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Elections

Railfuture is the campaigning name of Railway Development Society Ltd, 18a Grantham Road, Bracebridge Heath, Lincoln LN4 2LD

The board is elected annually and nomination forms can be obtained in January.



Smart future

By Ellen Boot and Ray King

While Britain's rail operators are sitting back waiting for the extra cash from fare increases to roll in, a new national smartcard system is being introduced in the Netherlands.

The public transport Chipcard works like the popular Oyster card in London and will include trains, metro, trams and buses throughout the country, not just on the Rotterdam metro and buses where it is currently being trialled.

The system is also about to go live on the Amsterdam metro.

Passengers buy one Chipcard – not individual tickets for every journey – and merely swipe a card reader at the beginning and end of their journey and the computer-based system does the rest.

It works out the fare, deducts it from the amount the customer has pre-stored on the ticket and then divides up the revenue between operators.

So far, 80% of transport operators have agreed to use the Chipcard and it is expected to be operating nationwide next year. In the past, revenue has been roughly shared

between the five major operators after a theoretical analysis of the available statistics.

In future, the operator will get an exact payment.

Chipcards can be pre-loaded at station ticket machines with monthly or weekly passes or a simple cash amount.

Computers have been installed at rail stations to manage the flow of information from the ticket readers at the station gates. All the transaction information is then sent via a series of computers to a central clearing house serving the entire public transport system.

The original government tender insisted that the technology companies should not keep the operating systems secret – to avoid a monopoly developing.

A good deal of negotiating and compromise was necessary for the operators to agree on a system that worked for their individual businesses.

Oyster blockers

As British train operators are resisting the extension of London's smart

card – the Oyster card – it will be interesting to see how they justify clinging to their archaic paper-based system which already causes delays for passengers, especially those who need several operators to complete one journey.

Smart cards are a great step towards an integrated transport system.

London mayor Ken Livingstone has already spent three years trying to persuade National Rail operators to join the Transport for London Oyster scheme.

For passengers, the train operators' refusal to join puts up the price of travel and makes it more inconvenient.

"Oyster works well, the public like it and it's not exactly rocket science to make it fully compatible," said Brian Cooke of London TravelWatch.

Oyster top-ups cannot be bought at national rail stations, nor at the 22 national rail stations which are served by the Tube. Richmond and Wimbledon are just two examples.

The result is that many people with an Oyster card avoid using national rail services.

Government faring badly

One of the Government's biggest failings is not keeping up with the public debate on the environment.

There is a general acceptance – outside the hothouse of Westminster – that reliance on road and air travel is a blind alley.

But the Government has failed to create the conditions where it is easy for people to make the correct environmental choices.

It has allowed the cost of motoring to fall while putting up rail fares to price people off hideously crowded trains, according to *The Observer* newspaper.

In a Passenger Focus survey, only 45% of passengers believe the railways are giving good value for the cost of a ticket.

Yet the Government has made a political decision to leave the railways in private hands, with all the added cost implications.

Train operating companies have a legal duty to make as much profit as possible for their shareholders while the public in general wants a

railway that provides good service at a low price. The Government has to find a way to square the circle by rewarding rail passengers for making the right travel choice.

Train operators have launched many cheap ticket offers for passengers travelling exclusively on their trains but have axed the network-wide Super Savers, undermined Savers and blocked the Oyster card in the London area.

Virgin has doubled the number of passengers on its London-Manchester service and is giving away tickets to attract air travellers.

But cheap advance purchase tickets have stringent restrictions, unlike the more flexible Saver.

"Saver tickets are the only low-cost regulated fares available when travelling with more than one train company," said Brian Cooke, chairman of London TravelWatch.

"One of the major advantages of rail is the ability to turn up and go. To lose this would be a disaster."

Railfuture has already shown the

way. Mr Cooke said: "A national rail loyalty card would help all of those people who do not commute every day but who still rely on trains a few times a week.

"The regulated fares system has not kept pace with changing working patterns and we need a way of protecting the occasional traveller."

Ignoring the private needs of operators but taking into account the national interest, Britain also needs extra trains, longer trains but most of all new lines and new stations.

Money must be spent. But it would be money well-spent, not tipped into a road-building pothole.

Time for action

You can help Railfuture by doing one of the following:

1. Find a bargain fare and recommend it in a letter to the readers of your local paper.
2. Ask for the railway fares manual for your local reference library.
3. Find a place for your Railfuture branch to put up publicity material.