

Britain's trains have most lucrative autumn ever

Fare revenue grows 8% as number of journeys increases to 385m – with biggest rise in crowded south-east

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The Guardian, Thursday 14 March 2013 20.02 GMT



Trains at London Euston. Photograph: Oli Scarff/Getty Images

Britain's trains had their busiest and most lucrative autumn to date, with passengers paying record sums to travel in the last three months of 2012.

The number of journeys rose almost 4% from 2011's total to 385m and fare revenue grew more than 8% to just under £2bn – a period immediately before fares rose again by 4.2%.

The biggest increase in passengers – of more than 5% – came in the already crowded commuter services of London and the south-east.

The figures, issued by the Office of Rail Regulation, were accompanied by a warning that the system must deliver better value for customers. The ORR is reviewing Network

Rail's strategic business plan for 2014-19 as the budget and future works on the railways are negotiated.

The ORR chief executive, Richard Price, said his office was looking to see "how can Network Rail close the gap between its performance and what it's paid for", adding that he thought the track operator had not made enough progress on managing problems in the old infrastructure that had caused disruption and delay for passengers.

Rail unions called on ministers to halt planned inflation-busting fare rises. Manuel Cortes, leader of the TSSA rail union, said passengers were already travelling on the most expensive network in Europe. "It really is now time to stop the persecution of commuters," he said.

However, the Association of Train Operating Companies said the figures showed that rail travel was more popular than it had been for 90 years, on a network half the size it was then. A spokesman said: "Significant investment and an industry focused on attracting more passengers have turned around decades of decline to deliver better stations, more trains and faster services."