

Transport minister one of coalition's leading users of chauffeur-driven cars

Stephen Hammond, minister for buses and rail, lives six miles from Westminster but used 'top up' vehicles 138 times in a year

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Stephen Hammond came fourth in the list of most frequent users of the 'top up' service, cars that are at the call of ministers if a departmental vehicle is unavailable. Photograph: Julian Makey/Rex Features

A transport minister is one of the most frequent users of chauffeur-driven cars which carry ministers or their red boxes across the UK, according to official documents.

Stephen Hammond, the minister for buses and rail, who lives six miles from Westminster, used the government's "top up" cars 138 times in a year. These cars are at the call of ministers if an official departmental vehicle is unavailable. On 19 occasions Hammond used the service to move his red boxes unaccompanied from one place to another.

Monday's disclosure follows public criticisms of the government for the latest increase in rail fares, which have risen by 3.1%. The former minister of transport Simon Burns faced

widespread anger last year when it emerged that he was using a ministerial car instead of travelling 35 miles from his home to and from London by train.

One union leader has asked Hammond, the MP for Wimbledon, to use public transport instead so that he can begin to understand the problems faced by commuters.

Mick Whelan, general secretary of the train drivers' and operators' union Aslef, said: "We believe that people in charge of public transport should use public transport, unless it is impossible, especially at a time when this coalition government stands full square behind the privatised companies raising prices for ordinary people on buses and trains. That's easy, I suppose, from the comfort of a chauffeur-driven limousine."

Details about use of the pool cars come from a Freedom of Information Act request which asked for a breakdown of which ministers were using official government vehicles.

The reply from the Department for Transport (DfT) said the government had revised and cut the overall use of ministerial cars and now provided a number of full-time vehicles for each department as well as a "top up" service.

Hammond comes fourth in the list of frequent users of the top-up service. Those who used the service more frequently were Lord McNally, the Liberal Democrat justice minister who stood down late last year, who used them 293 times, Lady Hanham, a minister in the Department for Communities and Local Government, who used the cars 176 times, and Helen Grant, the Conservative sports minister, who used them 155 times .

The reply also show how often ministers used the pool cars to transport their red boxes containing official document without a minister being in the car.

It found that Nick Clegg, the deputy prime minister, used empty cars to carry his papers 52 times; William Hague, the foreign secretary, 41 times; and Michael Gove, the education secretary, 21 times. Sajid Javid, the financial secretary to the Treasury, used cars to transport his bags on 30 occasions.

The government pointed out that the number of government cars had been reduced from 136 in June 2011 to 85 today. Ministers are no longer allocated a particular car and driver but are instead expected to ask for a departmental pool car. If these are busy, they are then asked to apply for a "top up" vehicle, which the department for transport insists is more cost effective.

Following recent changes to the service the DfT no longer keeps records of the use of departmental cars by ministers, the documents stated. According to the ministerial code, ministers are permitted to use an official car for official business and for home and office journeys within a "reasonable distance" of London on the understanding that they would normally be carrying classified papers.

A DfT spokesman said: "The top-up service can be a vital way for ministers to get from meeting to meeting and to urgent votes in parliament during the day."



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