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24 April 2025

Dear Jacqui

Proposal to trial Electronic Handover functionality within Passenger Assist software

We are writing to propose an alternative process to fulfil the Handover Protocol, with equivalent functionality and effectiveness to guidance set out in ATP Guidance Appendix C, for the purpose of a trial.

Northern would like to propose an initial trial of the use of 'Electronic Handover' at four stations – Leeds City, Blackpool North, Manchester Victoria, and Harrogate for a period of four months.

Background to Northern's proposal

Passenger Assist is the rail industry-wide software system for logging and managing assistance requests made by customers and the system is managed, on behalf of train operators, by Rail Delivery Group (RDG).

There are two ways that operators can interact with the staff software –the 'Staff Web Interface,' accessed using a web browser, and the 'Staff Mobile App' which is installed on a mobile device.

In late 2024, new functionality was added to the software called 'Electronic Handover'. This was developed as an alternative way for operators to fulfil the handover protocol, directly through the software, rather than by telephone call.

Widespread use of electronic handover has the potential to improve the overall customer experience and positively impact the robustness and accuracy of information passed between stations.

Anticipated benefits of electronic handover

The software's electronic handover functionality was developed to ensure that all requirements of the handover protocol continue to be met, whilst offering potential benefits over and above the existing telephone call method.

- Creates a consistent and efficient method of passing information between stations
- As information is provided directly from the real-time running system and the customer's profile / booking request, it removes any chance of information being relayed incorrectly by staff at the departure station, or taken down incorrectly by staff at the destination stations
- Allows station staff to dispense with paper notes and respond directly to requests within the system
- Increases confidence between stations that the assistance has been acknowledged and responded to
- Improves the audit trail: the system shows definitive details of when a handover was initiated, responded to and by whom and at exact times
- Gives staff the opportunity to use the time currently spent on telephone calls to improve the overall customer experience and to be customer-facing at the time of the handover
- Ensures detailed and reliable information about handovers that can be used when investigating customer complaints or assistance failures

Designed for this specific purpose, it is our view that the electronic handover functionality is an appropriate alternative method to pass information between enabled stations. As well as meeting the requirements of the handover protocol, it has been designed to be activated on a station-by-station basis. This provides assurance that stations could not initiate or respond to electronic handover requests unless they are involved in an active trial.

Northern's proposal

Northern has identified four stations to trial the use of electronic handover - Leeds City, Blackpool North, Manchester Victoria, and Harrogate.

These four stations have been chosen as they deliver a significant number of assisted travel requests in both booked and Turn-Up-and-Go; they are in the top 10 of Northern stations for Passenger Assist requests, with over six thousand assistances in Rail Year 2025 (Period 1 – 11) where the stations were either the departure or destination, together with Leeds City.

These stations were also the early adopters of the Passenger Assist software and have successfully demonstrated extensive and consistent use of both the staff web interface and staff mobile app.

Electronic Handover Trial – Phase 1

Our proposed trial would see the electronic handover functionality enabled at four stations - Leeds City, Blackpool North, Manchester Victoria, and Harrogate and trialled for four months. The launch date of the trial would be agreed with ORR and accompanied by dedicated training briefings to the stations.

The trial would see the Passenger Assist software's electronic handover being used as the primary method of passing information between departure and destination stations for booked and unbooked assistance requests for appropriate journeys. The scope for the trial will be clearly communicated to station teams.

At all times, Northern will adhere to the technical guidance of Appendix C of the ATP guidance including but not limited to:

- A dedicated phone number for each station remaining in use/available
- Responsible Person for assistance-related communications for every station
- The information shared remains unchanged - (where applicable) passenger name, assistance needed, train headcode, location on train and any other relevant information
- Where electronic handover is enabled between the two stations, this will be the primary method of handover. Where this is not enabled at both stations, or where the electronic handover is not responded to within the timescale, staff will use the approved telephone call method to pass information between stations

Learnings from the Avanti West Coast trial

Whilst the functionality was released in late 2024, the use of electronic handover can only be enabled where permission has been sought and granted by ORR, a recent example being the first trial of the functionality by Avanti West Coast.

We spoke with Avanti West Coast about their ongoing trial of electronic handover. The feedback was that it may have been more useful to include more stations in their trial, to allow better availability of data and show differences between station types. Between Avanti's three trial stations, there were around 1,200 assistances over the year. Whilst we are proposing one additional station in our trial, our stations had five times the number of assistances over the same period. To that end, it further reinforces that these stations are particularly appropriate for trialling the functionality.

At present, Avanti West Coast stations may only initiate and respond to electronic handover requests between their own stations - this is termed as the 'Within own network' condition in the Passenger Assist software. This condition ensures there is no risk of a trial by Northern impacting on the success of the ongoing Avanti West Coast Trial.

For a true cross-organisational trial of the electronic handover function, operators would be required to enable the 'Across all networks' condition. In our discussions with Avanti West Coast, we agreed that it would be beneficial to understand ORR's views on cross-TOC use of electronic handover as it could be seen as an opportunity for future phases within our respective trials.

We will continue to meet with Avanti West Coast on a 4-weekly basis to understand how their trial is developing, identify all available opportunities to positively impact a trial at Northern, and share learnings as they arise.

Planned enhancements to electronic handover

While both the staff web interface and the staff mobile app have the electronic handover functionality included, the way that handover notifications are displayed differs slightly.

Both the staff web interface and the staff mobile app can be used by the departure station to easily initiate an electronic handover. In the staff mobile app, a distinct notification appears to alert a staff member at the destination station that a handover has been initiated, whereas on the staff web interface the staff member is notified only by way of a red dot as a visual clue on the dashboard.

To address this issue, an enhancement is planned where a dedicated notification will appear directly in the staff web interface which can be responded to by staff. This is anticipated to be released by RDG in Autumn 2025.

Avanti West Coast have addressed this issue within their own trial by ensuring that their stations are active users of the staff mobile app and are immediately aware of electronic handover initiations from other stations.

Use of the software by Northern trial stations

We looked at how our proposed trial stations use and access the Passenger Assist software within their operational processes. We also reviewed the method of accessing the software – either by use of the staff web interface, or by staff mobile app – or a combination of both.

All stations demonstrated appropriate use of both - with active users set up in both staff mobile app and staff web interface. Like Avanti, team members will make use of the staff mobile app alongside use of the staff web interface to make the most of the notifications for incoming handovers. Our briefing material will clearly show how electronic handover is managed within the staff web interface and the staff mobile app.

Stakeholder engagement

We are actively engaged with RDG and their Passenger Assistance programme to ensure that Northern can be at the heart of any Passenger Assist software development, as well as meeting the team planning the enhancements to electronic handover. We have also discussed our proposal with LNER and TPE, who run services affected at the stations.

Our internal customer stakeholder group – the Northern Accessibility User Group (NAUG), made up of members with lived experience of disability - is engaged in all areas of Northern's Passenger Assistance Improvement programme.

At a meeting between NAUG and Northern on 17 March 2025, at which ORR were present, Northern described the potential use of the electronic handover function at selected stations.

Feedback from the group showed that there was strong support from NAUG on trialling the functionality, specifically:

- Their support of trialling new functionality that had the potential to improve customer experience and increase reliability
- Recognising that inter-operator relationships are required to deliver passenger assistance on journeys where a customer is travelling with more than one operator, or at stations operated by different assistance providers – there was broad support to try the function between operators
- Potential for the electronic handover function to replace the need for telephone calls was seen as a positive, as staff would not be required to relay, sometimes sensitive health information about a person – this can all be done discretely within the software
- To be kept informed about any trial, the success, and the impact on customer experience, including whether there would be opportunity to use the electronic handover function more widely, by more operators

To build on this initial feedback from NAUG, Northern will also be presenting on electronic handover at Rail Accessibility and Inclusion for the North (RAIFN) at the next meeting in May. This cross-organisational group brings together operators and accessibility experts from across the North. We will provide ORR with the feedback gathered at this session when it is available.

Trial measurement

Throughout the four-month trial, we will gather feedback from staff on the use of the functionality and any barriers to its use.

The success of the trial will also consider available data, such as:

- Passenger Assistance failures over the course of the trial, and root cause of these
- Staff feedback on the use of the functionality and if it is seen as a benefit
- Number of times an electronic handover is initiated/attempted for possible journeys between trial stations
- Numbers of complaints received from customers where handover is a cause of complaint or is found to have been a contributing factor

Data from the trial will be collected from launch and provided to ORR on a regular basis. It is anticipated that all data provided at the end of month three could be used to take a decision about whether the trial is successful and should be continued beyond the four-month trial period.

At any time, should the trial indicate that there are adverse impacts to customer experience or reliability of assistance, we will communicate this to ORR. The ability to disable use of electronic handover is available quickly and easily through the software. Should this occur, stations will return to the telephone call being used for handover protocol.

The risks identified by Avanti West Coast in its proposal are also relevant to Northern – we are reassured that the functionality has been designed in a way that ensures that risks are minimised whilst seeing the benefits that it is intended to bring.

Risks and mitigations

Risk	Mitigation
During disruption where staff are busy, electronic handover could be time consuming	Electronic handover has been designed to be quicker than a call, giving staff more time to support other customers.
During disruption, electronic handover may not be responded to within the required two-minute period due to staff fulfilling other duties	When electronic handover is not responded to within the required timescale, a telephone call will be used to meet the requirements of handover protocol
During a software outage, colleagues' access to the staff web interface or staff mobile app could be impacted, restricting availability of electronic handover	The daily report emails/ flash reports are available outside the system, during any outage a telephone call will be used to meet the requirements of handover protocol

Due to the ongoing roll out of the staff web interface and staff mobile app across Northern stations there are frequent, general, communications about Passenger Assist to all stations.

We have identified that there is a risk that communications about the trial could be confused with these general messages. This could lead to stations failing to understand the importance of adopting electronic handover as the primary method of communicating information between defined stations.

To ensure that electronic handover can be adopted successfully at trial stations, the programme team will ensure that stations are actively engaged to

- Understand any apprehension or reluctance to use electronic handover before the trial goes live

- Ensure that information and communication is clear around the reasons for adopting the new functionality, and how this will impact current processes in delivering assistance

- Ensure that all team members have sufficient training/briefing on electronic handover so that they can develop the skills to use and integrate into current processes

- Supply dedicated training sessions for each station, delivered by a specialist provider to be delivered before the trial starts.

Once the trial has been running for three months, it would be useful to meet with ORR and other relevant stakeholders to review success and to discuss the possibility to proceed to a second phase of the trial. We anticipate this phase could include other stations within Northern's top 10 stations for assistance delivery and/or the ability to test how the functionality could work between operators.

We look forward to discussing this in further detail with you.

Yours sincerely

Tracy Barr
Head of Customer Experience