

Nigel Harris

Comment



nigel.harris@bauermedia.co.uk

@RAIL

No trust, no surprise

Passengers now pay 80% of their fare and deserve respect

The twin pillars of any successful, long-term commercial relationship between a supplier and a customer are top-quality service delivery at the right price and trust between buyer and seller.

The most successful and mature businesses are acutely aware that if you get the first consistently right, then the second follows as a natural consequence among happy customers. The railway does a patchy job on the first, and a too often lamentable job in earning and maintaining the trust of its passengers. Yes, ongoing National Rail Passenger Surveys by Passenger Focus do indeed highlight significant levels of satisfaction with their journey - but the railway and Government turn Nelsonian blind eyes to the equally common high dissatisfaction scores with value for money. Taken alongside perceived high fares that are too often raised too much, and trust in the railway is very low.

Look no further than the farcical and ham-fisted 'adjustment' of peak fare restrictions, ostensibly by Northern Rail, as covered in bitingly critical terms by Fares & Services Expert Barry Doe in RAIL 757/758. Right up there with complaints about value for money, passengers are rightly suspicious of (and utterly despise) the complexity of a bewildering fares system which is barely understood even by many within the railway. This shows why.

Let me recap: on September 8, Northern implemented a new evening peak restriction on off-peak tickets. It decreed that if an off-peak ticket journey involved a train change during the peak (1600-1830), then an excess fare would be payable for that portion of the journey beyond the peak-hour change of train.

It seemed innocuous enough - and after all, southeast TOCs have for years decreed that off-peak tickets are not available within the peak period. But it's not quite that simple, and when you dig into the detail, a murky tale of fragmentation, ignorance and (how shall I put this?) a less than candid approach emerges. Railway, Government and regulators alike have all behaved in a less than straightforward and professional manner.

For a start, this restriction is not only not common, it is a new departure and unique. In the South East it is quite true that off-peak tickets are not available in the peak - but if you buy a cheap day ticket before the peak period starts (in this instance 1600) then the ticket is valid for the entire journey. This applies not only right through the peak period, but cru-

cially if you have to change trains for that journey within the peak period itself.

What's new here is that Northern is imposing a higher fare for that post-train change portion of the journey, which was previously covered by the cheap fare. Barry (supported by both Campaign for Better Transport and Passenger Focus) points out that this is a dangerous precedent that will drive fares up yet further and dampen demand. What if you buy a Penzance-Tonbridge cheap ticket, departing in the morning? That ticket currently covers the whole journey, even though it will inevitably involve a peak-time train change in London. If the Northern principle is allowed to stand, he argues, then in future you would

"Glib and nonsensical explanations about restrictions being common in the South are either misleading or ignorant..."

have to pay a penalty excess fare for your post-change portion. This is just wrong. It not only miserably fails the common sense and fairness test, it looks grasping, sneaky and underhand. It undermines trust.

What makes it worse - and most probably illegal - is that while booking office staff should advise you of this restriction when you buy your ticket, as I understand it, ticket machines and central systems are not programmed with this restriction. And so a ticket machine would still sell you a cheap ticket which, when you used it, would be invalid after a peak-time train change and would trigger an excess fare. If you were thus penalised and took it to court, you would probably win because you weren't told about the restriction when the machine sold you the cheap ticket.

This is a complete mess - so should we hang Northern out to dry for what critics see as cynical rip-off management? Well, no - because further investigation indicates that Northern is doing no more than implement an order from the Department for Transport!

As part of Northern's 22-month Direct Award franchise extension that started on April 1, the DfT demanded both cost savings and revenue increases to ease the financial burden on the taxpayer. Northern offered car park charges for previously free car parks, the

withdrawal of some ludicrously low fares, or the implementation of peak-time restrictions.

Politicians balked at introducing car parking charges, but many cheap fares were indeed withdrawn by Northern (£1.95 evening returns anywhere in the Greater Manchester area?). And on April 1 the DfT simply withdrew the subsidy for evening peak cheap ticket use without further discussion - leaving Northern no choice but to implement this controversial restriction. Also, unlike other peak restrictions in the South East, where travel is banned only in the outbound direction from London, Northern's restriction is a blanket ban on peak-time travel in any direction.

What makes this rather unfair mess even worse is that when Barry enquired about this, the DfT gave him a meaningless political answer about next year's fares nationally, while the Office of Rail Regulation washed its hands of any involvement. See the full sad story in *Fare Dealer* in RAIL 757/758.

Glib and nonsensical explanations about restrictions being common in the South are either misleading or ignorant, says Fares & Services Expert Barry Doe.

"...the general principle is that the restriction on a ticket applies from the start of the journey - not individual legs - and cannot change en route unless specific trains are barred," he says.

We already have a confusing system operated by CrossCountry whereby an empty seat you take on boarding suddenly becomes reserved en route, and you are ordered to vacate it. Now Northern (under DfT orders, effectively) has launched a system where you suddenly become liable for an expensive mid-journey excess fare penalty, too! It's unfair madness and breaks any fair play principle.

Put this together with the annual misleading and mischievous manipulation we see from the Association of Train Operating Companies about the annual fare increase, plus the confusion of split-journey ticketing and other inconsistencies that jack up fares, and it's no surprise that passengers have a hearty distrust for train operators. TOCs (and DfT) are reaping what they have sowed and need to take a long, cool look in the mirror.

Wolmar frequently asks 'What is a franchise for?' This has always puzzled me, because it's blindingly obvious. A franchise is there 100% to serve the fare-paying passenger who now pays around 80% of the cost of their journey.

They deserve more respect, frankly. ■