Benchmarking operators' performance in rail passenger assistance: 2026 report

3. Regulatory engagement and monitoring outcomes

43. ORR has continued to engage with operators where benchmarking results, passenger feedback or previous regulatory interventions identified concerns. While each operator's circumstances differ, engagement has focused on understanding root causes, supporting improvement activity and monitoring outcomes. Several operators have now developed and implemented improvement plans, with early evidence of positive change.

Northern Trains

44. Our concerns about Northern's delivery of passenger assistance were prompted by ongoing poor results in our Experiences of Passenger Assist survey. In September 2024, we asked Northern to set out a plan that would deliver sustainable improvements for passengers who require assistance to travel, informed by an assessment of current performance, known weaknesses and risks to the delivery of passenger assistance.

45. We held Northern to account for delivery of its passenger assistance improvement plan, and all actions were completed by November 2025. Our focus then moved to monitoring passenger assistance outcomes using a range of insights to assess the effectiveness of its actions. While outcomes did not improve right away, recent data suggest a more promising picture is emerging (see Annex B for annual data):

- A decrease in the proportion of respondents to ORR's Experiences of Passenger Assist survey reporting they received none of the assistance booked with Northern. For example,

in 2024/25 the proportion was 18% which fell to 13% in 2025-2026. At Leeds, the proportion of passengers reporting that they received none of their booked assistance fell from 15% in 2023/24 to 5% in 2025-2026;

- Increasingly positive ratings submitted via the Passenger Assist mobile app at key stations like Leeds and Manchester Victoria. For example, Passenger Assist mobile app satisfaction scores increased from 67% to 80% at Manchester Oxford Road and from 68% to 84% at Manchester Victoria over the same period;
- Fewer participants in Northern's mystery shopping exercises report they receive none of their assistance.

46. We are therefore confident that the delivery of the actions in the improvement plan have laid the foundation for more Northern passengers who require assistance to have a more positive experience. While there are still instances where things go wrong, Northern now has the capacity to identify them, investigate the causes, learn lessons and take appropriate action. Importantly, insight-led continuous improvement, which was lacking prior to implementation of the improvement plan, is now embedded in Northern's passenger assistance processes and driving better outcomes. A critical aspect to this improvement has been the significant buy in and support from senior staff at Northern; accessibility is now a priority that is regularly discussed at senior levels within the organisation.

47. Overall, we are satisfied that Northern's improvement plan has begun to deliver for passengers that require assistance. We have therefore returned to business-as-usual monitoring of Northern's passenger assistance performance and will be focused on whether the recent improvements are sustained.

Disability awareness training investigation

48. In August 2025 new reporting requirements for all operators revealed that around 800 Northern passenger facing staff had not received required disability awareness training. The training gap had not been identified or addressed in the passenger assistance improvement plan.

49. Northern submitted a plan to deliver training to station staff and, on 4 November 2025, reported that it had fulfilled the plan.

50. Notwithstanding the delivery of training in October 2025, given the range of issues raised previously, we continued to have concerns about Northern's historic and ongoing compliance.

51. In December 2025, we opened a formal licence investigation into Northern's provision of disability awareness training for its staff. The licence investigation focused on commitments that Northern made in its Accessible Travel Policy relating to disability awareness training and included:

- The timeframe over which staff who had not received required training were interacting with disabled passengers, and the scale and impact of the issue;
- The circumstances that led to staff not receiving training when required and how the issue remained unresolved and unreported during this timeframe;
- How Northern can assure itself, its passengers and ORR that:
    i. The recent training has been effective and is enabling staff to meet the required training outcomes, and
    ii. A similar situation will not arise in future.

52. Northern's own internal audit, conducted in December 2025, identified a number of systemic issues relating to governance processes, monitoring and controls that led to the failure to deliver training to staff.

53. In March 2026 ORR published our decision that Northern had failed, and was failing, to comply with commitments made in its published Accessible Travel Policy (ATP) to provide disability awareness training for staff and to provide the management and oversight arrangements that would support and assure delivery of that training.

54. During the investigation, Northern submitted a training improvement plan aimed at bringing it back into compliance. ORR accepted the plan as comprehensive and well-targeted at tackling systemic issues relating to governance, oversight and delivery of disability awareness training.

55. In addition, Northern submitted a package of reparations with an estimated value of £550,000, intended to represent a commitment to repair and build a foundation for improved standards of customer service delivery.

56. We monitored Northern's delivery of its improvement plan and reparations package, and on 8 September 2026 we wrote to it to confirm all actions in the plan had been completed and satisfactory progress with the reparation package had been made. Having received this confirmation, we have returned to our regular monitoring of Northern's obligations related to disability awareness training.

South Western Railway (SWR) and West Midlands Trains (WMT)

57. Our 2025 Benchmarking Report highlighted ORR's concerns regarding the passenger assistance performance of SWR and WMT. We asked both operators to develop improvement plans designed to address the reliability of their assistance provision and are now monitoring implementation.

58. Both operators have made good progress implementing their plans and have reported that delivery remains broadly on track. Improvement activity is being embedded within day-to-day operations and continues to receive attention from senior management at both operators. Both operators are focused on improving the reliability of assistance delivery through a range of measures. For example, SWR is strengthening operational accountability, governance and investigation processes, while WMT has enhanced performance monitoring and reporting arrangements and targeted improvement activity at priority stations to better identify and address passenger assistance issues.

59. ORR will continue to monitor delivery of the remaining commitments and assess the longer-term impact of both plans on passenger assistance outcomes.

Transport for Wales (TfW)

60. In 2024 ORR raised concerns with TfW about reliability of passenger assistance and the operator established a range of improvement actions in response. Since then, TfW has achieved some improvement in passenger assistance performance but remains among the weakest performers.

61. ORR therefore revisited its engagement with TfW during the 2026 benchmarking exercise to assess the impact of the actions previously introduced and ensure TfW fully understood the factors contributing to poor passenger assistance performance.

62. TfW has continued to refine its approach, including introducing new customer insight measures and more targeted analysis of assistance delivery at locations where operational challenges are greatest.

63. ORR continues to monitor performance trends and engage with TfW as this work progresses. While there are some encouraging signs of improvement, further sustained progress will be required to demonstrate that recent initiatives are delivering meaningful improvements for passengers who require assistance.

Avanti West Coast

64. Following analysis of the 2026 benchmarking results, we engaged with Avanti after identifying a recent decline in the reliability of passenger assistance, passenger satisfaction and passenger confidence to make a similar journey in the future. While Avanti has historically performed around the industry average, ORR sought assurance that the emerging negative trajectory was understood and being addressed.

65. Avanti's review identified challenges at Crewe and Preston, where increasing assistance demand and operational complexity were placing pressure on service delivery. In response, the operator began developing a targeted programme of improvement activity focused on staffing, operational processes and ways of working with stakeholders.

66. Early actions included securing additional staffing at Crewe and Preston, strengthening engagement with Network Rail and developing dedicated passenger assistance coordinator roles. A wider passenger assistance improvement plan remains in development.

67. ORR will continue to monitor performance trends and engage with Avanti as this work progresses to ensure the negative trajectory is reversed.

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