The case for a card

Why we need a national railcard

By Malcolm Smith

What is a national railcard ?

A National Railcard would be a card that could be bought by anyone, allowing the holder to get a third off the price of off-peak rail travel. In the Netherlands and Germany, such cards have been available for a number of years and both those countries see a higher level of rail usage than the UK.

In a way, we do have our own mini version within the area formerly served by Network SouthEast. This card is available to all and gives discounts of one third off rail fares over an area extending from Northampton down to Exeter. The card is extremely popular with up to 300,000 card holders and it has led to higher levels of rail travel throughout the area. Unfortunately with the introduction of a new £10 minimum fare, the popularity of that ticket is now under threat.

Why is the present system unfair ?

At the moment, we have a whole range of railcards: Senior Citizens, Young Persons, Disabled Persons', Network South East, Military Personnel Railcard, Scottish Highlands Railcard, Season Ticket Gold Card and even a Cornish Railcard!

With this huge array of cards, there are loads of anomalies. For instance, a colonel in the army can qualify for a discount but a nurse over 25 does not, even though a colonel's salary is far greater than a nurse's. A Season Ticket Gold Card can get you reductions on a weekday fare of under £10, but a Network South East Card will not. There are some individuals within the 25 to 60 age group on much lower incomes than some senior citizens.

This is not only unfair but also extremely complex. Many railway staff are not aware of all the different restrictions, so it is less likely that passengers will be. Merging this array of cards into one would encourage a fairer and more economical system.

Why is it a good idea ?

A National Railcard would encourage more rail travel. Priced at a reasonable level (say £30), it would encourage purchasers to make more than one journey per year to make it worth buying. The money generated from the £30 could go into a national pot which could be used to invest in the railways. New technology could also mean that the card could be different from the present railcards, and become like a supermarket reward card with which you could collect points. This would encourage even more rail travel.

Won't it mean a loss in TOC (Train Operating Company) revenue ?

Not at all. It will lead directly to many more off-peak passengers and thus more revenue. Many people are unwilling to make the transition from car to train, simply because it is not worth their while. With the National Railcard set at a sensible price, people would be encouraged to make 2-3 rail journeys a year in order to get their money's worth. It would be a lifeline to many smaller branchlines.

What about disadvantaged groups ?

A national railcard could have different prices per age group. Disabled people, under-25's, senior citizens and families could be charged at their present level (£15), while everyone else could be charged at a higher level (£30). This would make the National Railcard fair and ensure decent revenues for the railway network.

What can I do about it ?

Write an email to the following addresses to state the case for a National Railcard.

The Strategic Rail Authority (SRA) has been conducting a review of fares which was due to end in October. Please email them comments on why there should be a National Railcard to FaresReview@sra.gov.uk

Department for Transport can be emailed at rail@dft.gsi.gov.uk

Find the email address of your local MP at www.ukpolitics.org.uk/cgi/viewnews.cgi?id=98879396

Conclusion

Ultimately this will mean more people on the railways, leading to less congestion and greater long-term profits for the railway companies.

Railfuture annual draw winners

1. £500 John and Florrie Taylor, Monksmill, Castle Douglas DG7 2NY

2. £200 Paul Wilson, 15 The Meadows, Flackwell Heath, Bucks HP10 9LX

3. £100 Ms K Harman, 24 Sand Passage, Laide, Achnasheen, Ross & Cromarty IV22

4. £50 Sally Carter, Flat 4, 6 Lisburn Crescent, Torquay TQ1 2LA

£10 Book Tokens:

Mr & Mrs Jenkins, Marsena Bungalow, Quarella, Bridgend, South Wales CF31 1JG

G P Welch, 4 Cedar Close, Ware, Herts SG12 9PG

David Sammons, 34 Thoresby Avenue, Doncaster DN4 5BQ

David Randall, 90 Blackmead, Orton Malborne, Peterborough PE2 5PY

M Kneen, 41 Innage Lane, Bridgnorth, Shropshire WV16 4HS

G Gill, East Cleave, Sourton, Okehampton EX20 4JB

Railfuture monthly lottery winners

July: Philip Ralph, Leeds £40, Mrs J Brinicombe, Basingstoke, £25, Mrs E Ritson, Edinburgh £15, W L Ebbett, Bath £10, Miss B Easter, London SE12 £5, Brian Balmain, Rothesay £5.

August: Mrs J Vokins, Lewes, Sussex £64, Philip Bisatt, Swansea £40, Mary Acland-Hood, London SW8 £24, Roger Lucas, Melksham, £16, J Rice Ormskirk £8, Alan Everett London N16 £8.

September: W Ebbett, Bath £64, P Ralph, Leeds £40, J Dwelley, Felixstowe £24, P Wilson, Flackwell Heath £16, M Meredith, Kidderminster £8, A Boultwood, Edgware £8

New ideas for Chunnel

Eurotunnel wants to introduce new long-distance "piggyback" trains by 2005, possibly from Lille in northern France to southern England.

The idea comes from the company's new chief executive, Richard Shirrefs.

He said moving freight through the tunnel has been "so far a pretty substantial failure".

There are not enough trains moving though the Channel Tunnel which is an "under-utilised piece of kit".

Mr Shirrefs claims his own Le Shuttle operation is performing well but the rail freight operators have been lacklustre.

He singled out EWS for failing to respond fast enough to the problem of asylum seekers.

He also criticised the passenger service run by Eurostar which has kept fares high in spite of the threat of low-cost airlines which offer return fares to Paris for £35. Eurostar's lowest return fare is £79.

Railfuture has consistently pointed out the problems of high fares and we have also campaigned for ordinary rail services through the Channel Tunnel from places like Canterbury and Ashford to Amiens and Rouen.