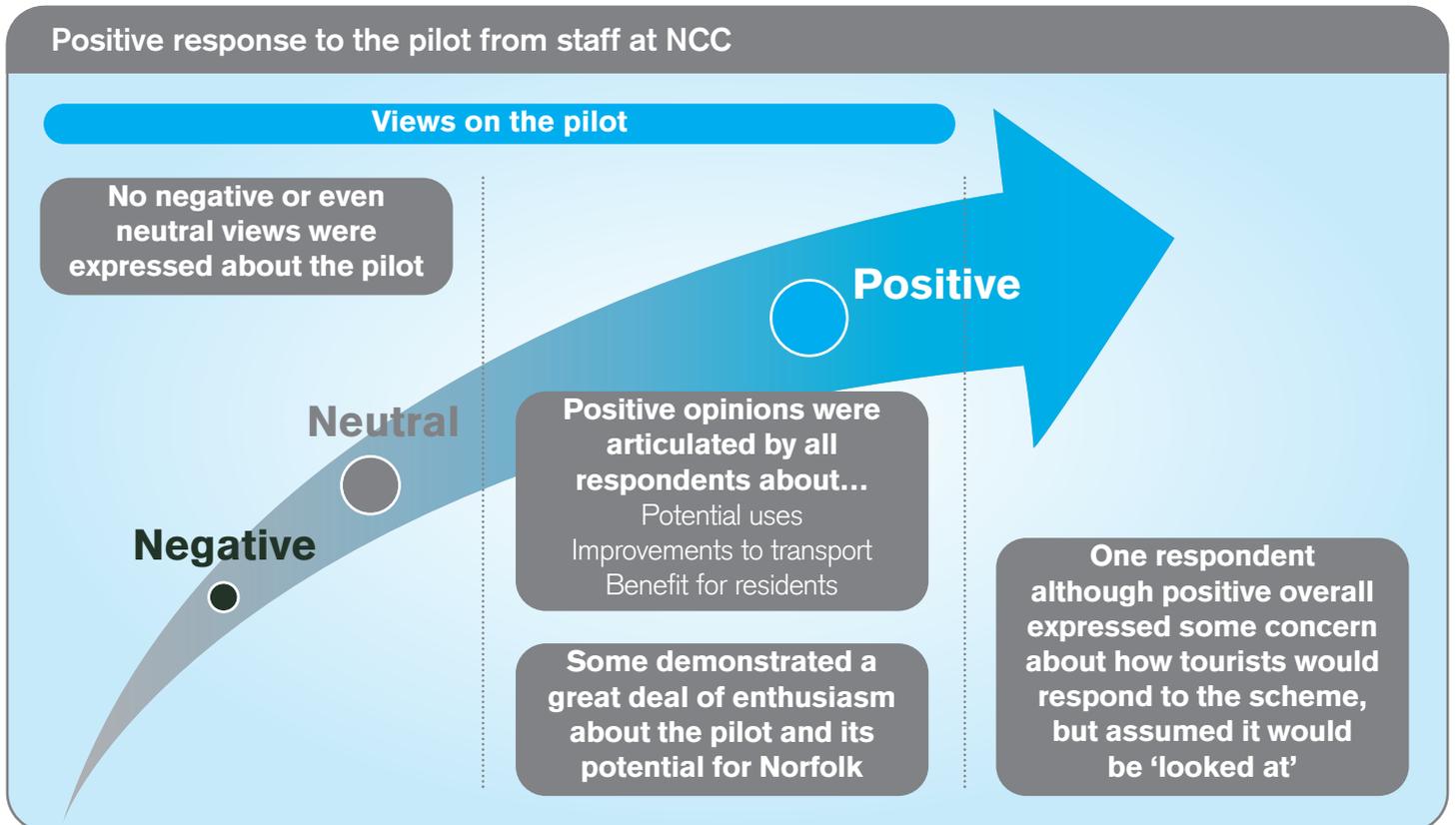
"I am sure some will take it up with open arms because they are either technically minded or don't like using cash/ buying season tickets, so they will be happy. Others will continue using cash because that is what they do. I think some people will be happy, others won't be bothered"

Negative

"If only using bus now and again, because your car is off the road, are you going to waste time getting a card? You will get people who just want to pay a fare"

Norfolk County Council staff views before the pilot

There was a strong desire for the pilot to be successful, so that it could deliver benefits to transport, delivery of services and to businesses.



However, staff asked for:

- improved internal communications so staff are well informed and can answer queries correctly
- an effective campaign to engage service users and overcome any resistance
- close working with operators and suppliers to ensure the technical aspects of the pilot are accomplished.

Staff were mindful of the many issues that the pilot would face but did not let this overwhelm their upbeat view.

"I like the idea of anything we can do to assist the people of Norfolk and our staff"

Passengers' views before the pilot

To smart ticketing in principle

Passengers were excited about the idea of smartcards being introduced in Norfolk and many assumed that it would be similar to Oyster in London. Many could see benefits for their own bus travel – particularly those aged 35-59 with household responsibilities.

Appeal varied by age, with 35-39 seeing most benefit

Getting older



Often cash-orientated, and at the younger end may not have credit / debit cards (or getting the hang of using them). Many in jobs where be paid in cash /tips, so have formed cash-focused habits. Several not very organised, lacking routines and there seemed to be a fear of 'commitment' associated with smart ticketing, for some



35-59 age group are used to managing household accounts, and different financial relationships, so they are experienced with a range of payment methods. Busy lives, juggling careers, kids and household, so many welcome ways of simplifying lives. No time plus reasonable cash flow makes smart ticketing very appealing



Those aged 60 plus seemed extremely satisfied with existing means of payment (bus pass occasionally supplemented by cash) and often preferred using cash to cards in general terms. Some anxiety around internet payments and general 'new technology' meant that many would reject smart ticketing, and be pleased to continue as they are

- for urban users, the benefits of shorter queues, faster boarding and not having to interact with drivers (especially for commuters and users of peak-time buses) made them feel positive about the idea
- some younger passengers enjoy technology and use the internet throughout the day – smart ticketing is more convenient for them than a trip to the cash machine, and may help them with budgeting and being organised about travel.



To the proposed model for smart ticketing in Norfolk

A proposition was tested in more detail. This showed some features to be appealing, while others caused some concerns.

Reactions to proposition: Introduction

Passengers can get a smartcard which can be used to make **cashless** journeys on all Norfolk buses



Sounds appealing in principle to most, some find the exact benefits hard to articulate

Smartcards, tickets and credit can be purchased **online**



Online **only** is a **major** barrier to some, but positive for others

By the end of the pilot, passengers will be able make purchases until 9pm the night before travel, and they will be available from 6am in the morning



Sounds OK but some can't understand why not instant. Needs planning, which is something that smartcards should remove?

Passengers will be **protected** against fraudulent use of their card if registered and reported lost or stolen



Recognised as a benefit – a few picked up that this makes it safer than cash

Reactions to proposition: How to get a smartcard

Norfolk County Council's website will have a portal for these cards to be obtained online



Online off-putting for many (especially rural and older) and NCC website doesn't reassure re: security

Personalised cards for school pupils, 16-19 and over 60 year olds will require upload of a photograph, and may be issued by the school or authority



Personalisation of **all** cards, including non-concessionary, was seen as a plus

The card is **free** if bought with a ticket or credit on it or £10 if bought alone



Most thought this was fine. Some infrequent users on low incomes worried it could 'tie up' money

The card will be posted to the passenger ready to use



Sounds 'ok' but some worried this could take too long

Reactions to proposition: Moving forward

You can add tickets or credit to your smart card using the same web portal on Norfolk County Council's website



Makes sense for those who are able to and comfortable with web use

You can pay the bus driver **in cash** and he/she will add the ticket to your card



Generally liked although some concerns that this adds to time spent boarding/another task for the bus driver to worry about

You can set up '**auto top up**' so that if your smart card falls below a certain value (that you can set) your card automatically tops up from your debit or credit card. This is set up online



Great option (especially for parents to give to children/teens) but has to be clearly **optional**

Mixed views on the proposition tested

For some, the introduction of smart ticketing would offer immediate improvements to their bus journeys. However, the need to use the internet alienates some passengers. Rural, older and less well-off passengers may not have a computer, an email address or internet access, or if they do may use it tentatively and infrequently.

Many have concerns with online payment and banking and reject having to do this. They resent the idea of being forced to change established habits when they do not struggle with the current means of ticketing.

Because there is no compulsion to buy and use the card, buses remain accessible for all and some will simply choose to continue paying by cash, unless incentivised.



"The idea of a paper ticket is a bit old now compared to everything else. It would make things more modern and more appealing to people my age"

Female, 19, Norwich

"The amount of times I set off to go to the Park & Ride and in the car I realise I have no cash. Your heart just sinks. This would be great for me"

Female, 32, Norwich

"I object to being made to do things online, it removes freedom. I don't have an email address and I don't want to get one"

Male, 85, Downham Market

"We don't have a cashpoint in the village, or in the next door one, so one of the reasons I go into town is to get cash. This would be a great help for me"

Male, 45, Downham Market

"It's not for me, I don't use the buses so much anyway and I don't like buying things online. I'd much rather continue how I am"

Male, 60, Wells

"You wouldn't know the bus prices - you would need to be able to see your balance. I'd worry they were taking too much off"

Male, 18, Norwich

Since smart ticketing was launched in Norfolk

The holdall® card was launched in April 2014, on Park and Ride buses into Norwich. We spoke to passengers, bus drivers and support staff to get their views on both the implementation and the scheme itself. The full report is published alongside this summary.

Key findings from post-introduction research

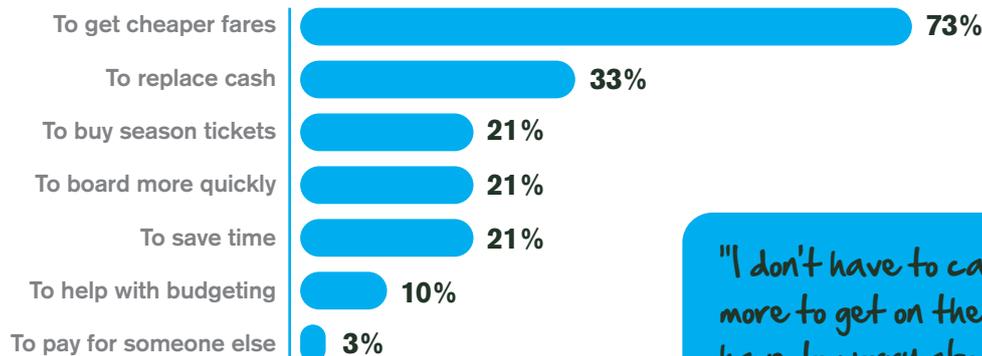
Most Park & Ride passengers we spoke to welcomed the introduction of smart ticketing in principle but had a mixed response to the way the card was introduced. Some felt that they had little choice other than to get one.

Most holdall® owners use the Park and Ride frequently (31 per cent daily and a further 26 per cent several times per week) and have been using it for several years (83 per cent for more than two years).



Reasons for getting holdall®

- passengers got a holdall® to get cheaper fares, to avoid having to carry cash and to buy tickets they couldn't buy with cash any more
- quantitative data support this finding further but show time saving is also a reason for getting holdall.®



Getting a holdall® wasn't necessarily seen as a choice. Many felt they needed the card to avoid higher prices. But now they have seen them, some do appreciate other benefits of smartcards too.

"I got it because I had no other option due to price increases. I can't afford the full price to get to work!"

[User comment from online survey]

"I don't have to carry cash any more to get on the bus, I don't have to worry about taking £20 or whatever it was to get my 10 trip pass"

Male, 24, User, Konect

Reasons for getting holdall®

68%

easy to understand how to **apply** for a holdall®

56%

easy to understand tickets to **buy** on holdall®

90%

easy to **use** holdall® on buses

70%

easy to **apply** for a holdall®

62%

can find ticket that **suits** their travel

58%

easy to **collect** tickets on buses

75%

thought they **received** their card quickly

55%

satisfied with **range** of tickets can buy

60%

easy to **buy** tickets online

61%

easy to **understand** about peak and off peak tickets

38%

tickets you can buy with holdall® **affordable**

55%

easy to use **online** holdall® account

Passengers are generally satisfied with the application process. Nine out of 10 rated using the card on the bus as 'easy'. Some had difficulties with using the web portal and may need more information and explanation about fares and ticket types.

Fares and pricing on holdall®

Norfolk County Council held back the introduction of a revised fare structure from 2013 to coincide with the smartcard launch. This was so passengers weren't faced with several changes to their service in a relatively short time. It included an increase in fares, the introduction of peak and off-peak fares, and charging for children who had previously been free.

Some passengers found it hard to separate their response to the new fare structure and pricing from how they feel about the holdall® smartcard. This had made them potentially less positive about the card than they would have been otherwise:

- many felt price rises were inevitable as cost of living was going up across the board, however, some felt the fares increase on the Park and Ride was drastic

"It was a bad idea because people were too busy arguing about fare rises to embrace the card"

Female, 33

- some stress that new children's fares and higher group fares mean Park & Ride is more expensive than parking in central Norwich
- many also thought that the fare rise was linked to the introduction of the holdall®, and some thought it was 'sneaky' to make paying in cash more expensive so more people get the holdall®
- others thought fare rises were introduced to fund the holdall®
- most felt the changes to the fares shouldn't have been introduced at the same time as the holdall® card as it meant passengers had to deal with too many changes at the same time.

Non-users of holdall®

The single biggest reason for not getting holdall® was non-users' perception that they don't use the Park & Ride service enough to make getting a holdall® worthwhile. Helping them understand how saver tickets and the sQuid travel purse (an electronic purse, on which money can be stored to pay for travel) work is likely to raise interest in getting a holdall® for some of them.

Those non-users who saw holdall® communications assumed it was only for frequent users and not relevant to them. For example, some thought it had to be used on consecutive days to be worthwhile or that tickets would expire before they were able to use them fully. A few didn't think the name holdall® had any relevance to buses.

Other reasons non-users mentioned for not applying were: lack of awareness, lack of motivation to apply, the online application/account as a barrier.

From the other side: how has it been for drivers and NCC support staff?

Drivers explained they can see the potential benefits of smart ticketing but thought they haven't benefited as much as they hoped from the holdall® smartcard yet.

"I had seen the signs but I hadn't taken any time to actually read them!"

Female, 54, non-user

"I'd vaguely seen advertising with holdall on it but it must have passed me by because I had no idea it was to do with Park and Ride!"

Male, 59

"I wasn't interested before because I'm an occasional user so there wasn't much urgency"

Male, 56, non-user

What
bus drivers want
from smart

less cash
handling

speedier
boarding times

What
bus drivers think
they got

some cash reduction
because of holdall® but
too many people still use
cash to really benefit

season tickets speed up
boarding in the morning
but no or adverse impact
on other boarding times

As passengers and drivers get used to the new fare structure, some of the difficulties drivers have are likely to reduce. Also, as holdall® ownership grows, the benefits of speedier boarding times and handling less cash may become more significant.

Information for passengers

In line with the online self-service strategy that underpins NCC's approach to smart ticketing, the publicity for holdall® directs passengers to go online for detailed information. The amount of questions from passengers that drivers and support staff received at the outset meant that this was quickly revised, so that more support was available.



Offline publicity

- adverts, posters, leaflets
- visual, focus on holdall® brand
- directing customers online for more info.



Online information and application

- detailed information about holdall® and new fare structure
- links to holdall® website to apply.



More offline information later

- NCC realised more information about fares and more offline information was needed and adjusted the strategy.

"The experience of the smartcard has been marred by having to put prices up. I don't think that anyone dislikes the card, but they dislike the price rises"

NCC staff

The experience in Norfolk suggests that information about the introduction of a smartcard or new fares has to be clearly directed to customers, for example through leaflets that are handed out on buses, as many have low engagement with the topic and won't make an effort to find out more.

Fares

The fares changes caused some issues; both NCC staff and drivers found communicating this to passengers while also explaining the holdall® to be one of the most challenging aspects of the introduction of smart ticketing. Drivers reported having to explain the changes (particularly on fare increases and off-peak times) repeatedly and having to deal with frustrated or irate passengers, which could lead to delays in the bus service.

"There's no one else to complain to but the drivers, so the drivers get it in the neck"

Female, 33, holdall® user

"At the time, it looked it would be simpler for bus drivers and passengers to have one transition rather than two"

NCC staff

- initially, NCC thought it would be easier for passengers to go through one transition than two
- fare changes were publicised at the time of Traffic Regulation consultations but the delays meant this was forgotten by the time the changes were introduced.

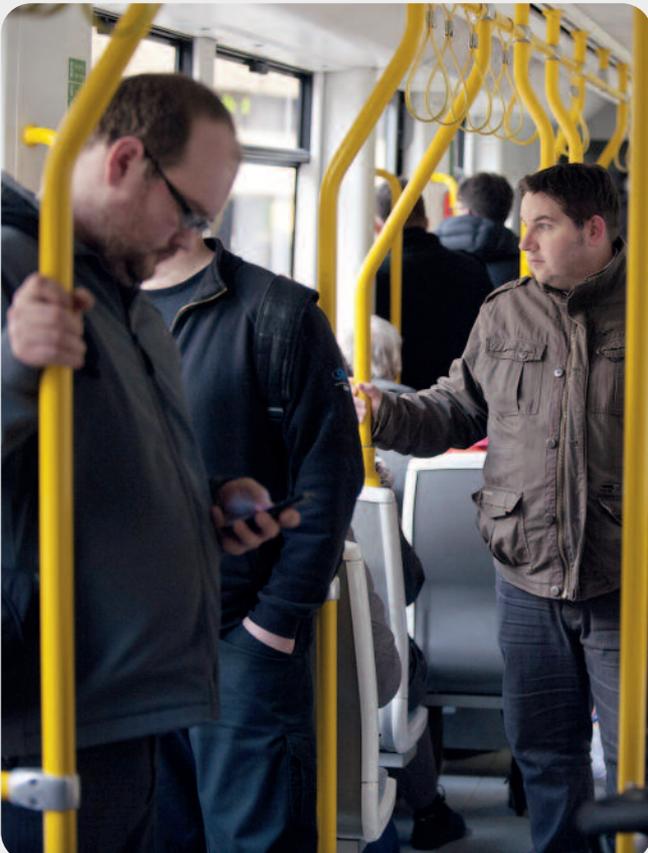
In hindsight some NCC staff wondered whether they should have introduced the fare changes and holdall® separately after all.

Norfolk's experience suggests fare changes and smart ticketing are best introduced separately from each other *if at all possible*, in order not to affect the response to the smartcard and overwhelm passengers.

Where next?

What improvements do passengers want?

- Passengers' experience of the web portal suggests all relevant information and actions should ideally be on the same website rather than split between holdall®, NCC and sQuid websites. As a minimum it should be easier for passengers to understand what to do and why the functions can't all be in one place.
- The problems some users experience with the holdall® web portal will need to be resolved in order to improve customer experience.
- Passengers say they would like additional channels of buying and topping up tickets, including the option of using ticket machines in addition to the online facility.
- Enabling passengers to use the same smartcard across different bus services/modes of transport in Norfolk and possibly for other payments is likely to make holdall® more useful and therefore more appealing to customers.



NCC plans for improvements

NCC is keen to improve the holdall® customer experience but recognises that this depends on what suppliers can do and in what timescales. It would like to:

- improve the **application process** so one person can set up and top up multiple accounts with one e-mail address and customers don't have to buy a season ticket to get the card in the first place
- improve the **web portal** and help customers understand holdall® both conceptually and in terms of being clear about how to buy tickets, top up, find the information about the fare options or see the status of products they bought (for example, if they're collected, how many journeys they have left, past purchases and so on)
- enable customers to use **auto top-up** if they want to.

Lessons learned so far: NCC, bus operators and suppliers

- All stressed strongly the need to co-ordinate suppliers and ensure everyone works together to avoid issues. Developing the technology has been the major challenge in the Norfolk pilot. It is also where the council hopes to break new ground in terms of what can be delivered to passengers.
- Views differ among some NCC staff and some bus drivers about how well prepared bus drivers were for the pilot. It is important that bus drivers are involved as early as possible in any future roll-out and have all necessary information – particularly as they are the ones who explain it to passengers and answer most of their questions.

This research is part of the joint Department for Transport/Passenger Focus smarter-travel research programme. The research projects were undertaken by BDRC Continental, Define and Illuminas.

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