Benchmarking operators' performance in rail passenger assistance: 2026 report

4. Common themes from operator improvement activity

Introduction

68. Although the operators we engaged with faced different challenges when delivering passenger assistance, several common themes emerged in the actions they identified to resolve those challenges and improve performance and reliability. These themes were:

- improving performance insight through better data and monitoring;
- targeting improvement activity where risks and demand are greatest;
- strengthening governance and accountability;
- improving collaboration across the industry; and
- embedding more structured approaches to continuous improvement.

69. This chapter explores how operators have applied these approaches to better understand performance, strengthen oversight and deliver more reliable assistance for passengers.

Understanding performance through better data and insight

70. The operators we engaged with have consistently identified lack of robust insight on

passenger assistance performance as a root cause of poor reliability. As a result, all have moved beyond tracking a small number of headline performance metrics and made greater use of passenger feedback, operational data and assurance activity to understand performance, identify issues and implement solutions.

71. Several operators identified limitations in the information they used to monitor performance and responded by introducing new sources of insight or making better use of existing data.

72. SWR and WMT developed enhanced dashboard reporting and monitoring arrangements, enabling managers to access more detailed information on assistance delivery, app usage, training compliance and operational performance.

73. Northern similarly expanded the range of data and insight used to monitor accessibility performance, drawing on customer and staff feedback, complaints, mystery shopping and operational information to support improvement activity.

74. Some operators also introduced new sources of insight:

- TfW introduced a dedicated customer-focused passenger assistance survey following engagement with ORR;
- Northern expanded its use of mystery shopping exercises to help better understand passenger experiences; and
- SWR commissioned research focused specifically on passenger expectations and experiences of assistance.

75. Many operators also highlighted the value of direct engagement with disabled passengers and accessibility forums. Stakeholder groups were increasingly used to test proposed solutions, identify emerging concerns and provide challenge from a lived experience perspective.

76. This increased use of customer insight demonstrates the value operators place on understanding passenger experiences and identifying opportunities for improvement. A common lesson emerging from our engagement is the value of combining multiple data sources rather than relying on a single performance metric. Passenger feedback, operational data, complaints, mystery shopping and staff insight can each provide a different perspective and, when considered together, offer a more complete understanding of passenger assistance outcomes. Operators are then better equipped to identify processes that are not working for passengers and can focus resources on resolving them.

Using data to identify priority stations

77. Operators are increasingly targeting resources and improvement activity at locations where demand, operational complexity or performance concerns are greatest. Many operators we spoke to found that passenger assistance demand and performance challenges were concentrated at a relatively small number of locations. Rather than adopting broad network-wide interventions, they used data to identify priority stations and focused resources where data suggested the greatest improvements could be achieved.

78. Northern prioritised improvement activity at its ten stations with the highest passenger assistance demands, including Leeds, before considering how successful interventions could be rolled out elsewhere. WMT focused specific improvement activity at Wolverhampton and Milton Keynes, while Avanti identified Crewe and Preston as priorities due to the volume of assistance requests, frequency of interchanges and operational complexity associated with those stations. SWR identified Southampton as being prone to significant peaks in demand so carried out a resource review to inform its staffing model. It has also developed station-level approaches to monitoring and understanding performance.

79. Engagement with Avanti highlighted the value of using detailed operational analysis to understand demand patterns. The operator identified that passenger assistance demand was concentrated around specific timetable flows and peak periods, helping it better understand where additional staffing and coordination arrangements may have the greatest impact.

80. This targeted approach allows operators to focus improvement activity where it is likely to benefit the largest number of passengers while also providing opportunities to trial and refine new initiatives before wider rollout.

Strengthening governance and accountability

81. Clear ownership and leadership are critical enablers of improvement. A recurring theme across several operators was the importance of ensuring passenger assistance performance receives appropriate management attention and accountability. This reflects findings from our previous Capability to Improve assessments in 2025, which identified governance, oversight and accountability arrangements as important factors in supporting improvement.

82. Several operators strengthened governance arrangements following engagement with ORR.

Northern introduced director-level oversight of passenger assistance improvement activity and established formal governance arrangements to monitor delivery.

83. SWR and WMT both strengthened reporting and oversight processes to support implementation of their improvement programmes. Both operators developed comprehensive passenger assistance risk registers to identify, record, monitor and mitigate risks to delivery before they caused issues.

84. As part of their passenger assistance improvement plans, both SWR and WMT have developed station-specific assistance plans, providing a more structured framework for identifying accessibility improvements, monitoring delivery and strengthening accountability for assisted travel outcomes at individual stations. The plans are intended to support greater local ownership of accessibility issues and more consistent delivery of Passenger Assist across their networks

85. Northern, SWR and WMT have all introduced internal passenger assistance discussion forums, where data and insight are discussed regularly with senior staff, which helps retain focus on improvement activities.

86. Operators also reported increasing management accountability through objectives, governance forums and programme oversight arrangements. These mechanisms help ensure that accessibility considerations are included in wider operational decision-making and that improvement activity remains visible across the organisation.

Working collaboratively across the industry

87. Delivering reliable assistance often requires effective collaboration between operators, infrastructure managers and industry bodies. Passenger assistance frequently involves multiple organisations and several operators identified collaboration as a key enabler of improvement.

88. Avanti reported increased collaboration with Network Rail on communication, handover arrangements and operational issues affecting assistance delivery. Avanti and Network Rail are trialling the use of the electronic handover when transferring information about assistance between boarding and alighting stations. They are the first to trial the technology between operators.

89. TfW increased engagement with Rail Delivery Group and other operators to identify good practice and strengthen its own approach. Northern, SWR and WMT also highlighted involvement

in industry working groups and collaborative initiatives aimed at improving reporting, training and operational processes. In addition, a number of operators identified handover arrangements between organisations as an area of continued focus. More effective communication, consistent processes and clearer allocation of responsibilities were all seen as important contributors to reliable assistance delivery.

90. The ability to share lessons learned and good practice across organisational boundaries is likely to become increasingly important as passenger assistance demand continues to grow.

Conclusion

91. Our engagement with operators has highlighted several factors associated with improvement, including stronger use of data and customer insight, targeted interventions at locations of greatest risk, clearer governance and accountability, effective collaboration across the industry, and continuous monitoring of passenger outcomes. We expect operators to continue to build on these approaches as demand for passenger assistance continues to grow.

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