Benchmarking operators' performance in rail passenger assistance: 2026 report

Executive summary

1. In 2025, ORR published its first benchmarking assessment of rail operators' delivery of passenger assistance. The report identified a consistent picture across the industry: while passenger satisfaction with assistance was generally high when delivered as requested, the reliability of assistance delivery varied between operators, with a minority of passengers continuing not to receive some or all of the assistance they had booked. The report set out targeted regulatory engagement with operators where performance concerns were most acute.

2. This 2026 report builds on that work. It presents the latest benchmarking assessment of passenger assistance delivery, reports on the outcomes of ORR's engagement with operators during the last year and identifies the common themes in the improvement actions being taken by operators.

3. We continue to use ORR's Experience of Passenger Assist survey as our key source of data. This year, for the first time, our assessment also incorporates ratings submitted by passengers through the Passenger Assist mobile app, providing a broader view of passenger satisfaction and enabling us to assess operators using a wider basket of measures.

4. Demand for passenger assistance continues to increase year-on-year. Record numbers of assistance requests are now being made across the network, up 18% this year. This growth places greater importance on operators being able to deliver assistance consistently and effectively. Our 2026 assessment continues to show high levels of passenger satisfaction with assistance received at stations and with the knowledge and proficiency of staff delivering that assistance. However, the central finding from our 2025 report remains unchanged: reliability continues to be the area of greatest variation between operators and the most significant challenge facing the industry as

usage increases. Improving reliability remains essential if passengers who require assistance are to travel with confidence and receive the level of service they are entitled to expect.

5. Our assessment uses a rolling three-year dataset weighted towards more recent performance and, as a result, changes in underlying performance may take time to be reflected fully in overall rankings. The strongest-performing operators over 2023-2026 remain broadly consistent with last year's assessment for 2022-2025. London North Eastern Railway (LNER) and Southeastern continue to perform strongly, with Network Rail, Chiltern Railways and Greater Thameslink Railway (GTR) also achieving strong results across the assessment metrics. West Midlands Trains (WMT), Northern Trains, Transport for Wales (TfW) and South Western Railway (SWR) remain the lowest-performing operators.

6. A key focus of this year's report is the impact of regulatory engagement following the 2025 benchmarking exercise. During the year, ORR continued to monitor and engage with Northern, SWR and WMT – focusing on ensuring improvement plans are in place, that those plans are being delivered and that they are providing the anticipated benefits. In the case of Northern, we are seeing the fruits of those efforts in this year's data.

7. We also undertook targeted engagement with TfW and Avanti West Coast where we identified emerging performance concerns.

8. The report identifies a number of common themes in the actions that operators are taking to drive improved performance, including:

- Using a wider range of data, insight and passenger feedback to understand performance;
- Targeting improvement activity at priority locations and known areas of risk;
- Strengthening governance, leadership and accountability for passenger assistance delivery;
- Working collaboratively across organisations to improve coordination and reliability; and
- Embedding continuous improvement through regular monitoring, review and action.

9. Our engagement suggests that these factors are important enablers of improved passenger assistance outcomes.

10. The Railways Bill, which is currently passing through Parliament, creates a new passenger watchdog that will take on some of ORR's consumer functions including monitoring of services provided to disabled passengers. The new watchdog will grow out of Transport Focus and we are

working collaboratively with them to plan and prepare for the transition, and to ensure that passenger protections are maintained and enhanced.

11. Ahead of the establishment of the Passenger Watchdog, ORR will continue to monitor passenger assistance delivery, share learning from effective improvement activity and target its regulatory engagement where it can have the greatest impact for passengers: in the case of SWR and WMT we will continue to hold the operators to account for the delivery of their improvement plans.

12. We will also continue to develop the benchmarking framework to strengthen our understanding of passenger outcomes and to support greater transparency, accountability and continuous improvement across the rail industry as it continues to evolve. Our objective remains to improve the reliability and quality of passenger assistance and to support better outcomes for passengers who rely on the service.

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