

Revolt over network card

Train operators made a bid in March to further undermine the value of the network railcard, after attempting unsuccessfully to abolish it completely.

If they succeed it will again push rail ticket prices up by as much as 50% in the London and south east region when they are already too expensive.

Planned changes will also virtually eliminate the use of the card for local journeys.

The bad news came on 1 March 2002 from the Association of Train Operators which has a dismal history even though it has existed for less than 10 years.

The latest change is to remove network railcard discounts for weekday tickets which cost less than £10.

The card costs £20 a year but entitles the holder to a one-third reduction on off-peak journeys.

ATOC ignores the fact that vast numbers of trains, particularly in the London contra-peak, run with many seats empty.

It could be interpreted as greedy rail operators, dependent on grants of public money for most of their profits, cashing in at a time when their own performance is far from impressive.

It will also negate many of the advantages of London Mayor Ken Livingstone introducing road charges for motorists coming into central London.

ATOC may have calculated that many more people will be prompted to try public transport when the charge is introduced next year.

The measure certainly seems likely to undermine the Government's 10-year plan which is aimed at switching people from cars to public transport.

An off-peak mid-week day-trip from Harlow Town to Cambridge currently costs £7.65 with a network railcard. This will increase to £10 if ATOC gets its way. Likewise a one-day Travelcard from Harlow will increase in price from £5.80 to £8.80.

This will drive people out of the trains and back into their cars.

"These changes will mean there are no network card discounts on weekdays for journeys of between 30 and 50 miles," said Alan Francis of the Green party.

"The full one third discount would only be available on journeys over 50 miles and at weekends. This vastly reduces the usefulness of the card. In a Railfuture website message rail



While the West Coast main line was closed for engineering work in January and February, many trains were diverted over the Settle-Carlisle line.

Only 15 years ago, the S&C was threatened with closure and was starved of cash until it became a backwater of the network.

Rail campaigners, including the Railway Development Society, pointed out that the line was invaluable to the local community, to tourists and as a diversionary route.

After a long battle, the line was reprieved and now has a healthy rail user group – the Friends of the Settle-Carlisle Line – to help ensure it survives. It is recognised as an integral part of the national rail network.

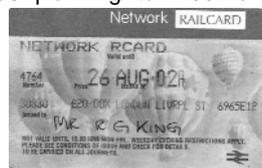
And it is regularly used as a diversionary route. Here a Virgin Voyager operates the 06.50 Edinburgh-Bournemouth past Ais Gill summit with Wild Boar Fell in the background on Saturday 23 February.

It costs £8 to join the Friends of the Settle-Carlisle Line. Details from Peter Davies, Membership Secretary, 5 Dewhirst Road, Brighouse, West Yorks HD6 4BA

Picture: Virgin Trains / Milepost 92 1/2

travellers were urged to write to their MPs and to their local train operators protesting about the erosion in the terms and conditions of the network railcard.

Action had to be swift as ATOC was planning to meet on 25



March to finalise the decision. There were conflicting reports of which train operators were pushing for the increase.

Railfuture's national executive met on 9 March, condemned the move and pledged to raise the issue with the Government, the SRA and with ATOC.

The full announcement from ATOC was at: http://www.atoc.org/communications/press/press/01_03_02.htm

Several newspapers, including the Sunday Express highlighted ATOC's action. ATOC has already brushed aside representations from Railfuture and other organisations that there should be a national railcard which would give regular rail travellers discounts – and therefore incentives – to travel by train.

John Pitcher of Railfuture, Kent, said: "At a time when the rail companies need all the goodwill they can get, they go and shoot themselves in the foot.

"They claim to be losing money but often they make only feeble attempts to sell and check tickets anyway."

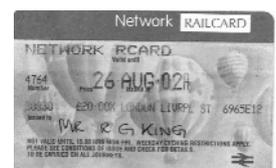
The £10 rule will not apply for tickets purchased for travel at weekends and on bank holidays. Current network railcards and ones renewed or purchased before 1 June will not be subject to the minimum fare.

It is also possible to mitigate

ATOC's action by renewing your network railcard before 18 May 2002.

This means you get a three-month extension – to compensate for current disruption to the network – and you will avoid the £10 rule until 17 August 2003.

Last year ATOC modified the conditions of the network railcard to force up the price for children. In addition South West Trains staff at London Waterloo were flouting ATOC's own rules



by refusing to sell £1 children's tickets to holders of the "old style" railcard. What is really needed of course is a national railcard offering good discounts to regular rail users.