



An Investigation Into Fare Calculation Practices in Irish Rail

Part 1 - Irish Rail Cannot Add

23 March 2008

1 Introduction

This document is the first in a two-part series investigation conducted by Rail Users Ireland into the fares charged by Irish Rail. This, the first part, highlights the numerous inconsistencies in the current arrangements which penalise the public. Part two, 'Fares Fair' will present a fair and transparent model for rail fares in Ireland based on European best practice.

There is increasing anger among passengers at the continued increase in rail fares despite the continued overcrowding, non-existent customer service, general poor reliability and punctuality of many services. Irish Rail set and measure the targets themselves, the targets are selective and in many cases are not even best industry practice¹. Irish Rail is a law unto itself accountable to no one:

This Memorandum of Understanding on Service Levels and Targets is of no legal effect and is not binding on Iarnród Éireann or the Department of Transport. The parties to this Memorandum of Understanding do not intend any part of this Memorandum to have any contractual status of any kind.²

This leaves the passenger in Ireland at a major disadvantage to their fellow passengers across most of Europe where severe financial penalties apply for failure to meet agreed targets.

While Rail Users Ireland, public representatives and others have been vocal in highlighting the unfair nature of the fares charged by Irish Rail, requests to revise the structure or to defer fares increases at certain stations have fallen upon deaf ears.

Certain ticket fares such as day saver, point-to-point discounts, returns the same price as singles and the intercity suburban divide can be explained based on legacy business practices, it most certainly does not justify the situation. Irish Rail are not a low cost airline, they are a state owned company with a public service mandate in receipt of hundreds of millions of taxpayers money per annum.

In recent months Rail Users Ireland has highlighted the fact anyone starting a journey in Munster are offered generous discounts mid-week, many of these discounts are valid for travel on trains which are already standing room only. However no discounts are offered for any journey commencing in Dublin to a destination in Munster despite a glut of empty seats³.

As the fares themselves are not up for discussion, we at Rail Users Ireland conducted an investigation into how fares were actually calculated and we were shocked to find widespread abnormalities where passengers are overcharged. This report will show Irish Rail themselves

¹ Irish Rail only record a suburban train late if it is more than 10 minutes late, 5 minutes is the metric used in NI and UK, over 50% of journeys are suburban on the Irish network

² Taken from "2006 Memorandum of understanding on Service Levels and Targets Iarnród Éireann & Department of Transport" This document is marked "commercially sensitive", obtained through FOI

³ Single tickets bought online are charged at half the return rate in both directions, no discount on returns.

cannot consistently calculate the correct fare for a journey requested by the passenger. We will show that the ticket vending machines, the website and Irish Rail's own customer service department at times quote widely differing fares for the same journey on the same train.

Specifically:

- We will show the calculation procedure used for journeys from suburban to intercity destinations is unfair.
- We will highlight that passengers are being penalised for using ticket vending machines, being overcharged by up to €19.00 for single journey.
- We will show that the Irish Rail website does not consistently quote accurate fares particularly where discounts exist.
- We will show that Irish Rail encouraged us to break the published terms and conditions when we sought fare quotes.
- For 9 specific journeys we have presented we would be overcharged by a colossal €120.85, that's an average of €13.42 per ticket.

The Irish Rail customer charter states:

“We will endeavour to sell you the most appropriate ticket to meet your expressed needs.”

We have focused mainly on the pricing of single tickets. With a single ticket, there is a simple need, to travel between the specified stations on the date of purchase, thus there can be no confusion as to our needs. None of the journeys quoted in this report form part of the online 'one way web promotion' offer.

1.1 Supporting Documentation

An appendix is available to accompany this report, containing screenshots of the Irish Rail website quoting fares, photos of ticket vending machines displaying various fares, copies of emails from Irish Rail customer services quoting fares as well as an extract from the internal Irish Rail fares manual. The appendix may be found online at www.railusers.ie/reports/2008/fare_calc_part1_appendix.pdf

1.2 About Us

Rail Users Ireland is Ireland's National Rail Users Organisation, We are objective observers and customers of Ireland's rail transportation network. We want the provision of excellent customer service to rail transport users and international best practice applied to the development of Mainline, Suburban, Metro and Light Rail transport in Ireland. We are ordinary rail users just like you, and we aspire to being your voice in the media and at Operator/Government level.

2 Calculation of Fares

Firstly, it is important to understand how fares in the simple case are calculated. The basic process behind the calculation of fares on Irish Rail is an archaic distance band system. For distances between 0 and 16km, fare zone A applies, for distances of 17-32km, zone B applies etc. The width of each zone varies, zone T, for example is 258-282km i.e. 24km wide.

The use of distance bands means two towns only a kilometre apart can pay very differing fares. European practice is the fairer per km travelled model.

To further complicate matters, there exists a different set of fares for each route for each fare zone. For the purposes of fare calculation the following 7 routes are defined:

1. Dublin - Cork/Limerick/Tralee
2. Dublin – Dundalk⁴
3. Dublin – Galway/Ballina/Westport
4. Dublin – Waterford
5. Dublin – Sligo
6. Dublin – Rosslare
7. Enniscorthy – Rosslare – Waterford – Limerick – Nenagh – Ballybrophy

In addition there are the Dublin⁵ and Cork fare matrices specific to the suburban fares in those areas. A totally different set of zones and fares applies to Cross Border journeys

2.1 Example Fares

For a journey of 93km - 108km, which is distance zone H, off peak single fares are:

Dublin – Cork/Limerick/Tralee	€23.50
Dublin – Dundalk	€23.50
Dublin – Galway/Ballina/Westport	€17.30
Dublin – Waterford	€15.80
Dublin – Sligo	€18.50
Dublin – Rosslare	€15.30
Enniscorthy – Rosslare – Waterford – Limerick – Nenagh – Ballybrophy	€16.30

⁴ Dublin – Dundalk fares are the same as Dublin – Cork/Limerick/Tralee for the same distance

⁵ http://www.railusers.ie/passenger_info/fares_matrix.php

3 The Problems

3.1 Travelling suburban to intercity

Journeys which comprise both a suburban and an intercity leg are charged at the intercity fare throughout, regardless of the distance of the intercity portion. Passengers can circumvent this practice by purchasing two tickets one for each leg, however this may be in breach of the published terms and conditions. This issue arises in both Dublin and Cork.

Example 1. Maynooth – Drogheda journey is charged throughout at the Dundalk fare level, despite 26.4km of the journey being on the Maynooth suburban route. Thus for the 77 km journey, the zone G (73-92km) fare is charged, €19.50.

Example 2. Mallow – Cobh, journey is charged throughout at the Cork/Limerick/Tralee fare. For the 52.3km journey, the zone E (49-56km) fare is charged, €13.50.

3.1.1 The Rip Off

The logical assumption is that for a journey such as Maynooth – Drogheda you pay Dublin Suburban fares to Dublin Connolly and Dundalk line fares to Drogheda, similarly in Cork.

Example 1. Maynooth – Connolly at Dublin Suburban Zone C fare is €3.00, Connolly Drogheda is €13.50, total cost €16.50 a full €3 less than one ticket at €19.50. This is fully legal as they are two separate trains.

Example 2. Mallow – Cork is €8.60, with Cork – Cobh at Cork Suburban Zone D fare is €3.75, total cost €12.35, €1.15 cheaper compared to the Irish Rail quote of €13.50. However as there are direct trains between Cobh and Mallow this may not be legal under Irish Rail's terms and conditions.

So we are now €4.15 out of pocket and we haven't reached the serious problems.

3.2 Travelling from one intercity route to another

As shown earlier different fares exist on each route for the same distance. Thus it is not possible to simply get the distance for the overall journey and check the tables. You would expect that Irish Rail diligently calculate the fares based on the routes and distances travelled on each to ensure fair play.

Investigation has shown that where a passenger makes a journey across two routes they are charged the per km band rates of the most expensive route for the complete distance, no matter what portion of the journey takes place on the more expensive route.

This is blatantly unfair and results in a situation where a passenger is better to buy two tickets.

Table 1 Comparison of fares quoted, for journeys starting in Drogheda

Destination	Website Quote	IE TVM	Two Tickets Mid Week	Saving	Two Tickets Friday	Saving
Sligo	51.50/40.50	59.50	13.50+27.00	19.00	13.50+38.00	8.00
Rosslare	39.50/34.00	49.50	13.50+20.50§	15.50	13.50+26.00	10.00
Waterford*	50.80	N/A	13.50+1.30+24.50	11.50	13.50+1.30+31.50	4.50
Enniscorthy	39.50/34.00	40.00	13.50+20.50	6.00	13.50+26.00	0.50

* €50.80 was also quoted as a response to Fares Query via IrishRail.ie for Thursday February 21st 2008, €1.30 relates to the Luas add on fare.

§ Fares Query via IrishRail.ie told us to buy two tickets, however such was in breach of the published terms and conditions, *Section 1 II. "Re-booking at intermediate stations"* as there are direct trains in both directions between Drogheda and Rosslare. Website quote is however valid.

Cheaper Saver fares are offered on all routes other than Cork/Kerry/Limerick/Dundalk Monday-Thursday and Saturday. The website quotes these correctly for most routes, thence 51.50/40.50

It is clear that the booking office ticketing systems fails to account for the existence of day saver fares available for separate legs of the journey. Curiously the website booking engine sometimes gets the fares right and sometimes gets it wrong. However, it is exceptionally awkward to book a journey from Drogheda to Rosslare or Sligo as the vast bulk of trains cannot be reserved.

So subtracting the most expensive mid week quote from the cheapest for each destination we add another €52.00 to add to our rip off total which becomes €56.15.

3.3 Point to Point Discounted Fares

Where a point to point discount fare exists, it doesn't apply if passengers continue beyond it, €46.50 Cork Dublin, but Cork Balbriggan same trains would cost €68.10 (€65.50 max day return fare + €2.60 for the Luas) when it should be €46.50 + €2.60 + €7.30 = €56.40, €11.70 gone amiss. Similar situations apply for virtually every station in Munster to Dublin Monday - Thursday and Saturday.

The Irish Rail website is somewhat fazed by these discounts, inquiring the cost of a day return from Tipperary Town to Dublin mid week results in a €46.50 quote, however if the passenger pays the ticket checker on the train he or she will be charged only €21.50, a massive €25.00 less. Making matters worse if a passenger wishes to make a return trip such as Monday morning to Dublin and Saturday return the website will quote €55.00 however the conductor will charge €27.00, a shocking €28.00 less

Combining our three examples our rip off total is now €120.85.

3.4 Student fares more expensive than adult fares

For short journeys of less than 16km (in some cases up to 32km) the student single fare is more than the adult single fare. The lowest adult single fare is €4.70 but the student single fare is a minimum of €6.

Students pay €15 per annum for the privilege of a student identity card which proclaims to offer savings on intercity journeys however as we have discovered a simple trip from Thurles to Templemore costs €1.30 more at student fares than at normal adult rates.

3.5 Ticket Vending Machines Don't Understand Fares

Ticket vending machines only issue tickets from the station they are in and a limited subset at that, while the booking office can issue any ticket for any journey between any two stations. Irish Rail proudly proclaim that up to 40% of tickets are sold through ticket vending machines at some stations where they are provided⁶.

In Figure 1 below screenshots of the Ticket Vending Machine (TVM) in Drogheda are illustrated, the date being Monday Feb 18th, a day upon which saver fares applied. As shown previously in table 1 there is a very significant difference between the fares quoted by Irish Rail themselves and what the TVM quoted us. As can be seen in the figure, no saver fares are offered and no student fares are offered either, they would be €25 and €29.50 respectively.

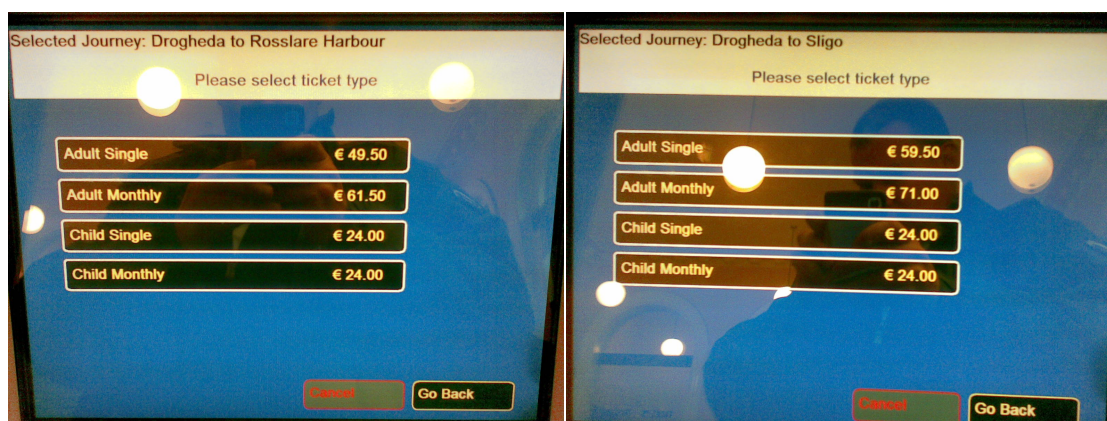


Figure 1 - TVM Drogheda Feb 18 2008

This raises a very interesting question, if the booking office is closed for whatever reason, is the passenger forced to purchase a ticket they know is the wrong fare? Will Irish Rail refund the difference to an affected passenger?

⁶ Iarnród Éireann Moving into the Future document, page 15

The Coras Iompair Éireann bye laws SI 109 1984⁷ make no reference to ticket vending machines, referring only to the booking office. This despite there were ticket vending machines in existence at least in Sutton and Dublin Pearse stations at that time. This would suggest a passenger is not obliged to use a ticket vending machine. However this has not been tested by the courts.

The booking office systems and ticket vending machines are not correctly programmed to account for journeys which cross more than one route and these are charged at the highest intercity rate for the full distance instead of combining the fares for each leg.

This results in incorrect fares for that passenger with overcharging on a grand scale for certain journeys, up to €19.00 in the case of Drogheda Sligo.

4 Advice to Passengers

Given the ad hoc nature of the fare structure and the myriad of discounts, there is no easy way to determine the best fare. We provide some advice for passengers here to utilise in the short term while we campaign for a complete overhaul of this outdated system.

4.1 If your journey involves a change of route

Seek quotes for a direct ticket and a ticket via the point of change, normally Dublin Connolly. If your journey starts at a suburban station in Dublin⁸ or Cork other than the main termini of Heuston, Connolly and Cork Kent it is frequently cheaper to buy a ticket to the city centre and then a further ticket onwards owing to a combination of saver fares and cheaper suburban journeys, always seek a quote for both options as the cheapest option varies on the exact combination of stations and also on the day of the week.

Any booking office or ticket checker can issue tickets for any journey regardless of destination. Excuses such as only the booking office in a certain station can issue the ticket you want are misleading. You should never have to queue up twice.

4.2 Avoid ticket vending machines for complex journeys

Avoid ticket vending machines unless you are satisfied that the fare and ticket type quoted by the machine are what you know to be correct. Ticket vending machines can't issue Weekender and Faircard tickets and can't issue student tickets for certain destinations.

⁷ <http://www.irishstatutebook.ie:80/1984/en/si/0109.html>

⁸ Any station within the semi circle made by Kilcoole, Hazelhatch, Maynooth and Balbriggan

4.3 Avoid the Irish Rail Website

The Irish Rail website gets confused, while in most cases it will quote the lowest fares for journeys, for certain routes and destinations it quotes a fare significantly greater than that available from the booking office or ticket checker.

4.3.1 Munster to Dublin

Never rely on the Irish Rail website when traveling from Munster to Dublin on two grounds

1. Discounted Fares won't be offered for certain valid journey combinations, e.g. Tipperary - Dublin
2. Where a discount is offered it won't be considered if you book to travel beyond Heuston or Dublin City Centre

4.3.2 Two Tickets May Still Be Cheaper

In some cases, e.g. Drogheda – Waterford it is cheaper to book Drogheda Dublin and then Dublin Waterford.

4.4 Students Be Careful

When making a single journey or a day return journey on certain routes at off peak times, e.g. Monday to Thursday and Saturday, a normal adult saver single or saver day return may in fact be cheaper.

For short intercity journeys adult singles are nearly always cheaper.