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**Virgin Trains breaks one million mark on Edinburgh-London after service investments**

* *Customer numbers break new records in 2016 following Virgin Trains’ investment*
* *Increase in passengers choosing train over plane on UK’s busiest domestic air route*
* *On track with ambitious to win 50% of air/rail market by 2023*

More than a million Virgin Trains passengers are travelling between Edinburgh and London each year for the first time.

The London to Scotland operator has ended the year on a high after seeing 8% annual growth in customer numbers between the UK and Scottish capitals.

It follows a string of timetable and customer service improvements introduced by Virgin Trains as part of a £140m investment programme on the east coast route.

A key driver in the growth has been an increase in the number of passengers choosing train over plane – the result of a deliberate strategy by Virgin to win market share on the UK’s busiest domestic air route.

Between January and September – the last month which comparable figures for airline journeys are available – the number of Virgin Trains passengers travelling between Edinburgh and London grew by 8.2% to 831,000. That represents 25% of the total air/rail market, or nearly a third once interlining passengers (those travelling via London airports on international journeys) are excluded, an increase of two percentage points.

Air traffic on the route remained broadly flat over the same period, reversing the trend seen in 2015, when growth on the Edinburgh-London corridor was driven by air\*. Overall, the air/rail market grew in both 2015 and 2016.

The passenger growth has been welcomed by Scotland’s Transport Minister, Humza Yousaf MSP, who said: “It is clear given the huge numbers of passengers now travelling on Virgin East Coast that cross border rail services are more popular than ever, with demand growing year on year. Virgin are also offering increased frequency and journey time improvements we will no doubt see the popularity of rail continue. More connectivity and more passengers travelling between Edinburgh and major stops en route to London can only be a major boon for business here and I look forward to Scotland feeling all of the benefits.”

After taking over the east coast route in March 2015, Virgin Trains has worked to transform customer experience, with a number of key improvements being made this year.

Two timetable changes have delivered an additional 45 services per week between Edinburgh and London, giving a half-hourly service through most of the day and more services at weekends. The entire fleet has been completely overhauled, while customers have benefited from free wifi through First and Standard Class and the introduction of BEAM, Virgin Trains’ revolutionary onboard entertainment streaming service.

Meanwhile, booking horizons have been extended to six months from the industry standard of three months, giving customers more time to plan ahead and find the cheapest fares.

Virgin Trains has set out ambitious plans to gain half the air/rail market by 2023 following the introduction of the state-of-the-art Azuma fleet which will provide faster, greener, more comfortable journeys.

David Horne, Virgin Trains Managing Director on the east coast route, said: “We’ve set out ambitious plans to take on airlines by investing in our services and we’re delighted to see that strategy bearing fruit. The growth in rail travel we’re announcing today shows that the improvements we’ve made have been popular with customers, who are voting with their feet. That’s good news for passengers, good news for the environment and good for the long-terms growth of rail between Scotland and England.”

\* Air traffic figures take from the Civil Aviation Authority, for passengers travelling between Edinburgh Airport and Heathrow, Gatwick, Luton, Stansted and London City airports.

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**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.

Visit the Virgin Trains Media Room - [http://mediaroom.virgintrains.co.uk](http://mediaroom.virgintrains.co.uk/) - for the latest news, images and videos. Subscribe [here](http://www.mynewsdesk.com/follow/47939) for regular news from Virgin Trains.

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