

Battle over tickets

LOCAL ACTION



GUILDFORD: Ticket hall and, below, travel centre Pictures: Ken Bryant

Amid widespread public dissatisfaction with the Government's policy on rail fares, South West Trains has been going out of its way to antagonise passengers.

Not only has it put up fares, it has re-classified off-peak fares so that some people face rises of 20%.

It has also given its guards and revenue protection staff orders to be uncompromising with people who have been unable to buy tickets.

It has even advised people trying to buy rail tickets to allow more time than they need to buy their tickets.

Now it plans to close the travel centre at Guildford.

As a result, there has been a large volume of protest letters to the local newspaper, the *Surrey Advertiser*, many of the writers giving well-argued reasons why the centre should stay open.

SWT's idea for a food shop on the site of the travel centre has been vetoed by many people who point out the existing efficient, speedy Express Cafe, providing food and beverages at reasonable prices.

The provision of travel centre facilities at stations such as Guildford is essential.

It is unreasonable of the company to expect ticket office staff to make advance bookings to other parts of the country as well as selling tickets for the local area while keeping passengers happy.

The result of this closure will be ever more frustration and annoyance on the part of other passengers, and extremely long queues at the ticket office. In the longer term,

it will mean more people reject train travel as a reasonable alternative. SWT managing director Stewart Palmer attended a fringe meeting at the Labour party conference in Bournemouth in late September. He left the impression that fares would continue to be increased by more than the rate of inflation if there continued to be strong demand for rail travel.

But there seems to be a difference of approach between the DfT and SWT. SWT talks of moving to airline-style ticket selling with flexible, demand pricing, while the DfT is talking about simplification.

Rail minister Tom Harris insisted that the Government was spending "masses of money on the railways", partly to make up for past mistakes, including the privatisation process.

He said the Government has considered further high speed lines and they are not ruled out in future but, for now, money is spent with greater benefit elsewhere.

On fares, he agreed with calls for a simplified structure but said regulated fares will increase based on the principle of retail prices plus 1%.

The Government wanted to achieve a balance whereby the taxpayer pays 25% and the passenger pays 75% of the real cost of travelling.

Apply that formula to the roads and there would be few cars on the road. Over the past few years the "real cost" of motoring has fallen, so that rail has proportionately become more expensive. Road users should pay more towards the real cost of roads.



Yorkshire

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■ ■ Aire Valley rail users group

With the assistance of the MP for Shipley, the group has been in discussion with Metro, Yorkshire Forward, Network Rail, and the City of Bradford Metropolitan District Council regarding capacity issues on the Airedale Route.

■ ■ Bradford rail users group

The group has continued to campaign for the cross-rail link between Bradford Interchange and Forster Square stations.

This has received public support and on 26 June, 2007 a petition was presented to the City of Bradford Metropolitan District Council who agreed to forward it to the Executive Committee.

The group is also campaigning for the reinstatement of Low Moor station and a public meeting was held on 13 September, 2007 at Morley Carr Working Men's Club.

■ ■ Harrogate line rail users group

The group has written to Leeds city planning department to express its concerns about the draft proposal for the Leeds city action plan. One of the preferred proposals is to introduce a tram-train network on the Harrogate line. The group has commented on the East Coast Main Line Route Utilisation strategy and submissions have been sent to Network Rail and Passenger Focus. The proposal to electrify the 15-mile route from Hambleton Junction to Leeds via Micklefield has been welcomed by the group.

■ ■ Hull and East Riding rail users

The very limited Goole to Knottingley service was included in a new study commission by the West Yorkshire Passenger Transport Executive from the consultants Steer Davies Gleave into rail services in the Castleford and Knottingley area, and into possible options for developing the services.

Representatives from parish and town councils between Knottingley and Goole have established a Goole and Leeds rail action group.

On 20 July, John Grogan MP hosted a meeting in Selby to discuss Selby and Goole rail issues with local councillors, Network Rail, Northern Rail, Selby and District Rail Users Group, the Hull and East Riding Rail Users Association and the Goole and Leeds Rail Action Group.

■ ■ Pontefract and District rail action group

Rail services in the Pontefract area are significantly inferior to all others on the West Yorkshire rail network. This has been the case for many years. Leeds to Goole and Sheffield to York services are almost unusable, and the Wakefield to Knottingley service is no more than a segment of a service. It is, therefore, gratifying to see at last some attention now being paid to the problem, but it is disconcerting to find it referred to as a Castleford area study as this diverts attention away from the problem. The common factor is Pontefract – not Castleford.

The group is concerned that the eventual outcome of the study does, in fact, solve the problem of Pontefract services.

■ ■ Selby and District rail users group

Members at Cliffe and neighbouring villages began campaigning in March to open a station at Cliffe on the Selby to Hull line to replace the station which closed 40 years ago. The area has seen extensive residential development, and a petition resulted in the signatures of over 1,600 people. The petition had the support of the local parish councils, and attracted considerable media coverage.

RAILFUTURE REOPENINGS CONFERENCE: Railfuture members who attended the conference in Glasgow on 23 June enjoyed in-depth discussions on the latest rail projects in Scotland. More details will appear in the next issue of *Railwatch*.