

New national rail passengers milestone reached

March 15, 2023



The Department for Transport (DfT) has published figures showing that national rail passenger numbers have reached over 100% of pre-COVID levels for the first time since March 2020. From Friday 10 February, passenger numbers on the national network hit or exceeded 100% five days in a row, and on Wednesday 22 February 103% was recorded. This means that passenger numbers have doubled in just over a year, with the DfT data showing that since the start of 2023 rail customers have been returning not just on weekends and the middle days of the working week, but also on Mondays and Fridays.

Darren Caplan, Chief Executive of the Railway Industry Association, said: “These are amazing figures, and ones that everyone in rail should take pride in. To reach 103% of pre-COVID passenger levels barely a year on from pandemic rules being relaxed is an amazing achievement, and shows that many people are returning to their previous routines of working, visiting friends and family, and enjoying leisure and hospitality. The remote working revolution has perhaps been over-reported too, with ‘hybrid-workers’ increasingly spending more time in the workplace.

“We should also bear in mind that today’s figures are being compared to March 2020, the end of the second highest period of passengers in UK rail history. And that in the last year we have had significant

industrial action and some poor service levels on some parts of the network. Imagine how much higher these passenger figures would be were this not the case.

“We are also hearing that passenger revenues are also hitting 90%, a post-COVID high. Given all this, the Railway Industry Association and our members again urge the UK Government – especially during Spring Budget week – not to take its foot off the pedal of rail investment. The UK will clearly need more rail capacity both now and in the future, as the numbers using rail go up. Investing in rail also supports thousands of jobs, billions of pounds of GVA and Treasury revenues, and can help the Government with its levelling-up and decarbonisation agendas.”

Responding to the news Andy Bagnall, Chief Executive of Rail Partners in response to the ORR’s latest passenger usage statistics said: “The latest ORR passenger usage statistics underline that, while passenger numbers are recovering positively, the industrial dispute and the imperative to focus operators on regrowing revenue are the most immediate issues that need to be addressed to ensure the future financial sustainability of the railway.

“What’s clear from the data is that where more commercial freedoms exist, such as for open access operators, passenger numbers are returning more quickly. That’s why it’s crucial that government pushes ahead with contractual reform to give its operators greater commercial freedoms so that they can drive the recovery of passenger numbers across Britain.

The latest DfT passenger figures can be found [here](#).

Photo credit: Railway Industry Association