



The outside edge of the blue zone indicates the boundary of the Network Railcard area where holders used to get a 33% discount after 10.00. The train operators' decision to impose a £10 minimum fare means travellers

from London now get 33% discount on cheap day return fares when they travel as far as the blue zone. Inside the pink zone, cheap day returns are less than £10 and no longer attract a discount. For travellers into London,

a similar effect applies, with discounts only on long journeys. Inside the white zone, between pink and blue cheap day returns from London range from £10 to £15 so attract a partial discount.

Action on fares at last

After years of suffering scandalously high fares, relief could be on the way for rail travellers in Britain.

On 19 July, the Strategic Rail Authority began a process of consulting passengers, train operators and other key stakeholders.

The three-month consultation is the first major review of fares regulation since privatisation in 1996. Changes are unlikely however until 2004.

Key issues to be addressed include whether regulated fares are working. There is strong evidence that train operators have done their best to undermine the system and have certainly let unregulated walk-on fares go sky-high.

The train operators have also exploited loopholes in the regulations and undermined Saver fares.

The latest move has seen GNER effectively changing Super

Savers into Savers and Savers into Business Savers. One campaigner in Yorkshire said: "Of course it is Savers, not Super Savers which are regulated. The motive for this is clearly to hoodwink the Regulator and implement a fares rise of about 10% without approval, adding yet again to the walk-on premium.

"The episode clearly illustrates the need for full control of all standard-class walk-on fares before the national structure disintegrates completely."

The SRA will also examine the link between fare levels and performance and whether there is scope for simplification.

"The time is ripe for a thorough investigation of rail fares," said SRA chairman Richard Bowker.

"The consultation will help us create a policy that will strike the right balance between the needs and aspirations of passengers, taxpayers and train companies. Fares play a part in

funding investment in the rail industry.

"In devising a fares policy for the future, we will need to align decisions with the revitalised 21st century railway we are creating through our strategic plan."

The consultation document *Future Fares Policy - Seeking Your Views* can be viewed on the SRA website at <http://www.sra.gov.uk>

The deadline for responses is 11 October.

Railfuture branches and rail user groups should ensure that their views are heard.

The importance of introducing a national railcard must also be stressed. Even so, there is still a danger that the SRA will make the wrong decisions.

It is already quoting a National Economic Research Associates report which blamed fares regulation for overcrowding.

Capital Transport campaigner

Cynthia Hay said: "The problem of overcrowding has been there for some time." The SRA must be reminded that slipping into the old BR habit of pricing off inconvenient traffic is no longer appropriate. The service and the network must be expanded to cope to ensure that road traffic congestion is not worsened.

The SRA receives £1.67 billion to subsidise rail. That is money well spent when the cost of road traffic congestion and road building is taken into account.

Millions of unnecessary road journeys are already made because of the cost of rail fares.

Recently the situation has been made even worse by airlines - who all benefit from subsidised fuel supplies - offering very low ticket prices.

A Railfuture delegation went to the SRA in July to raise the question of high rail fares, as well as ringfencing funding for small schemes, 15-year franchises and other issues.

RAILWATCH WEBSITE: <http://www.railwatch.org.uk>

RAILFUTURE WEBSITE: <http://www.railfuture.org.uk>