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PRESS RELEASE

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“PARIS? DO YOU MEAN PAISLEY?”

NEW REPORT HIGHLIGHTS A LACK OF JOINED-UP THINKING ON BRITAIN'S RAILWAYS

A new report has highlighted problems for passengers who want to book rail tickets to mainland Europe. Despite the fact that Eurostar trains direct to the continent have been operating for more than a decade, buying a ticket is far from easy. A mystery shopper exercise by transport pressure group Railfuture found that over a quarter of railway call centres had no information about Eurostar trains at all.

Enquiries made on the Internet were not much more successful either. When typing in "Paris" on two websites, customers were asked if they wanted to go to Paisley; while another website translated "Paris" into "Worksop" or "Newton Heath."

There was also a lack of publicity at stations, with posters instead advertising coach links to airports. The report's author Trevor Garrod said: "This looks like a real missed opportunity for the rail industry, and it's not rocket science to put it right ". His recommendations to train operating companies include ensuring that timetables include contact details for Eurostar, and making sure customer service staff have this information available.

"Almost all journeys to the continent will involve some domestic travel as well" he added "so it's in the rail companies' own interest to sort these problems out". The report does not name and shame individual companies, although Railfuture says that it is willing to pass on information to the companies concerned.

Notes for editors:

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Railfuture is Britain's only completely independent voice on railway development. We are not affiliated to or sponsored by any political party, trade union, or private industry. We are funded almost entirely by our members.

Rail is a vital part of an integrated efficient transport system serving a modern, vibrant, environmentally sustainable economy. We are pro-rail but not anti-road. Railfuture maintains that investment in rail travel and rail freight is vital to the future of the UK economy and environment.

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18 train operating companies were mystery shopped by 20 Railfuture members during December 2008 and January 2009.

The full body of the report is reproduced below.

MYSTERY SHOPPER EXERCISE CAN I BOOK A TICKET TO PARIS?

INTRODUCTION

For 5 years, the British rail network has been physically linked to that of continental Europe. Since November 2007 we have also had a high-speed rail link operating from London St Pancras International all the way to the Channel Tunnel, cutting journey times to Lille, Paris and Brussels and thus bringing these cities within easier reach of our own. Since then, ten Train Operating Companies have started to offer through ticketing between some British and continental stations. Our organisation and its predecessors campaigned for many years for a Channel Tunnel and looked forward to easy rail travel between Great Britain and the near Continent. How easy is it in practice?

MYSTERY SHOPPER

During December 2008 and January 2009, 20 members of Railfuture took part in a Mystery Shopper Exercise. They tested 18 Train Operating Companies in England, Scotland and Wales. Their brief was to see how easy it was to find out about, and book, a ticket from their local station to Paris. This report summarises their conclusions. We have decided not to identify particular TOCs in this report but we would be happy to provide more detailed findings of a particular company's test to that company on request. The aim of our exercise was to provide a snapshot of the overall situation; but we should be happy to work with individual operators to secure improvements. It is also our wish to work with the Association of Train Operating Companies, Passenger Focus and all other stakeholders in this respect.

WEBSITE

Our members logged on to their local TOC website. It is reasonable to assume that potential rail customers would do this to find out about trains. Our members found that only four websites gave any direct mention of Eurostar. One listed it under "Tickets and forms" but not under "destinations." Another listed it under "Leisure", possibly because they did not expect any business travellers from their stations within easy reach of London? When typing in "Paris" on two other websites, two members were asked if they wanted to go to Paisley; while another TOC website translated "Paris" into "Worksop" or "Newton Heath." Four websites did enable our members to book a ticket from their local station to Paris, with between 4 and 18 clicks. Two other TOC websites directed our members to the Eurostar website from which they were able to book a ticket to any one of 75 French or Belgian destinations, including the London Underground fare. It may well be possible to do this from some other websites as well, but other members were unable to discover how to do so. One member who was unable to make a booking e-mailed an enquiry via the "Contact us" box and had to wait two weeks for a reply. Another member, following difficulties with his TOC website, tried to use the National Rail website to book a "London International" ticket and found that this could only be done by inputting "London International (CIV)" into the search box. How many customers would realise this?

PUBLICITY

A potential customer is most likely to have a local timetable booklet or leaflet or to pick up one at a station, library, tourist information centre or other outlet. Members checked at one or more local stations. In only three cases did they find a leaflet or booklet mentioning Eurostar, and on one of these it was only travel to Paris that was mentioned. One TOC gave the Eurostar website address on its timetable folder. Members did not notice any posters at stations promoting Eurostar, although some TOCs did promote coach links from their stations to airports. Some members did comment that their TOC's publicity did not even mention other TOCs, to say nothing of Eurostar. It would not require much space, time or expense for a TOC to at least mention the Eurostar website and phone number on its publicity. After all, none of them is in competition with Eurostar. Even if a TOC does not itself offer through ticketing to the Continent, it is reasonable to assume that some customers will use that TOC's trains for all or part of the journey to London.

PHONE ENQUIRIES

Our members phoned their TOCs for information about times and fares to Paris. At five call centres, agents said that they had no such information!

One TOC line was constantly engaged or on answerphone. Of the remainder: –

- Four transferred the customer to National Rail Enquiries who in turn transferred him/her to Eurostar. Would it not have been possible to transfer the customer to Eurostar direct?
- Agents at four other call centres advised the customer to ring Eurostar and two of these gave Eurostar's number.
- One agent mentioned the existence of through fares but was unable to give any information about how much a ticket would cost or train times.
- One agent gave our member the telephone number of National Express East Coast.
- One agent advised our member to phone Rail Europe.
- One member reported that, after hanging on the line for some time, he spoke to a real person "who was very helpful and could if necessary pass me on to someone who could help me complete my booking."

It is a matter of concern to us that nearly 28% of TOC call centres apparently have no information for customers wanting to travel to a very popular Continental destination. Surely it is not too much to expect them to have certain very basic information such as a telephone number and/or website address for someone who can help. There surely needs to be some consistency and a lowest common denominator in the information given.

EUROPEAN SAVER / LONDON CIV TICKET

A London International or CIV ticket is flexible enough give a choice of trains and routes to London (especially important in the event of weekend engineering work or a late running return Eurostar); it includes London Underground travel and affords CIV protection in the event of delays and cancellations. For customers unable to book through to Paris from their local station, it is extremely useful. Our members made enquiries, sometimes on the phone and sometimes at ticket offices.

- Four TOCs said that they did not sell such tickets; three said that they did; one TOC told one enquirer that they did and another that they did not.
- One TOC thought they only sold them to Ireland.
- One member of staff said she had never been asked for such a ticket but was aware of its existence.
- One TOC employee only mentioned the London CIV ticket when specifically asked about it. Three said that they could issue one if presented with a Eurostar ticket or booking reference number. This is fair enough, as there has been some evidence of customers buying a CIV ticket as a cheap and flexible way of having a day or overnight trip to London!
- One member also asked NRES about the London International ticket and received, from an agent in India, some helpful information after the agent had looked it up.

CONCLUSION

Railfuture members are by definition committed and experienced rail travellers. Would some more casual customers be deterred from going by train to Paris in the light of some of these problems? We hope not. Some very simple things can be done to make it easier for them, however. These include:

- brief mention of Eurostar's website and phone number on all TOC timetables making sure that customer service staff have this simple information.
- ensuring that all staff are aware of London CIV tickets
- making some TOC websites easier to use for the international traveller.

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