Reliability of help points at stations

An assessment of the maintenance and passenger provision of help points based on quantitative and qualitative data from 21 station operators.



Executive summary

There are more than 4,500 help points at over 2,100 mainline railway stations in Great Britain, covering 83% of stations across the rail network. Help points enable passengers to speak to a human operator where station staff are unavailable. Passengers can access an equivalent service by calling a freephone number at the 325 unstaffed or partially staffed stations without a help point.

The Office of Rail and Road (ORR) holds station operators to account against several complementary requirements in relation to help points that are set out in operator licences, station accessibility standards and health and safety legislation. There is no specific regulatory requirement for a station to have a help point, but there are various services that must be available to passengers that station operators can fulfil through the presence of a help point.

This report assesses whether station operators have the systems and processes in place to reliably operate their help points and manage calls from them, including calls made via freephone numbers to access an equivalent service.

We gathered and analysed quantitative and qualitative data from 21 station operators, including Network Rail, who all manage a combined total of 2,591 stations across the rail network and are responsible for both help point maintenance and service provision for passengers. We also drew on DfT and Transport Scotland data from routine service quality audits, which include an assessment of help points at stations.

Help point usage is relatively low: for the station operators that were able to report data to us, on average a call was made less than once a day at each station that had one or more help points. Passengers primarily used help points to access passenger information, such as finding out when the next train is (49% of calls), and they were also occasionally used to request passenger assistance (0.3%) or report an emergency (0.04%). Most of these calls were answered within 30 seconds. The figures suggest that help points are not a primary route through which most passengers would choose to access the information or assistance they need.

Nonetheless, help points are an important back-up for passengers when other ways of getting what they need are not available. For help points to fulfil that purpose, and where industry has chosen to invest in the provision of this service, they must be working.

Station operators are making investments in their help point provision. All operators have told us that their help points will be ready for the transition from analogue to digital landlines (Public Switched Telephone Network (PSTN) switch-off) in 2027, and most have completed that work already. Several operators are also investing in new help points and expanding the scope of their help point service to meet more passengers' needs.

However, the evidence provided by industry indicates that not all station operators have systems and processes in place to reliably operate their help points, or reliably answer calls from them. Based on the evidence, we identified four main findings:

- In the last year, 25% of stations audited for DfT in England had at least one help point reported as not working when inspected, meaning passengers were unable to use them. Station operators' approaches to testing their help points vary significantly, and we are concerned that operators may not be identifying and therefore fixing issues promptly.
- Every unstaffed or partially staffed station on the rail network has access to a help point or an equivalent freephone number, but there is a risk that service is impacted by poor help point reliability or insufficient mobile coverage in remote areas.
- Not all station operators collect and report on call handling data and so are not able to assure the quality of their service or understand the needs of passengers using help points. This means that there is no feedback or insight and information to assist operators in improving the passenger experience.
- Station operators are investing in help point services, taking advantage of new technologies.

We need industry to make improvements to their management of passenger help points at stations. We set these improvements out in our recommendations and next steps.

- → Next Introduction