

3rd March 2010

RAIL SEAT RESERVATIONS – A DISCUSSION PAPER

These comments relate specifically to issues observed in the NW of England where the principal operators offering a seat reservation service are Virgin Trains, Transpennine Express and CrossCountry. Similar concerns may however arise elsewhere in the country.

1. Causes of Concern

1.1 Advanced bookings – In our experience passengers booking rail journeys before the day of travel either by the web, telephone, or booking office are frequently offered reserved seats without charge. This is the case regardless of the type of ticket purchased. A distinction is necessary between cheap “Advance” tickets and Open (“Anytime” & “Off Peak”) tickets. The latter can be bought either in advance or on the day and seat reservation is optional (though often offered in our experience even for open returns). “Advance” tickets are quota controlled, must be bought currently up to 1 day ahead and are always linked with a specific train and reserved seat. Thus those booking advance singles at prices as little as £10 sometimes for a journey of 200 miles or more obtain a guaranteed seat, whereas those booking Anytime or Off Peak (at much higher prices) only do so if they choose to reserve (whether or not offered the facility). It is also possible for passengers with a valid open ticket to make reservations for several trains by making a number of reservation calls or visits.

1.2 Walk on tickets – Those buying tickets at the time of travel are not offered reservations as the system does not permit bookings close to the time of travel (although CrossCountry advises that In the summer of 2010 it will be trialling a system providing reservations up to 10 minutes before a train's departure, also enabling Advance fares to be available much later in the booking process). Others booking a day or so in advance are often unable to obtain reservations at peak or busy travel times, as the trains are fully booked. With the exception of a few day return fares most of these passengers are paying a higher price for their tickets but may find themselves unable to find a seat.

1.3 Selection of Seats –

(i) websites

The CrossCountry website allows some choices of preference (although these are not guaranteed). Direction of travel (forward or backward facing), position (aisle or window) and coach type (quiet or no preference) are offered for choice. Airline (with no forward/backward facing preference) or table seat are also options. CrossCountry advises that its website now offers the opportunity to choose a preferred seat from a pictogram of each carriage which shows available seats highlighted.

The Virgin website offers no direction of travel choice, but aisle or window seat are optioned as is quiet coach or no preference. A table seat is also shown as an option.

(ii) stations

In our experience although it is possible to request a specific type of seat or location booking clerks often do not ask and passengers usually accept the seat first offered. We have found that clerks do however try and keep parties of 2 or more close together.

1.4 Information on seat location – Holders of reserved seat tickets are given both the carriage letter and seat number on their tickets. Operators show the carriage letters on the exterior of their trains by illuminated sign, permanent lettering, or window label. The position of the carriages for Virgin trains is also highlighted on the digital departure screens and often announced at major stations. This is not the case with Transpennine Express. Here first class can be identified by the presence of a yellow marking on the front or rear of the train as the train approaches the station, but can be at either end even on regular journeys.

1.5 Empty booked seats. – As a result of the current system it is not unusual to board trains with a considerable number of seats marked as booked but unoccupied. This occurs for a number of reasons. Those who have booked seats do not always sit in the seat they have booked. After boarding some find their booked seats unattractive – adjacent to a bulkhead; in a busy carriage etc – and find and sit in unbooked seats elsewhere more to their liking. Others with open tickets may not even have boarded the train in the first place.

1.6 Labelling of booked seats – On Virgin & CrossCountry Pendolinos and Voyagers booked and available seats can be identified by an illuminated bar above the window in each seat position. This can only be done by closely scrutinising each seat position. This can be time consuming and inconvenient when searching for an unreserved seat. The messages vary by the type of train. On Pendolinos the seat is described as 'reserved' or as 'available until (e.g.) Macclesfield'. Voyagers have informative messages such as 'reserved from Warrington to Birmingham', 'available from Wigan' etc as the message

scrolls across the screen. Transpennine Express still utilise a label attached to the seat with the information 'Reserved from a to b.'

1.7 Location of unbooked seats. - Virgin advises that on five car Voyagers the whole of Coach C is left unreserved as is Coach E on the Pendolinos. Virgin also state that at busy times extra unreserved seats are often made available, including the possibility of de-classifying First Class coach G. Those familiar with rail travel, operator practice and train types, and without reservations, are thus able to position themselves to locate likely available seats without having to struggle past passengers with luggage, children etc, hunting for their own reserved seats in other carriages. The location of unbooked seats on a train is, however, infrequently announced. Moreover, whilst information screens show the location of first and standard class, buffet and quiet coaches they do not normally show the location of the unbooked coach. If people are standing unnecessarily the on-train manager will occasionally advise, by intercom, the location of any spare seats, but this is not always done.

1.8 Effect on those unfamiliar with rail travel. – Whilst the current system has the advantage of ensuring that those who have booked travel in advance are assured of a seat it does lead to many seats being shown as reserved which are in fact unoccupied. Many travellers, particularly on longer distance trains only make occasional journeys by rail and a proportion are visitors from abroad. The result is that, in the absence of clear announcements or visual displays, passengers without booked seats get on anywhere and wander up and down a lengthy train looking for seats marked available. They are often carrying luggage, struggling past people looking for their own reserved seats, and even encountering a counterflow of other unbooked passengers struggling in the opposite direction. Many give up if one or two carriages appear to be full and this leads to a considerable number of people being left standing in doorways and corridors.

1.9 Where the booked section of the journey is marked some will utilise booked seats for the available portion of the journey and others will sit in 'reserved' seats if they are not taken up at the start of the journey. Passengers unfamiliar with rail travel are often however too timid to do so or do not realise that the train will not stop to pick up for an hour or so e.g. between Warrington and London on many Virgin trains. The result is many stand for long distances and are unimpressed by their rail travel experience. Oddly, even when full information of the booked journey is given on the reservation label as on Transpennine Express trains, it is common to see booked seats empty and inexperienced travellers (often elderly) standing. This is despite the fact that the seat has clearly not been taken up at the labelled departure station or the booked section of the journey has ended.

2. Can the system be improved? – possible changes for consideration.

2.1 Charges for reserved seats – The issue of charging is a contentious one. East Coast recently introduced charges and this was criticised by passenger groups (charges have now been withdrawn following take over of the franchise by the government). Charging might reduce the number of seats reserved unnecessarily and free more seats for those without reservations. For example it is likely those uncertain as to which train they intended to use and with open tickets would not book a seat. Similarly a percentage of able bodied people would not book, either to save money or to feel free to pick a seat to their liking after boarding. However families and the elderly, would be likely to continue to reserve – in the case of families charging per seat would be particularly onerous. On balance we are opposed to charging.

2.2 Booking Office Policy – Booking agencies including stations, telephone and web services could cease to offer free reserved seats with the purchase of open outward and return tickets unless specifically requested by the buyer. Multiple bookings could be avoided by stamping the ticket 'booked seat reserved' or computer marking in the case of telephone reservations. This would help minimise the number of currently unoccupied seats marked as booked.

2.3 Location of Unreserved Seats – Consideration should be given to advertising the unreserved coach/area in announcements and on departure screens thus minimising the number of people wandering up and down the train looking for spare seats.

2.4 Train Manager Activity – Conductors could be encouraged, as they pass through the train to remove seat labels if the reserved seats remain unoccupied well after the prescribed start station, and to assist genuine booked passengers to retrieve their seats if occupied by others. Virgin reservation details are downloaded from a central database and cannot be amended by the train manager, however when passengers are seen to be standing unnecessarily train managers could be advised to make it standard practice to announce spare seat locations. Where there are long gaps between station stops train managers could, at their discretion, recommend passengers to sit in unoccupied reserved seats unless approached by a passenger with a valid reservation for that seat.

2.5 We are advised the following by CrossCountry. Train Managers can already use the onboard Train Management System to cancel unused seat reservations. The 10 minute reservation system will allow Train Managers to control the onboard reservation system using their Avantix ticket issuing and information machines. This will mean they can delete any unused reserved seats from the system and reserve customers without a reservation into any vacant seats.

2.6 Computer Labelling – The possibility of the train manager being able to adjust the computer labelling system to remove reserved labels if the seats remain empty much beyond the reserved boarding point could be investigated. The introduction of a more informative message on the illuminated screen in Pendolino trains appears to have been carried out since our early investigations. A system of identifying the status of a seat from some distance away would be helpful. For example, red/green lights, instead of seat labels, would enable passengers to discern whether a seat was available or not without having to peer closely at the small screen above the window.

2.7 Late bookings – As most passengers who book to travel in the last few days before departure are paying a higher price than those who book earlier the possibility of leaving a number of seats available for reservation up to 24 hours before departure could be considered.

2.8 Obligation to use Reserved Seat – Holders of Advance Tickets are currently obliged to travel on the train to which their booking applies but not to sit in the particular reserved seat allocated. Consideration could be given to making use of the reserved seat obligatory thus reducing the number of seats marked reserved which are actually unoccupied as the ticket holder is seated elsewhere. In this event it would be necessary to offer a choice of seat as standard when booking including window, aisle, facing forward/backward, table, airline, or non-bulkhead, if available, to avoid passenger dissatisfaction. A change to the National Rail Conditions of Carriage may be required.

2.9 Location of First Class Seating – It would be helpful if the location of the first class section of Virgin and TPE trains was included in announcements and on visual displays.

3. Conclusions

3.1 Consideration of the above recommendations is advocated -

- ***in order to ensure that vacant seats available for unbooked passengers are easy to locate***
- ***to help inexperienced passengers to efficiently find a seat***
- ***and to minimise congestion caused by internal movement of passengers.***

3.2 Improvements along these lines should lead to less unnecessary standing and a better journey experience for all without loss of passengers.

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