

3 May 2021

First quarter of 2021 sees 100 million fewer rail journeys than pre-COVID times

Rail passenger numbers grew in the first quarter of 2021 as more people returned to passenger transport, but national rail patronage remains 48 per cent lower, or more than 100 million fewer passenger journeys, than pre-COVID levels.

National rail passenger numbers rose by 8.57 million or 8.6 per cent during the first quarter of 2021, but this was 41.5 per cent, or 77.13 million passenger journeys, below the same time the previous year.

Australasian Railway Association (ARA) Chief Executive Officer Caroline Wilkie said whilst passenger numbers are increasing steadily, we are unlikely to see a return to pre COVID 19 levels until international borders open.

“The rail industry has made significant investments in hygiene and new customer service measures to give people confidence in travel on the rail network,” Ms Wilkie said.

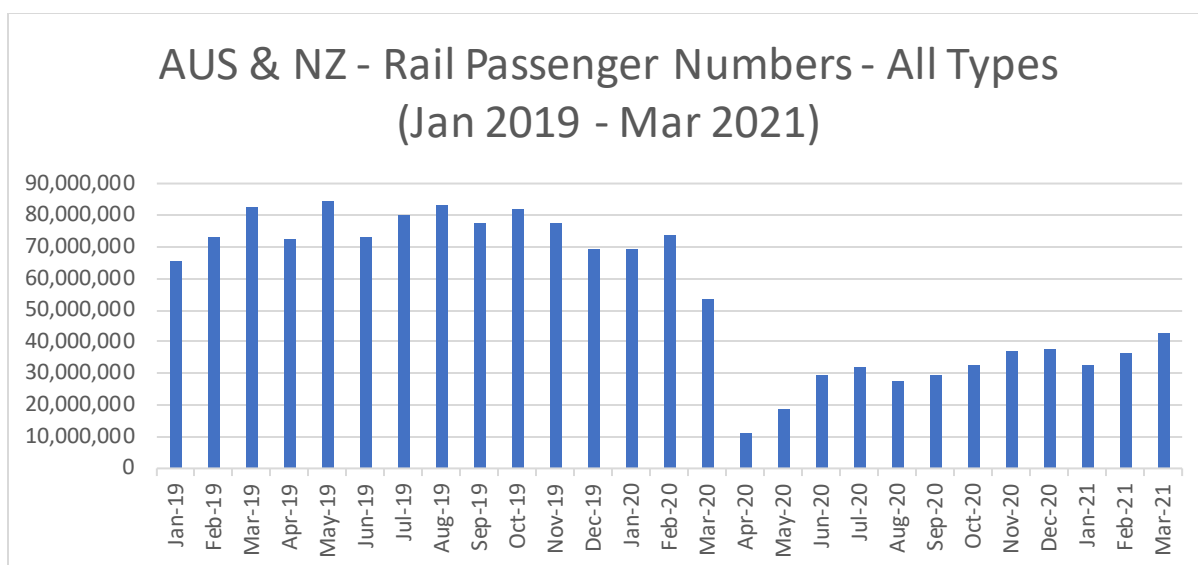
“After a year of disruptions throughout 2020, it is great to see more people coming back to rail services.

“The return to rail is crucial if we are to avoid traffic gridlock and rising congestion in our cities.

“More people will need to return to the network over time to keep emissions in check and ensure Australia’s sustainable growth.”

Of note, the light rail network saw the biggest return of passengers, with a 33.3 per cent rise, or a 3.56 million increase in passengers, during the quarter.

While January 2021 featured a reduction in rail passenger traffic, this was consistent with previous years over the holiday period. Nationally, passenger numbers rose month on month throughout the quarter.



All Australian states except Western Australia – which experienced its first lockdown in 10 months in January – recorded an increase in passenger numbers during the first quarter of the year. Lockdowns, even short-lived have proven to have a knock-on effect on patronage numbers.

Victoria, which had been hardest hit by the impact of lockdowns in 2020, recorded the biggest rise in the first quarter of 2021, with patronage up 26.6 per cent but still 59 per cent down on the previous year.

Patronage fell in New Zealand over the holiday period, but passenger numbers were climbing again by the end of the quarter. The quarter was 37.3 per cent below the same time last year and 43.9 per cent below pre-COVID levels.

Ms Wilkie said while the trend of rising patronage was encouraging, the industry remained ready to welcome those who had yet to return to rail.

“Nationally, passenger numbers are just over half of what they were for the same period two years ago, before the impact of COVID-19,” Ms Wilkie said.

“It is essential for our cities and communities that we bring those people back to the network to avoid traffic gridlock and to support our long-term economic growth.

“The rail industry is ready to welcome people back and continues to implement dedicated COVIDsafe measures across all networks.”

ENDS

Note to editors: Please see the following table for statistics by country and state.

Australian snapshot – rail passenger numbers

Quarterly passenger numbers			
	Q4 2020	Q1 2021	Variance
Passengers	100,259,252	108,833,136	8,573,884 8.6%

Year on year quarterly passenger numbers						
	Q1 2019 (pre-COVID)	Q1 2021	Variance	Q1 2020	Q1 2021	Variance
Passengers	209,496,189	108,833,136	-100,663,053 -48%	185,960,594	108,833,136	-77,127,458 -41.5%

State and territory rail passenger trends

Location	Change this quarter	Change year on year	Location	Change this quarter	Change year on year
NSW & ACT	3,229,895 5.5%	-32,376,394 -34.4%	VIC	5,227,034 26.6%	-35,828,331 -59.0%
QLD	371,746 4.8%	-3,637,395 -31.2%	WA	-750,082 -6.7%	-3,343,365 -24.3%
SA	495,291 14.8%	-1,941,973 -33.6%			

New Zealand snapshot – rail passenger numbers

Quarterly passenger numbers			
	Q4 2020	Q1 2021	Variance
Passengers	5,458,791	4,893,112	565,679 -10.4%

Year on year quarterly passenger numbers						
	Q1 2019 (pre-COVID)	Q1 2021	Variance	Q1 2020	Q1 2021	Variance
Passengers	8,729,229	4,893,112	-3,836,117 -43.9%	7,808,165	4,893,112	-2,915,053 -37.3%

Further information

Joeley Pettit

General Manager Corporate Affairs, Sustainability and Member Engagement

0407 061 421, jpettit@ara.net.au