

DIY rail tickets

Rail companies in Britain are waking up to the delays passengers experience in buying tickets at stations.

The latest service for passengers is the ability to buy tickets on the internet and print them at home just as airline passengers have been doing for some time.

The service – already offered by Swiss and German railways – can help the passenger and shorten queues at stations, but there are dangers.

Occasional rail users often need help and advice to guide them through the maze of options and regulations.

For the train operator, there may be a temptation to cut booking office staff, claiming tickets can be bought on the internet.

This approach would be a disaster for rail passengers as well as for the companies themselves.

Virgin Trains launched a trial of print-at-home tickets for online customers in September.

As part of the trial, Virgin was offering London Euston to Birmingham for £7 and Manchester for £9 for advance purchase single tickets and a seat reservation.

The Trainline site www.thetrainline.com is also running a trial involving Midland Mainline and ONE.

It offers £6 single tickets between London and Nottingham, Derby, Leicester, Sheffield and £5 London-Cambridge.

The e-tickets can be checked in the normal way by train crew.

First ScotRail meanwhile is planning to provide tickets for the Caledonian Sleeper via a text message to mobile phones. Although the e-tickets are providing a few, very



BLAST: Railfuture has always recommended that railways employ as much new technology as possible but maybe this is a step too far. British Rail used vast amounts of chemicals sprayed from moving trains to keep the weeds on the track down. But the Minneapolis and St Louis Railway in America adopted this novel approach – what looks like an adaption of a military flamethrower. This dangerous-looking contraption was photographed in 1958. The railway went bust in the 1920s, came back to life in the 1940s and was taken over by the Chicago and North Western in 1960.

limited, cheap offers, most rail passengers are worried by increasing prices and more restrictions on cheap tickets. First Capital Connect banned cheap day day return journeys from London during the evening peak.

It claims the restrictions are aimed at reducing overcrowding, which would be better tackled by dual-voltage class 319 trains being transferred from Southern to the former Thameslink route for which they were built.

A major revamp of the ticketing system is being heralded by the As-

sociation of Train Operating Companies, following inquiries by MPs and rail watchdogs. ATOC claims it is listening to passengers and wants to develop a simpler and more consistent fares structure.

A Railfuture delegation put these points at a meeting with ATOC on 12 September. They were not reassuring when it came to the questions of more restrictions.

Of course, ATOC's primary purpose is to defend the financial position of the companies which now run our trains. As usual it is difficult to judge where the Government

stands. It has lavished much more money on the privatised railway than it ever did on British Rail.

The Tory-supporting *Daily Mail* even claims the Government wants to price people off the rail system because it is costing too much to maintain.

After taking more control of the rail system, it nevertheless wants to keep its hands free.

"It's a commercial decision for rail companies to set unregulated fares," said a Department for Transport spokesman in June.

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Frustrated by lack of progress in reopening former railway lines, some local authorities are planning to turn these routes into guided busways.

The recent Government announcement to give £92million out of a total £116m to Cambridgeshire County Council to build a busway on the former Cambridge to St Ives railway line illustrates the point.

How should Railfuture respond to such schemes in the future and what lessons can be learnt from the St Ives campaign?

Where a busway is being proposed on a former railway trackbed, the first task is to consider realistically if a rail alternative would work and the possible benefits a rail reopening would bring.

Potential arguments could be the provision of long-distance services,

Valid objections to busways

freight terminals or a diversionary rail route.

Protecting a trackbed just for the sake of it is unlikely to prove successful and could damage the reputation of Railfuture. Even if there is a case to be made to protect the route for a future rail scheme, unless there is active support for a rail reopening from within the railway industry this argument will not get us very far. The local authority will simply highlight this lack of interest as a reason to go for a busway.

A potentially far stronger argument against a proposed busway would be the little additional benefit it will bring over existing bus services.

Government will insist that the local authority considers alternatives

for any scheme requiring Government money.

Campaigners should insist that local authorities look at improvements to existing bus services as an alternative rather than simply a rail versus busway comparison.

This is an important lesson to be learnt from the St Ives line, where it was not obvious if the claimed (very modest) switch from cars to buses was due to the guided busway or the provision of new park and ride sites associated with the busway.

Diverting bus services from local roads on to a busway may actually reduce accessibility to public transport for some people. Busways will tend to have fewer stops so the average travel distance to a

bus stop will increase. Diverting services on to a busway could also reduce the frequency of service on the original route, and if these remaining services are no longer commercially viable, local taxpayers' support will be needed. These issues must be included in any cost benefit analysis of the scheme.

Finally, it should be noted that busway schemes appear to be judged on different criteria to rail schemes. Can you imagine Network Rail asking for money for a new route where the timetable had not been worked out and the impact on and integration with existing rail services was unknown?

Such a scheme would be rejected out of hand. If it's a guided busway, the cheque is in the post!