

Campaigners urge Chancellor to freeze fares or lose passengers

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Campaigners and rail passengers are urging the Chancellor to freeze rail fares next year to help get people back on board trains and put the brakes on the car-led recovery.

To help highlight the urgent need for a price freeze and fare reforms, Campaign for Better Transport and rail passengers will deliver a giant postcard to Rishi Sunak MP at 11 Downing Street today (20 October) showing where passengers want to travel to by rail, but only if fares are affordable.

Paul Tuohy, Chief Executive of Campaign for Better Transport, said: “The Chancellor understandably wants to claw back some of the money he sensibly spent to keep trains running during the pandemic, but he may find that when it comes to rail, he needs to speculate to accumulate.

“The Government wants people to go back to work, to visit family and friends, and to spend time at tourist attractions to get the economy back on track but raising rail fares above inflation will not do this, it will simply prompt ever more people to jump into their cars worsening congestion, air pollution and climate change. Even a relatively small increase in the cost of rail travel could lead to fall in passenger numbers with people choosing to work at home or commute part-time by car instead.”

John Lilley, a rail passenger from Hertfordshire, said: “The world has changed since Covid and I can now work from home most of the time. I try to go into the London office one or two days a week, but if the fares go up a lot then it’s more likely to be one day a week.”

Penny Woods, a rail passenger from London, said: “I’m desperate for our government to freeze rail fares this year and build on the green momentum that we all hope is generated by COP in Glasgow. Trains are the safe, green option and we need to make them the cheapest option as well, to encourage families and commuters out of their cars. I really hope this government can think long term on train travel – for the sake of all our futures.”

The government sets the annual rail fare rise each year but has yet to confirm how much fares will go up in January. The proposed RPI+1% increase would mean fares rising 4.8 per cent next year and be the highest rise since 2013.

With passenger numbers remaining below that of pre-pandemic and traffic levels rising, and commuters no longer the captive market they once were thanks to changes to working patterns, Campaign for Better Transport is warning that a rise in rail fares could result in fewer passengers and less income for the railways, doing nothing to help boost the economy and making congestion even worse.

The charity is urging the Chancellor to announce a fare freeze in next week’s Budget to keep the country moving in a green and sustainable way, along with a number of other measures to address the outdated rail fares system and encourage more people to travel by rail.

Immediate measures needed:

- Rail fare freeze for 2022
- A temporary special ticket offer to encourage people to travel by rail
- A third off the price of a season ticket for a limited time to encourage people to return to workplaces by train
- Abolish peak fares on Fridays for a limited period.

Short term measures:

- Pay-As-You-Go (PAYG) ticketing within towns and cities with daily price capping
- Single leg pricing for rail journeys outside PAYG areas
- A proper flexible season ticket than offers comparable savings to a full time one.

Longer term reforms

- Action to reduce the difference between peak and off-peak rail fares
- Eliminate inconsistencies in the fares system.

Paul Tuohy added: “With COP26 just around the corner, it’s time to redress the balance of the cost of transport towards the greenest modes and send a message that the Government wants people to travel by rail.”

Photo credit: Cycling UK