

# Taxing topics for trains

By Norman Bradbury

The Chancellor Gordon Brown's last budget announced long overdue tax concessions for employers' contributions to Local Transport Plans which apply to bus fares but not rail.

Behind the omission of rail is a desire to avoid encouraging long distance commuting and the Treasury misconception that rail commuters are relatively well-heeled.

The primary objective of transport tax concessions should be to generate modal shift from the car, but this latest measure will do little or nothing to achieve this since it ignores the potential of rail.

The superior ability of rail and light rail to achieve modal shift has been amply demonstrated and it should, therefore, form the backbone of future transport taxation strategy.

It should be remembered that commuters who choose rail travel do so principally because, in terms of time, it offers better value for money as a rule than either bus or car.

Clearly, there is a distinct difference between cost and value as anyone attempting to commute more than four or five miles in or around London, for example, will know and soon choose the quickest way, irrespective of how wealthy they may or may not be.

This also raises a social exclusion issue. By confining tax concessions to bus users, is the Chancellor saying to the less well off they should not travel by train?

It would also be a mistake to assume people commute long distances by choice as the main influence on choice of location is affordable housing. This is, for most people, what determines how far they are prepared to travel to work.

As an example, in the mid 1990s, nearly 40% of the working population of Epsom and Ewell relied upon London for employment even though London is 12 miles distant.

Property values in the area have escalated so much since then that essential workers can no longer find affordable housing without moving further away from London. In any case, long-distance commuting can easily be discouraged by placing a cap on the distance from a place of employment which might quali-



***Blind and partially sighted people are getting a rough deal on public transport, says the Guide Dogs for the Blind Association. Lack of accessible information, a lack of awareness among staff on how to cope with disabled customers and poorly designed vehicles are the major hurdles identified by the association.***

***The association teamed up with Chiltern Railways to launch an "Access for all" campaign in October urging transport operators to sign up to its travel charter. Five train companies signed up even before the launch. Guide dog owners are worried about the lack of automated announcements on many trains and the potentially life-threatening gap between trains and platform edges. But guide dog owners often praise the helpful attitude of many railway employees.***

***"The fact that some operators are praised for demonstrating best practice shows that there is no valid reason why all of them can't deliver those standards," said Geraldine Peacock, chief executive of the Guide Dogs Association.***

***Cath Proctor of Chiltern Railways said: "We look forward to working with organisations like Guide Dogs to ensure our trains and our staff training continue to meet the needs of everybody who travels with us.***

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fy for tax relief. In this way, tax relief could be given on, say, the first 10 or 12 miles only from the work place or a simpler method might be a limit on the first £8 of

the daily peak return fare. There need be no distinction between bus and rail fares. Alternatively, perhaps the Chancellor would care to address the problem of

some two million untaxed and uninsured "old bangers" now being driven at will around the country. This really is cheap travel.