

Investment and fare increases cannot compensate for decades of neglect, say rail experts

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Decades of neglect in the UK's rail network cannot be instantly rectified by short term Government investments and price promises, transport experts have said.

Ministers have recently announced billions of pounds will be ploughed into infrastructure projects across the country, including Crossrail and HS2, while Chancellor George Osborne also stated that rail ticket prices will in future only rise in line with inflation.

But Professors Jon Shaw and Iain Docherty, in a new book titled *The Transport Debate*, say these measures do not alter the fact that the UK is still languishing behind much of mainland Europe when it comes to the quality of its rail system.

They say the current levels of investment will need to be sustained for many years to come if UK rail passengers are to experience the same levels of comfort enjoyed by their continental counterparts.

Jon Shaw, Professor of Transport Geography at Plymouth University, said: "It's true we're seeing impressive levels of investment in the railways at the moment – more than I can ever remember, actually – but there was no real alternative given how little we've spent in the last decades. At least this year passengers see some relief as regulated fares will rise only in line with inflation, but we're still getting appalling value

for money. Let's not let this piece of good news deflect from the fact that further increased investment will be needed to ensure our rail network is fit for purpose in the future."

In the four decades leading up to the early 2000s, the UK spent on average 40% less annually as a proportion of gross domestic product (GDP) on its [transport](#) infrastructure than other leading economies in Europe. It also costs much more to build major railway projects in this country than elsewhere in Europe.

In spite of the poor investment, passengers – who have endured a 15% real-term rise in ticket prices since 1997 – still pay far more than their European counterparts, with an annual season ticket from Glasgow to Edinburgh costing as much as an equivalent card for the entire German network.

Professors Shaw and Docherty add that the complexities of the national pricing policy, with up to 84 single ticket options available for some journeys, make the system almost impossible to understand for irregular travellers and can result in poor value for money.

In the book, published on January 7 by Policy Press at the University of Bristol, the authors also say the Government's annual subsidy bill – which currently stands at around £5billion – is at least twice the size it was before the system was broken up for privatisation in the 1990s.

Iain Docherty, Professor of Public Policy and Governance at the University of Glasgow, added: "All too often Westminster governments find it difficult to follow through on their transport promises. Even when money is available, each pound invested buys too little, and important transport projects often end up delayed, over budget or even cancelled because when the going gets tough the political will to deliver them evaporates. Ministers are also overly sensitive to the demands of car-

dependent middle managers – they should be focused on improving transport for as many people as possible, rather than being captured by a vocal minority who use their cars more than they need to do."

The Transport Debate, including a foreword by respected commentator Christian Wolmar, provides a detailed analysis of the current state of the British transport system, focusing on both successes and failings of the country's road, rail, sea and air connections.

It celebrates the advantages of a modern transport system, while arguing that years of poorly conceived and executed transport policies have resulted in Britain's transport system being far worse than it should be. It also demonstrates the knock-on effects of a substandard [transport system](#) and its economic, social and environmental costs, but looks at how these can be addressed through affordable and politically deliverable changes.

Provided by University of Glasgow

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