4 April, 2019

**Virgin Trains on course for 50m passengers ahead of HS2 after breaking new records**

* *Nearly 40m Virgin Trains passenger journeys last year, up from 30m just six years ago*
* *Report by Campaign for Better Transport says “transformative” investment in Virgin High Frequency (VHF) timetable has underpinned growth*
* *VHF boosting regional economies, cutting pollution & motorway congestion, report finds*

Virgin Trains has broken new passenger records after nearly doubling rail industry growth levels.

Nearly 40 million journeys were made over the last year (2018/19) on the route connecting London to major cities such as Manchester, Birmingham, Preston and Glasgow, a 3.1% increase on the previous year and up by nearly 10m compared with six years previously.

The current growth trajectory will see nearly 50m passenger journeys being made on the west coast route by 2026 when the HS2 route between London and Birmingham is due to open\*.

It comes as a new report by Campaign for Better Transport found that growth on the west coast route had nearly doubled that of the rest of the rail industry following “transformative” investment by government and industry in the Virgin High Frequency timetable a decade ago.

*Transformation of the West Coast Mainline: How rail investment is benefitting people, the environment and the economy*found that upgrades to the line, along with the smooth introduction of the transformative Virgin High Frequency timetable and new trains, have achieved not just better journeys and increased passenger numbers, but also regional and local economic growth, less congested roads and lower carbon emissions from transport. The investment has led to:

* 7m fewer car journeys a year between London and Manchester
* 26,000 fewer daily car journeys on the M1 and M40
* Preventing a 17% increase in peak-time traffic flows north of Birmingham
* 1.7 million fewer people flying between London and Manchester, resulting in 5,000 fewer flights and 60,000 tonnes of carbon savings between 2004 and 2017
* Removing 1m car journeys from the Lakes District National Park
* Growing rail’s share of the Glasgow-London market from 8% in 2009 to 20%

Phil Whittingham, Managing Director for Virgin Trains said today’s rate of passenger growth had taken years of investment and commitment. “We have worked tirelessly with Government and industry partners to completely transform the West Coast route, introducing a fleet of new trains, achieving one of the biggest timetable changes since privatisation without a hitch and bringing a focus on customer experience that the industry had not experienced before. This report offers a useful insight into the scale of this transformation and its wider positive impacts on regional economies and the environment,” he said.

Darren Shirley, Chief Executive of Campaign for Better Transport, added: “At a time when rail investment is being questioned because of poorly implemented timetable changes, problems with franchises and over-running and over-budget projects, it is easy to lose sight of the huge benefits which can be achieved. Rather than being happy side effects, outcomes such as lower carbon emissions, support for local economies and tackling road congestion should be regarded as a direct consequence of support for the railways.

“The improvements to the West Coast Mainline were achieved thanks to a partnership of government and industry investment. With radical changes to the UK rail system under consideration as part of the Rail Review, this report shows how thinking, collaboration and cooperation can have far reaching and long-term benefits.”

The VHF timetable introduced shorter, more frequent journeys connecting London to Birmingham, Manchester, Liverpool and Glasgow and other key destinations on the 400-mile west coast route when it was launched from December 2008.

Between 2006 and 2018, Virgin Trains journeys grew by 105%, compared with growth of 59% across all train operators and 62% in the long-distance sector, the report found.

It followed major investment in modernising Victorian infrastructure, introducing tilting Pendolino and Super Voyager train fleets and transforming the offer to customers.

In the last financial year, there were 39.5m journeys, nearly triple the 14m in 1997 when Virgin took over the West Coast route.

ENDS

Notes to editors

\* Based on last year’s growth rate, passenger journeys would reach 50.4m in 2026 if growth were unconstrained. Based on an average of the last six years of growth, passenger journeys would reach 55m by this point.

Transformation of the West Coast Mainline: How rail investment is benefitting people, the environment and the economy can be downloaded here: <https://bettertransport.org.uk/sites/default/files/research-files/Transformation-of-the-West-Coast-Mainline.pdf>

**About Virgin Trains**

Stagecoach and Virgin are working in partnership to operate the West Coast inter-city route under the Virgin Trains brand, revolutionising travel on one of the UK’s key rail arteries.

The network connects some of the nation’s most iconic destinations including Glasgow, Liverpool, Birmingham, Manchester 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 ahead of other long-distance rail franchise operators in the National Rail Passenger Survey (NRPS) commissioned by industry watchdog, Transport Focus.

Virgin Trains has a proud record of challenging the status quo - from introducing tilting Pendolino trains, to a pioneering automated delay repay scheme, introducing the industry-leading onboard entertainment streaming service, BEAM, and becoming the first franchised rail operator to offer m-Tickets for all ticket types.

Virgin Trains operated the East Coast route between March 1, 2015 and June 24, 2018. In that time, we invested £75m to create a more personalised travel experience, including over £40m in the existing fleet. Customers have benefitted from 48 additional services between Edinburgh and London every week, and an extra 22 Saturday services between Leeds and London – a total of 1.74 million additional seats since May 2015.

Working together, the partnership railway of the public and private sectors has published a long-term plan, called *In Partnership for Britain’s Prosperity,* to change and improve Britain’s railway. The plan will secure almost £85bn of additional economic benefits to the country whilst enabling further investment and improvement, and contains four commitments which will see rail companies: strengthen our economic contribution to the country; improve customers’ satisfaction; boost the communities we serve; and, create more and better jobs in rail. For more information go to [Britain Runs on Rail](http://www.britainrunsonrail.co.uk/?gclid=CjwKCAiAr_TQBRB5EiwAC_QCq9OA-y_Al1Voo4ZvYjMvSBs86kuvjZLD8MfFvnOUU9UeVZ1T5CObLRoCasIQAvD_BwE).

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