

New chance for national railcard

Railfuture's call for a national railcard will be considered again in a new review of the railway fare structure by the House of Commons transport select committee.

The Association of Train Operators was unhelpful when Railfuture commissioned research which showed that a national railcard would be a financial and economic success for everyone.

ATOC is still clinging to the view that operators should be completely free to fix ticket prices, even though unprecedented amounts of public money are going into the operators' coffers.

Transport 2000 gave evidence to the committee – chaired by Gwyneth Dunwoody – in late November and reminded the committee of the importance of the national railcard.

Mrs Dunwoody agreed that "rail fares should be put in a wider political and economic context".

Transport 2000's Stephen Joseph said: "Now that the Department for Transport is in charge of railways, it can use its powers to make the fares policy provide wider social benefits." He added: "Public policy should be aimed at getting as many people as possible on trains. There are clear public benefits from lower rail fares. There should be a Gov-



A mock-up of what a national railcard could look like, left, and top, the existing range of railcards.

ernment strategy to increase capacity on the railway, dealing first with pinch points."

Unfortunately the rail industry seems to think that it can choke off demand on overcrowded services by increasing fares. And such a policy lets the Government off the hook of providing capacity for all the new passengers coming to rail.

"Predict and provide" policies have allowed unbridled road building in the past but now that people are switching to rail as an economically

and environmentally better mode of transport, the Government is sadly not responding to the challenge.

At a public evidence session, some MPs on the committee even tried to undermine the evidence from the RMT rail union that fares in Europe are generally cheaper than in Britain.

RMT leader Bob Crow exposed some of the under-hand practices of the train operators, small allocations of cheap fares, high walk-on fares and software that gave a better service to people living in middle-class areas than those living in inner-city areas, for example.

He added: "The present situation seems to be that the rail companies are prepared to sell tickets to the highest bidder."

The RMT submitted a 44-page dossier of detailed fares information.

Mrs Dunwoody joked that there might not be a great conspiracy about fare prices but maybe there was a little one.

Some MPs demonstrated immense lack of understanding.

One even asked: "Can you demonstrate by statistical analysis that a reliable service leads to increased rail use?" Can he be serious?

One MP seemed to think that schoolchildren enjoy free travel on London trains. In fact they have just been given free travel on the buses. They have to pay on both the Tube and National Rail.

That puts rail at both an economic and marketing disadvantage although ATOC has added to rail operators' problems by not properly implementing London's highly popular Oyster ticketing system at National Rail stations.

It unconvincingly points out that it wants a better system. It's always easier to do nothing.

The Rail Passengers Council told the committee it would be carrying out passenger surveys but believed that value for money was the most important issue for passengers. It said a £30 national railcard, giving 50% off off-peak fares would be a £70million winner for the industry.

Back to Berlin

By Jim Walker

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Since the last Railfuture visit to Berlin in 2000, the new Lehrter Bahnhof has moved from a huge hole in the ground to a very impressive glass-roofed elevated station for east-west international trains crossing an underground station for north-south lines.

When a Railfuture party visited for a week in September, only suburban trains were stopping there. It will open for all international trains in June just in time for thousands of foreigners to arrive in Germany for the World Cup.

Apart from this hair-raising deadline there is a real problem in that the station is currently in the middle of 20 acres of nothing, land that was on the border between the two Germanys, and will eventually be developed.

Communications from the new station will be quite limited, compared with the current international arrivals station, Berlin Zoo.

There were plenty of signs of better railways on our visit this time.

Berlin's suburban network, the S-Bahn, was managed by the East with little maintenance for 40 years. Since reunification it has been revived with massive investment in new stations, track and signalling. The mainline Ost-

bahnhof, once a gloomy barn of a place, now has more retail outlets than Waterloo. Railfuture's sister organisation Pro Bahn took us on a day trip to Eberswalde, a town with an interesting tram system, and the Niederfinow ship-lift, an amazing 1930s structure capable of lifting a Rhine-style canal barge 36 metres.

The day was rounded off by a visit to Frankfurt an der Oder, using a privately owned railway with impressive new diesel trains. Of course there was also plenty of free time in Berlin for members to see whatever they wanted.

On the first day of our trip we caught the mid-day Eurostar to Brussels. Our hotel in Cologne had no record of our booking (their fault) but they still managed to find us rooms and we arrived in Berlin the next afternoon.

That evening we met Klaus-Jurgen Link and Dietmar Dalbogk from Pro Bahn for a meal and swapped notes on our respective governments' attitude to investment in railways.

Generally, it's pretty poor in the UK but has been good in Germany. Unfortunately the German economy is not in the best of health and may struggle to pay for more rail development schemes. Now we're all set for Railfuture's first venture to Italy in May 2006. See next page.

Euro briefs

Half right-half wrong: At the end of September, members of the European Parliament voted to adopt a watered-down version of the European Commission's proposed regulation on rail passengers' rights and obligations. The European Passengers' Federation welcomed the MEPs' move as "a small step forward". But EPF wants an obligation on operators to sell through tickets and to provide information about other railways.

These two proposals by the European Commission were deleted by the MEPs. EPF is calling on national transport ministers to put these clauses back in at the next council of ministers.

Equal opportunities: EPF submitted comments on the European Commission's paper on the rights of international coach passengers. EPF called for statistics about late buses and coaches to be collected and published, as they are for trains. There should also be a complaints-handling body.

Spread the word: EPF members addressed three international conferences in the autumn. Trevor Garrod was in Berlin. Christopher Irwin addressed the Nordic Rail Conference in Sweden. Jean-Paul Jacquot spoke at the Union International des Chemins de Fer event in Milan. Then, on 9 December, EPF representatives were due to meet managers of Thalys, the international company which operates high-speed trains between Paris, Brussels, Amsterdam and Cologne.

EPF conference: All Railfuture members are invited to the EPF annual general meeting on Saturday 18 March in the Dutch city of Maastricht. The chief executive of the public transport authority at Aachen will speak along with others from the European Parliament and Commission. For full details of the conference, which should be available just after Christmas, send a SAE to Trevor Garrod, 15 Clapham Rd South, Lowestoft, NR32 1RQ