

Government to pay rail firms to convert first class carriages to economy to ease overcrowding

The Government is trialling a scheme to convert first class carriages for use by standard ticket holders to ease overcrowding



Passengers on a crowded Swansea-Paddington rail service Photo: Richard Isaac/LNP

By Keith Perry

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The Government is to pay a train operator to convert first class carriages for use by standard ticket holders to ease overcrowding.

The move is designed to appease passengers angry at being packed into increasingly congested standard class carriages on busy routes.

Transport Secretary Patrick McLoughlin is preparing to pay one train company, First Great Western to do away with first class seats that are left empty, Government sources say. If the scheme is a success, it could be expanded to other operators.

From next month, as a declaration of intent, the operator is expected to be told to remove at least one first class carriage from its premier fleet of trains and replace it with a standard class alternative, the Daily Mail reported.

Mr McLoughlin is negotiating changes to the franchise agreement with First Great Western, whose trains connect London to the South West of England, South Wales and the Thames Valley, to effect the move.

He is understood to have authorised millions of pounds of taxpayers' money to help compensate the company for making the conversions.

“The Government is fully aware of the capacity crunch on trains. We cannot keep building longer trains and it is going to get worse. We are trialling this with First Great Western initially.”

Typically, a nine-carriage train will provide 101 first class and 526 standard class seats. In 2010, all ten of the most overcrowded rail services in the country were provided by First Great Western.

The proposal comes on the day passengers face the annual rise in fares, with annual season tickets rising by an average of 3.1 per cent.