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Minister lets car take the strain



Conservative MP Simon Burns travels the 35 miles between his Essex home and Westminster using the £80,000 a year departmental car service

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Rail fares minister Simon Burns is under fire after it emerged he shuns commuting by train in favour of a costly chauffeur driven government car.

According to the Mail on Sunday, the Conservative MP travels the 35 miles between his Essex home and Westminster using the £80,000 a year departmental car service.

The disclosure comes just days after inflation-busting average rises of 4.2% for regulated rail fares, which include season tickets, took effect for passengers.

A spokesman for passengers' campaign group Railfuture told the newspaper: "It would be nice if the person who is setting these fare rises was also experiencing some of the congestion and overcrowding endured by ordinary, hard-pressed travellers."

Mr Burns reportedly defended his regular use of the Department for Transport pool car by saying: "I have given up my second home in London and I commute to and from work carrying classified papers which I work on during my journey."

Cabinet Office officials confirmed that there are no restrictions on ministers taking the "red boxes" that contain their government papers on public transport.

Transport minister Stephen Hammond revealed details about the department's travel arrangements in parliamentary documents. He said: "With the introduction of a departmental pool car service on 1 April 2012, individual ministers are no longer allocated government cars. The Secretary of State (Patrick McLoughlin) and Minister of State use the pool cars on a daily basis. I use the pool cars occasionally and also use the top-up service as business requires it. The Under-Secretary of State for Transport, Norman Baker, used the car on an extremely occasional basis for journeys of less than three miles, the last date being 20 November 2012."

Labour MP Fabian Hamilton, who uncovered the arrangement through a parliamentary question, told the Mail on Sunday: "This looks to be an extremely poor use of taxpayers' money, and a very bad example for a minister to set."

A Cabinet Office spokeswoman said non-classified documents could be taken on public transport. She added: "The Ministerial Code provides for ministers to use a government car for home-to-office travel when working on classified papers."

A DfT spokesman said: "The Minister of State does not have a home in London but uses his commute to work on official papers and so travels in a car provided by the Government Car Service for security reasons. The Ministerial Code permits ministers to use official cars for home-to-office journeys within a reasonable distance of London when they are working on classified papers."

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