



We could have a national railcard like the Austrians

The rail fares farce

Getting the right rail ticket has taken over from the British Rail sandwich as the national joke, believes Railfuture member Keith Flinders.

The media were also delighted in November when reporters discovered that it can cost £1,000 to travel from Cornwall to Scotland. The newspapers failed to tell the whole truth in comparing rail and air fares, but there was a new blow for rail later when it emerged that some fares would go up by 15% in January, despite an official announcement that the average fare rise would be only 1.1%.

The numbers of people travelling by rail held up well as the credit crunch deepened in 2009 but, in their desperation for more revenue, rail companies are now driving away passengers by putting up fares. There are now many spare train seats which could be sold off cheap to attract custom.

Railfuture has shown that a national railcard, similar to the Austrian Vorteils card, shown above, would attract more revenue for the train companies and more people to travel by rail.

"Research has shown that if you cut train fares by 20%, you would boost demand by 17%," said Cat Hobbs of the Campaign for Better Transport.

Where High Street stores are cutting prices and restaurants are offering "credit crunch" cheapies, rail companies are aping cash-strapped British Rail by putting up prices. BR had the excuse that it was forced by miserly grants from government to price passengers off trains.

Liberal Democrat transport spokesman Norman Baker said: "It is very sad that over the past 30 years under successive governments, train fares have gone up 49%, in real terms, above inflation, whereas the cost of travelling by car has gone down 17%. That differential is still widening today.

"What kind of sense does it make if we are tackling climate change, to price people off low-carbon forms of transport and into cars, and

indeed planes? We have got to start carbon pricing transport in a way that we have not done so far."

Many Railfuture members know their way round the fares system and can find the real bargains that still exist.

As Keith reports, where there is more than one train operator serving a route, ticket revenue is shared in a complex formula ORCATS. Although the Operational Research Computerised Allocation of Tickets to Services aims to provide a fair share-out, it can also produce distortions. If an operator can sell a ticket for use only on its trains, it keeps all the revenue for itself. Although the problem has eased somewhat, it is sometimes difficult to obtain a reasonably priced ticket for journeys involving more than one operator.

The system also provides some bargains. Keith reports that Wrexham and Shropshire was selling a £9 ticket from Tamebridge Parkway to London on its website while the cheapest fare quoted on thetrainline.com was £41 single!

In theory the Government protects rail passengers from unfair increases, but by choosing only to protect some fares, loopholes for the cash-hungry companies are enormous.

Rail unions said fares, among some of the highest in Europe, should be frozen or cut.

Anthony Smith, Passenger Focus chief executive, said: "Many unregulated fares will continue to soar above inflation as the average figures will mask steep rises on individual routes.

"We call upon the industry to be clear about which fares are going up and to publish average increases for unregulated fares for each train operating company.

"We are also concerned that some train operators will tinker with off peak ticket restrictions, forcing passengers into buying more expensive tickets."

For more national railcard information: www.railfuture.org.uk/tiki-index.php?page=National+Rail+Card

North East

By Peter Kenyon

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■ ■ Rail promoter

Nick Harvey talked about his work to popularise Hunmanby station on the Hull-Scarborough Yorkshire Wolds Coast Line when he spoke to our October branch meeting in Durham. Nick produces train and bus information in a combined A4 timetable sheet as well as a larger poster for display. These include fare information and contact numbers. Passenger journeys at Hunmanby have increased by 64.5% over a period of five years, compared with an overall line average of 8.7%, even though Hunmanby has a less-than-ideal timetable, with an irregular interval service of nine trains between 08.00 and 20.00. In addition, Nick has campaigned persistently for the restoration of the hourly train service on the Bridlington-Scarborough section of the line. He uses his skills for the benefit of the community, bearing most of the costs involved himself. For further information see www.greenexpressrailtours.co.uk



■ ■ Timetable improvements

Network Rail has produced the first draft of the proposed new standard pattern timetable on the East Coast main line for December next year. The branch co-ordinated responses from station and line user groups and other interested parties, to ensure coherent representation at the Newcastle consultation session which took place early in November. This was the last of six meetings initiated by National Express East Coast at venues ranging from Peterborough to Edinburgh. Balancing the needs of intermediate stations, branch workings, interconnecting services and freight traffic will keep the planners busy.

■ ■ Connection restored for Weardale Railway

After much hard work by volunteers and with full cooperation from Network Rail, the connection at Bishop Auckland has been reinstated. At the same time the disused part of the line from Bishop Auckland to Wolsingham has been prepared for service. An excursion from King's Cross to Stanhope in the New Year has been advertised and freight workings may be feasible. See www.weardale-railway.org.uk

■ ■ Campaign for integrated transport

Robert Whitehouse, a retired lawyer with experience on the Wensleydale Railway, has been appointed to the part-time post of community rail officer for the Darlington-Bishop Auckland Heritage Line by the Heritage Rail Partnership. The partnership wants the line to become an exemplary community railway with good integrated transport.

■ ■ Good news from Coastliners

Thanks to the efforts of Alex Nelson of chester-le-track.co.uk, it is hoped that Eaglescliffe station will see a regular staff presence from April 2010. At Hartlepool, when the long-awaited transport interchange is completed in 2010, the station should enjoy the luxury of a rail staff presence on Sundays and extended staffing hours on weekdays.

■ ■ Railway films on offer at church hall

Railway films feature in Saturday charity film shows organised at regular intervals by the Reverend Peter Barham, vicar of Ponteland. The shows at St Mary's Church Hall have proved so popular that there are two houses at 15.00 and 19.30. For details of the next show, please contact Peter Kenyon on the email address above.