



# **Buying your train ticket six months ahead:**

a passenger perspective

December 2025

# Introduction

## – planning ahead, or playing it safe?

Every journey begins with a plan. For many passengers, that plan hinges on timing; when to book, how to secure the best fare, and whether plans will stay on track. The current minimum rail ticket booking window is set at 12 weeks. Transport Focus has worked with the rail industry

to explore passengers' reaction to, and support or otherwise for, that being extended to six months. This qualitative research was undertaken through discussion groups and in-depth interviews across Great Britain.

# The current situation

## – familiar, functional, but a little fuzzy

While some passengers are aware that train tickets are generally available 12 weeks in advance, most don't give it much thought, mainly because it aligns with how they plan. Most journeys are arranged four to six weeks ahead, with exceptions made for holidays or big events like weddings, festivals and sports fixtures. Price, peace of mind, and guaranteed seating drive the choice to book early, especially for disabled passengers or those travelling with children.

Those in the latter group do experience frustration when train tickets are not available as far in advance as they would like. They are often well-informed leisure travellers hoping to coordinate rail with flight bookings or other time-sensitive plans. When they discover train tickets are not yet on sale, they explore alternative ways to travel or set calendar alerts to try again later. This reveals an underlying, if irregular, demand from some passengers to buy train tickets further ahead than is currently possible.

*"I think it (booking in advance) means I feel quite organised, and I'm also getting a good price, because I think the further in advance you book, the better offer you get. Also, if we're with family, we like to have window seats and tables."*

Passenger travelling for leisure and other reasons,  
North West England



# The proposal

## – what happens when you offer more time?

When presented with the idea of a six-month booking window, passengers responded positively, and consistently. Across all groups, three motivations stood out:

- price certainty - many assumed/hoped that extending the booking horizon would result in lower fares than are available 12 weeks ahead.
- guaranteed seating - securing a preferred seat, particularly for long journeys and for passengers with mobility needs, was a major incentive
- peace of mind - booking early meant ticking a task off the list, especially for complex, multi-person trips, and feeling in control.

*“It is a bit of convenience kind of thing, just so that it’s one more thing ticked off the to-do lists. If you’ve already got the ticket there, then, I mean, it’s kind of like a commitment you’ve made that you have to stick to but also does give you peace of mind kind of thing.”*

Passenger travelling for leisure, South of England

Initial reactions were broadly enthusiastic, with many passengers assuming/hoping, that an extended booking window would apply across all rail routes. Their strong preference was for network-wide availability, to avoid confusion over which routes did and didn’t have a six-month window. However, most acknowledged that availability on ‘main lines’ only would be better than nothing.

*“The good thing about booking it in advance as well, you know, especially if money’s tight, it means that you’ve bought and paid for it, so you’ve got another six months to save up for, you know, actually going on the journey. So, it’s a good way of saving for going away.”*

Passenger travelling for leisure and other reasons, Scotland

# The hesitations

## – what holds passengers back?

Despite interest, some hesitations emerged. Life, as passengers repeatedly pointed out, is unpredictable. Venues change, concerts are cancelled, and children’s schedules shift. Key issues included:

- uncertainty of plans - many simply don’t plan that far ahead, making extended booking less relevant

*“Plans change too much. I wouldn’t risk losing money on a non-refundable ticket.”*

Passenger with impairment travelling for leisure and other travel reasons, North of England

- inflexible ticket rules - the fear of non-refundable tickets or steep ‘change’ fees acted as a deterrent
- timetable changes - even small alterations can unravel multi-leg journeys, especially where connections are involved.

*“Sometimes my children might get a swimming gala or other sporting event thrown in last minute and so I would be on edge about booking something for myself if I then had to cancel it.”*

Passenger travelling for leisure, South of England



## Building confidence in booking earlier

### – what passengers need

To overcome these barriers, passengers outlined five needs, consistent across journey type, location, and type of passenger:

- 1 Flexibility: Affordable options to amend, cancel, or transfer tickets, ideally with models familiar from airlines or hotels.
- 2 Transparent communication: Upfront, jargon-free information about pricing, ‘change’ policies/fees, and timetable changes between date of purchase and travel.
- 3 Proactive support: Notifications about ticket release dates when parts of the journey are not available at time of booking, service changes, or alternative travel options when disruptions occur.
- 4 Simple booking systems: User-friendly platforms that make changes and refunds quick and intuitive.
- 5 Passenger protection: Confidence that if operators change schedules, travellers won’t bear the cost and will have options.

*“I’ve booked in advance before and I had a seat but the train was delayed and then cancelled and sometimes you can’t get your money back for that train ticket and that’s one of the biggest reasons I don’t book in advance because that has happened a lot more than I would have liked.”*

Passenger travelling for leisure and other reasons, Wales

## Communication is critical

Clarity, not just availability, of information makes or breaks confidence. For example, “times are subject to change” was preferred over “times are provisional” or “times are not final,” which passengers said sounded vague or untrustworthy.

Similarly, refund assurances were welcomed, but only if passengers believed the process would be simple and fair. Passengers want timely updates, clear explanations, and reassurance that changes will be communicated early enough to adjust plans without stress or financial loss.

*“You want to know as soon as there is a change and the options around that.”*

Passenger travelling for leisure, Scotland

*“For accessibility, I’d need plenty of notice if there are any changes.”*

Passenger with impairment travelling for leisure and other reasons, North of England

*“As long as you can get your money back then it does give you more confidence to book in advance.”*

Passenger travelling for leisure and other reasons, South of England





## Key findings and recommendations

### – from potential to practicality

The research revealed an appetite for an extended booking window but also emphasised the importance of getting the surrounding conditions right. Without flexibility, transparency, and passenger-centric support, the benefits of early booking could be quickly undone by uncertainty and inconvenience.

For some, the extended horizon offers peace of mind and cost savings. For others, it introduces risk. As one participant said:

*“If I was to book something further than three months, I would need to get some kind of flexibility options... even if that comes at a higher cost, to have that sort of refundable option.”*

Passenger travelling for leisure, North of England

- Passenger expectations and perceptions are shaped by their experiences in other sectors, particularly airlines and hotels, where booking well in advance is normal and supported with clear refund structures.
- For rail to match this, passengers need systems they can trust, options matching their specific needs for that journey, and communications they can rely on. Extending the booking horizon would be a valuable step toward a more predictable and passenger-focused rail experience, but only if the safety net is robust.
- This study highlights the importance of embedding flexibility and transparency from the outset. Doing so will not only improve passenger confidence but ensure that any extension of the booking horizon delivers genuine, long-term value across the network.

# Methodology

To carry out this study, we conducted in-depth qualitative research with passengers across Great Britain. The study focused on individuals who typically book their rail travel between four and 12 weeks in advance, covering a mix of leisure travellers, commuters, and occasional business passengers. All fieldwork was conducted in December 2024, through focus groups of four participants (quads) and in-depth interviews, conducted via Zoom.

The sample included a wide range of passenger profiles: solo travellers, families, those booking for holidays or events, and people who travel for work or personal business. Importantly, the research ensured

representation from passengers with hearing, visual, physical, cognitive and mobility impairments, including wheelchair users and those requiring staff assistance. Participants were drawn from urban, suburban and rural areas across England, Wales and Scotland.

The discussions explored current booking habits, awareness of the existing 12-week horizon, and spontaneous thoughts on what an ideal booking window might look like. Later, participants were introduced to the concept of extending the booking horizon to 26 weeks and asked to respond to a variety of realistic travel scenarios, prompts and prioritisation exercises to capture their motivations, concerns and expectations.

Region/nation	Predominantly travelling for leisure	Other reasons for travelling	Passengers with impairments
South England	16	8	3
North England	16	8	3
Scotland	16	8	2
Wales	16	8	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>96</b>		<b>10</b>

## Definitions and additional criteria:

- **Leisure travellers:** Making booked-in-advance journeys in their free time and across a range of purposes including day trips, shopping trips, attending theatre/concerts/sporting events, to get to a holiday destination:
  - a spread of those travelling alone/with friends/with family/with children
  - inclusion of some who book commuter or business travel train journeys within a week of travel, only where this is in addition to their pre-booked leisure travel.
- **‘Other’ travellers:** Includes commuters and occasional business travellers who book non-leisure travel in advance:
  - commuters: those who use the train as their main form of transport for getting to work or education two or more times a week
  - business travellers: defined as those using the train both for ‘personal business’ reasons (e.g. hospital, doctor etc) or for work reasons (e.g. meetings and site visits in other locations)
- inclusion of those who book leisure travel train journeys on the day, so long as this is in addition to their pre-booked leisure travel.
- **Booking in advance window:** For both the above passenger types, all were booking train travel between four and 12 weeks in advance, with a spread of how far in advance.
- **Passengers with impairments:** Using the train for any purpose and having at least one impairment, representing a range of hearing, visual, physical, cognitive impairments, learning difficulties and mobility impairments. Additionally included:
  - 2 wheelchair users across sample
  - 4 who require staff assistance to complete their journey
  - spread of age and gender
  - spread of journey type.



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Transport Focus is the operating  
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