

Commuters won't stand for fare hikes

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COMMUTERS travelling from Sevenoaks Station to London are fed up with being hit by above inflation fare increases each year only to have to stand for the entire journey.

That was the message a Chronicle reporter received loud and clear when he boarded the busy 7.29am fast service from Sevenoaks to Cannon Street on Tuesday.

"I don't think anybody's happy with the commute," said Ian Nash, of Linden Chase. "If you get an annual ticket it costs £2,300 every year. If people pay this amount of money they need to be able to get a seat. They should put more trains on and I think many of the trains are quite short."

Clarendon Road resident Gareth Atkinson was another one of the countless passengers with one hand clutching a handrail.

"If I could get a seat the price would be more acceptable," he said. In January season ticket holders were hit with an inflation-busting 6.8 per cent increase in their fare. Rail operator Southeastern has claimed a requirement of its franchise, imposed by central Government, stipulates fares should be increased by inflation plus three per cent up until 2011.

Spokesman Nigel Jarrett said there had been many improvements as a result, including a reduction in crime and improvements to buildings such as the resurfacing of the concourse at Sevenoaks Station.

He added 90 per cent of trains were now regularly arriving on time.

Passengers agreed the service was generally reliable and trains were clean.

But Hildenborough resident Claire Bennellick still believed more could be done.

"There's not enough carriages," she said. "They should put more on."

"It's not obvious what you're getting for the extra money."

Mr Jarrett said Southeastern would shortly be taking ownership of 110 new carriages from the Department of Transport.

Sevenoaks Rail Travellers Association chairman Dr Roger Johnson believed peak-time services were close to capacity.

"It's outrageous," he said. "I think all commuters travelling more than 20 minutes per day should be entitled to a seat."

"For the past four years passenger numbers have risen by four per cent per annum."

"There has been a small net loss in the number of seats in that period. That's why passengers are standing."

Mr Jarrett accepted this point.

"Passenger numbers have increased and our trains are intensively used, particularly in and out of London during the rush hours," he said.

"We can never guarantee a seat to every passenger."

Neil Statham, Sevenokas
commented

To suggest that the only reason passengers are now standing is because of a small loss of seats and a 4% rise in passengers in recent years is ridiculous. I have been travelling from Sevenoaks to Cannon Street for 20 years and getting a seat on a fast train has always been a game of chance. I find it hard to believe the total number of seats has dropped, when we had the old slam door trains, standard class carriages had 4 seats across and 1st class 3 seats across. The modern rush hour trains (7:29, 7:49 & 8:09) are 5 seats across and 4 seats across respectively. The fact that they are also much less comfortable when you are lucky enough to get one is obviously a secondary issue, but try not to sit next to anyone over 5'8" and 10 stone or your seat won't be all your own! It's hard to think of any other service that's gone up in cost and down in value as much as an annual season ticket on the train. The bottom line is there are simply not enough fast services running from Sevenoaks to Cannon Street during the rush hour. We need 4 fast services to Cannon Street between 7:29 and 8:09 not 3. I seem to remember being told by Southeastern that they could not increase the number of carriages as many of the platforms along the line were not long enough and could not be extended!