

Summer saw most passenger rail use since start of pandemic

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An ORR quarterly report has said that the summer months of 2021 have seen the most rail journeys since the COVID-19 pandemic began.

The number of passengers using trains went up by just over a third in the summer (36%). This equates to a total of 248 million people during this period, compared to 182 million in the first quarter of 2021-22. That is the most since the pandemic began.

The regulator's analysis also shows that the average journey lengths were shorter in 2021-22 Q2 than two years ago for all ticket types despite the overall increase in journey length.

Total passenger revenue was more than half (54%) of pre-pandemic levels – with £1.5 billion of revenue coming from passengers in Q2.

Recent work from home guidance, however, has had an impact.

Weekly estimates of rail passenger journeys relative to pre-pandemic levels published by the Department

for Transport showed the week ending Monday 6 December that usage was estimated to be at 56%, down from 72% recorded two weeks earlier.

Feras Alshaker, director of planning and performance at the Office of Rail and Road, said: "The events of recent weeks remind us that challenges remain for the rail industry, but our stats show in the summer months, people's enthusiasm for rail journeys continued and remained strong to see the most journeys by rail in a single quarter since the start of the pandemic.

"It remains important to thank all those in the rail industry, who continue to work hard to help people travel safely and with confidence."

ORR's statistics show that journeys in the Long Distance sector were at 63% of pre-pandemic levels, with 23 million journeys made in the second quarter of the year.

LNER saw relative usage hit 89% compared to two years ago, and Avanti West Coast was at 57%.

In the regional sector, usage hit 57% of pre-pandemic levels this quarter, with relative usage ranging from 69% for journeys on Merseyrail to 48% for ScotRail. Journeys in London and the South East were at 54% of pre-pandemic levels, with 166 million journeys made this quarter.

There was also an increase in the use of ordinary fare tickets (including advance, anytime/peak, and off-peak tickets) from July to September, with 211 million journeys made using these types of tickets.

Season tickets accounted for 15% of franchised journeys made in 2021-22 Q2, which is the lowest share for any quarter in the time series.

Responding to the latest passenger stats published today (16 December) by the Office of Rail and Road, Andy Bagnall, Director General at the Rail Delivery Group, said: "Today's figures show some positives as passenger journeys grew over the summer meaning people wanted to return to the railway, but it's clear that the pandemic, and the latest wave of Omicron are delivering a heavy blow to the railway's finances.

"We are dedicated to keeping the country moving so that people can get to where they need to be, but we know we must change to become more financially sustainable and more focused on our customers so that when the time comes, we can get people back travelling by train."

Image supplied by ORR.