

Jacqui Russell
Head of Consumer Policy
Email ATP@orr.gov.uk



Tracy Barr
Head of Customer Experience
Northern Trains Limited
By email

13 May 2025

Dear Tracy

Approval of Northern Trains Limited's proposal to trial an alternative to the handover protocol (electronic handover) for communicating between stations on assistance provision

Thank you for your letter dated 24 April 2025, outlining a proposal for Northern to use an alternative to the handover protocol at select stations on a trial basis. You made this application in view of the potential to improve the overall customer experience and positively impact the robustness and accuracy of information passed between stations. We have considered your application against the requirements set out in our [Accessible Travel Policy \(ATP\) Guidance](#), and outline our decision-making process below.

I am pleased to confirm that ORR accepts Northern's proposal to trial use of the electronic handover for assists on journeys between Blackpool North, Harrogate, Leeds and Manchester Victoria, on all operators' services, for a four-month period. For assists involving other stations, Northern will continue to use the telephone handover protocol.

ORR requirements

Reliable delivery of assistance depends on clear and timely communication between stations. This ensures that staff are expecting the passenger at the destination and are aware of relevant information such as assistance needs or location on the train. To mitigate the risk of failed communication, operators are required to comply with the handover protocol when assistance at the destination station will be provided by station staff, as set out under section A1.2e of the ATP Guidance. The handover

protocol as described in the ATP Guidance is referred to as the 'telephone handover' in this letter.

The ATP Guidance also allows an operator and ORR to agree an alternative process provided it has the same functionality and effectiveness as the telephone handover. You made a request for ORR to consider and approve an alternative process for Northern to use for assistance between four stations.

The Passenger Assist system and electronic handover functionality

The Passenger Assist (PA) system facilitates both booked and turn-up-and-go (TUAG) assistance by recording individual passengers' assistance requirements and providing staff with the information they need to deliver against these. Staff can access the system using either the staff web interface or staff mobile app.

The electronic handover functionality has recently been added to the PA system and is available to all operators. It works as follows:

- Departure station staff enter the required information into the system, which will notify destination station staff.
- Destination station staff can then either accept the handover or call the departure station to share relevant information about the destination station if needed.
- If destination staff fail to acknowledge the handover then the departure station will be required to revert to the telephone handover.

Northern proposal

Your proposal, and the reasoning behind it, is set out in your [letter](#) of 24 April 2025, and is summarised below.

You consider that the electronic handover will have a positive impact on customer experience, and the robustness and accuracy of information passed between stations. You have confirmed that it will continue to meet all handover protocol requirements.

You have proposed trialling it as the primary method of passing information between Blackpool North, Harrogate, Leeds and Manchester Victoria. The trial would include all assists on journeys between these stations, regardless of train operating company. You have chosen these stations as they were early adopters of the PA system where staff have since demonstrated extensive and consistent use of this via either the staff web interface or staff mobile app. Your data shows that each station has actioned at least 98% of assistance requests in the PA system (periods 1 to 11

of 2024 to 2025). You have confirmed that you will provide dedicated training briefings to staff at the in-scope stations if this proposal is approved.

For assistance that is not for travel between the four trial stations the telephone handover will continue to be used, and electronic handover functionality not enabled. This therefore includes journeys starting at one of these stations but destined for a station not included in the trial.

You have given early indication of a potential second phase for the trial, which could include other stations within Northern's top ten stations for assistance delivery and/or a test of how functionality may work between operators.

ORR decision

We approve Northern's proposal to trial use of the electronic handover for booked and TUAG assists on all services between Blackpool North, Harrogate, Leeds and Manchester Victoria, for a trial period of four months. For journeys involving any other station Northern should continue to use a telephone call, as required by the handover protocol.

We have reached this decision by assessing the evidence you have provided in your proposal letter and through additional engagement. You consider the electronic handover to have the same functionality and effectiveness as the existing telephone handover, as is required by our ATP Guidance.

The data you have provided demonstrates that the PA system is well-used at the trial stations, which is essential for the electronic handover.

You have engaged with a range of relevant stakeholders. This includes with Avanti West Coast, who have undertaken a similar trial in recent months, and we note that their experience has informed aspects of your proposal. You have also discussed your proposal with London North Eastern Railway and TransPennine Express, both of whom run services between the trial stations. We also note that you have consulted with the Northern Accessibility User Group (NAUG).

You have considered potential risks with the trial and have suitable mitigations in place for all identified risks, and have confirmed that you are able to return to using the telephone handover if the trial is leading to adverse outcomes for passengers.

You have a clear evaluation framework for the trial, and will assess the following data and information:

- Assistance failures during the trial and the root cause of these;
- Staff feedback on use of the electronic handover functionality;
- The number of times electronic handover is initiated or attempted for in-scope journeys; and
- Number of complaints received where handover is found to be a factor.

This approval is for a trial period from 2 June to 30 September 2025. You will provide us with interim monthly updates before submitting a full update by 31 August 2025 to confirm how implementation has progressed and to understand its effectiveness. This update should include reporting relevant to your evaluation framework and confirmation of any proposal for a second phase of the trial. We will consider the evidence provided and then reach a decision with respect to this.

Rail Delivery Group is continuing to work with operators to deliver further improvements to the PA system. Northern should continue to play a full role in this work, sharing its experience from use of the electronic handover during the trial period, and incorporating any changes into its own working practices as appropriate.

Next steps

As outlined above, please provide us with monthly updates, and a full update on implementation by 31 August 2025. In the meantime, we will publish this decision letter, along with your proposal letter, on our website.

Yours sincerely,

Jacqui Russell

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