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Tunnel costs must be cut, says commission



The EU commission has threatened legal action if London and Paris fail to respond Denis Charlet/AFP/Getty Images

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Passengers and goods trains using the Channel Tunnel are being overcharged, the European Commission said yesterday. It demanded that Britain and France should move to cut the levies.

The commission threatened legal action if London and Paris failed to respond to its formal request for lower access charges within two months.

It claimed that excessively high track-access charges were being passed on to passengers as higher ticket prices for Eurostar services between London, Paris and Brussels. The charges were also putting off freight operators, meaning that containers were being transported by road rather than rail.

“The Channel Tunnel is not being used to its full capacity because of these excessive charges,” EU transport commissioner Siim Kallassaid in a statement. “As a result, more freight is being carried on lorries instead of by rail, freight operators and their customers are being over-charged, and passengers are paying over-the-odds for their tickets.”

Substantially lower charges, it claims, would attract double the volume of freight trains. The Commission says that the tunnel could accommodate 43 per cent more trains.

Train companies are only allowed to charge fees consistent with the amount of wear and tear caused by trains under European law. However, an investigation by the commission found that Eurotunnel was charging above the odds and using the income to subsidise its car shuttle service, which does not pay the same charges.

The EU asked Britain and France to ensure that a fully independent regulator monitored tunnel fees. It called for an end to a “restrictive” agreement which reserves capacity in the tunnel to certain train operators.

Eurostar is currently the only operator which runs passenger trains through the tunnel and there are only about six goods trains a day.

“The high track access charges get passed on to passengers in their ticket prices and rail freight companies complain that they cannot afford to send more freight through the Tunnel — it remains on the roads causing congestion and pollution,” the commission said.

Eurotunnel said it would support a change to its regulatory regime. The Anglo-French body which oversees safety and operations was set up in 1987 at a time when the railway was fully nationalised. However, a spokesman denied that users were being deterred because its charges are too high.

Eurostar made profits of €100 million last year and freight operators are put off because they cannot get guaranteed train paths across France, he said.

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