PE1930/P: Ensure customers are always given information on cheapest possible fare in new Scotrail contract

Petitioner written submission, 14 November 2024

This submission seeks to outline some key objectives for the Scottish Government and Scottish Rail Holdings, particularly in light of recent proposals to close/significantly reduce ScotRail's ticket offices, and highlights how these closures could impact fare transparency and access to the lowest fares.

Background on Current Limitations

As noted by both ScotRail representatives and personal experiences, there are significant limitations in the split-ticketing options currently available through ScotRail's system. Many customers, even when using ScotRail's ticketing platform, may not receive the lowest possible fare due to a limited range of split-ticket combinations. This is especially relevant given recent feedback from sources like MoneySavingExpert, which highlighted Trainline's service as similarly costly, indicating that no alternative provider consistently offers the lowest fares. Trainline is ScotRail digital retailer provider for split-ticketing functionality.

While ScotRail offers some split-ticketing, feedback has shown that customers could benefit from a more extensive multi-split system. For example, competitive third-party services offer multiple split options across a single journey, potentially offering greater savings. However, ScotRail's current setup may limit customers to fewer, and therefore less cost-effective, options. Given their consumer duty under the Consumer Scotland Act 2020 this seems less than optimal for Scottish consumers.

An enhanced split-ticketing system that supports multiple splits per journey would not only improve customer satisfaction but align ScotRail with broader value-for-money expectations. Additionally, providing clear guidance to customers on how to manually apply these splits could mitigate some of these limitations in the interim.

1. Impact of Ticket Office Closures on Access to Affordable Fares

The planned closure/reduction in hours of ticket offices could make it harder for customers to access accurate fare information, especially those who rely on in-person assistance to find the best value. Ticket office staff are essential in helping customers navigate split-ticketing options, which can offer considerable savings. Without ticket office support, customers may need to rely solely on ScotRail's online platform, which currently lacks a comprehensive system for identifying all cost-saving ticket combinations.

2. Challenges of Online Fare Transparency

With fewer ticket offices, more passengers will be directed to ScotRail's digital systems, which are not yet able to provide the lowest fare for every journey. Many customers may miss out on the best options due to limitations in the online split-ticketing tool, which often doesn't show every possible combination. For those less familiar with digital ticketing, this transition from in-person to online could mean

paying higher fares, reducing the accessibility of public transport, and not meeting their consumer duty.

3. Urgency for Enhanced Digital Fare Solutions as In-Person Support Declines

If ticket offices are sadly phased out, ScotRail's digital services must fill this gap by offering a comprehensive fare-finding tool. To maintain fare transparency, the digital system should:

- Automatically identify and display all potential split-ticket options that could save passengers money.

- Clearly communicate these savings, particularly for routes where manual split-ticket input may be required for the best deal.

4. Recommendations

- **Invest in Digital System Upgrades**: Develop a more advanced split-ticketing feature online that replicates the guidance provided by ticket office staff, ensuring customers can independently secure the lowest fares. At present, ScotRail admits that it only splits the journey once rather than multiple times to provide the best value. I am happy to provide email from ScotRail if substantiation is needed.

- **Customer Education**: Introduce an awareness campaign on how to use split-ticketing features online and the limitations of ScotRail's system, particularly for those moving from in-person to online fare searches.

- **Ensuring Fair Access to Fare Information**: Guarantee that any fare savings available through ScotRail staff are also accessible through digital systems, so that customers are not disadvantaged by the closure of ticket offices.

In conclusion, as ticket offices close or reduce opening hours, it is crucial that ScotRail's digital services advance to meet customer needs for accessible and transparent fare information. Addressing these gaps aligns with the aims of petition PE1930 and promotes fair access to affordable travel, at present I don't think ScotRail has objectively meet these outcomes/aims of my petition.