Benchmarking operators' performance in rail passenger assistance: 2025 report

4. WMT Capability to Improve: assessment and next steps

Overall assessment

West Midlands Trains (WMT) has taken steps to improve its passenger assistance delivery, including increasing use of varied data sources, a new stakeholder forum, and encouraging staff use of the industry's passenger assistance staff mobile app.

However, **the evidence provided during our assessment was limited and not always easy to interpret, making it difficult to fully understand the effectiveness of these efforts.** Based on that evidence, our assessment is that WMT's potential may be undermined by gaps in data analysis, limited issue management, unclear feedback loops, and a lack of focus on targeted improvements to assistance delivery. We recommend WMT commissions its own review of passenger assistance delivery to explore these issues more fully.

Overview of operator

4.1 West Midlands Trains (WMT) operates under two brands: West Midlands Railway and London Northwestern Railway. Its routes span from Liverpool to London, passing through major hubs such as Birmingham and stations including Wolverhampton and Milton Keynes Central. WMT operates both regional commuter services across the West Midlands and longer-distance intercity connections to London Euston and the North West.

4.2 It manages 149 stations, including busy locations such as Watford Junction, Milton Keynes Central, Wolverhampton, University (Birmingham) and Birmingham Snow Hill. During April 2024 to March 2025, WMT recorded 67.7 million passenger journeys and recorded delivery of 92,093 assists (56,613 pre-booked and 35,480 turn up and go). In terms of pre-booked assists, this represented a 20% increase on the previous year. As of 31 March 2025, it employed 3,123 full-time equivalent staff.

4.3 Under the Government's rail reform programme, the company will transfer to public ownership on 1 February 2026, becoming part of the DfT Operator Limited.

4.4 Key statistics for all operators can be viewed on the ORR data portal.

Evidence of capability

Monitoring and reporting

4.5 WMT has access to a broad range of data sources to monitor passenger assistance performance: its own Assisted Travel Survey, assist volumes, mystery shopping, passenger feedback via the Passenger Assistance app and complaints data.

4.6 Staff record the outcomes of assists through the industry-wide staff mobile app. In interviews, staff reported confusion and difficulty using the app. WMT did describe steps it is taking to increase usage to support the handover of passengers from station to station but did not evidence the impact of these actions. The effectiveness of mystery shopping as a performance insight tool also remains unclear.

4.7 A Customer Experience Board taskforce is presented with data on complaints received, completed assists (total), positive feedback via the Passenger Assistance app, complaints per 'assistance delivered', as well as 'successful assists'. This final metric excludes certain 'incomplete' assists, such as those where the customer could not be located by staff, which may limit the accuracy and impact of performance reporting. While WMT claims to assure the validity the data it collects on passengers' experience of assistance, no supporting evidence was provided during the assessment.

4.8 WMT has begun to explore the potential of passenger assistance system data to generate more detailed insights alongside recent analysis of is Assisted Travel Survey, which has the potential to be a rich source of insight. It is important that WMT makes use of this data, as in its

responses to our requests for information we found little evidence of a clear strategy for using survey results or passenger assistance data to understand or improve reliability, and only limited evidence of action taken at key stations with known performance challenges such as Wolverhampton. We are concerned this may limit WMT's ability to develop targeted interventions and drive meaningful improvements in assistance delivery.

Risks and Mitigations

4.9 WMT maintains a risk register for assistance delivery, which covers operational and infrastructure risks such as lifts failing, systems failure of the Passenger Assistance staff app and platform-train interface issues. We saw no evidence that more targeted risks were also being systematically considered, such as risks to specific customer groups or at individual stations. We might for example have expected to see risks recorded in relation to stations with significant demand or other challenges, for instance where ticket office staff provide assistance alongside their other duties at busy times, or relating to the usage of the app by guards (an issue of which WMT has little visibility).

4.10 WMT has introduced initiatives aimed at minimising risks to the experience for disabled passengers. For example, station managers reported that they actively plan for periods of peak assistance demand, and a dedicated taskforce is overseeing the implementation of mitigations intended to increase staff app usage, for which an issues log has been created. Frontline staff also appear confident in their roles and responsibilities.

4.11 During our assessment, we received minimal evidence indicating how frequently the risk register is reviewed or how promptly mitigations are actioned. Alongside the gaps we have identified, we are therefore concerned that WMT may not be fully capturing or addressing all the operational risks that could impact the consistency and reliability of assistance delivery.

Engagement

4.12 WMT has established two forums for engaging disabled stakeholders. While both groups provide valuable input, their distinct roles and how they coordinate are unclear. The newer Stakeholder Equality Group appears to offer effective feedback on specific initiatives, and WMT described to us a number of examples where this input had resulted in improvements and how this is tracked. These assertions were not well supported by the documentary evidence provided, and the older forum (its Stakeholder Accessibility Group) expressed concerns about being excluded from early-stage discussions, limiting its ability to influence outcomes. We are therefore

unsure whether this input is always sought early enough to meaningfully shape project development.

4.13 WMT has also taken steps to engage frontline staff through management station visits, which are used to promote the staff app and gather feedback on its use. This reflects a degree of proactive engagement. More broadly, there is limited evidence that staff and stakeholder feedback is systematically captured or used to inform service improvements. While WMT asserts that feedback influences its initiatives, there is little visibility of performance reporting, structured feedback channels, or how input translates into tangible changes.

4.14 We received minimal evidence of WMT's collaboration with other operators and wider industry groups; what was provided lacked detail. Assertions of contributions to cross-industry initiatives were not well substantiated during the assessment.

4.15 Accessibility stakeholder engagement and management is clearly an area of focus for WMT. It is therefore disappointing that, whilst the stakeholder group meeting we observed was a positive example of engagement, the supporting documentation provided for this part of the assessment was too limited for us to reach broad conclusions on the depth and effectiveness of WMT's engagement, both internal and external, as well as its ability to contribute to broader improvements in accessibility across the rail network. We therefore find that WMT should consider further whether it is making most effective use of its various stakeholder engagements to provide meaningful input into its proposals and plan.

Training

4.16 WMT set out to us how it tracks the completion of induction training for accessibility, but otherwise we received limited evidence of ongoing internal monitoring or mechanisms for incorporating feedback into training materials. Furthermore, awareness of refresher training was not widespread amongst the staff we were able to speak to, adding weight to our concerns that current assurance processes may not be sufficient to ensure continued competence and understanding across the workforce.

4.17 We were provided with limited evidence of WMT's training materials but were able to observe the disability awareness training provided at induction for new staff. Whilst training facilitators are clearly passionate about delivering a good service for disabled passengers, the training material relies heavily on generic, publicly available multimedia content, little of which was tailored to the challenges disabled people face when travelling by rail. Quizzes of facts and figures

aside, participants were largely passive, and there was only limited focus on effective communication and the lived experiences of disabled passengers.

4.18 We are also concerned that disabled people's voices are not consistently present in WMT's induction training sessions. While input from one of the two forums is referenced in the training slides, and we were provided with evidence of a video made in collaboration with this forum, this input was not reflected in the training content observed during the assessment.

4.19 Overall, we are not convinced this training is sufficient to equip staff with the skills and knowledge needed to provide high-quality assistance. We find that WMT would benefit from refreshing its training approach to include more interactive elements and direct engagement with disabled people, ensuring that staff gain a deeper understanding of diverse passenger needs.

Next steps

4.20 Based on our assessment, we set out below our expectations of actions WMT should take to strengthen its capability to improve assistance delivery.

Monitoring and reporting / risks and mitigations

1. Strengthen issue management

WMT should expand and keep under ongoing review its existing risk register and issues log to ensure comprehensive coverage of operational challenges related to passenger assistance. Mitigation actions should be clearly tracked, with escalation procedures in place to address unresolved or recurring issues. This will support a more proactive and transparent approach to service improvement.

2. Improve data quality and insights

WMT should make more effective use of the data it collects to generate meaningful insights at station and route level, particularly in relation to disabled passengers' experiences. In particular, WMT should take action to reduce instances where customers are not found by staff and are therefore at risk of not receiving the assistance they need to travel. Its success metric should accurately reflect performance in this area.

WMT should assure itself of the effectiveness of mystery shopping as a performance insight tool.

3. Review of assistance delivery capability

WMT should conduct an internal review of its passenger assistance delivery capability, taking into account the recommendations set out in this report. This review should assess current practices, identify gaps, and lead to the development of further recommendations where appropriate. The aim is to ensure that WMT's assistance delivery is robust, responsive, and aligned with passenger needs.

Engagement

4. Strengthen engagement governance and feedback loops

The roles and governance arrangements of stakeholder groups should be clarified to ensure meaningful engagement. Existing stakeholder engagement structures should be used more effectively, and feedback loops involving both staff and stakeholders must be strengthened. WMT should assure itself that staff and stakeholder feedback informs and strengthens service delivery and training, with visible impact across the organisation.

5. Enhance training delivery

WMT should refresh its disability awareness training programmes to ensure it includes greater lived experience perspectives and focuses more on practical communication and staff interaction, which equips staff to respond effectively to a diverse range of passenger needs.

As set out in recommendation 3, because of the limited nature of some of the evidence provided to us during this assessment, we have asked WMT to commission its own review of passenger assistance delivery, before developing an action plan **by the end of March 2026** that considers both its recommendations and those set out in this report.

We will then monitor both the delivery of this plan and WMT's passenger assistance performance, with regular review points. We will report on WMT's progress in our 2026 Benchmarking Report.

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