



email : chair@weardownsouth.com

11th October 2013

Mr. D. Martin,
Chief Executive, Arriva UK,
Admiral Way
Doxford International Business Park
Sunderland
SR3 3XP

Dear Mr. Martin,

I would like to alert you to the poor service and breakdown in communication we have been subject to in recent weeks from Grand Central, and I would like to urgently discuss with someone from your organisation how we can resolve the current situation.

Since the Grand Central Sunderland to London service started, the Sunderland AFC Supporters Association (London & Southern England Branch) has, we believe, been your most regular and largest off-peak group travel business customer. We have increased usage year by year, and have contributed circa £20,000 per annum to Grand Central's revenue stream. In addition, members choose Grand Central for their personal travel on the basis of the goodwill from our relationship.

After 6 years in which we have shown ourselves to be a trustworthy, self-supervised group and we had a reasonable expectation that our arrangements would continue. Indeed this summer many members, who have valued not only the attractive fare but also the flexibility of our business arrangement with Grand Central, renewed not only their Branch membership but also invested in football club season cards on that basis.

However, recently we were very disappointed to experience a sudden and unsatisfactory change in that good relationship. Communication all but ceased over the summer months and while we were anticipating a fare increase on the group fare we received, we did not expect under any circumstances a hike of c70%, including cessation of concession fares, placing huge restrictions on flexibility of booking, and more frustratingly, a total unwillingness to communicate or negotiate. Grand Central staff did not answer our emails and calls, which left us wondering why the good relationship we had enjoyed had suddenly been deemed unimportant.

Despite being a regular customer worth £20k per year, the proposed changes amount to a worse deal than one any individual can get by booking a few weeks in advance. A one-off traveller with a railcard can get a walk-on fare on the day less than the fare you are offering us; a travelling group who have provided approximately 40 regular passengers fortnightly over the past 6 years.

While we appreciate the need for fares to increase in line with costs, we appeal to you to reopen communications with us so that we can at least discuss a mutually beneficial arrangement that ideally contains;

1. A competitive fare - in particular not more expensive than advanced purchase tickets available to individuals.
2. A discount that takes into account the regularity and size of the group travelling, ideally more beneficial than the fare applicable to a one-off group booking.
3. A fare structure and eligibility for any concessions that apply to a full season (i.e. not be affected by the national January fare increases) and be agreed in time to be announced to members before the start of the season so that they can take a reasoned decision on season ticket renewal.
4. A block booking of seat reservations should be made available to us so that fans can travel together.
5. A flexible approach to numbers and deadlines, bearing in mind the likelihood of changing fixtures and midweek games,
6. A named individual in the train company who will deal with us in a flexible manner, sympathetic to our requirements.

Even before Grand Central trains began to run, the SAFCSA London Branch has been a staunch supporter of Grand Central. As a Sunderland-based business, we are rightly proud to promote your service: we advertise your logo on our website. The Branch supported Grand Central through its difficult early months when cancellations and bad publicity were common.

As you might imagine, our members are already complaining bitterly at the treatment from Grand Central and many have suggested unless the restrictive conditions and huge price increase can be avoided, they will simply abandon Grand Central altogether and use other operators or drive to games. We find it difficult to believe that it is Arriva's intention to treat regular customers this way.

As one of your longest serving and biggest customers we urge you to review our relationship and to urgently resume communications with us regarding our continued patronage of your service. Your motto is "Railway the right way", and I do hope this extends to your customers.

Yours sincerely,

(Helen Wright)
Branch Chair