



Transport User Rail Community

Rail refunds and fee changes

October 2020

What did we ask our community?

Refunds and change fees

The community were shown the coronavirus refund policy on the National Rail website:

https://www.nationalrail.co.uk/stations_destinations/coronavirus_refunds.aspx

They were asked to comment on whether this felt fair in the context of the pandemic, paying particular attention to the policy on advance refunds:

'Advance tickets are non-refundable (unless disruption to your booked journey means you do not travel) but you can change the date and time of your booking and an admin fee may apply. Because Advance tickets are non-refundable, even in lockdown or quarantine scenarios, customers may wish to consider purchasing a more flexible ticket for travel.'

They were also asked to comment on the admin fee and whether this felt appropriate.



Who is in our rail community?

60

people using rail to commute prior to Covid-19



Across England, Scotland and Wales



Mix of payment methods



Mix of those currently using rail and not using rail



A spread of age, gender and ethnicity



Some have disabilities

The community is divided on the current refund policy

Mixed. A 'no questions asked' refund policy would be seen as a gesture of goodwill to the passenger and it should be noted that, even at this stage of the pandemic, passengers **want to be incentivised back into travel**. However, the community is pragmatic about the need for rail operators to sell tickets and that the discount on advance tickets is a trade-off requiring a degree of commitment to travel.

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Divisive. When it is revealed that the fee can be as high as £10, passengers begin to question what actual 'work' goes into reallocating passengers to a new train – **most assume the whole process is automated**.

Irritating. For many, advance tickets are something of a lifeline because of the discount offered, and tonally this can come across as **telling passengers they made a 'wrong' choice and should have spent more on a flexible ticket**.

Where refunds apply, the £10 admin fee is the sticking point

Refund fees are seen as reasonable when the passenger could have planned around their circumstances, but this is not the case with the pandemic.

For some, a fee as high as £10 feels **harsh and punitive**. Only a handful argue that it is incumbent on the passenger to keep a close eye on the news and plan around potential restrictions – for most, the **passenger should not be expected to predict the future**.

Others are pragmatic, and argue that rail operators can only absorb so much cost from COVID-related disruption. A lower fee, or at least some explanation of why the fee stands where it does, would soothe this issue. It should be noted that advance tickets are the default ticket for most of our community – they are accustomed to planning, and being **rewarded for planning by saving money**.

More broadly, the community point out that the refund policy can come across as overly complex and difficult to understand. A simpler explanation of the key issues, along with a sense of the underlying rationale behind the policy, would help to build trust and help passengers feel that they are being **invited back to rail use**. While they would not ask for the fee to disappear entirely, a significantly lower fee is seen as fair.

“£10 admin fee! I think this is disappointing and that they should be enabling people to travel as and when they can. Lots of people’s movements are constantly changing right now and you may have to change plans last minute. I would like to see a more flexible approach here. Losing money or being tempted to travel when you shouldn’t is not in good taste at the moment.”

Female, 40, South East

“I think this is a good compromise, allowing you to change the date on tickets. The perfect answer would be to get cash back but I understand why rail companies want to hold on to any money that comes their way. It's better than not being able to cancel and losing all of you money.”

Male, 57, South East

“I don’t think this will encourage people to travel, and surely you want people using the trains again?”

Female, 40, Scotland