

SENUG RESPONSE TO LNER COMPULSORY SEAT RESERVATION POLICY.

LNER's Proposal and their reasons for it is set out in their recent "Inside Track" Bulletin, an extract of which is below. SENUG's response to the proposal is as follows:

Email to LNER 4th April 2021

Dear LNER Public Affairs

I refer to the item "**More People Would Choose Rail If Assured A Seat**" in your recent Inside Track Bulletin, which I have pasted in to this email below. I strongly object to the proposal to retain compulsory seat reservation on LNER trains after the current COVID social distancing restrictions have eased, for the reasons set out below.

The one in three adults that are more likely to travel if they are guaranteed a seat, and the 34% of passengers currently flying, can achieve that guarantee under the current pre-COVID system by simply reserving a seat voluntarily and free of charge for their journey. These passengers are not lost to the rail industry, provided the facility to reserve seats is better publicised, the ability to reserve them up to 5 minutes before departure is retained, and most importantly, LNER on-board staff actually enforce the seat reservation system and ask passengers to vacate if sitting in a seat which is reserved for someone else. So a reserved seat really does mean a guaranteed seat.

However, a compulsory seat reservation system would lose those **14%** of passengers your research indicates would be less likely to travel by train if compulsory seat reservations were in place. It would also, I suspect, drive many existing passengers into the arms of competitors who are not implementing such a policy, both open access operators between London, York, Hull, Sunderland, Morpeth and Edinburgh and of course the other franchised operators sharing your route between York and Edinburgh and within Scotland.

Thus, compulsory seat reservations brings with it significant disadvantages, whereas all the advantages you point to can be achieved through voluntary seat reservations. Compulsory seat reservations also takes away one of rail's key advantages over air travel - namely flexibility.

I also consider compulsory seat reservations to be discriminatory against vulnerable travellers, those without mobile IT facilities, and those from smaller communities where the nearest station served by LNER is unstaffed for large parts of the day, or has no LNER station staff.

I have observed when travelling by LNER that one reason passengers with a reserved seat choose not to sit in their reserved seat is due to LNER's policy of loading up one coach until it is unpleasantly crowded whilst leaving the next coach virtually empty. I'm pleased to note LNER is now aware of this and is changing it's policy to load coaches evenly.

Thus my recommendation is:

Do **not** retain the current compulsory seat reservations system once the social distancing requirements on trains has eased

Promote the fact that those wanting a guaranteed seat can have one - by reserving a seat voluntarily either at time of ticket purchase or later.

Retain the ability to reserve a seat from any station up to 5 minutes before the train departs from that station.

Enforce the seat reservation system - ticket checks after each station call and proactively provide assistance to anyone who finds someone else is sitting in their seat

Finally, I do wonder if your researchers were correctly briefed? You say "34 per cent of those who previously flew **long distance**" would travel by train. It seems to me that long distance train travel should be compared to short haul air travel. Long distance air travel normally refers to inter-continental or transatlantic.

I also think more people would travel by train if LNER reverted to selling tickets for at least 12 weeks forward. It currently only seems to be offering tickets for 3 weeks or so ahead. we can expect a major increase in within-UK holidays this year, and many people would like to travel by train, but certainly like to plan their travel significantly more than 3 weeks in advance. Airlines and hotels, by contrast, normally allow you to book 12 months in advance.

Kindest regards

Dennis Fancett

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EXTRACT FROM LNER "INSIDE TRACK" BULLETIN

More people would choose rail if assured a seat

As we plan for a return of customers, when restrictions allow, we are focused on delivering improvements to attract more customers to make long distance journeys by rail – strengthening the economy and our communities, and protecting the environment. We are always gathering insight into our customers and potential customers to support this.

Recent YouGov polling has found that 68 per cent of British adults consider overcrowding a major concern when travelling by train for a long distance journey in the UK. However, the research also found that **one in three adults would be more likely to take a long distance train if they were guaranteed a seat** (just 14 per cent were less likely).

The research also found that having a guaranteed a seat would make 34 per cent of those who previously flew long distance (at least once a year before the pandemic) more likely to take a train.

We accelerated our plans for reservation-only services in response to COVID-19 and the need to maintain social distancing. As such, reservations are currently required for anyone using our services and can be made when booking, up to five minutes before departure online or by speaking to one of the team at the station, thereby protecting the walk-up railway while delivering improved comfort.

Our research shows that having an assured seat has benefits beyond social distancing and pandemic. In addition to supporting those who are attracted by the guarantee of a seat, Seat Assurance, means that customers on busy trains not being squeezed into the vestibules and unable to get to their seats. It also helps us manage unplanned disruption through better data on how many customers are planning to be on each service.

Our reservation system has been improved several times since it was introduced last year and now includes an interactive tool for passengers to check for quieter trains, and to choose their own seat. Small groups are automatically placed together rather than treating all passengers as solo travellers, with the system also spacing passengers throughout the train rather than filling up one carriage at a time.

If you have any suggestions on how this approach to rail travel could be improved further, please email PublicAffairs@LNER.co.uk

End