Update report on the reliability of help points at stations

A summary of train operators' actions and good practice examples.

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Introduction

1.1 Help points at stations allow passengers to speak to a human operator when station staff are unavailable. In their absence, a freephone number provides an equivalent service at unstaffed stations.

1.2 Usage of help points is generally low, mainly for travel information such as train times, and occasionally for requesting passenger assistance. Despite low usage, help points are an important back-up when other means of getting help are not available. To be of value, they must be in good working order and provide a reliable service whenever passengers need them.

1.3 This report provides an update on station operators' responses to the Office of Rail and Road (ORR)'s 2024 report on the 'Reliability of help points at stations'. This work forms part of the seven priority areas identified in the UK Government's Roadmap to an accessible railway, which sets out accessibility improvements to be delivered ahead of the establishment of Great British Railways (GBR), with the aim of creating a more inclusive and accessible rail network.

1.4 Since the publication of our 2024 report and recommendations, help point performance in

England has improved.The proportion of stations in England found to have all help points operational and with good connection at the time of inspection has increased from 75% (for the period April 2023 to August 2024) to 82% (for the period April 2025 to January 2026).This is based on Service Quality Regime (SQR) audit data that has been shared with us by the Department for Transport (DfT). The improvement suggests that actions taken by operators may be contributing to more reliable help point provision, although there is further progress to be made.

1.5 Performance of help points at ScotRail-managed stations in Scotland was substantially better and that has been maintained. The proportion of individual help points that were present and fully operational at the time of inspection has increased from 95% to 96% over the same time periods as above. This is based on SQUIRE audit data that has been shared with us by Transport Scotland.

1.6 SQR and SQUIRE data is not directly comparable because SQR reports at the station level while SQUIRE reports on individual help points, and the criteria used differ slightly. Details of DfT and Transport Scotland's approaches to collecting and reporting help point audit data are set out in our 2024 report.

Regulatory framework

1.7 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.

1.8 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.

1.9 Two inter-related licence obligations relate to the provision of help points. All operators are required, by their operating licences, to comply with both an Accessible Travel Policy (ATP) and with a Passenger Information Code of Practice (delivered via industry's Customer information pledges).

1.10 The ATP Guidance requires operators to provide passengers with a means of speaking to a human operator that can provide assistance and service information. This may be in-person, via a help point or, where there is sufficient mobile coverage, a freephone number.

1.11 The customer information pledges state that at unstaffed stations, or if no staff are present, there will be a way of getting in touch with the operator and they will inform passengers about

this on notices around the station (Pledge E6).

1.12 In addition, general health and safety laws, such as the Health and Safety at Work etc Act 1974, may make help points necessary to manage safety risks. This is particularly relevant at unstaffed stations with poor mobile coverage, where help points can reassure passengers without mobile devices and ensure they can contact the operator in an emergency.

Monitoring help point performance

1.13 The UK Government and devolved administrations in Scotland and Wales each have a mechanism for monitoring the performance of help points. DfT and Transport Scotland undertake regular station audits and assess performance against a range of service quality criteria, including whether help point calls successfully connect to the operator. Transport for Wales (TfW) records and reports faults affecting its help points and maintains a log of issues.

1.14 Rail Delivery Group's (RDG) National Rail Enquiries (NRE) contact centre handles calls from most operators' help points in England. They monitor call response times to ensure calls are answered within 30 seconds.

Assessing the reliability of help points

1.15 Our 2024 review on the reliability of help points at stations found that poor reliability and varied monitoring of service quality were common issues across the rail industry. It also found that in some cases, there is a risk that help point and freephone services may be affected by poor mobile coverage at stations in remote areas.

1.16 We made six recommendations to the industry, calling for improvements to reliability, clearer performance monitoring, and measures to ensure services remain effective where connectivity is limited.

1.17 To inform the 2024 review, we analysed qualitative and quantitative data from 21 station operators on their help point systems and processes. We reviewed performance related audit data provided by DfT and Transport Scotland and call handling data provided by the NRE contact centre. We also carried out site visits and met with several individual operators to gain in-depth insight into their provision.

1.18 Subsequently, we asked the 21 operators for a response to two of the six recommendations we made in the review, to gain further insight on how they are addressing two main issues: how

they monitor the availability of their help points, and how they are assured there is mobile coverage available at their unstaffed stations.

1.19 In response, the operators reviewed their current approach, demonstrating whether they considered it fit for purpose. Where they identified gaps, they set out the action they planned to implement to address them.

1.20 Overall, nearly half of the 21 station operators have either rolled out or are in the process of introducing newer models of help points to replace older units. These upgraded systems offer a range of features that can make them more reliable for passengers, including remote monitoring, and regular remote functionality checks.

1.21 They also enable more accurate reporting of faults and faster fault resolution supported via real-time status updates. Calls are auditable and detailed daily, weekly or monthly call information is easily extractable.

1.22 The introduction of new or upgraded help points also means they are being assigned Internet Protocol (IP) settings, enabling them to connect to and communicate over a network. This digital connection is generally more reliable than traditional analogue phone lines that operate via the Public Switched Telephone Network (PSTN). As the PSTN is due to be switched off in December 2027, it is increasingly important that station operators ensure their help points are connected via modern technology. Our 2024 report found the operators affected by the switch-off have clear plans which will be completed ahead of the deadline.

1.23 Northern Trains and TfW were highlighted in the report as the operators facing the greatest challenges. Both are currently implementing strategies to improve the reliability and coverage of their help point provision.

1.24 By the end of 2026, Northern Trains plans to have enabled help points at the majority of its stations, including rural locations with poor mobile coverage. This includes replacing help points at circa 30 stations in preparation for the PSTN switch off and surveying a further circa 128 stations to inform future upgrades. In parallel, they are piloting the upgrade to the function of the ticket vending machines as help points, starting with circa 30 PSTN stations before a review of plans for a wider rollout.

1.25 TfW are renewing help points that are life expired or connected by PSTN by Spring 2027. They are also exploring options to install new help points at stations, prioritising stations with limited or

no mobile coverage, in rural areas and stations at risk of flooding. TfW will review their current process of logging help point calls and will explore improvements to performance monitoring.

1.26 This report summarises some of the additional approaches and new initiatives being delivered by operators outside of the new or upgraded units. We consider these examples to be good practice and an indicator of progress towards making help points more reliable for passengers, and which we welcome as approaches that could be adopted more widely across other station operators.

Monitoring the availability of help points

1.27 We asked all 21 station operators to demonstrate to us that their approach to monitoring their help points is fit for purpose. Where gaps were identified, operators were required to set out actions to address them.

1.28 Below is a summary which reflects the range of approaches and steps being taken to monitor the availability of help points:

Monitoring and data analysis of faults

- Sharing the help point performance audit data with maintenance providers to support effective monitoring and combining it with station test logs to track reliability and identify underperforming help points.
- Regular review of fault trends and recurring issues to understand underlying causes and plan appropriate mitigation.
- Use of performance forecasting to anticipate and resolve issues before they escalate.

Inspection and in-person checks

- Regular visits to unstaffed stations to spot damages not picked up remotely.
- Annual programme of maintenance tasks, including internal inspection, testing, cleaning, and hearing loop function tests.
- Regular reminders to station staff of the importance of help point checks.
- Ad-hoc mystery shoppers carrying out in person help point checks at stations.

Maintenance and service management

- Review of maintenance contracts to establish clearer service level agreements and key performance indicators for fixing help point faults.
- CCTV showing the location of faulty help points on contact centre video walls, while the teams monitoring them make station announcements to direct passengers to information posters or alternative help points.
- Re-routing help point emergency calls to a central control centre if not answered locally.
- Adopting standardised monitoring procedures across stations on the same network.

Mobile coverage at unstaffed stations

1.29 We asked 14 station operators that operate either unstaffed or partially staffed stations, to carry out a risk assessment of stations that rely on mobile coverage for help point or freephone communication connectivity. Where there is a risk of poor mobile coverage, operators were required to set out actions to address it.

1.30 Below is a summary which reflects the range of steps being taken by some station operators to address any risk of poor mobile coverage at their stations:

Monitoring and detection

- Prioritised monitoring of high-risk locations, including alerts to station staff, onboard staff and back-office teams if signal connectivity is lost.
- Increased monitoring of CCTV at stations where signal loss or poor mobile coverage has been reported, to help identify issues and support passenger safety.
- Ongoing signal strength connectivity monitoring at stations, through remote tools and mobile network scanning.
- Twice-yearly reviews to monitor signal connectively, including use of coverage maps and heat maps, call data analysis, and on-site testing.

Equipment and technology upgrades

- Installation of 4G conversion kits with multi-operator capability, allowing connections across multiple mobile providers to maximise signal availability.
- Use of high-gain antennas to improve signal reception at stations with weaker coverage.

- SIM cards with access to all multiple major mobile networks to increase the likelihood of maintaining connectivity.
- Testing and selection of the best-performing connectivity options, including different mobile network providers, and satellite-enabled solutions.

Network and system resilience

- Backup servers with automatic network switchover.
- Strategic relocation of servers for optimal signal performance.

Passenger facing mitigations

- Alternative contact methods in areas where help points are not working, such as access to freephone numbers, WhatsApp messaging, or direct assistance from station/onboard staff.

Next steps

1.31 We recognise the progress outlined in this report as a positive step towards improving the reliability of help points across the rail network. However, continued action from operators is essential to ensure these improvements are delivered and sustained. This will also help to support the delivery of the UK Government's accessibility roadmap in improving the performance of key facilities at stations.

1.32 To monitor progress and assess the effectiveness of actions being taken by operators, we will work collaboratively with DfT and Transport Scotland to review service quality audit data for help points on their respective networks. Our analysis of this industry-level data will enable us to track performance over time and understand whether operators' interventions are driving improvement, or whether further work may be needed.

1.33 We will also continue to engage directly with Northern Trains and TfW to assess the progress of their improvement strategies and the outcomes achieved.

1.34 In parallel, we will continue to participate in the RDG's Customer Information Group and seek updates from operators on their progress in addressing the remaining recommendations from our 2024 review. These include timely delivery of plans for the PSTN switch-off, proportionate monitoring of help points calls, improved passenger awareness of help point provision, and

greater collaboration between operators to share good practice. We will also maintain engagement with the RDG's National Rail Contact Centre to monitor ongoing work to enhance call handling services for help points.

1.35 We expect all station operators to keep their processes under review, identify and address any gaps and take steps to adopt the good practice set out in this report. Our objective is clear: to ensure help points and freephone services are reliable, effective and meet the needs of passengers.