Annual rail consumer report 2023 to 2024

Executive summary

Passengers across Great Britain made 1.6 billion journeys by rail this year. For every journey, we want travellers to feel confident about the experience they can expect. This report highlights our key interventions to protect passengers during 2023 to 2024 and our forward plan.

Planning a journey

We understand the importance of the passenger experience right from the point that people start to plan their journeys. Some passengers want to speak directly with a member of staff, as we saw through the public response to proposals from industry to close many ticket offices. But others are increasingly going online to plan journeys and purchase rail tickets.

Our achievements this year include:

- securing increased transparency from online retailers where they charge fees
- improvements in the notifications sent to passengers who have purchased online when there are changes to their booked train, and
- a 50% reduction in the maximum refund fee that can be charged when a passenger decides not to travel

We have now initiated a review of the Retail Information Code of Practice, which is designed to provide clarity to retailers on their obligations to passengers, to promote further good practice.

Accessibility and assistance

Our rail network should be accessible to all, and this year we have seen a 22% increase in the number of bookings for passenger assistance.

However, operators have not sustained the improvements in delivery of booked assistance that we saw last year. Our passenger research suggests that cross-industry performance this year has fallen back to the levels seen in 2022 to 2023. We expect operators to turn this around.

We are developing a new approach to benchmarking performance that will enable us to hold operators to account more transparently and robustly. We will assess in the coming year whether the busiest stations are meeting requirements for how they manage communications between departure and destination stations on the assistance needs of passengers.

Lifts at stations are key enablers of access to the railway. We have started to publish data on lift performance and launched a review of Network Rail's processes for lift maintenance.

Protecting passengers when services are disrupted

Train service reliability is a top priority for passengers, and so also needs to be a top priority for industry. Where services are disrupted, whether by planned engineering work or unplanned events, we expect operators to minimise the impact on passengers.

Our current focus includes:

- improvements in passenger information for rail replacement buses
- provision of live information about lift availability
- the health, safety and welfare of passengers when they are at risk of being stranded on a train for hours

ORR sponsorship of the Rail Ombudsman

Where things go wrong, passengers can claim compensation and operators must respond appropriately to any complaints. This year, as an extension to ORR's role, we took over sponsorship of the Rail Ombudsman, a free, impartial and independent service that passengers can use to escalate unresolved complaints about train and station operators. We are now working to improve aspects of the service including:

- the introduction of new passenger contact channels to provide a more accessible service
- improved response times for certain case types to speed up the complaint resolution process for passengers

In the year ahead, we will continue to make targeted interventions in the passenger interest, tackling underperformance by operators and driving service improvements.

Infographic: Key figures

Covering the period from April 2023 to March 2024. Percentage point differences reflect a comparison with the previous year.

348,929
passenger complaints were responded to by operators, up 1% on last year [1]

More than 32,000
passengers told us about their experiences of making complaints to train operators[2]

94%
of complaints were responded to by train operators within 20 working days, and 74% within ten working days[2]

99%
of delay compensation claims were processed by train operators within 20 working days, up 2pp on last year[3]

November 2023
ORR assumed sponsorship of the Rail Ombudsman

43
rail organisations including train and station operators joined the new Rail Ombudsman scheme

354,521
passenger bookings were made for assistance, up 22% on last year[4]

More than 9,000
passengers told us about their experiences of using booked assistance[5]

76%
of booked assistance users received all assistance booked, down 5pp on last year[5]

94%
of passengers who received assistance at a station were satisfied with the assistance provided by staff, down 1pp on last year[5]

87%
of booked assistance users were satisfied with the overall experience, down 3pp on last year[5]

1.6 billion
journeys made. This is around 93% of pre-pandemic levels[6]

195,258
Disabled Persons Railcards were issued, up 10% on last year, saving passengers a third on fares[7]

Infographic sources:

1. ORR Passenger rail service complaints statistical release
2. ORR Passenger satisfaction with complaint handling survey
3. ORR Delay compensation claims
4. ORR Passenger assistance factsheet
5. ORR Passenger Assist User Experience Survey
6. ORR Passenger rail usage statistical release
7. ORR Disabled Persons Railcards factsheet

Note: pp = percentage points

Our consumer role

ORR protects the interests of rail and road users, improving the safety, value and performance of railways and roads, today and in the future.

Our regulation of the rail sector makes a difference for passengers at every stage of their journey from planning a journey and booking a ticket, through to travelling and redress where things go wrong.

We want passengers to feel confident about the experience they can expect when travelling by rail. Our passenger-facing work focuses on five key areas:

- ticket retailing and passenger rights
- passenger information
- accessible travel
- complaints and compensation
- sponsorship of the Rail Ombudsman, a new role this year

We define the minimum acceptable standards for the passenger experience, hold operators and retailers to account against those standards, and drive continuous improvement across the industry. Our work is underpinned by requirements set out in consumer law, conditions in the licences that we issue to passenger train and station operators, and health and safety legislation.

We oversee all mainline train and station operators and retailers against common standards, including:

- those operated by and for the Department for Transport, the Scottish and Welsh Governments, and Transport for London
- open access and heritage operators
- third-party rail ticket retailers

We use a range of information sources to help us prioritise our work and identify where there is an opportunity to drive improvements or where we need to intervene to protect passengers from harm. This includes commissioning ongoing and ad-hoc passenger research, and collecting information from industry.

Our core expectation is that if something has gone wrong, it is fixed quickly by the operator or retailer. To help secure this outcome, we may:

- monitor activity more closely and require more frequent reporting
- request improvement plans
- escalate issues in line with our economic enforcement policy

Our Consumer Expert Panel provides independent advice and challenge, and plays a key role in bringing a consumer perspective to our decisions.

We are not responsible for setting fares, awarding or monitoring management agreements with operators, or for setting the level of public subsidy in the railways – these sit with Department for Transport and Transport Scotland. We are also not responsible for enforcement of the Equality Act 2010, which sits with the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC).

Ticket retailing and passenger rights

We want operators and retailers to be fair and transparent in all their interactions with passengers, enabling passengers to make well-informed decisions and access their statutory rights as customers.

Increasing the transparency of fees for online rail ticket purchases

We asked third-party retailers to make changes to their websites and apps to increase the transparency of the fees they charge during the booking process.

We raised concerns with seven retailers about their use of 'drip pricing', which is when consumers are shown an initial price for a product or service before additional fees are revealed later in the purchase process.

They engaged with us constructively. Some have already made changes to their websites and apps, and we expect the remaining changes to be implemented by the end of 2024.

Reduced fees for ticket refunds

We prompted a reduction in the maximum fee ticket retailers can charge when an unused rail ticket is refunded from £10 to £5.

We found that of the 5.8 million tickets refunded during 2019 to 2020, there were notable differences between the cost to the ticket retailer of processing a refund and the then allowed maximum admin fee of £10.

We called on the industry to review the maximum cap in the National Rail Conditions of Travel and are pleased that the rule change means a fairer deal for passengers.

Regulatory framework for ticket retailing and passenger rights

Our work is underpinned by:

- our consumer law investigation and enforcement powers, which we hold concurrently with the Competition and Markets Authority

- obligations set out in train and station operating licences
- commitments set out in industry-owned documents such as the National Rail Conditions of Travel

Our priorities for April 2024 to March 2025

We will:

- maintain our focus on the transparency of fees charged by retailers and the implementation of changes to websites and apps
- review the existing Code of Practice on retail information for rail tickets and services, including its status and scope
- assess the implications of the new Digital Markets, Competition and Consumers Act for our powers as a consumer authority, including with respect to drip pricing where the Act reinforces the interventions we have made this year.

Passenger information

We want passengers to have accurate and timely information about their travel options, so that they can plan and make journeys with confidence, including during disruption.

Encouraging cross-industry collaboration

We continue to support cross-industry collaboration that enables network-wide improvements to the provision of passenger information. We previously challenged the industry to develop a single, transparent strategy to deliver improvements in passenger information.

In response, the industry established the Smarter Information, Smarter Journeys (SISJ) programme, which is jointly led by the Rail Delivery Group (RDG) and Network Rail. The SISJ programme now plays a central role in enabling change that requires cross-industry collaboration. Alongside, RDG's Customer Information Group (CIG) focuses on supporting operators to deliver for passengers every day, including through a focus on getting the basics right.

We engage actively with both SISJ and CIG in recognition of the value that they bring in enabling improvements in the passenger experience.

Protecting passengers when trains are stranded

Working with Transport Focus we reviewed the passenger experience when trains are stranded.

In late 2023, there were several significant incidents where passengers were stranded on trains

for several hours. These incidents demonstrated the risks to the health, safety and welfare of passengers.

We commissioned a review of the passenger experience and have asked Network Railand train operators to jointly set out for us how they plan and prepare for stranded train incidents. We will publish the findings of our joint review in summer 2024.

Better information about planned rail replacement buses

We set out what operators need to do to improve passenger information for journeys that involve planned rail replacement services.

We described what good looks like at each stage of the passenger journey, identified key areas for improvement, and asked operators to report to us how they plan to address the gaps. We are conducting further fieldwork over summer 2024 to review progress.

At our request, SISJ is exploring how real-time running information for planned rail replacement services could be made available to passengers.

Automated notifications when booked trains change

We asked operators to make further improvements to the notifications they send to passengers when there are changes to booked trains.

Following our intervention last year, operators now send notifications to passengers where booked trains are cancelled or changed more than 48 hours ahead of travel, using a service that was developed through SISJ.

This year, we have seen operators improve the clarity of those notifications and, again through SISJ, operators have responded to our request to review their policies on ticket flexibility.

The new industry policy is set out in an industry code of practice that we expect to be implemented in August 2024 and reinforced by changes to National Rail Conditions of Travel.

Live information on lift availability

We are closely monitoring Network Rail's progress in meeting our expectations that live data on lift availability will be made easily available to both passengers and staff to support journey planning.

The project is progressing more slowly than planned because of unanticipated issues that affect data quality and consistency. To be useful, the data must be accurate.

We are reassured that Network Rail, supported by SISJ, recognise the critical importance of data accuracy. They are taking steps to understand and tackle issues as they emerge, and are capturing lessons learned that will be of relevance as the industry continues to build the range of information available to passengers.

Live data is currently available through the National Rail Accessibility Map for 86% of lifts. We want to see Network Rail move towards 100% availability and for that data to be available through the National Rail website and to third-party website and app developers through an API.

We also expect Network Rail and operators to ensure that lifts remain able to report their status after the analogue landline phone service is switched off in 2027.

Timely release of timetables and Advance tickets

We are monitoring operators' return to releasing timetables and Advance tickets at least 12 weeks before travel.

We expect full compliance for all travel from the December 2024 timetable change (timetables released in September), although recognise that there may be occasions where operators cannot provide 12 weeks' notice for reasons outside their control. Progress to date is good.

Regulatory framework for passenger information

We hold operators to account against requirements set out in the Passenger Information licence condition, under which operators have adopted the Customer Information Pledges as their regulated Code of Practice.

The Pledges must be reviewed annually to drive continuous improvement. The licence requirements complement wider requirements in consumer law and the Railway Interoperability Regulations.

Our priorities for April 2024 to March 2025

We will:

- continue to engage and influence across the breadth of the SISJ and CIG work programmes in recognition of the value they have demonstrated in enabling improvements for passengers across the whole network
- publish and follow up the findings of our joint review with Transport Focus into stranded trains
- conduct further fieldwork to review the progress that operators have made in improving passenger information for rail replacement buses
- continue to assess operator compliance with the Customer Information Pledges, particularly during disruption, providing bilateral feedback to operators.

Accessible travel

We want to empower confident travel by all, including disabled passengers, whether their journeys are made independently or with assistance.

Approval and review of operators' Accessible Travel Policies

We approved new Accessible Travel Policies (ATPs) for three operators, including Eurostar, and assessed the annual review of ATPs by others.

We hold operators to account against the commitments they make in their ATPs, and require operators to review their ATPs annually. This year, all amendments to ATPs proposed through the annual review process were minor and reflected improvements made by operators.

London North Eastern Railway (LNER) separately sought our agreement to an alternative process for communicating between departure and destination stations when assistance is being provided, using the Passenger Assist staff app rather than a phone call. Following a successful trial period, we gave our approval.

Understanding the reliability of passenger lifts at stations

For the first time, we published data from Network Rail on lift performance.

Lifts enable access to the railway for disabled passengers and others. We have concerns about the number of faults that are occurring and an apparent decline in performance over time. We have launched a review of Network Rail's monitoring and management processes for lift maintenance and repairs, which will report later in 2024.

Network Rail will continue to report performance to us twice a year.

Improving the reliability of passenger assistance

We identified key areas of focus for the industry to drive improvement in the delivery of passenger assistance.

Informed by audits that we commissioned into how five operators were meeting regulatory requirements related to the delivery of assistance, we identified key areas for cross-industry focus, including:

- rollout of the Passenger Assist staff app
- communications between departure and destination stations, including at peak times (the handover protocol)
- delivery of assistance by onboard staff
- proactive maintenance of shared industry systems such as Passenger Assist and National Rail Enquiries
- risk management processes

We have set out next steps in all areas.

Better data to inform improvements in assistance provision

We are changing the data we collect from operators so that we are better able to hold them to account.

Operators report data to us every month on their provision of both booked and unbooked assistance, including failed assists. We had low confidence in the quality of that data and the insights it offered both to us and to operators themselves.

We have already implemented changes to improve reporting consistency. We also asked operators to comprehensively review the categories for reporting failed assists, which they delivered through RDG. RDG is now integrating the reporting into the Passenger Assist staff app.

We plan to update our guidance to require reporting of failed assists in line with the new categories from April 2025. Operators' staff will need to be using the Passenger Assist staff app to be able to report data accurately.

Accessible rail replacement vehicles

We work with the Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency to monitor provision of accessible rail replacement vehicles, supporting them in their role enforcing the Public Service Vehicle Accessibility Regulations.

According to the data that we receive from operators, nearly all rail replacement vehicles either

met accessibility standards or have an exemption from the Secretary of State. For passengers, this means that 95% of rail replacement vehicles met accessibility standards.

This is a small rise from 94% in 2022 to 2023 and primarily reflects improved provision of rail replacement for unplanned disruption, where 95% of vehicles met accessibility standards this year compared to 90% last year.

Our research on the passenger experience of booked assistance

We have been surveying passengers on their experience of booked assistance on an ongoing basis since 2017, and publish findings annually.

This year, more than 9,000 passengers participated. Satisfaction is relatively high, with 87% of passengers satisfied with the overall service from booking through to travelling.

However, improvements that we saw in the reliability of assistance in 2022 to 2023 have not been maintained in 2023 to 2024.

The proportion of passengers reporting that they received all of the assistance they had booked has reverted to 76%, a fall from 81% in 2022 to 2023, and the same as 2021 to 2022. The same pattern is seen in the proportion who received none of the assistance that they booked, which has increased to 12% after dropping to 8% in 2022 to 2023. This is concerning.

Our published research report explores the data in more detail. The work that we have planned over the coming year is designed to drive up performance again.

Case study: securing compliance with requirements to provide disability awareness refresher training for passenger-facing staff every two years

We required recovery plans from three operators who failed to provide timely disability awareness refresher training for passenger-facing staff.

Well-trained staff are essential for an accessible railway. Most operators provided appropriate refresher training for their staff within the two-year timescale we require. Three of the operators

who were due to complete refresher training by end 2023 failed to meet the deadline: Southeastern, ScotRail and West Midlands Trains (WMT). We required a recovery plan from each.

Southeastern responded promptly and positively, both setting out for us a plan that saw them complete their training in April and a range of complementary activities designed to protect the passenger experience. They also extended their training to Directors, as well as passenger-facing staff.

ScotRail completed its training in June, in line with its plan.

WMT initially had a poor understanding of its progress and no clear plan for delivering the training. We engaged actively with WMT and accepted a plan that forecast completion by December 2024. This was on the basis that delivery was face-to-face which requires taking staff out of set rosters for training, and agreement that delivery would be accelerated where possible. At the end of June 2024, over 75% of eligible WMT staff had received training. We are monitoring progress closely.

Case study: ensuring that appropriate ramps are available for staff to deploy

We asked ScotRail for assurance that staff could deploy ramps.

In response to concerns we raised in 2021, ScotRail implemented changes to ramp provision that were designed to support better maintenance and safety. Ramps would be carried on trains and be available on the platform only at the 50 stations with the highest ramp usage.

We accepted this plan and ScotRail implemented the new approach in 2023. However, it emerged that station staff had been trained only to deploy platform ramps.

We were concerned that circumstances could arise where onboard staff were not available to deploy on train ramps, which would result in a failed assist.

To mitigate this risk, ScotRail plan to complete installation of ramps on the platforms at all staffed stations served by Driver Controlled Operation (DCO) services in July 2024.

Regulatory framework for accessible travel

All train and station operators must establish and comply with an Accessible Travel Policy (ATP) as

a condition of their licence, setting out their provision for disabled passengers.

Our published guidance defines the minimum requirements for operators' ATPs, covering areas such as:

- provision of assistance
- staff training
- passenger information

ORR also holds operators to account against accessibility standards for rolling stock and stations, which are set out in the Code of Practice on Design Standards for Accessible Railway Stations and the National Technical Specification Notices that are issued by Government under the Railway Interoperability Regulations.

Our priorities for April 2024 to March 2025

We will:

- develop a new approach to benchmarking operator performance on accessibility, supported by better quality data reporting from industry, so that we are able to hold operators to account more transparently and robustly
- assess compliance with the handover protocol (which sets out communication procedures between staff at departure and destination stations when assistance is being provided) at the busiest stations
- consult on amendments to our ATP Guidance that would require operators to take the views of passengers into account when proposing permanent changes to staffing at stations
- review operators' processes for operating help points
- disseminate good practice for operators to support greater reliability in assistance provision by onboard staff
- review industry progress in improving passenger information about station accessibility

Complaints and compensation

Where things go wrong, we want passengers to feel confident that they will be compensated for delays, can easily complain and that their complaints will be addressed. We want operators to use

learnings from all complaints to drive continuous improvement in passengers' experiences of rail.

Improving complaints process and redress provision for disabled passengers

We have asked operators to set out how they are using insights from complaints on issues of concern to disabled passengers to drive continuous improvement.

This action follows on from the findings in our report that disabled passengers would be more likely to complain if they felt it was a worthwhile use of their time and energy and would lead to change.

Alongside, we are engaging with targeted operators to secure compliance with requirements designed to raise passengers' awareness of redress options where booked assistance fails and ensure that complaints processes are accessible to all disabled passengers.

Case study: securing compliance with requirements to provide timely responses to complaints

We required a recovery plan from West Midland Trains (WMT), to bring them back into compliance with the obligation to respond to 95% of customer complaints within 20 working days.

We first engaged with WMT in March 2023 after their performance had dropped to processing only 18% of complaints within 20 working days, which is exceptionally poor performance.

WMT attributed their issues to increases in volumes of customer contacts related to industrial action, and an end-of-life Customer Relations Management system that they were in the process of replacing. Performance initially appeared to be recovering, however in September 2023 WMT identified inaccuracy in the data they were reporting to us.

This showed that passengers were still experiencing exceptionally slow response times and exacerbated our concerns about WMT's performance. We formally requested a recovery plan, introduced weekly reporting, and closely monitored WMT's progress. In line with their plan,

WMT achieved compliance in January 2024. Good performance is now being sustained.

Case study: operator good practice in demonstrating compliance with requirements to provide timely responses to complaints

We took assurance from LNER's proactive engagement with us on complaints handling that they understood the drivers of their performance and what they needed to do to address issues.

Operators should respond to 95% of complaints within 20 working days, and report performance to us each month. We engage where performance is poor; however, best practice is for operators to proactively engage with us where they identify compliance issues.

LNER got in touch to let us know that they were expecting their performance in complaints handling to drop, explaining the reasons, the steps they would be taking to recover the position, and when they expected to be back in compliance. We continued to monitor their performance monthly through the regular reporting, ready to step in should that be necessary.

Within two months, LNER's performance recovered to over 95% from a low of 83% complaints responded to within 20 working days.

Regulatory framework for complaints and redress

We hold operators to account against requirements set out in:

- the Delay Compensation licence condition and supporting Code of Practice that defines minimum requirements
- the Complaints Handling licence condition, which is also supported by a Code of Practice that defines minimum requirements

Our priorities for April 2024 to March 2025

We will:

- work with operators to embed the findings of our review on the experiences of disabled passengers in raising complaints
- assess the continuous improvements reports that operators are required to produce each year on their delay repay and complaints handling processes
- monitor operator performance using the data they report to us each month and our ongoing survey of passenger satisfaction with complaints handling, intervening where necessary
- continue to challenge industry to fully utilise the insight and learning that is generated from complaint handling

The Rail Ombudsman

The Rail Ombudsman is a free, impartial and independent service that passengers can use to escalate unresolved complaints about train and station operators.

It also plays an important role in driving continuous improvement in the rail sector by generating learning and insight from its casework that helps operators make improvements to their services.

Sponsorship of the Rail Ombudsman

This year, we took over sponsorship of the Rail Ombudsman.

The May 2021 Plan for Rail set out an intent for ORR to take over sponsorship of the Rail Ombudsman from RDG.

Following a competitive tender process, we appointed Dispute Resolution Ombudsman as the service provider, and the transition to the ORR sponsored scheme was completed in November 2023. We have used this as an opportunity to introduce a range of improvements to the service, including:

- introduction of new passenger contact channels to provide for a more accessible service, such as a new WhatsApp channel and the option for video calls with case handlers
- improved case handling response times for certain case types to speed up the complaint resolution process for passengers
- the appointment of a board member with lived experience of disability to the Rail Ombudsman's new independent board
- the creation of a new Passenger Advisory Panel to advise the Rail Ombudsman board, which includes representatives from disability groups and experts with lived experience of disability
- Ombudsman staff being trained in disability and vulnerability awareness by experts with lived experience of disability

Using passenger insight to drive improvements in service delivery

We commissioned a range of awareness, usability and accessibility research on the Rail Ombudsman service this year. We have published the findings, identified specific opportunities for improvement, and written to the Ombudsman asking them to set out how the insight will be used to improve their service.

Regulatory framework for the Rail Ombudsman

Under the Complaints Handling licence condition, operators are required to be members of the Rail Ombudsman. The Ombudsman is funded through charges to operators for the service it provides.

Our priorities for April 2024 to March 2025

We will continue to hold the Rail Ombudsman to account for its service delivery, driving continuous improvement where opportunities are identified, while also challenging industry to

fully utilise the insight and learning generated from the Ombudsman's casework.