Benchmarking operators' performance in rail passenger assistance: 2025 report

Executive summary

Passenger assistance enables older and disabled passengers to travel with confidence by providing help at stations and on trains – such as boarding, alighting and navigating complex station environments. It is a core requirement under operators' Accessible Travel Policies (ATP) and forms part of their licence obligations. Demand for assistance continues to grow: between April 2024 and March 2025, over 1.6 million pre-booked assists were requested, an 18% increase on the previous year. (N.B. An assist is all the help provided at one station. Two assists are recorded per journey leg, one when boarding and one when alighting.)

This report presents the Office of Rail and Road's (ORR) first annual benchmarking of train and station operators' delivery of passenger assistance. It forms part of the Government's Accessible railways roadmap. Our aim is to provide transparency on performance, identify areas for improvement and celebrate success where operators are delivering well. The benchmarking framework focuses on two areas:

- Delivery performance – how reliably assistance is provided, alongside passenger satisfaction and staff knowledge.
- Capability to Improve – a qualitative assessment of organisational capacity to strengthen delivery, targeted at operators with sustained poor performance.

Delivery performance

Survey data shows consistently high satisfaction and staff knowledge across all operators when assistance is delivered – so these are not major differentiators. However, reliability remains a concern: 11% of passengers reported receiving none of the assistance they booked. Even the

strongest performers failed some passengers.

Operators achieving the highest reliability scores were **Southeastern, London North Eastern Railway, and Network Rail**, closely followed by **Avanti West Coast**. These operators also performed strongly on satisfaction and staff knowledge. At the other end of the scale, **Northern Trains, South Western Railway (SWR) and West Midlands Trains (WMT)** recorded the lowest reliability. This variation highlights that while good practice exists, significant improvement is needed to ensure disabled passengers can travel with confidence.

Capability to improve

Given sustained poor reliability and limited progress following earlier engagement, ORR undertook assessments of **SWR** and **WMT**.

- **SWR** has shown commitment to improvement, commissioning an external review and taking steps towards data-driven decision-making. However, weaknesses remain in governance, risk management and structured oversight.
- **WMT** demonstrated a commitment to working with staff and disabled people to improve the experience of assisted travel, but provided limited and inconsistent evidence of its capability to improve, with gaps in data analysis, unclear feedback loops and training weaknesses.

Taking our findings into account, the operators have now committed to:

- **WMT** will commission an independent review and produce an Action Plan by the **end of March 2026**.
- Having already conducted its own independent review, **SWR** will submit an Action Plan by the **end of January 2026**.

ORR will monitor delivery and set out progress in our 2026 benchmarking report.

Northern Trains

We have been engaging with Northern since 2024 on our concerns with the poor reliability of its assistance provision. We accepted an improvement plan in December 2024 and all actions have been delivered. We are now monitoring Northern's progress towards delivering sustained improvements in the reliability of passenger assistance.

In 2025, however, we identified significant gaps in Northern's delivery of disability awareness training to passenger facing staff. Northern's improvement plan had included delivery of some targeted staff training but had not identified or addressed this wider training need. Northern established a recovery plan and, in November, reported that rollout of training to all relevant staff had been completed. We have now opened a formal investigation to establish the timeframe, scale and circumstances of this issue, and to seek assurances the recent training has been effective, and this issue will not arise again. This investigation could result in formal action.

Future framework and good practice

ORR will evolve the benchmarking framework for 2026 to include new metrics, such as passenger confidence post-assistance and staff training coverage. Work is underway with Rail Delivery Group to capture turn up and go (TUAG) reliability and integrate feedback from the Passenger Assistance app. The report also highlights examples of good practice from East Midlands Railway, Govia Thameslink Railway, Greater Anglia and Southeastern, covering areas such as data dashboards, stakeholder engagement and lived-experience training. These examples provide practical examples for operators seeking to improve reliability and passenger satisfaction.

Next steps

ORR will continue to monitor operators' performance, drive improvements through action plans, and consider how we best share lessons from higher-performing operators. Our goal is to ensure that disabled passengers can travel with confidence, supported by a reliable and responsive passenger assistance service.

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