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OFFICE OF RAIL AND ROAD

Network Rail and Industry Access Colleagues

4 November 2026

Dear Industry colleague

Audit of Sections 18(1)(c) and 22(3) of the Railways Act 1993: access contracts specified in a general approval given by the Office of Rail and Road (ORR)

1. I am writing regarding the annual audit the ORR conducts on the use of access contracts General Approvals. For the period 1 April 2025 to 31 March 2026, we were notified of **452** uses of the 10 General Approvals available to industry.

2. This confirms that industry continues to conduct a lot of business and contract management activity through use of the ORR General Approval process and is evidence of the significant value it adds in reducing administrative burden. Twenty-four of these approvals automatically granted by ORR ensured that over a thousand passenger and freight services could run on an interim basis while the operators and Network Rail worked on a long-term decision.

3. The wider economy also enjoyed the benefits of the ORR suite of General Approvals through their use in ensuring safe, well managed connections between various facilities to the mainline network and Associated British Ports were able to extend contractual arrangements supporting their business. The use of the General Approval for stations was essential to minimising the administrative, and therefore cost, burden on the operators nationalised in the period, ensuring existing station access agreements were captured as part of the statutory transfer scheme.

4. Overall, the quantity and quality of the submissions was broadly similar to previous years. In some cases we spotted errors requiring ORR to intervene

to ensure the amendment was valid and did not have unintended consequences. Importantly, no intentional misuse was identified.

Passenger

5. Network Rail notified ORR of 46 uses of Passenger General Approvals during the audit period, 11 were considered as not “right first time” and these issues were resolved quickly and satisfactorily by the ORR Case Officer by working with the party/parties involved. Additionally, Core Valley Lines notified ORR of 1 use of the Passenger General Approval during this period.

General Approval Type	Received	Comments
Passenger Access (Short Term Timetable and Miscellaneous Changes) General Approval 2023	46	Around 35% of these related to berthing offsets. **A further 30% put in place short-term rights pending a longer-term supplemental agreement**. The rest related to amendments to corrections, train data, service adjustments (new/changed services), equipment and rolling stock updates.
Passenger Access (Infrastructure Managers Other Than Network Rail) Short Term and Miscellaneous Changes) General Approval 2023	1	This was used by Transport for Wales on the Core Valley Lines to amend the class of railway vehicles permitted to be used on the infrastructure.
Passenger Access (Model Charter Track Access Contract) General Approval 2024	7	These General Approvals were submitted under S18 to put in place new Charter contracts for seven operators.

6. The 30% of General Approvals used to put in place short term rights were public sector operators. Some operators submit General Approvals because they have not planned their required capacity sufficiently in advance, others because they have not been able to reach a long-term agreement with Network Rail in advance of the timetable change date. Where operators have relied on the ORR General Approval process they will need to consider the

implications of a similar approach under the future Great British Railway (GBR) regime.

Freight

7. The freight team was notified of 37 uses of the freight General Approvals during the audit period of which only 4 were considered as not 'right first time'. We received one misuse, although it was unintentional, which was swiftly returned to Network Rail to correct and prepare for specific approval.

8. The 4 cases that were not 'right first time' were for contracts where neither party was Network Rail. This is an example of how ORR's proportionate review of the General Approvals it receives provides a degree of assurance to the wider industry where expertise in regulated contracts may not be as strong.

General Approval Type	Received	Comments
Freight Track Access Contracts 2024	10	All but one of these was rolling over contingent rights for 1 timetable period.
Facility Access 2018	15	9 of which were from Associated British Ports extending existing contracts. The remaining 6 were a mix of operators with 4 of the 6 cases not right first time.
Connection Contract 2014	12	Various locations, no specific issues.

Stations and Depots

9. The stations and depots team received 559 General Approval cases during the audit period. The team supported government's plans to nationalise train operators by providing assurance to industry and DfT Operator Ltd (DfTO) through the review and issuance of acknowledgements for 53 amendments to existing agreements, ahead of their inclusion in Secretary of State–sponsored transfer scheme.

General Approval	Type	Received	Comments
General Approval for stations (2017)	New Station Access Agreements	60	35 were right first time. Common errors included incorrect references to TAC, and amendments to the template which disapplied the General Approval.
General Approval for stations (2017)	Amendment to Station Access Agreements*	276	200 of these were right first time. The majority of those which were not right first time were in relation to minor drafting issues. Most submissions related to amendments to the relevant station specific annexes to reflect changes at the station. E.g. to record updates to assets or lease plans. 43 amendments were directly linked to amendments to ensure that existing Access Agreements were captured as part of a statutory transfer Scheme where one operator was transferring to Public

			Ownership. (SWR, GATL, WMT, C2C)
General Approval for depots (2017)	New Depot Access Agreements	0	No new Depot Access Agreements were submitted under the General Approval for this period.
General Approval for depots (2017)	Amendment to Depot Access Agreements*	25	17 submissions were right first time. 10 amendments were directly linked to amendments to ensure that existing Access Agreements were captured as part of a statutory transfer Scheme where one operator was transferring to Public Ownership. (SWR, GATL, WMT, C2C)

10. Overall, we are satisfied that the suite of ORR General Approvals continue to provide efficiencies to industry and are used effectively and compliantly.

11. This letter to industry will be published on the ORR website as part of our commitment to transparency.

Yours sincerely

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Margret Haswell