Reliability of help points at stations

Findings

We have identified four main findings. In this chapter we set these out together with a summary and outline of supporting data.

Finding 1

Since April 2023, on average, 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.

Reliability of help points

Audit data shared with us by DfT from their SQR shows that from April 2023 to August 2024, 25% of the 9,677 station audits found at least one help point at the station to be either out of operation, faulty or had poor reception. The 25% failure rate shows little variation over the 17 months of audit data, ranging from 20% to 30%. The data is based on inspections conducted at 11 operators' stations in England and provides a snapshot of the condition of a help point at specific stations at the time of the inspection.

In contrast, Transport Scotland's SQUIRE data for help points in Scotland shows that for the same time period, five percent of 11,810 individual help point audits failed the criterion for either being missing, not fully functional or not operational. It is difficult to draw direct comparisons with DfT's SQR data because it reports on individual help points rather than stations and the criteria used are slightly different, but performance at ScotRail-managed stations in Scotland is substantially better. Details of ScotRail's approach to identifying faults are described in the following section.

DfT's data for stations in England suggests there is likely to be a moderate to significant risk that, when a passenger wants to use a help point, it will not be working. TfW Rail has gaps in its audit data so we have not used this as part of the review. This raises questions over whether station operators in England and Wales are identifying help point faults in a timely way and whether faults, once identified, are being promptly resolved.

Identifying faults

Testing of help points is important because it enables faults to be proactively identified and timely action to be taken to re-establish the service.

Testing can be carried out in person or remotely – where the tester is not physically in the location. Remote testing enables diagnostic checks, for example testing the quality of its audio/video communication, or seeing whether a help point is online, and some systems allow the user to see if the fault is station-wide and therefore a network issue. In-person testing can be more comprehensive and looks at physical and functional aspects such as pressing buttons, speaker checks and cosmetic inspection.

In response to our information request, all station operators reported that they carry out testing of their help points. However, the frequency and approach to testing varies significantly.

All 21 station operators told us they carry out in-person testing ranging from daily (11 operators) to monthly (one operator) across their estate. Six operators reported regular in-person testing but were not specific about the frequency. Of the 11 operators who carry out daily in-person testing, four of them combine it with additional remote testing carried out by their supplier.

Of the 21 station operators, 18 referred to station teams carrying out frequent in-person testing, though eight of the applicable operators lacked detail about how help points are tested at their unstaffed stations. ScotRail and West Midlands Trains were the only operators to report how testing works for their unstaffed stations: West Midlands Trains' cleaning staff test the help points three times a week at its unstaffed stations, and ScotRail's station maintenance teams undertake testing at theirs.

The two remaining station operators reported SQR audits as their only more frequent in-person testing, where all help points are either audited once a month or once every three months.

Nine of the 11 Network Rail stations provided information about their approach to identifying

faults. They reported their station teams carry out testing, either daily (four stations) or weekly (five stations). They also reported that maintenance engineers carry out additional checks every six months.

Fault reporting

Once a faulty help point is identified, it needs to be fixed. We sought to understand how quickly faults are addressed once they have been identified and what mechanisms station operators use to address the root causes impacting the reliability of help points.

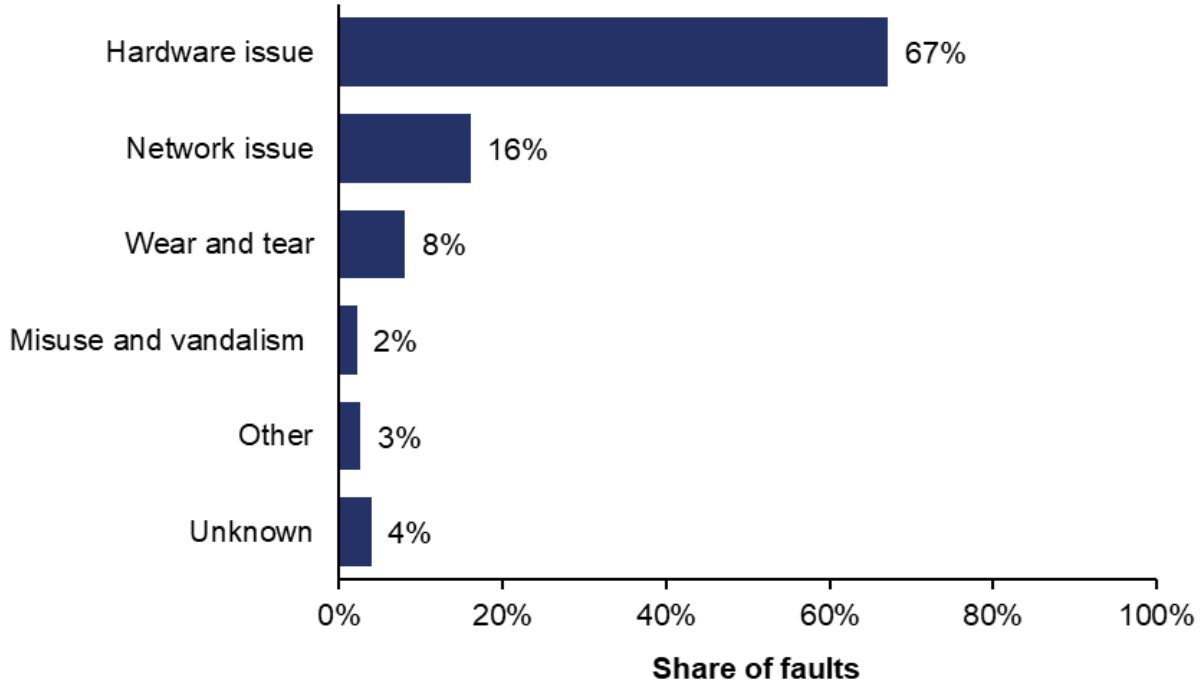
We asked station operators to provide quantitative data on the volume of faults, their types and time taken to fix them, over the last three years. This type of data can provide insight into whether faults are being promptly fixed once identified, and whether trends in types of faults are being identified to inform decisions about the need for wider preventative work.

Eight station operators provided the full set of fault data we requested, allowing us to gain detailed insight on the performance of their help points. It was disappointing that we did not receive the same level of detail from the remaining 13 operators, which would have enabled us to have an overall picture of the availability of help points for passengers.

Fault data

Figure 2.1 shows data for the 14 station operators who reported on fault volumes and types of faults impacting their help points during April 2023 to March 2024. It shows that the majority (67%) of faults were related to hardware issues and a further 16% of faults were because of network issues. This demonstrates the importance of in-person testing as hardware issues typically require manual inspection and may not be identified by remote testing.

Figure 2.1 Percentage of help point faults by fault type, April 2023 to March 2024



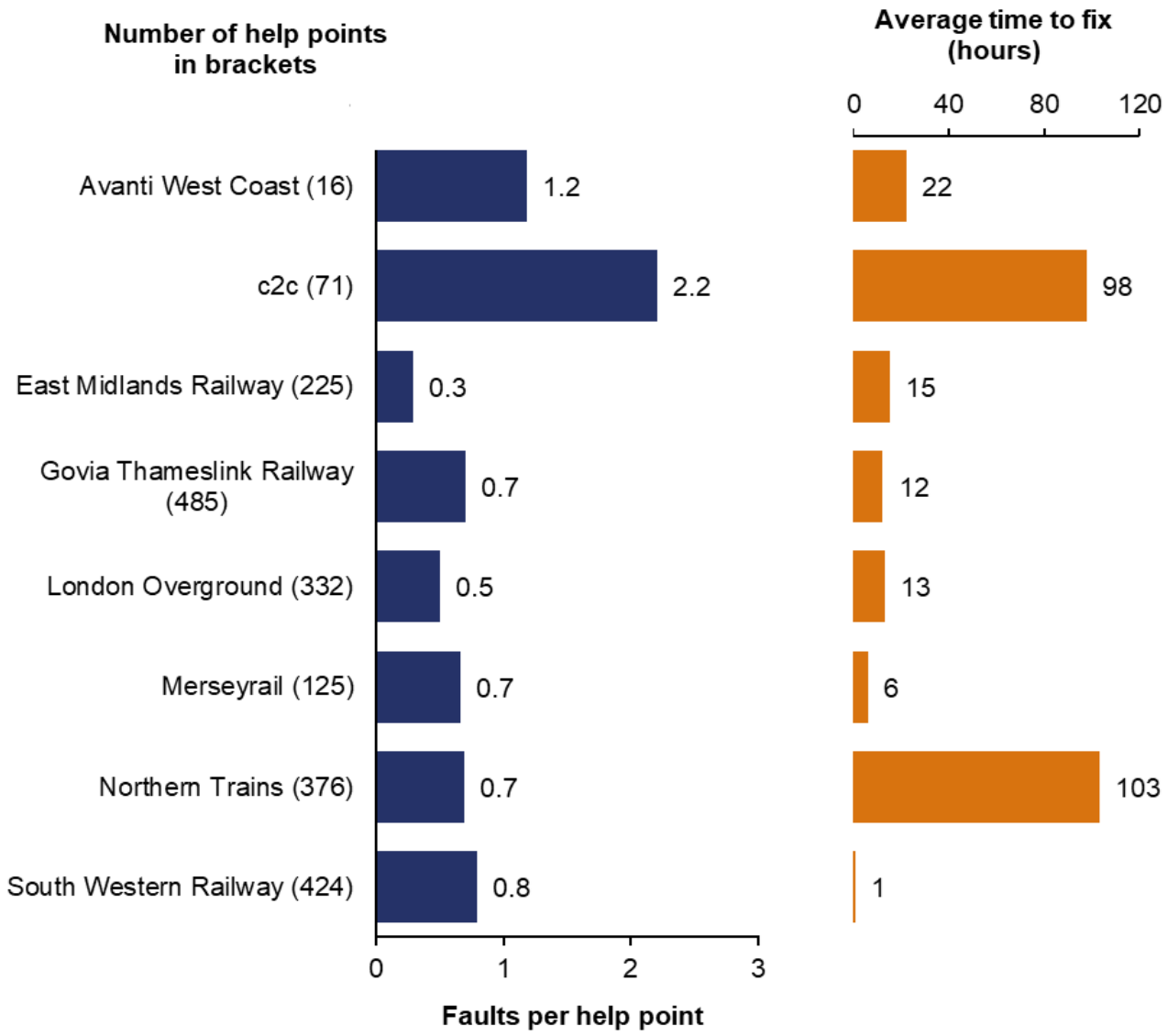
Source: Data provided by station operators

Figure 2.2 shows data for the eight station operators who reported on the volume of faults affecting their help points and average time taken to fix the faults during April 2023 to March 2024. c2c had the most faults relative to number of help points, with 2.2 faults per help point during April 2023 to March 2024. In contrast, East Midlands Railway had 0.3 faults per help point.

'Time to fix' was recorded from when a fault had been identified. The data suggests that, in the main, these station operators were addressing faults in a timely way once they were aware of them. For Northern Trains and c2c the average time to resolve faults was four to five days, indicating that some of their help points may be out of order longer than those on other networks.

However, given the potential time lag between a fault occurring and being identified, the data shown in Figure 2.2 may not be an accurate indication of how long a help point is out of service for passenger use .

Figure 2.2 Number of faults per help point and average time to fix those faults by station operator, April 2023 to March 2024



Source: Data provided by station operators

Mitigations where a help point is out of order

We are concerned about the reliability of help points. Once a fault is detected, suitable mitigations are an important step to ensure passengers are still able to access the same services when a help point is not working. Station operators reported varied approaches to continuing to provide a service where one of their help points is out of order.

Our analysis of station operators' mitigations focused on unstaffed or partially staffed stations. Our minimum expectation for a mitigation when a help point is not working is that there should be clear information on or near the help point which includes a freephone number to access an equivalent service.

Several station operators reported they advise passengers to use another help point at the station where one of them is not working. Data taken from Network Rail's Station Accessibility Dashboard shows that 66% of unstaffed or partially staffed stations with a help point have more than one, however this type of mitigation has its challenges. The second help point may not be accessible to a passenger, it may be difficult for a passenger to locate at the station, and the nature of the fault may cause all help points at the station to be out of order at the same time.

Twelve station operators reported that they advise passengers to call a freephone number when their help points are not working, although this information may not be provided on or near the help point itself. Where a freephone is presented as an alternative when a help point is out of order, operators should ensure this is signposted on the help point.

Conclusion

If help points are to have any value to passengers, they must be working when they need them. Station operators should review their approach to the monitoring and reporting of help point faults and ensure their processes are sufficient to provide assurance that help points are reliably available for passenger use.

This includes making sure that the approach to testing help points is sufficient to identify issues in a timely way and should not rely solely on SQR or equivalent data – although we note that this has the potential to complement other data sources. Station operators should understand the type of issues impacting the performance of their help points and how long it takes to fix those issues. This insight can inform preventative work and help plan what type of mitigations are needed whilst a help point is out of order.

Finding 2

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.

Provision at staffed and unstaffed stations

All station operators have reported that they provide a way for passengers to speak to a human operator at all staffed and unstaffed stations, to request assistance or obtain service information.

That may be through providing staff at the station, a help point or an advertised freephone number, which are all consistent with the minimum requirements set out in our ATP Guidance.

At unstaffed or partially staffed stations (67% of stations), 81% have a help point. The other 19% provide a freephone number for a passenger to call to receive an equivalent service.

The proportion of stations that are unstaffed or partially staffed varies significantly by station operator. Table 2.1 shows seven operators have 100% of their stations staffed from first to last train, although help points may still be provided as an additional facility at the station.

Other station operators have unstaffed or partially staffed stations on their network and provide help points or freephone numbers as a way for passengers to speak to a human operator. Operators with the highest numbers of unstaffed or partially staffed stations are Northern Trains (314, 67% of its stations), ScotRail (220, 61%) and TfW Rail (200, 81%).

Northern Trains and TfW Rail are the only two of the 21 station operators to operate unstaffed or partially staffed stations without help points. This applies at 203 (43% of all its stations) and 122 (49%) of their stations respectively. Both operators have told us that they advertise freephone numbers at all these stations to enable passengers to contact a human operator (although we have not verified this at this time).

Table 2.1 Station staffing and help point or freephone provision by station operator

Station operator	Stations	Staffed with help point(s)	Staffed without help point(s)	Unstaffed or partially staffed with help point(s)	Unstaffed or partially staffed with freephone number only
Avanti West Coast	16	94%	6%	0%	0%

Station operator	Stations	Staffed with help point(s)	Staffed without help point(s)	Unstaffed or partially staffed with help point(s)	Unstaffed or partially staffed with freephone number only
c2c	26	23%	0%	77%	0%
Chiltern Railways	37	16%	0%	84%	0%
East Midlands Railway	103	11%	2%	87%	0%
Elizabeth line	29	100%	0%	0%	0%
Govia Thameslink Railway	237	29%	8%	63%	0%
Great Western Railway	198	8%	1%	92%	0%

Station operator	Stations	Staffed with help point(s)	Staffed without help point(s)	Unstaffed or partially staffed with help point(s)	Unstaffed or partially staffed with freephone number only
Greater Anglia	137	39%	0%	61%	0%
Heathrow Rail	4	100%	0%	0%	0%
London North Eastern Railway	11	55%	45%	0%	0%
London Overground	82	100%	0%	0%	0%
London Underground	30	100%	0%	0%	0%
Merseyrail	64	94%	0%	6%	0%

Station operator	Stations	Staffed with help point(s)	Staffed without help point(s)	Unstaffed or partially staffed with help point(s)	Unstaffed or partially staffed with freephone number only
Network Rail	20	60%	40%	0%	0%
Northern Trains	467	20%	13%	24%	43%
ScotRail	360	39%	0%	61%	0%
South Western Railway	188	11%	0%	89%	0%
Southeastern Trains	165	16%	0%	84%	0%
TfW Rail	191	6%	3%	27%	64%
TransPennine Express	19	84%	0%	16%	0%

Station operator	Stations	Staffed with help point(s)	Staffed without help point(s)	Unstaffed or partially staffed with help point(s)	Unstaffed or partially staffed with freephone number only
West Midlands Trains	150	7%	0%	93%	0%

Note that due to the rounding of numbers, percentages for each station operator may not always add up to 100%. Source: data provided by station operators

Mobile coverage at remote stations

Reliable mobile coverage is sometimes essential for enabling passengers to contact an operator. This applies both to help points where communication is through a mobile network and where a freephone number is the main route for passengers to speak to a human operator.

Two station operators (Northern Trains and TfW Rail) are reliant on freephone numbers for passengers to contact staff at many of their unstaffed or partially staffed stations. The geographical remoteness of some of these stations presents a risk that there may be insufficient phone coverage to be able to access the freephone service. We have asked these operators for assurance that there is sufficient mobile coverage at these stations, but they have been unable to provide this to inform our review. Both Northern Trains and TfW Rail have plans to address this issue as part of their forthcoming help point renewal strategies.

Public switched telephone network (PSTN) switch-off

Help points need to be connected to a communications network. There are several different communication technologies to enable this. The primary options are VoIP (enabling voice calls to

be made over an internet connection), mobile network (2G, 3G, 4G, or 5G) or PSTN.

PSTN, the traditional landline telephone network, will be switched off in December 2027. We asked station operators to tell us what their plans are ahead of the switch-off to ensure their help point service continues for passengers.

Ten station operators reported some or all their help points will be impacted by the PSTN switch-off. All ten of these operators plan to maintain the current volume of help points and upgrade or replace the communication lines. Operators' planned work is either near completion or due to begin soon with completion ahead of the 2027 deadline.

Station operators are taking different approaches, dependent on various factors such as location of the station, where the help point is on the platform, and whether it is voice-only or has video capability. ScotRail's plans include using satellite communication to provide connectivity for help points at their remote stations with no other reliable communication infrastructure.

All other station operators are unaffected as they already use either VoIP or mobile network technology, and some operators use a combination of the two on their network.

Overall, station operators' responses indicate that all existing help points will continue to function following the PSTN switch-off. Affected operators have clear plans, some of which are complete or nearing completion, ahead of the 2027 deadline.

Conclusion

Station operators should understand whether poor mobile coverage is an issue impacting their help points or use of a freephone number, particularly in remote locations. Where necessary, they should implement suitable mitigations. For example, operators may wish to consider upgrading help points to VoIP or using remote satellite technology where other approaches may not be feasible.

Station operators need to ensure the help points impacted by the PSTN digital switch-off will continue their service to passengers beyond the 2027 deadline. The operators whose plans are not yet complete need to ensure timely delivery ahead of this deadline.

Finding 3

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 wider passenger experience.

Monitoring and reporting the usage of help points

There is variation across station operators in their approach to monitoring passenger usage of help points. Figure 2.3 shows call volume data from April 2023 to March 2024, and differentiates between the operators who use the NRE Contact Centre for all their help point calls and operators who have their own arrangements and use the NRE Contact Centre to divert their overflow calls where they are unable to respond. It also shows the two operators who manage all the calls themselves.

The NRE Contact Centre reported data on behalf of the 11 station operators who use it for all their calls, in addition to partial data for the four operators who use it for their overflow calls. Two operators reported data on volumes for all calls made to their own contact centres.

Six station operators reported that they did not collect volume data for their help point calls.

Based on the data reported to us by NRE Contact Centre and the two station operators who record call volumes, help point usage is relatively low. Over half a million calls were made via help points at these 15 operators' stations during April 2023 to March 2024, which means that on average a call was made less than once a day at each station that has one or more help points. This suggests that help points are not the primary route through which most passengers would choose to access services when they travel by rail. Nonetheless, they are an important back-up for passengers when other ways of getting what they need are not available.

Overall, 96% of calls were answered, and the average time taken to answer did not exceed 30 seconds for any of the station operators. Separately, Transport Scotland's SQUIRE data for ScotRail shows that from April 2023 to March 2024, of the 7,697 help points audited, 0.2% calls were not answered within 30 seconds

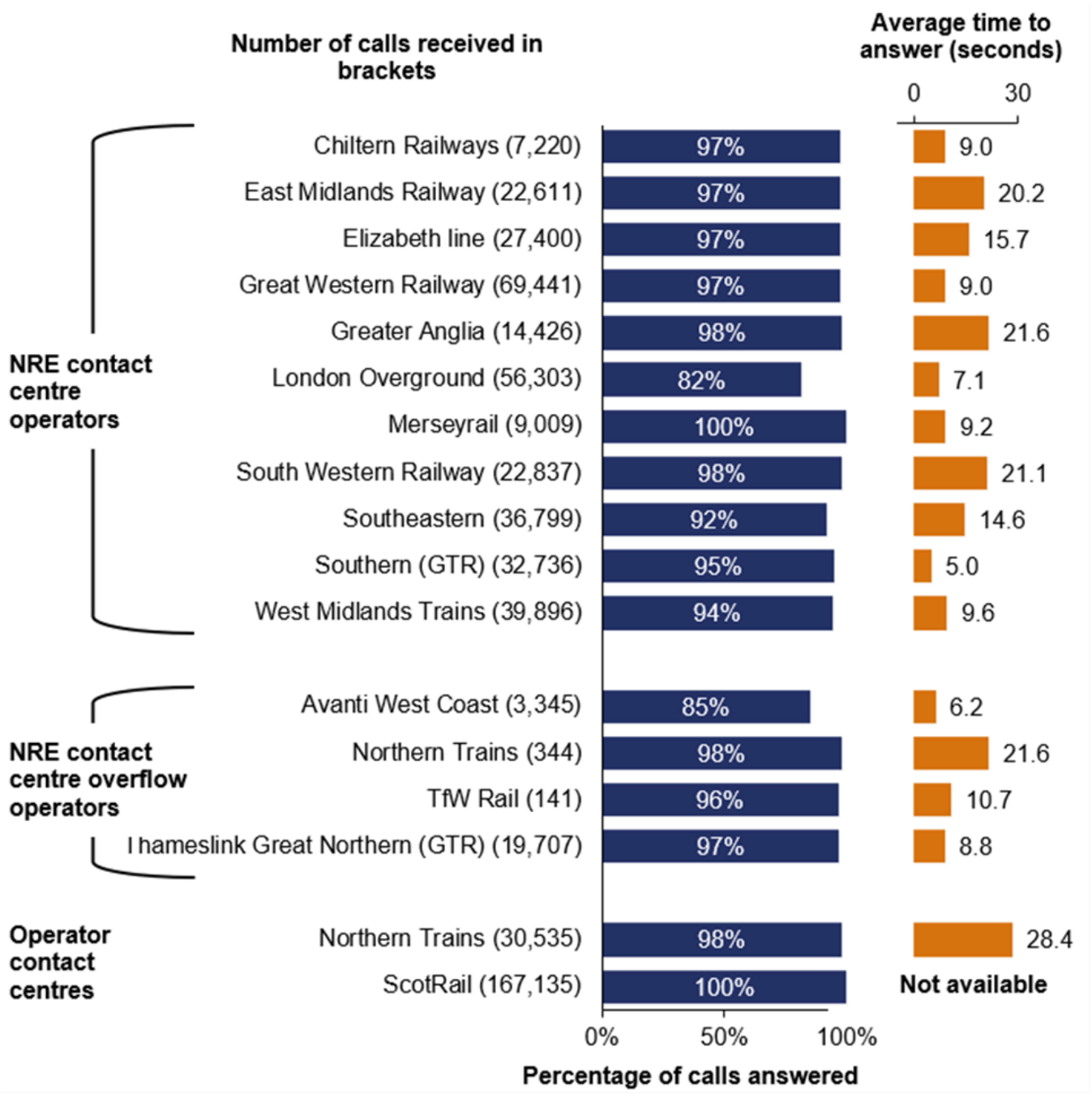
London Overground and Avanti West Coast were the poorer performers for number of calls answered, reporting 82% and 85% respectively. Both station operators experienced telephony

issues during this period, which meant some calls were faulty and disengaged before an advisor could answer. Avanti West Coast's issue is resolved, and London Overground's is currently being investigated.

The variation in average time to answer calls made to the NRE Contact Centre is dependent on the volume of calls they receive from the station operators' help points, disruption on certain routes or issues specific to the operator which impact passengers' journeys.

The NRE Contact Centre prioritises help point calls over others, particularly when disruption or issues take place on a route. No further priority is given to types of call made from help points, for example emergency calls, however additional supervision is provided to the response team.

Figure 2.3 Percentage of calls answered and average time to answer by station operator and centre which receive the calls, April 2023 to March 2024



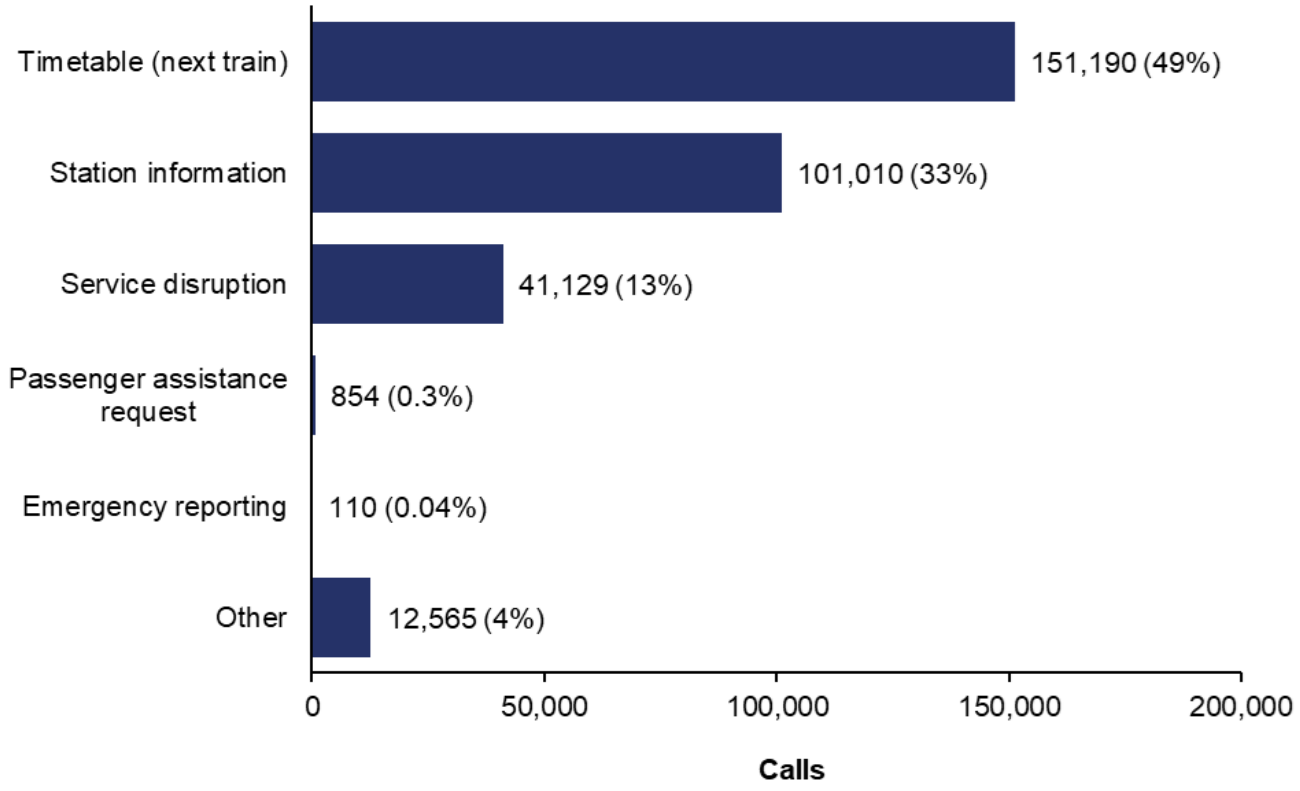
Source: data provided by NRE Contact Centre, Northern Trains and ScotRail

Types of help point queries

The NRE Contact Centre was the only organisation to report on the reasons behind the calls being made via help points, for the 15 station operators who use their service for their calls. Figure 2.4 shows that passenger information is the primary usage, with 49% of queries about the next train, 33% about the station and 13% relating to service disruption during April 2023 to March 2024. In the same period, 0.3% of calls were to request passenger assistance and 0.04% were for

emergency reporting. These equate to the NRE Contact Centre receiving 854 and 110 calls for each purpose respectively.

Figure 2.4 Types of queries made from help point calls to the NRE Contact Centre, April 2023 to March 2024



Source: data provided by NRE Contact Centre

Staff answering calls

Across 19 station operators, 86% of help points were reported as having two separate buttons: typically, one for information and one for emergency calls. During April 2023 to March 2024, 11 operators used the NRE Contact Centre to handle all the calls made via the information button on the help point. In the main, emergency calls are managed in-house and divert to the British Transport Police where necessary. The number of operators using the NRE Contact Centre has increased to 12 (plus the addition of GTR's Thameslink Great Northern network), since we received responses to our information request, meaning more operators will have access to call handling data.

The remaining 11 station operators manage their calls in-house and have individual arrangements for responding to information and emergency calls. The majority are managed by station teams or control centres, and some emergency calls go directly to the emergency services. Northern Trains were the only operator to report emergency calls being prioritised by their call centre. Two operators rely on one staff member to manage both the information and emergency calls.

Conclusion

There is limited monitoring of help point calls and call handling by some station operators. It is important for operators to understand whether calls are being answered within a reasonable time, and what their passengers use help points for.

Station operators should ensure they are conducting proportionate monitoring of call volumes and service levels, and reasons for the call, which includes data collection. This monitoring should be used to ensure that calls are responded to in a reasonable time, and people answering calls have the right skills and knowledge, and to help identify weaknesses in information provision that can be addressed via other communication channels.

Finding 4

Station operators are investing in help point services, taking advantage of new technologies.

Investment decisions by station operators

Several station operators have identified help points as a route for better meeting the needs of their passengers and are investing accordingly. Others may prioritise other means of communicating with passengers.

For example, ScotRail actively promotes the use of its help points to passengers for all types of queries and staff are equipped to answer these questions. Passengers can use the help points to access tourist and local information such as onward travel options. The range of services available explains the high volumes of calls received from their help points, as shown in Figure 2.3. For its unstaffed and remote stations, the help point system can provide reassurance to passengers through its integration with the CCTV system, which is monitored 24/7. ScotRail uses specific branding to publicise the additional services to passengers, and the services are promoted via its social media teams.

West Midlands Trains is replacing all its help points, installing devices with touchscreens in some locations. Touchscreens enable expansion of the scope of its help point service to include detailed travel information, maps and other service-related information, without the need for a call being made. Greater Anglia plans to use its existing touchscreen help points to support passenger assistance, wayfinding at the station and station information, and these will function in multiple languages.

Several station operators are exploring the use of AI. West Midlands Trains and Greater Anglia use AI virtual assistants to give spoken answers to common questions, with the call passed to a human operator where needed. Avanti West Coast and c2c plan to use AI as part of their future help point service.

Other station operators are prioritising other routes for meeting passenger needs. For example, Southeastern has help points at all its 165 stations but encourages passengers to use WhatsApp to contact staff instead. QR codes are posted on or near help points, which passengers can scan to reach the Southeastern WhatsApp channel where they can raise queries. Southeastern's customer team can send links and images to support with a passenger's query in real time.

Information for passengers about when and how to use help points

Passengers need to understand what help points are for and how to use them, to ensure station operators' investment in installing and operating help points brings benefits.

In their response to us, 18 out of 21 station operators reported their help points have simple button labels on them, directing passengers on how to use the help point – for example, instructions like "press for assistance" or "emergency help".

Seven station operators go further and have additional signage at the station either directing passengers to the help point or signage next to the help point explaining what to use a help point for and how to use it. Four operators reported using their station information posters to advertise the location of their help points and what to use them for.

Station operators' ATPs are varied in describing to passengers what their help points are for. In 16 out of 20 cases, operators refer to their help points as available for requesting turn-up-and-go assistance. Thirteen state they can be used to seek support during disruption and 12 operators state they can be used for general information and to seek support during disruption. London North Eastern Railway and Northern Trains have very limited information about what their help

points can be used for in their ATPs.

Conclusion

We acknowledge that operators will have different approaches to investing in their help points and communicating with passengers about help point services, depending on each operator's wider view on the role of help points in delivering services at their stations.

Station operators should ensure all investment decisions are informed by a good understanding of what passengers need and how it improves the overall passenger experience.

Station operators should reassure themselves that the information they provide about help points sits coherently within a broader communications strategy, is consistent, and is sufficient to enable passengers to know when they could use a help point and how to use it. This should include reviewing the information on help points and at the station to check if it is fit for purpose. It should also include reviewing the information on help points provided for passengers in ATP documents and passenger leaflets.

- ← Previous Introduction
- → Next Recommendations