

Unfair to rural lines

Many pensioners now travel free on local buses. The scheme is to be extended nationwide next year. But rural rail lines could suffer as people abandon the railway where they have to pay, and switch to free buses. Ray Bentley looks at how this could be turned into an opportunity.

For many people rail is a better option than bus. For example, the local journey from Bere Ferres to Plymouth takes 20 minutes on the train and there is a train every two hours. By bus it takes over two hours and needs a change of bus.

There are only two buses per day which means that people have only an hour in Plymouth. The train runs later than the bus and operates on Sundays. The bus doesn't. After the morning peak train there are plenty of seats.

Travelling from Tavistock, the best option is for people to use a direct bus which goes every 20 minutes, although it is less frequent on Sundays.

Pensioners in Bere Ferres pay the same national and local taxes, so is the concessionary fares scheme fair on them?

The situation from other Tamar Valley Line stations is not quite as bad but still unacceptable. There will be other examples across the country. The lines that survived Beeching often did so because of the relative rail and road geography.

Cost

I suggest that if the concession scheme was extended to include only local rail services, the net cost would be low. As a result, some of the local council compensation payments could be paid to train as well as bus operators.

In many cases the bus fare is more expensive than the train. Barry Doe's fares survey says: "For all bar 27-mile journeys there are always bus operators charging more – sometimes significantly more – than rail, especially for off-peak returns."

My survey of branch lines in Devon and Cornwall found only one where the bus was cheaper. It was not operated by one of the large groups.

Abstraction

There appears to be no UK-wide inclusive research but Report 179 from the Scottish Executive's Development Department looking at the effect of the free bus concession said: "A significant switch from rail to bus was measured on train surveys on routes in the Lothians and Strathclyde where bus was offered as a free fare alternative." Researchers found between 19% and 66% pensioner abstraction on different



LUCKY: Betws-y-Coed station on the Conwy Valley line should benefit from the Welsh Assembly Government's initiative to include local railways in their concessionary fares

Picture: ATW

lines, averaging at 46%. That means nearly half of pensioners are being put off travelling by train.

Community rail

There are three quantified targets in the Community Rail Development Strategy. One seeks to double revenue in five years. Removing fare paying pensioners whose alternative used to be half fare bus is already reducing revenue on community railways.

Another target is to halve the subsidy per passenger. Concession travel generates use that isn't compensated to the operator but does add passengers to help achieve this target.

Joined-up government would look at the CRDS and concession fares (two Government policies) and seek to make them complementary rather than one harming the other. Unless of course there is a policy of "closure by stealth".

Postcode lottery

Many local authorities and passenger transport executives do however offer free or low flat fare concession travel on local rail. In England 46% of the population enjoy this benefit. In Scotland it is 53%.

In Wales the Assembly Government is piloting free travel on two community railways with plans to extend to another three. In Northern Ireland the whole rail system is free to concession travellers. From April 2007 Republic of Ireland concession pass holders will have free bus and train travel in Northern Ireland, and Northern Ireland residents will enjoy free travel in the republic.

About 75% of local authority expen-

diture is funded by central government.

The 54% of the English population not enjoying free travel on local rail may well feel aggrieved.

They could see themselves as paying or having paid national taxes to allow free or low flat fare use of trains by the 46% of the population.

The UK Exchequer will pay (either directly or by reciprocation, I don't know which) for free rail travel in Northern Ireland by neighbouring non-UK citizens, but not for UK citizens visiting Northern Ireland.

The series of local solutions is not equitable. We need a national solution.

The Bill

This Concessionary Bus Travel Bill contains the legislation necessary to make free bus concessionary travel England-wide from April 2008. Free bus travel is already on offer across the areas of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. This will only be extended UK-wide if cross payment issues can be resolved, as they must have been between Northern Ireland and the republic.

The Bill for secondary legislation (regulations/orders) has provisions to enable further changes to concession fares. Clause 8 (1) (b) could allow for extension to local rail.

The Department for Transport should be praised for having the wisdom to allow for this possibility.

The opportunity

I propose that free (or low flat fare) concession travel should be introduced on local rail off peak.

If the Government wants to pilot

this (as in Wales), initial implementation could be on community railways only. On equity and cost grounds there is no excuse for not doing this. The postcode lottery of local solutions does not resolve the equity issue. If the Government wants to avoid the accusation of "closure by stealth" via abstraction from local rail to free bus, they need to level the playing field.

Joined-up government is meant to be a virtue. The community rail and concessionary fares policies are working against each other.

However, the Bill in Parliament now to make free bus concession England-wide allows for later regulations to extend concession fares to local rail.

The tools to allow joining up of Government policy will be in place when the Bill is passed. We need to pressure MPs and others to activate Clause 8 (1) (b) as soon as possible and to moderate the community railways targets in the meantime.

● Ray Bentley has much more detail on this issue than space allows here. He can be contacted at erbentley@supanet.com for that detail and would be glad to hear of initiatives and views elsewhere.

● Until 2002 Ray Bentley was head of transport at Plymouth City Council. He is now a non-executive director of Northern Ireland Transport Holding Company and he is also on the boards of its subsidiaries.

