

Flexible Season Tickets for 2021 – an open letter by Railfuture

This paper has been prepared to set out our views on how flexible season tickets might work for a mid-2021 launch date. At present, there is extensive home working occurring to help control the rate of Covid-19 infections. There is a widely held view that, in the future, many people will spread their working time between their home and the workplace. The number of days of attendance will undoubtedly vary, dependent on factors such as the benefit of interacting with others and personal circumstances.

Traditional season tickets are designed for the full time – 5 days a week, travelling in peak hours – workplace attender and there is now an urgent need to supplement them with a product designed for the less regular attender, who often get no, or very limited, benefit from the traditional season ticket. It is important, however, to remember that some workplace attenders will still need to travel in peak hours every day, and so the traditional season ticket – or an equivalent – needs to be retained.

A number of TOCs offer Carnet tickets – a flat rate discount for purchasing a bundle of tickets for use within a defined period. Whilst they do offer a small price improvement for the regular traveller, they have quite different characteristics to the traditional season ticket: they do not reward regular or long term travel in the manner of monthly and annual season tickets, nor does their discount vary according to distance, as also occurs with the traditional season ticket. For instance, for Bedford, a weekly season ticket to London is priced with a 45% discount when compared to 5 Peak Day return tickets; carnet tickets offer under a ¼ of the discount (10%), but only require a return journey around once a month (see appendix). The offerings from TOCs have noticeable variations in discounts and other terms & conditions.

We support the view that urgent changes are needed to the fares to meet the needs of the new sometimes in the workplace worker¹. To best support the “Return to the Office”, rail fares need to be seen to encourage this through a reward for more regular travel to work. A more attractive price will help win back to the railway those who have car-commuted during the pandemic, and also encourage new customers. This has several advantages including reducing carbon emissions, improving air quality, reducing congestion, and, through increased travel better fare revenue.

For speed, we support the view that this year’s flexible season ticket changes need to be a tactical delivery based on an evolution of existing Carnet products. We believe it essential that this:

1. Provides nationally consistent discounts and sets of conditions that applies across all TOCs and includes flows that cross TOC boundaries.
2. Provides for flexibility in travel – eg two days one week, three the next; products that allow (eg) attendance on three consecutive days will not meet the needs of someone who usually attends Mondays, Tuesdays and Thursdays, with occasional variations.
3. Encourages more regular travel – eg more than once per week, occasionally three times etc.

This, however, should not be seen as the long term solution. Discounts for more frequent travel needs to be seen as an integral part of the work already underway on the redesign of fares as recommended in the Williams review and by the Rail Delivery Group. At this point, new options can be contemplated, such as Pay as You Go fares with discounts that are based on recent spend or the rate of ticket purchase.

¹ Transport Focus, the independent watchdog for transport users has also reached the same conclusions – eg <https://www.transportfocus.org.uk/publication/fairer-fares-the-future-of-rail-commuting/> & <https://www.transportfocus.org.uk/publication/transport-user-community-travel-and-ticketing-post-covid/>

Features of the flexible season ticket for 2021

Non price element

- Tickets **are best provided as Singles, each half the price of the relevant return fare.** Existing example: Thameslink & Great Northern (TL & GN).
- Tickets **should have Peak and Off-Peak versions** (availability linked to the underlying fare). This is an important feature to align fares to the more flexible post Covid-19 workplace attendance for many workers. Existing example: TL & GN .
- Tickets need to be available for **all routes with a regular passenger flow**, including those that **span more than one operator** – eg: Dorking (Deepdene) to East Croydon: GWR & Thameslink/Southern.
- **Reliable & simple mechanisms** to allow the passenger **to record ticket use** at the start and end of their journey **are essential**, together with processes for any errors to be corrected promptly and fairly. There needs to be recognition that passengers will occasionally make mistakes and they must not be penalised for this. Where a route has a pervasive presence of **smartcard readers** (for example, Thameslink North), then **Smartcards are the preferred (and only) option** as speedy and reliable touch in/out² can be achieved, linked to operation of the ticket barriers (when present)³. Existing example: Greater Anglia; planned example: TL & GN⁴.
 - Where Smartcards cannot yet be used for the specific journey (eg missing readers), or a TOC does not have suitable back office systems, alternative options will be needed⁵; **we are not in favour of solutions based on the orange striped ticket** as the time & nature of each day's activity (such as writing in the date) is error prone, creates greater opportunity for fraud and regularly leads to unpleasant experiences during ticket inspection.
- **Purchasable online, at ticket offices and, ideally, at TVMs.** Existing example: TL & GN – Ticket Offices and on-line.
- A First Class travel version is not essential but may make commercial sense, by encouraging upgrades.

Price element

- **We support the principle that the more you spend, the greater the discount** Existing example: Greater Anglia.
- A **simple & fair** approach is to **effectively double the time a season ticket is valid for**. So, a traveller would purchase **10 single Carnet tickets** for the price of a **price of a weekly** season ticket and need to use them **within two weeks**; preferably, it would be possible to buy any reasonable number of tickets over 10, with a proportionate increase in price and life, including a small bonus usage time for larger purchases (eg buy 40, get 2 additional weeks to use).
 - Off-peak usage might be catered for by granting credit against future purchases or, if system core features already allow, PAYG upgrades.
- Existing carnets products should continue as is for the less regular traveller. The discount should be standardised on 10% and made universally available. Existing pricing example: TL & GN.

We have prepared a FAQ which is available at <https://railfuture.org.uk/Flexi+Season+Tickets+2021+-+FAQ>; this will be updated from time to time as we clarify / respond to questions.

² Touch out may not be essential but can help with missed tap ins and also makes features like auto Delay Repay possible.

³ It would be good to also support phones with NFC capability and Bank Cards, but there is an essential precursor of making these options generally available for ticketing purposes.

⁴ http://aptu.org.uk/pdfs/gtr_winterservices2020webinar.pdf#page=19

⁵ Options such as Smartphone Apps and Print at Home tickets are likely options, but both have challenges with inclusiveness.

Appendix – Sample existing prices

