Passenger views on rail ticket retailing

– their experience and attitudes to change

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transport**focus**

Research methodology

This qualitative research was carried out in December 2021 and included a diverse mix of passengers from across Great Britain. Given the importance of understanding the barriers to switching from buying at the station and views on potential changes to station retailing, those currently buying paper tickets at the station were over-represented in the sample.

- **Nine online mini focus groups (with five to six passengers in each):**
  - six groups with passengers primarily buying paper tickets at the station
  - three groups with passengers primarily buying online, via app or using pay-as-you-go.

- **12 depth interviews:**
  - six disabled passengers
  - three digitally excluded passengers
  - three passengers less confident with technology.

- **Four stations observations and intercept interviews at:**
  - Exeter
  - Manchester Piccadilly
  - Tunbridge Wells
  - Middlesbrough.

Retail is changing – are train tickets different?

In recent years, online shopping, self-service technology and smartphone apps have fundamentally changed the way many of us buy goods and services in many areas of life. This society-wide shift is often seen as a positive, particularly in terms of speed and convenience. Nevertheless, this change is difficult for some, and even enthusiastic users of new technology can feel concern at some of its effects on those people less able to adapt, or even sadness about reducing human interaction.

Many passengers have shifted how they buy train tickets too. However, some people told us they have changed their purchasing behaviour elsewhere, but still prefer to purchase their train tickets at the station. They say buying train tickets is different, primarily due to:

- complexity – purchasing a ticket can feel less straightforward due to the complicated ticketing structure and the number of considerations to get the right ticket (date, time, peak/off peak, single, return, route and so on)
- risk – the perceived high risk of buying the wrong ticket and concern about losing money if they do.

"I think I got the banking app first as they were promoting it so heavily. It was so efficient that I started download lots more apps."

"It's just all so confusing. There's hundreds of different options and it doesn't make sense!"

"There's a lot less human interaction. It's taking away conversation. It'll have a big impact on our mental health."

"I'm dyslexic and I bought a ticket to Portsmouth instead of Plymouth – so now I always go to the ticket office."

Buying tickets and barriers to switching

The research explored how passengers buy their ticket now and the barriers some passengers perceive to switching from buying from the ticket office to alternatives including ticket vending machines (TVMs), websites, apps or pay-as-you-go.

Ticket offices
Passengers that use ticket offices have a very positive attitude towards staff. They appreciate their help, the human interaction and the reassurance provided:
- that the right ticket has been purchased at the best possible value
- by the issue of a paper ticket (no worries about phone battery life, or barcodes not working at ticket gates)
- by staff advice about delays and other information about their journey.

Queuing is the main pain-point for users of ticket offices, as well as a reason other passengers prefer to buy their ticket another way.

"My issue is that I never know if it's peak, off peak, super off peak – it drives me mad. Too many options and I don't know what I'm doing so I'd rather talk to someone."

"I like that she sells me the cheapest ticket. For example with a machine you need to do so much more. She designs my route for me – I can't fault the ticket office."

Ticket vending machines
Those using ticket vending machines (TVMs) often do so for their convenience or because it is the only option at smaller stations. Regular users describe TVMs as quick and easy to use once you know how. They typically use them for habitual, regular journeys and appreciate the

reassurance offered by the paper ticket. Despite this, some common gripes emerge, including:
- out of order machines
- unresponsive touchscreens
- queues
- inability to purchase all ticket types
- hygiene concerns (more top of mind due to Covid-19).

While regular TVM users tend to find them straightforward, they are inclined to use alternative options for less familiar or more complex journeys. Other passengers avoid them altogether due to the impersonal experience and lack of guidance or reassurance. Fears include:
- being overcharged or not getting the best deal
- buying the wrong ticket by accident
- a 'nightmare scenario' where they don't understand the machine, cause a queue to form and feel even more anxious.

"I've got no issues with them [TVMs]. It's quick and easy – straightforward!"

"The station I go to is quite small and so sometimes the window isn't open so I have to use the machine. Once I had a bad experience with the machine – it wanted an extra £10 and the guy at the window told me I could get a much better deal and that's stuck with me."

Booking online and using apps
Booking online allows passengers additional flexibility and convenience and is the preferred option for many. It allows them to book a ticket in advance without visiting the station and to compare different options and prices.

For some using a website on a PC or laptop is a more comfortable choice than a smartphone or app and can offer passengers more confidence they will make

the right purchase due to:
- a familiar device and larger screen
- easier comparison of different options and prices
- no need to download anything.

For passengers who are less experienced and confident using apps can be an intimidating step. For familiar users apps are an even more convenient option, with additional benefits including:
- quick and smooth booking process with integrated live train information
- an account with helpful features, such as journey history for easy repetition
- easily displayed e-ticket barcodes.

"I usually book online if it's a longer journey which will be more expensive. That way I can look at different times and different sites to make sure I'm getting the best price."

"The app is easier and what I know. I've booked tickets in the back of a taxi before as I'm on the way to the station. You're not going to pull out a laptop and do that are you?"

Resistance to booking online or using apps often comes from uncertainty and a lack of confidence, exacerbated by the complexity and variety of ticket options available. The most commonly mentioned barriers include:
- a lack of confidence shopping online in general (such as risk of fraud)
- complexity of ticket options (Super off-peak, and so on) or how to apply a Railcard discount
- fear they will book the wrong ticket (time, day, or journey)
- booking fees
- worries about smartphone battery or signal problems.

"I'm honestly just afraid I'd get myself lost and waste money on the wrong blooming ticket. The station is 5 minutes away, it's easier for me to drive down to the station."

"My eyes aren't very good, so I'm not off to a great start. My neurological condition means I get confused easily, so I just find the whole thing so stressful."

Pay-as-you-go – contactless and smartcards
Payment with contactless bank cards or smartcards (like Oyster in London) are already used for pay-as-you-go travel by millions of passengers. Those who use it feel the convenience of 'tap and go' travel outweigh any downsides, and over time have become very comfortable with using it.

Pay-as-you-go is much less common outside the London area. Some less tech-savvy passengers find the concept difficult to comprehend and the idea of using such a system for longer and more costly journeys is typically rejected. When considering a pay-as-you-go smartcard a number of familiar questions are raised, including:
- How fares are calculated, and how accurately?
- Would they be getting the very best price possible?
- Where and how would smartcards be topped-up?
- How are Railcards taken into account?
- What are the penalties for forgetting to tap out?

Experience shows that pay-as-you-go can be a significant step forward for passengers for shorter journeys, but unfamiliar passengers will need reassurance, especially about how fares are calculated to feel confident making the switch.

"You know how in London you have the Oyster, tap on tap off. If they did that up here, I'd love it. It'd be a dream come true. It'd be brilliant for me..."

"The pricing is all over the show, so that means there are so many opportunities to charge incorrectly and you'd have no idea..."

Ticket format preferences

For many passengers, paper tickets remain the tried-and-true option. Being able to have a physical ticket they can hold in their hand is a source of comfort and reassurance. It allows them to readily double-check their ticket information, and it provides a level of security and proof they have purchased their ticket.

"For me, I need to have that paper ticket in my hand. It might sound silly, but just being able to open my purse and check it's there means I'm on the right track..."

On the other hand, for passengers who have used e-tickets the convenience of having all their information at the touch of a button is the key benefit. However, even some more tech-savvy passengers worry about relying on their mobile phone to manage their tickets. Common concerns preventing passengers from switching to e-tickets include the fear of their smartphone battery running out or the annoyance of the barcode not scanning at the gate.

Passenger views on station staff and attitudes to change

In the second part of the research, we explored passengers' views on the role of staff and potential future changes to the way tickets might be sold at stations. To do this we used a series of hypothetical scenarios to get passengers' reactions, hear how they might be impacted and to better understand their needs.

Passengers' views on the role of staff at stations
Passengers value staff at stations highly, though some have got used to travelling from unstaffed stations. Passengers' understanding of the responsibilities of station staff broadly fall into four key categories:

- safety – everything from patrolling the 'yellow lines' on platforms to helping passengers that need assistance on and off trains
- security – passengers say they feel safer with station staff visible, in case of incidents or abuse, particularly when travelling at unsociable hours
- service – passengers rely on station staff to inform them about disruption and provide advice
- sales – mentioned less often, but selling tickets is still recognised as a key responsibility of station staff.

inevitable, but for others the thought of removing them completely is met with strong concern. This is driven by the thought of potential job losses and worries about how they would get help and buy a ticket.

While potentially disruptive, reducing ticket office opening hours seems to be more acceptable at less busy stations. Notably, there is no consensus when it comes to potential opening hours. Some suggest peak hours, others suggest off-peak hours are more important on the basis more people who need help and advice are likely to be travelling then.

> "Health and safety. I went to the end of the platform for better reception and someone must have seen me, who ran over to ask if I was alright."

> "As a woman, I think it's nice to have someone on the station. It just makes me feel safer."

> "I'd be gutted. The lady by the desk has helped me a lot. I'd feel bad for her. I don't know what they'd do."

What if ticket offices were closed or opening hours reduced?
When considering the closure of ticket offices initial reactions can often be negative. Ticket offices feel like an integral part of the railway and those who use them are very satisfied by the level of service and reassurance they provide. For some eventual closure of ticket offices seems

> "It wouldn't even register as I rarely use them. My station probably hasn't had one since 1965."

What if ticket offices closed, but staff were redeployed?

The concept of staff redeployment at the station is received more positively than the prospect of closure of the ticket office without this reassurance. However, a number of passengers express scepticism that redeployment would actually happen in practice, rather than jobs being lost. If staff were redeployed, most passengers could see the benefit of them being readily on-hand around the station concourse and platforms to help. A common concern, without a ticket office, was knowing where in the station to go to find staff and get assistance.

> "As long as they're easy to find, and able to help you when you need it that's the main thing... They might even prefer not being stuck in a booth all day."

> "The best way to implement any kind of change would be by keeping staff around. It doesn't necessarily need to be in a booth, but there needs to be people helping us to get the right ticket, helping with luggage, directing us to the right place."

What do passengers' need?

When thinking about their own and others' needs, it becomes clear the main functions ticket offices offer to passengers are providing a central point to find staff and a reassuring ticket purchase experience. Though it feels impractical to passengers for it to happen overnight, many passengers can conceive of a near future where they could manage without ticket offices if this is mitigated with continued provision of:

- a clearly marked area where passengers can access help from staff
- a reassuring purchase experience, with staff available to help passengers use TVMs, identify the right ticket for them and ideally able to issue tickets directly from handheld devices.

In the discussions about potential future changes elderly and disabled passengers are understandably the most concerned about the potential impact, feeling they may struggle or be 'left behind'.

> "I'm 88 years old, and while I'm pretty good for my age, I'm not going to be downloading an app just to catch the train."

> "My vision isn't very good so the machines are no good for me. I have bought tickets online before, but I had to get my daughter to do it for me because I can't read the screen."

Could rail go cashless in future?

Though they express concern for others, the majority of people we spoke to would not be adversely affected if the railway became cashless, as they already rarely use cash. For most passengers cashless feels inevitable, but for an older minority, this could be very disruptive and some even claim they wouldn't use trains anymore.

Passengers also worry about potential emergency situations, or if technology fails and they only have cash available and need to get on a train. A minority mention the 'unbanked' (people without bank accounts) as a group who could potentially be excluded.

Passengers can see that a smartcard system could potentially be a viable alternative to cash if convenient top-up locations (such as supermarkets, post offices and corner shops) were located near to stations and their opening hours were adequate.

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