

Rail fare rise to be delayed

- rail tickets will remain at 2020 prices until March 1 2021, giving commuters the chance to renew season tickets at old prices
- passengers still advised to reduce number of journeys as much as possible for the time being
- regulated fares to increase by 2.6% in March, the lowest amount in 4 years, ensuring taxpayers are not unfairly overburdened by anticipated investments of around £10 billion to keep vital services running during pandemic

The government will delay the normal annual January change to rail fares until 1 March next year (2021), offering a significant window for commuters who cannot work at home to purchase cheaper season tickets at the existing rate and allowing greater flexibility in uncertain times.

Regulated fares will then increase by RPI+1, a 2.6% rise. This is the lowest actual increase in 4 years. The effect of the delay means that key workers and those using the network throughout 2021 will pay about the same across the year than if fares had risen by inflation at the usual time. Those renewing season tickets will be able to do so until 28 February, getting up to a year's travel at the old rates.

Changes to the price of tickets reflect the need to continue investing in modernising the network, improving punctuality and reliability, and also recognises the unprecedented taxpayer support over the last 12 months.

The government took immediate action at the outbreak of the pandemic to support our railways, investing over £4 billion to date to protect the key services passengers depend on and frontline jobs. In total, the government anticipates providing around £10 billion to protect the railway through its emergency agreements with rail operators.

This change will help recover some of the significantly increased costs met by taxpayers to keep services running during the pandemic.

Chris Heaton-Harris, Rail Minister, said:

Delaying the change in rail fares ensures passengers who need to travel have a better deal this year.

Right now, our priority must be ensuring our transport network is safe for passengers and staff, and we urge members of the public to follow the government's advice and only travel when absolutely necessary.

By setting fares sensibly, and with the lowest actual increase for 4 years, we're ensuring that taxpayers are not overburdened for their unprecedented contribution, ensuring investment is focused on

keeping vital services running and protecting frontline jobs.

The guidance remains that you should reduce the number of journeys you make wherever possible. Walk or cycle where possible, and plan ahead and avoid busy times and routes on public transport. This will allow you to practise social distancing while you travel. If you're in Tier 3, you should avoid travelling outside of your area.

If you need to use public transport, you should follow the [safer travel guidance](#).

Granting the fare break follows on from extensive investment by the government to provide refunds on Advance Tickets during changes to regional and national restrictions throughout the pandemic, ensuring passengers were not left out of pocket for following essential health guidance.

COVID-19: CMA launches investigation into airlines over refunds

The move comes as part of ongoing work by the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) in relation to holiday refunds during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.

The investigation will consider situations where airlines continued to operate flights despite people being unable lawfully to travel for non-essential purposes in the UK or abroad, for example during the second lockdown in England in November.

The CMA is aware that, in some cases where flights were not cancelled, customers were not offered refunds even though they could not lawfully travel. Instead, many were offered the option to rebook or to receive a voucher.

The CMA recognises that the airlines sector, like many others, is under strain due to the pandemic. However, it is concerned that certain airlines may have breached consumers' legal rights by failing to offer cash refunds, leaving people unfairly out of pocket, and has therefore opened an investigation to examine the matter further.

Andrea Coscelli, Chief Executive of the CMA, said:

We will be carefully analysing all the evidence to see whether any airlines breached consumers' legal rights by refusing people cash refunds for flights they could not lawfully take.

We recognise the continued pressure that businesses are currently facing, but they have a responsibility to treat consumers fairly and abide by their legal obligations.

The CMA will be working closely with the UK Civil Aviation Authority as it progresses its investigation.

While the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) leads on consumer protection in the airline sector, the CMA has undertaken extensive action in connection with cancellations and refunds during the pandemic and is well placed to support the CAA on these issues. The CMA and the CAA continue to work closely and share the same enforcement powers to tackle breaches of consumer protection law.

The CMA will now be writing to a number of airlines requiring information to understand more about their approaches to refunds for consumers prevented from flying by lockdown.

Following a careful analysis of this evidence, the CMA then will decide whether to launch enforcement action against individual airlines.

Notes to editors

1. It should not be assumed at this stage of the CMA's investigation that any airline has breached consumers' rights. The CMA has not reached a view on this issue and, ultimately, only a court can decide whether this has occurred.
2. At this stage, the CMA is not disclosing the identities of the airlines it will be writing to. Should it decide to launch enforcement action, it will likely name the airline(s) involved at that time, in line with its [transparency policy](#) in consumer enforcement cases.
3. As an enforcer under Part 8 of the Enterprise Act 2002, the CMA cannot levy administrative fines, but it can enforce consumer protection legislation through the courts, and where appropriate, obtain additional measures to improve consumer choice, drive better compliance with the law, or obtain redress for consumers.
4. More information about the investigation will be available on the CMA's [airlines case page](#).
5. With media queries, contact the CMA press office via press@cma.gov.uk or on 020 3738 6460.

[Fifth COVID-19 vaccine starts UK clinical trials](#)

- Valneva begins first UK clinical trials for its promising COVID-19

vaccine, being developed in Livingston, West Lothian

- the UK government has pre-ordered 60 million vaccine doses
- follows a multi-million-pound UK government investment in Valneva's manufacturing facilities, boosting its capacity to supply up to 250 million vaccine doses

Valneva has today (Wednesday 16 December) started UK clinical trials for its promising COVID-19 vaccine, currently being developed in Livingston, West Lothian.

Speciality vaccine company [Valneva](#)'s candidate will initially be tested on 150 UK volunteers at four [National Institute for Health Research](#) (NIHR) testing sites in Birmingham, Bristol, Newcastle and Southampton. These early phase 1 and 2 trials will show whether the vaccine produces a safe and effective immune response against COVID-19.

Should this early trial prove successful, larger clinical trials will be planned for April 2021 with over 4,000 UK volunteers testing 2 doses of the vaccine in 2 groups: those aged between 18-65 years and over 65s.

The UK government has already pre-ordered Valneva's vaccine candidate and should studies prove it to be safe and effective, 60 million doses could be made available to the UK by the end of 2021.

This latest milestone follows a [multi-million-pound up-front investment](#) announced in August by the UK government and Valneva to expand its Livingston facility. This supports over 100 highly skilled jobs for technicians and scientists at the West Lothian site, while advancing Scotland's vaccine manufacturing capacity.

Through this investment, if Valneva's vaccine candidate proves successful, this permanent facility will potentially have the capacity to supply up to 250 million vaccine doses to the UK and internationally.

Valneva's vaccine is the fifth to enter clinical trials in the UK, alongside Oxford/AstraZeneca, Imperial College London, Novavax and Janssen, whose studies are currently ongoing.

Business Secretary Alok Sharma, said:

As we take the monumental steps in rolling out the first COVID-19 vaccine, we must remember that we need to have a range of vaccines available to protect the British public now and long into the future.

Today we have more welcome news that life-saving clinical trials will begin across the country to test the safety and effectiveness of Valneva's vaccine, which is being clinically developed right here in the UK.

Having visited Valneva's state-of-the art facility in the Summer, I

have seen first-hand the incredible work our scientists and researchers are doing to develop this vaccine.

Thanks to significant investment from the UK government, we are doing all we can to ensure our country has the capabilities in place to produce hundreds of millions of doses of this vaccine for the UK, and for those around the world.

Secretary of State for Scotland Alister Jack said:

Today marks an important milestone not only in the UK's fight against coronavirus but for the hundreds of staff at the Valneva facility in Livingston who have worked tirelessly over the last few months to develop this vaccine. This is a great example of the work of Scotland's world-class life sciences sector.

The UK government is doing everything it can to support all parts of the country throughout the pandemic including ordering and paying for vaccines for the whole of the UK. We are investing in Valneva's manufacturing facility in Livingston, supporting hundreds of highly skilled jobs.

With a number of other vaccines in development, this gives us all hope for the months ahead.

The UK was the first country in the world to both procure and authorise the [Pfizer/BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine](#), ordering 40 million doses – enough for around a third of the population. The UK was also the first country in the West to start a mass COVID-19 vaccination programme, which began on 8 December.

In total, the UK government has developed a portfolio of 7 different vaccine candidates and secured access to 357 million doses to date, putting the UK in the best position for a vaccine and increasing chances of finding vaccines that work for different people.

Chief Executive Officer of Valneva Thomas Lingelbach said:

Our teams have been working extremely hard to develop our differentiated vaccine candidate and I would like to thank them, as well as the UK government, for their dedication and support. While conducting our first clinical trials, we are already ramping-up our manufacturing capacities and commencing production at full-scale so that we can make the vaccine widely available across the world assuming the vaccine is safe and effective.

Interim Chair of the government's Vaccines Taskforce Clive Dix:

Huge progress has been made in developing a successful COVID-19 vaccine. While this is very positive, we must remember there is no one size fits all approach, and we need to continue developing different types of vaccine so we can vaccinate the UK population.

We believe that Valneva's vaccine is promising and has the potential to tackle coronavirus now and into the future, which is why we have pre-ordered 60 million doses and are investing to help them expand their UK manufacturing facility. This will not only support them in manufacturing hundreds of millions of vaccines for the whole world but boost the UK's resilience against possible future health crises.

Chief Investigator for the Valneva study Professor Adam Finn said:

We are really pleased to be initiating this first-in-man phase 1 study in Bristol and continuing it in several other centres across the country in the New Year. This is a more traditional vaccine design than those that have been in the news recently, consisting of the whole SARS CoV2 virus that has been chemically inactivated. This kind of viral vaccine has been in widespread use for 60 years.

Our team will be working hard through the Christmas holiday period to get the first participants enrolled and vaccinated. We are pleased to be adding further to the research already done via the NIHR in Bristol over recent months to test COVID-19 vaccines and we are really grateful to the many members of our community who continue to come forward and volunteer to take part in this important work.

Some of the volunteers taking part in Valneva's clinical trials came through from the [NHS Vaccines Registry](#), allowing the UK public to support the national effort to speed up vaccine research. Over 364,000 people have already signed up to the Registry, with more needed.

Additional information about volunteering for clinical studies can be found by visiting the [NHS site](#) to join the NHS Vaccine Research Registry.

The Registry was launched by the UK government in partnership with the NIHR, NHS Digital, the Scottish and Welsh governments and the Northern Ireland Executive in July. It aims to help create a database of people who consent to be contacted by the NHS to take part in clinical studies, to help speed up the development of a safe and effective vaccine.

Through the government's Vaccines Taskforce, the UK has secured early access to 357 million doses of 7 of the most promising vaccine candidates, including:

- BioNTech/Pfizer – Phase III – 40 million doses secured
- Oxford/Astra Zeneca – Phase III – 100 million doses secured

- Moderna – Phase III – 7 million doses secured
 - Novavax – Phase III – 60 million doses secured
 - Janssen – Phase III – 30 million doses secured
 - GSK/Sanofi – Phase I / II – 60 million doses secured
 - Valneva – Phase I / II – 60 million doses secured, with an option to acquire a further 130 million if the vaccine is proven to be safe, effective and suitable
-

[Record numbers of nursing students as pandemic inspires next generation](#)

The final figures from this year's admission cycle show there were 29,740 acceptances to nursing and midwifery courses in England, 6,110 more than last year and an increase of over a quarter (26%). This year, 23% (6,770) of acceptances were from students aged 35 years and older, a 43% increase on last year.

The number of new nursing applicants to English providers between 15 January and 30 June was 68% (4,600) higher than the same period last year. The lockdown period (23 March to 30 June deadline) itself saw nearly double the number of applications to nursing relative to the same period in the year previously.

Minister for Care Helen Whately said:

It's fantastic to see so many people choosing to pursue a career in nursing and midwifery, with over a quarter more students starting on courses. This year has shown just how much we depend on nurses. I have no doubt that their incredible work has inspired the next generation to pursue careers in the NHS and social care.

This year we've also introduced a new training grant for nursing students of at least £5,000 a year, helping to remove the barriers for anyone considering this brilliant career.

With over 14,800 more nurses working in our NHS compared to last year, we are on our way to delivering 50,000 more by the end of this Parliament to help us build back better.

In September the government introduced training grants for eligible nursing, midwifery and many allied health profession students of at least £5,000 a year, which does not need to be paid back. Additional payments of up to £3,000 will be available for specialisms struggling to recruit, including learning disability and mental health nursing and to help students cover

childcare costs.

Figures to the end of August show the number of nurses in the NHS in England increased by 14,813 compared with last year.

[The end-of-cycle 2020 data resources](#) will be available on the UCAS website.

Boston Barrier flood gate fully operational

The Boston Barrier gate is now fully ready and working to give an enhanced level of flood protection to over 13,000 homes and businesses in the town.

As the centrepiece of the flood scheme, the barrier gate can be raised in just 20 minutes, responding quickly to threats of North Sea tidal surges.

With the whole of the £100m [Environment Agency](#) scheme now two-thirds complete, the project will provide Boston with one of the best standards of flood defence outside of London. Once the scheme is fully completed in 2022, flood risk to over 14,000 homes and 800 businesses will be greatly reduced and allow for the effects of climate change for the next 100 years.

This barrier is part of the [government's long term investment](#) in flood and coastal defences. Since 2015 it has invested £2.6bn to better protect the country from flooding and coastal erosion and is on course to have better protected 300,000 homes by March 2021. Earlier this year, the government announced a [record £5.2 billion investment](#) in flood and coastal defences and the [National FCRM Strategy](#) will help build a better prepared and more resilient nation.

The Boston Barrier project is expected to be fully completed in 2022.

Minister for Floods, Water and Emergencies Rebecca Pow said:

Flooding has a devastating impact on lives and livelihoods, but for communities like Boston the barrier project brings a real sense of support for the years ahead, better protecting 13,000 properties.

We are determined to support flood-hit communities as we build back greener and we are investing a further £5.2 billion over the next six years to reduce flood risk to hundreds of thousands more homes.

Environment Agency chief executive Sir James Bevan said:

Reaching this stage of the Boston Barrier project represents a huge development for the town and for the Environment Agency.

During this most difficult of years, I want to thank all of the teams who have shown great dedication and determination to reach this important milestone in a Covid-secure way.

Now that the barrier gate is fully operational, Boston is better prepared for what winter may bring, this year and for many years to come.

Environment Agency Boston Barrier project director Adam Robinson said:

It gives me great pleasure to see the barrier gate fully operational following rigorous testing.

This marks a huge leap forward for the scheme and there is now a significant reduction to the risk from tidal flooding in Boston. The majority of properties covered by the scheme will be better protected for a similar event to that of December 2013.

Work on the scheme, which has been identified by government as critical infrastructure, continues in line with the government's coronavirus advice with measures in place to ensure safe working procedures on site.

Our team have worked incredibly hard throughout the pandemic to minimise disruption while maintaining the health and safety of staff, suppliers and members of the public. That effort has definitely paid off and means we now have a winter-ready operational tidal flood defence.

Further stages

The next stages of work will focus on tying-in the further parts of the scheme downstream, including:

- Installing a replacement flood gate at the Port of Boston wet dock entrance.
- Work to tie the project into the Haven Banks Improvement Scheme, a separate Environment Agency project to raise and strengthen the existing flood banks running from the Barrier towards The Wash for a distance of 5 km.

Background information

- The Boston Barrier is a critical infrastructure project and national priority project for the Environment Agency, delivered by BAM Nuttall Mott MacDonald Joint Venture.
- Over 800 properties were flooded across the town in a tidal surge on 5

December 2013. The surge highlighted the need for improved tidal flood defences in Boston, and the barrier scheme became a national priority project for the Environment Agency's Six-Year Programme six months later.

- With total funding of over £100m, the scheme will protect Boston town centre against a tidal surge similar to what was experienced in 2013.
- When complete, the scheme as a whole will give 14,000 homes and 800 businesses a better standard of protection against tidal flooding, giving Boston one of the best standards of defence outside of London.
- It will help deliver economic benefits to the area estimated to be worth over £1 billion.
- The Boston Barrier project was granted the Transport and Work Act legislation which gave the permissions to start the project in December 2017, and had spades in the ground at the beginning of January 2018.

Winter readiness

- The Environment Agency is prepared to take action this winter wherever it is needed. Throughout the year, it has continued to build and repair flood defences. It has 250 high-volume pumps available and 6,500 trained staff across the country, including 314 trained flood support officers.
- The Environment Agency is also making the most of new technology to prepare for and respond to floods:
 - It uses drones and aeroplanes to map river channels and the extent of flooding
 - Nimble, remote-controlled boats help it monitor river flows and collect data
 - It uses its [flood warning system](#) to directly alert over 1.4 million properties at the touch of a button when flooding is expected.
 - It uses a wide range of social media and media channels to increase the reach of its warning messages.