

## Fury as rail minister says fares are not as high as people claim

Norman Baker tells commuters they are paying for 'premium product', but Bob Crow says passengers being bled dry by spivs

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Soaring rail prices – UK train tickets are the most costly in Europe. A 24-mile commute into Paris is £924 a year, compared with £3,268 into London. Photograph: PA

Commuters have expressed fury after the railways minister said train fares – some of which have soared by almost 90% over the past decade – were "not nearly as expensive" as presented by the media.

Norman Baker said fares, which were raised by an average of 3.9% on Wednesday, were not that expensive if passengers took advantage of advance and off-peak tickets. His comments came as the government introduced the tenth consecutive year of inflation-busting price rises.

"Once you take the basket of fares, include early advance and off-peaks, we are not nearly as expensive as has been presented," he told BBC Radio 5 Live.

Some fares between London and Norwich have gone up by 9.2%, and campaigners point out that 10 successive years of above-inflation fare increases has led to an 87.5% rise in the cost of an annual season ticket from Sevenoaks, Kent, to London to £3,112 compared with £1,660 in 2003.

Commuters, who have been hit by a 4.2% average increase in the cost of season tickets, must pay more for peak early-morning services because they were enjoying a premium service, Baker said. "You could argue that the people who are travelling in the rush hour are using the premium product and therefore ought to pay something which reflects that premium product which they are buying, so it works both ways," he added.

Baker, the Liberal Democrat MP for Lewes, East Sussex, said the price rises had allowed the government to embark on the "biggest investment programme since the 19th century".

Rob Smith, an IT manager who commutes from Grantham in Lincolnshire to London, said Baker was "stupid" to say train travel was not expensive when prices "have gone up every year for as long as I can remember".

He said his £7,600 annual season ticket accounted for about a quarter of his net salary, adding: "[Rail prices have] gone up by £2,000 in four years with no improvement whatsoever. It's ridiculous, but what choice do we have? We have to get to work."

Hay Group's quarterly PayNet UK salary tracker said the average annual season ticket of £2,191 represented 8% of the median UK salary of £26,082.

Labour's transport spokeswoman, Maria Eagle, said the government had caved in to train companies by allowing some regulated fares to rise by more than 4.2% as long as the overall 4.2% average was maintained. "People are paying more for a worse service," she said.

Bob Crow, the leader of the RMT transport union, said: "Passengers getting another inflation-busting kick in the teeth know that their hard-earned cash is being bled out of the railways and into the pockets of a bunch of spivs and chancers."

The Association of Train Operating Companies said the fare increases have led to "more trains, better stations and faster services".

Frances O'Grady, the general secretary of the TUC and chairwoman of Action for Rail, said: "At a time when real wages are falling and household budgets are being squeezed, rail travellers are being forced to endure yet another year of inflation-busting fare increases."

Bruce Williamson of Railfuture said rail fares had risen again with no perceptible improvement in service. "Over the last 10 years, fares have increased by more than 50% – much more than people's incomes," he added. "Some fares are going down a little bit, although you'll need a magnifying glass to find them. Most people's fares are going up anywhere between 4% and 11% or 12%."

British train tickets are the most expensive in Europe. A 24-mile commute into Paris costs £924 a year, compared with £3,268 into London. In Berlin, a 21-mile commute costs £705, and a similar journey into Madrid costs £654.

Stephen Joseph, chief executive of the Campaign for Better Transport, said the price increases were "truly shocking". "The impact of successive governments' policies on rail fares is appalling," he said. "We have deliberately made getting the train to work an extravagance that many struggle to afford. The time has come not just to stop the rises but to reduce fares."

Ticket prices are also going up by an average of 4.2% on the Underground and on London buses.

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