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First-class train seats will be scaled back

By George Parker and Jane Wild



Patrick McLoughlin, the transport secretary, is preparing to pay millions of pounds to turn first-class compartments into standard-class seating on First Great Western trains operating into and out of London's Paddington station.

In an attempt to ease overcrowding, Mr McLoughlin may decide to extend the policy to other rail routes, particularly when franchises come up for renewal.

"If it works well and solves a problem, it would be sensible to look at where else we might do it," said an aide to the transport minister. "But there is no blueprint to roll this out across the network."

First Great Western said it was working with the Department of Transport on determining "the best mix of first-class and standard-class seating in our high-speed trains", but said the long-term solution was electrification and new rolling stock.

Virgin Trains said "a large number" of its passengers did travel in first class but that it would look at what was being proposed by the government.

The idea is supported by many in the rail industry. "Reducing first class, for some routes, is close to a no-brainer, particularly on suburban networks," said Chris Stokes, an independent consultant and former rail executive. "It's different on intercity routes, where there is a market for first class, primarily business travellers."



The government will pay First Great Western to convert at least one first-class carriage per train into standard-class seating over the next two years – its routes to the Thames Valley, South Wales and the west of England are some of Britain's most overcrowded.

The payment, expected by government sources to run to "the low single millions of pounds and less than £10m", will compensate the train operator for the cost of the work and lost profits.

There are said to be practical problems on some types of train for such conversions, while Mr McLoughlin believes that some operators, including Virgin Trains, have fare structures that encourage use of first-class accommodation.

The move came on the day new fare rises came into effect on the railways. George Osborne announced in last month's Autumn Statement he would keep them in line with July's 3.1 per cent retail price inflation figure.

The move was intended to respond to Labour's focus on the high cost of living, but transport campaigners said it did not go far enough in helping with the cost of rail travel.

The Campaign for Better Transport says the government will be making a profit from passengers by 2018, as fare revenues continue to cover a greater share of the operating costs of the railways.

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