**Monday 24 April**

**Record numbers take the train to Cumbria, according to Virgin Trains**

* Half a million journeys taken between London and Cumbria in the last 12 months setting a new record as the train operator celebrates 20 years on the West Coast Main Line

New figures from Virgin Trains show that over half a million journeys (517,000) have been taken on trains between London and Cumbria in the last 12 months (1 April 2016 – 31 March 2017).

A little over a year from the devastating floods of 2015, the region is proving as attractive as ever. The latest figures show that the number of journeys taken with Virgin Trains between London and Cumbrian destinations including Penrith, Oxenholme and Carlisle have increased by a third in the last five years.

Oxenholme (the gateway to the Lake District) is the most popular destination in Cumbria with 55% of journeys (283,000) to the region being made between London and Oxenholme in the last year. Nearly 159,000 journeys were made between London and Carlisle and 75,000 to and from Penrith (the North of the Lakes) in the same period.

Mirroring this increase in customer numbers, the latest figures from Cumbria Tourism’s Visitor Attraction Survey show an increase of 7% in the number of visitors to attractions in the region last year compared to 2015.

Within the last year, Virgin Trains has introduced m-tickets across all routes along the west coast, extended the booking horizon to six months, introduced its on-board entertainment portal, BEAM, and achieved the highest level of punctuality since it began running trains on the West Coast Main Line 20 years ago.

Anna Doran, General Manager at Virgin Trains on the west coast, said: “Virgin Trains is proud to serve Cumbria and these figures show just how attractive the region is to visitors. The floods of 2015 had a devastating effect for many Cumbrian residents and businesses, so we’ve worked hard, alongside others in the region, to get the message out that Cumbria is open. These figures are a testament to the resilience of Cumbria, and the tenacity of local residents and businesses. As we celebrate our twentieth birthday, we would like to thank all those customers who have chosen to travel with us to visit the beautiful region of Cumbria.”

Virgin Trains partnered with Visit England so support their ‘Love the North’ campaign by offering discounted fares to flood-hit regions, including Cumbria. The train operating company also renamed Pendolino 390010 ‘The Cumbrian Spirit’ to celebrate the spirit of the Cumbrian people during and after the floods.

Ian Stephens, Managing Director of Cumbria Tourism, said: “Provisional occupancy figures for the end of 2016 and start of 2017 look good and the increase in rail journeys to the county is promising and shows that businesses across Cumbria have real resilience. The effects of the events in winter 2015 highlighted how important tourism is to the Cumbrian economy with the sector supporting in excess of 60,000 jobs and in 2015 was worth £2.62 billion to the region’s economy. Iconic towns affected by the floods, such as Keswick, Kendal, Appleby, Pooley Bridge and Grasmere for example rely heavily on visitors and so it’s vital that our tourism industry is recovering.”

**Local business recovers**

Grasmere Gingerbread, a local business run by third generation owners, Andrew & Joanne Hunter, that makes and sells the unique gingerbread (a spicy-sweet cross between a biscuit and cake) the region is well-known for. The company fell victim of the floods with their warehouse suffering real damage. Andrew Hunter, of Grasmere Gingerbread, was invited by Virgin Trains to unveil ‘The Cumbrian Spirit’ at Carlisle station in March 2016, to celebrate all those businesses trying to recover from the floods.

A year on, Grasmere Gingerbread’s warehouse is fully functional and they are welcoming visitors to sample a unique taste of Cumbria. The railway has been vital to Grasmere Gingerbread, since the Victorian era – with many tourists coming to the Lake District by train and stopping off at the cottage of Sarah Nelson (a Victorian cook who invented Grasmere Gingerbread) on their way to visit William Wordsworth’s grave.

Andrew Hunter, Co-owner of Grasmere Gingerbread in Cumbria, said: “Cumbria is resilient and its people are strong in the face of adversity. After the December 2015 floods, everyone worked hard to repair damaged roads and bridges, re-build businesses and make this county the welcoming destination that it has always been. Grasmere Gingerbread® flood-proofed its warehouse, re-energised its marketing and publicity, and thanks to a mammoth team effort finished 2016 in a much stronger position than it was at the beginning of the year. The Virgin Trains Pendolino ‘The Cumbrian Spirit’ perfectly encapsulates this amazing county. We were determined to bounce back and that is exactly what we have done.”

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**Editor’s Notes**

**About Virgin Trains**

Stagecoach and Virgin are working in partnership to operate the East Coast and West Coast inter-city routes under the Virgin Trains brand. Together, they are on track to revolutionise rail travel across the UK.

The combined network connects some of the nation’s most iconic destinations including Glasgow, Liverpool, Birmingham, Manchester, Edinburgh, Newcastle, Leeds, York and London.

Virgin Trains is committed to delivering a high speed, high frequency service, offering shorter journey times, more comfortable travel and excellent customer service. Customers consistently rate Virgin Trains as one of the top long-distance rail franchise operators in the National Rail Passenger Survey (NRPS) commissioned by industry watchdog, Transport Focus.

On the East Coast route, £140m is being invested to create a more personalised travel experience. We have already invested £21m to completely revamp our existing fleet and customers can now benefit from 42 additional services (22,000 extra seats) per week between Edinburgh and London. 2018 will see the introduction of completely new Azuma trains being built in the UK by Hitachi.

The West Coast route has a proud record of challenging the status quo - from introducing tilting Pendolino trains, to a pioneering automated delay repay scheme and becoming the first franchised rail operator to offer m-Tickets for all ticket types.

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