Communications between stations when assisting passengers

Key observations

This section summarises the key observations we made during our assurance work. It sets out our expectations on what good practice looks like and describes examples we identified at the stations.

Handover Protocol Process

The processes that operators put in place for the Handover Protocol play a key role in the success of communications between stations and therefore assistance delivery overall. Processes should be clear, robust, and well documented.

What good looks like

The good practice examples we were looking for in Handover Protocol processes were:

- contact being made to destination stations for all assistance requests
- reacting efficiently to assistance requests following contact from a boarding station
- adequate checks to ensure sufficient resource to meet demand for assistance
- robust approaches to training accompanied by quality training material
- dedicated assistance number used only for assistance communications
- good oversight of all incoming assist requests that are pro-actively monitored
- clear meeting points / assistance lounge for passengers to make themselves known to staff

- for busy stations, the responsible person is dedicated to passenger assistance delivery and has no other duties in the station

Observations

Two out of the six operators met all our expectations on Handover Protocol processes.

Good practice that was demonstrated across most operators included:

All six operators:

- having clear meeting points for passengers
- communicating assistance requirements to all destination stations during our visits
- delivering in-person training with shadowing of experienced colleagues playing a key part

Five out of six operators:

- having the responsible person dedicated to passenger assistance delivery

Four out of six operators:

- using the dedicated assistance number only for assistance communications
- demonstrating good oversight of incoming assists by having the responsible person as a static coordinator with access to the dashboard
- having regular resource reviews to ensure adequate staff to fulfil Handover Protocol requirements and meet demand for assistance

We observed some areas that were cause for concern, with all operators:

- reporting mixed success with other stations answering or making handover phone calls
- confirming they do not routinely seek the outcome of assistance at the destination station once they help board a passenger

Some stations had unique processes that were not widely observed elsewhere. Examples include:

LNER and GTR at London Kings Cross provided considerably more training material than other operators alongside the in-person training. For LNER this included an e-learning package, and for GTR this included training videos.

GTR at London Kings Cross and GWR at Bristol Temple Meads reported that they make the handover call to the destination station before the passenger is boarded. All other stations reported making the call after the passenger has been boarded. Journey length was the key factor influencing which approach was taken. Operators judged it more appropriate to contact the destination station prior to boarding the passenger where the journey times were shorter to reduce the risk that staff would not be alerted in time to provide assistance off the train.

Network Rail at Birmingham New Street reported that staff aim to meet all arriving trains where a passenger has booked assistance, including where the boarding station had not provided a handover. This is to mitigate instances where the passenger has boarded themselves and will arrive at the station expecting assistance to disembark.

Similarly, to mitigate the same risk, Network Rail at Manchester Piccadilly reported they do not remove bookings off the Passenger Assist system when they did not locate a passenger to assist them to board. This is intended to increase the likelihood that staff will be there to meet the passenger at the destination station if they boarded themselves.

Governance

Good governance structures should result in robust processes that secure positive outcomes for those who rely on passenger assistance. Communication between stations plays a pivotal role in successful assistance delivery, so operators are expected to invest time to ensure it works as intended.

What good looks like

The good practice examples of governance we were looking for included:

- clear roles and responsibilities, including overall accountability for passenger assistance and for each element of delivery, including the Handover Protocol
- clear escalation routes for issues to be raised by staff to senior management

Observations

Approaches to roles and responsibilities were largely the same across all operators and generally met our expectations. All operators we examined:

- described clear roles and responsibilities of the staff involved with the delivery of passenger assistance
- had an appropriately senior member of staff with overall responsibility for passenger assistance delivery
- had escalation routes for staff to report issues on an ad hoc basis

Continuous improvement

Operators must have a commitment to the continuous improvement of services and facilities for disabled people as part of their ATP. The key aspects of continuous improvement are having a good understanding of what the issues are, their causes and how recurrence can be prevented. Monitoring and evaluating performance to show trends, both positive and negative, informs what actions may be needed to secure continuous improvement.

What good looks like

The good practice examples we were looking for in continuous improvement were:

- robust risk management procedures, including internal discussion forums and ways of anticipating potential issues with the Handover Protocol and passenger assistance
- a range of insight gathered about Handover Protocol performance and passenger assistance outcomes at station-level
- boarding stations pro-actively collaborating with destination stations to review assistance outcomes
- creating action plans to address the underlying causes of any recurring issues
- using lessons learned to amend processes to prevent known issues happening again

Observations

Approaches to risk management differed across operators. Half the operators (three out of six) demonstrated good practice with risk management by holding regular internal forums where the Handover Protocol and passenger assistance are discussed. Two of those operators also monitor potential passenger assistance issues via an internal risk register. The same two used a range of insight to pro-actively monitor assistance outcomes. Four out of six operators relied largely on passenger complaints to become aware of issues with assistance delivery.

Examples of good practice included:

Avanti West Coast, responsible for delivery of assistance at Crewe, hold a monthly Passenger Assistance Steering Group that discusses passenger assistance data, any issues around the Handover Protocol and any planned improvements, across all its stations. The risk of failed passenger assistance is monitored via a risk register. Avanti West Coast examine a range of data to identify themes in assistance delivery including periodic reports from the Passenger Assist dashboard.

GTR, responsible for assistance delivery at London Kings Cross, have an Accessibility Steering Group that feeds into higher level strategic committee meetings. The Steering Group maintains a risk register that tracks assistance provision and emerging trends through regular reporting, for all its stations. GTR use its Zero Harm safety management system to report and investigate assistance incidents, feeding results into governance reports. Mystery shopping also formed a key source of insight on assistance reliability.

All operators gave examples of actions taken to improve implementation of the Handover Protocol at the relevant stations. These ranged in scale and impact. Some examples include internal promotion of the staff app to encourage uptake, improved training being rolled out, data driven roster reviews to better manage resource and new processes for terminus train walkthroughs.

All operators confirmed they work with other operators to address Handover Protocol related issues between their stations, on a largely reactive basis.

None of the operators we examined provided us with a station-level record of the outcomes of calls made to destination stations.

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