

Off the rails

Poor advice means passengers could be paying well over the odds for rail travel

With more than 19,000 passenger services a day, operated by 23 train companies serving more than 2,500 stations, Britain's rail network is certainly complex. To confuse things further, there are more than 70 types of fare on sale, governed by an incredible 760 conditions of use. So for passengers to get the best value for money, it's absolutely crucial that they are provided with a full choice of all available fares for their journey when they buy a ticket.

In the past, we've expressed serious doubts about the reliability of information given out by booking clerks at station ticket offices and the National Rail Enquiries (NRES) telephone helpline. Our latest research into how accurate their advice is (see 'Our research', p30) shows that, to paraphrase British Rail's slogan of the 1980s, they're still 'getting there'.

Research results

Some of the worst advice we were given occurred when we asked for the cheapest fare for a single journey between London and Grantham, leaving on a weekday and arriving before 9am. For a ticket bought on the day of travel, both NRES and a King's Cross station clerk quoted GNER's £44.50 fare, ignoring a competing Hull Trains service that leaves ten minutes earlier from the same station and costs just £20.

Overall, NRES managed to give the cheapest fare for just two of our eight journeys that gave a choice of which train

company you could travel by. Station staff did slightly better, with four correct answers – see 'Investigation results', opposite, for further details.

Cheaper fares, such as Savers and Cheap Day Returns, are valid immediately after the busy morning peak period. We put the companies to the test to see whether we were told about trains leaving just outside of peak times. Particularly poor advice was given when we asked for the cheapest day return between Winchester and London, arriving by 10am. The price quoted by NRES and at Winchester station was £43.40, but we'd have liked to have been given the option of arriving eight minutes later, as this would have cost just £27.40.

Price of bad advice

Our six questions about breaking journeys en route were generally answered well, with station staff scoring full marks. NRES answered four scenarios correctly, but the errors it made would have proved very expensive for passengers.

We asked whether we could travel from Southampton to Bristol and then on to Birmingham later the same day. A through single should cost £48, but NRES made a real howler and quoted separate fares for each leg, pushing the fare up to £91. Our rail fares expert described this as an 'appalling lack of knowledge by staff'.

Some of the most costly bad advice was dished out when we asked about journeys where we should have been advised to buy a Season or Rover ticket (see 'Checklist',



right) to save us money; neither NRES nor station staff got any of these questions right.

When we asked about making a return journey between Swindon and Penzance twice in the same week, we should have been offered a Freedom of the Southwest Rover, which is valid for unlimited travel on any three days out of seven and costs £70. Instead, both NRES and station staff quoted £67 per journey, making £134 in total – nearly double the cheapest price.

Online advice on track

Discouraged by the poor fares advice on offer at stations and over the phone, we went on the NRES website (see 'Contacts', p30), the 'official information service' for Britain's rail network.

We weren't able to test all of our scenarios online. It isn't possible to plan a route when you break a journey and you can't plan multiple journeys over time, which we used to test our season ticket scenarios. But we're pleased to report that the NRES website quoted the cheapest fare identified by our expert for the 14 queries we were able to test, making it the best source we tested.

Both the NRES helpline and station staff quoted nearly double the cheapest price

In 1957, an open return from Manchester to London cost £3 2s 0d – about £54 at current prices. Today it costs £219.

55 per cent of Which? members think that tickets are poor value when bought on the day of travel.

Overcrowding puts off more Which? members in the South (46 per cent) than in the North (33 per cent).

Fare dodging costs about £230 million a year. Only 39 per cent of Which? members who travel regularly had their tickets checked every journey.

The government claims rail fares went up overall by 3 per cent in the last ten years. This masks huge hikes in the cost of fully flexible travel at peak times.



THE STRAIN OF TAKING THE TRAIN

Ithiel Mogridge 52, *research chemist*
Ithiel Mogridge, from Yate near Bristol, travels by train about three or four times a year, and usually experiences problems.

She says: 'Last Christmas I found my brother a ticket on thetrainline.com to travel from Blackburn to Yate. While the direct route was £51, this one involved a change in Newport and cost just £21. I emailed the details to him and his partner. They went to Blackburn station where the clerk insisted that the fare was £51. My brother's

partner had printed the email and made the clerk find the £21 journey.

'On another occasion I went to London for the day. As I had the temerity to travel in the rush hour it cost me £95. Had there been two of us, it would have been cheaper to pay for petrol and have someone drive us.

'I support the concept of public transport but, sadly, the extreme complexity of the booking system coupled with the painfully high prices of travelling at busy times make train travel an excruciating choice.'

However, we'd like the website to show trains either side of the time you want to travel. For example, if you state that you want to arrive by a certain time, the site doesn't immediately show trains that arrive just after that time – you need to click a link to get to this information. If you don't realise this, you could miss out on a cheaper fare.

The government's solution

With two of the sources we tested not coming up to scratch, we were encouraged to see the government's recent proposal to introduce a 'price promise' to ensure that if passengers are pointed to one fare when there was a better deal on offer, they will be refunded the difference.

When we spoke to the Department for Transport, a spokeswoman told us that the price promise is likely to work in the same way as John Lewis's 'never knowingly undersold' policy – meaning passengers will have to be aware of whether there's a cheaper alternative available. Based on our research results, we have concerns about this. If you can't access the NRES website, how will you know whether the price you've been quoted is the cheapest fare or not?

Investigation results

Bad advice would have cost us more than £1,263

Based on the results of our test, we wouldn't recommend the NRES helpline or station staff as a source of reliable information for rail fares. Station staff answered 15 out of 25 questions (60 per cent) correctly, but this still falls a long way short of acceptable. NRES correctly answered only ten out of 25 (40 per cent), which is inexcusable. Overall, just 50 per cent of questions were answered correctly. If we had followed the advice given, we would have been £1,263.60 worse off.

TYPE OF QUERY	Total queries	NRES good advice	Station staff good advice
COMPETING ROUTES ^a	8	2	4
PEAK/OFF-PEAK TRAVEL ^b	6	4	5
BREAKING JOURNEYS ^c	6	4	6
SEASON TICKETS ^d	5	0	0
TOTAL	25	10	15

^a More than one company serves the same destination ^b Different fares are available, depending on the time travelled ^c Ticket allows you to stop off at stations along your route ^d Better value than individual tickets when making a number of journeys over a set time

Checklist

Essential advice to help you get the best out of Britain's railways

■ **Advance fares** These should be available at least nine weeks ahead of departure, although we found they can be bought around 11-12 weeks in advance. Seat reservations are included, but you can travel only on a specified train and refunds aren't usually available.

■ **Cheap ticket tip** Once you're on the 'Timetable results' page on the NRES website, scroll down to 'Other options' and select 'Cheapest' from the drop-down 'Search by' menu.

■ **Avoid peak times** If you're travelling at or around peak times (between 7am and 9am weekdays and, in some areas, 4pm and 7pm), ask about trains departing just before or after these periods to see whether cheaper fares are available.

■ **Money off** Railcards cost just £20 for a year (£18 if you're disabled) and can save you a third on most tickets. Go to www.railcard.co.uk or call 0845 748 4950 to check eligibility.

■ **Save time and cash** If you're making the same journey on a regular basis, a Season or Rover ticket may save you money – and time queuing at the ticket office – even if you make just two trips a week. Use www.nationalrail.co.uk to calculate the cost.

■ **Special offers** Check www.nationalrail.co.uk and train companies' websites for regular special offers.

■ **Compensation** If your train arrives at your destination more than an hour late because of delays, you're entitled to a minimum of 20 per cent of the cost of the ticket, paid in travel vouchers. Claim online at www.traindelays.co.uk or ask for the train company's passenger's charter to find out how to claim.

Which? says

The government subsidy received by the railways in 2006 to 2007 was £6.3bn. That's almost £220 (or the cost of a standard open return on Virgin Trains between Manchester and London) from every UK taxpayer. At the very least, this level of public financial support demands that staff can provide accurate information to passengers about cheap tickets.

The NRES helpline and station staff need to be better trained. If people using the NRES website at home can access accurate

information, why can't station clerks and those manning the NRES helpline?

If you're a prospective passenger and you don't have access to the internet, don't rely on the NRES helpline and station staff – use our 'Checklist' (see p29) to help you beat the system.

Contacts

National Rail Enquiries
0845 748 4950; www.nationalrail.co.uk
TheTrainline www.thetrainline.co.uk
TrainDelays www.traindelays.co.uk

OUR RESEARCH

In June this year, we asked National Rail Enquiries and clerks at station ticket offices what the cheapest walk-on (not advance purchase) fares would be for 25 different journey scenarios, devised for us by a rail-fare expert.

Over a 12-week period from mid-May 2007 to August 2007, we used the booking website www.thetrainline.com to check the price and availability of single advance-purchase fares on selected trains operated by five train companies. We also asked 3,696 Which? online panel members about their usage and opinions of rail services in Britain. Thanks to all who took part.

THE CHEAPEST TICKETS AREN'T ALWAYS AVAILABLE AT THE EARLIEST POSSIBLE DATE

Booking tickets ahead won't always get you the best deal. We investigate

'The earlier you book, the cheaper the ticket,' advise all five of the train companies we monitored for the availability and price of their single advance purchase tickets.

Advance tickets were generally available at least 11 weeks ahead of departure, although on peak-time trains the companies' advertised lowest-

priced fares weren't available at all – even this far in advance.

The lines on the graph below show how the cost of the cheapest ticket on selected journeys changed over a 12-week period. The train companies' own advice would suggest a gradual upwards curve for each line. This is clearly not always the case. On some

services, ticket prices went up and down, seemingly at random.

We put our findings to the Commercial Director of the Association for Train Operating Companies, David Mapp, who said: 'Generally speaking, the price of the advance-purchase fare will increase as the day of departure approaches. But occasionally the train operator

will reduce the price if it becomes clear that seats are not being sold as quickly as expected or if capacity suddenly becomes available – for instance, if a large group booking is cancelled.'

However, we think that it's confusing for passengers and does little to inspire confidence in the companies' own advice.

