

Of fares and ticketing...



If passengers can make an informed choice in full knowledge, if they need it, of all the options and then, having bought a ticket, are clear about what they have bought, this should really help boost value-for-money ratings and trust says **Anthony Smith**

The recent government decision to restrict the amount by which regulated fares can be raised on individual routes is very welcome and represents a victory. Passenger Focus has been calling for years for this to happen. The old system was simply unfair and totally inexplicable. It effectively left train companies allocating government subsidy.

It also struck at the heart of trust. The Secretary of State would stand up and announce regulated fare rises of, say, the RPI figure plus one percent. So 4.2 per cent for January 2014. However, down the line this figure could translate very differently and some passengers could end up paying quite a different amount. Double-digit rises were not uncommon just a few years ago and, while train companies have exercised some restraint in recent years, it simply seemed unfair that such a wide range of 'flex' could be applied.

Up to five per cent difference could be applied based on complex, impenetrable rules about carrying such an increase over from one year to the next.

Some flex is probably needed to cope with capacity problems and fare anomalies that are always being discovered or created. However, it seemed that such a wide range undermined the very nature of necessary and welcome fares regulation. So this restriction of flex seems to us a step in the right direction.

Information is the key

As a consumer organisation we like choice – it provides an opportunity for passengers to choose the ticket most suited to them. With 2,500 plus stations, yield management, London and other regional fares, some tickets only valid on specific operator's trains, some tickets only available online and other offers as well, totally cutting through the fares jungle was never on the cards. It has always seemed to us that information is the key.

If passengers can make an informed choice in full knowledge, if they need it, of all the options and then, having bought a ticket, are clear about what they have bought, this should really help boost value-for-money ratings and trust.

The raft of recent announcements about single-leg pricing, smarter ticketing and a code of practice on information is all heading in the right direction. Given the sometimes complex nature of ticket-purchasing decisions and the heavy price that can be paid if you are found with an 'invalid' ticket, train companies must work hard to make sure they help passengers make the right choice.

Then, once passengers have bought a ticket, it should be clear from the face of the ticket what they have bought. I am convinced the industry undersells the value of Anytime and Off Peak tickets. It might boost value-for-money ratings if passengers knew they were in possession of a valuable flexible ticket although it can be confusing to receive a handful of coupons for a simple return journey if reservations are involved. We welcome the proposed new-look ticket layout which should make recognition much clearer. ●

Anthony Smith is the chief executive of Passenger Focus

