

Rail journeys fall to July levels following rise of Omicron variant

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New figures show fewer people are travelling by train following the emergence of the Omicron coronavirus variant.

Provisional figures published by the government today show in the week to 9 December, daily rail journeys were an average of 55% pre-covid levels. This is down from 63% the previous week (to 2 December) and a high of 72% the week before that (to 25 November).

Omicron was first reported in the UK on 21 November. Since then, weekly train ticket sales have dropped from 68% of pre-pandemic levels to just 59% for the week ending 11th December.

Last Monday (13 December) saw the introduction of work from home guidance in England, with many fewer people travelling. This led to a further drop in rail industry revenue, down by 23% week on week. This means that on Monday, income from fares was at just 43% of pre-pandemic levels, down from 55% the previous Monday. This is the lowest level on a Monday since the end of July, when the country first reopened after lockdown.

In the Spending Review, the government committed a further £5.7 billion over three years from 2022 to keep essential rail services running. This is in addition to over £15 billion committed so far during the pandemic. The rail industry has been working hard to create a financially sustainable, more passenger-focussed future for the railway, as it addresses the challenges faced after the pandemic and lays the foundations for future growth. The rise of the Omicron variant has intensified this challenge.

Train companies are continuing to help people to travel with confidence by keeping up enhanced cleaning, by ensuring trains are well ventilated with eight out of 10 carriages having systems that refresh the air every six to nine minutes, and by improving information about how busy trains are so that people can avoid the busiest times.

Andy Bagnall, Director General at the Rail Delivery Group, said: “Like many other parts of the economy, Omicron is dealing another blow to the rail industry, which has seen its finances decimated by the pandemic.

“The railway cannot take more than its fair share of support from the taxpayer which means changing to be more sustainable and more customer focussed. That will allow the railway to build back stronger for the country as we emerge from the pandemic.”

Photo credit: Rail Delivery Group