

Stephanie Tobyn
Director of Strategy, Policy and Reform



Tricia Williams
Managing Director
Northern Trains
By email only

2 July 2025

Dear Tricia,

Enabling disabled passengers to travel with confidence by delivering assistance reliably

On 19 September 2024 I [wrote to you requesting an improvement plan](#) to address our concerns with the reliability of Northern's passenger assistance. Our concerns originated from correspondence with Northern that did not assure us that it understood the causes of the failings identified through our passenger research. It became clear that Northern lacked plans to secure improvements and had made insufficient progress in delivering previously planned actions.

You carried out a detailed assessment of the gaps in the passenger assistance service and on 4 November 2024 provided a plan consisting of 21 actions aimed at securing improvements. I [wrote to you on 5 December 2024 to accept the plan](#) and confirmed ORR would hold Northern accountable for its delivery.

It is now seven months since implementation of the plan commenced. During that time Northern have engaged constructively with ORR via fortnightly progress updates and two in depth reviews at the end of January and April respectively. ORR found the invitation to Northern's Accessibility User Group (NAUG) particularly insightful.

The actions in Northern's plan are noted as either high or medium priority based on the potential to secure the greatest impacts for passengers. It is encouraging to note that to date, progress against all high and medium priority actions has been good.

Actions that have been completed include:

- I. The introduction of a dedicated remote Assisted Travel Support team to help passengers who require assistance, including during their journey, using WhatsApp;
- II. Extensive progress with the rollout of the Passenger Assist staff app to conductors and station staff across Northern's network;
- III. Additional staff training on communications between boarding and alighting stations, including a trial of an electronic handover using the Passenger Assist staff app that we [approved on 13 May 2025](#);
- IV. A trial of a new process that enables passengers at unstaffed stations who have not pre-booked assistance to alert conductors to their presence using QR code technology;
- V. Delivery of updated refresher disability awareness training for conductors;
- VI. Introduction of new assistance meeting points at 40 stations;
- VII. An awareness campaign for customers and additional briefing for staff on the existing mobility scooter policy; and
- VIII. New operational policies and procedures for staff who deliver assistance that underpin all the other actions.

There are some high impact actions that are currently behind schedule for delivery. These include:

- Implementing the outcomes of the review of staffing models for assistance at the ten stations that currently provide the highest volumes of assists; Leeds, Blackpool North, Manchester Victoria, Manchester Oxford Road, Bolton, Harrogate, Bradford Interchange, Halifax, Skipton and Barnsley.
- New processes to ensure that all reports of failed assistance are recorded, investigated and the root cause identified.

I am satisfied that despite not being completed by the delivery dates set out in the original plan, sufficient progress has been made with both actions. Delays in recruiting to key roles have been adequately mitigated to keep delivery largely on track and both are now nearing completion. Both actions have the potential to secure tangible improvements and as such Northern should prioritise their completion.

All other remaining actions are continuing well against the original delivery timescales and are expected to be completed by the end of September 2025. These include the introduction of new procedural principles for staff, an assistance model

for smaller stations and a process to make reporting instances of failed assistance easier for passengers.

I welcome Northern's focus and commitment to delivering the improvement plan. Engagement with ORR has been constructive throughout.

Next steps

Given there are still several actions being progressed, the fortnightly progress updates to ORR will continue until the key actions are implemented.

Now that many of the key actions are in place, Northern's focus needs to be on monitoring the impact of the steps taken, identifying where further improvements may need to be made as part of an ongoing cycle of continuous improvement, and demonstrating improved outcomes for passengers.

We will monitor a range of data sources going forward including our own passenger assist survey, which is an industry wide survey that asks passengers who have booked assistance about their experiences. We will also monitor quarterly reports that we have requested from Northern over the year ahead that will outline instances of failed assistance, what caused them and what has been done to prevent the issues recurring.

Once the plan has been delivered in full, failure to secure the expected improvements for passengers in a reasonable timeframe may result in formal action being taken in line with our economic enforcement policy.

I am copying this letter to Gary Bogan, Director of the Rail North Partnership.

Yours sincerely

Stephanie Tobyn