# BREAKING BLUE

**Bringing clarity,
delivering breakthroughs**

**Office of Rail and Road**
**Passenger Assistance – Deep-dive qualitative research**
**(Full report covering passenger and staff findings)**
December 2017
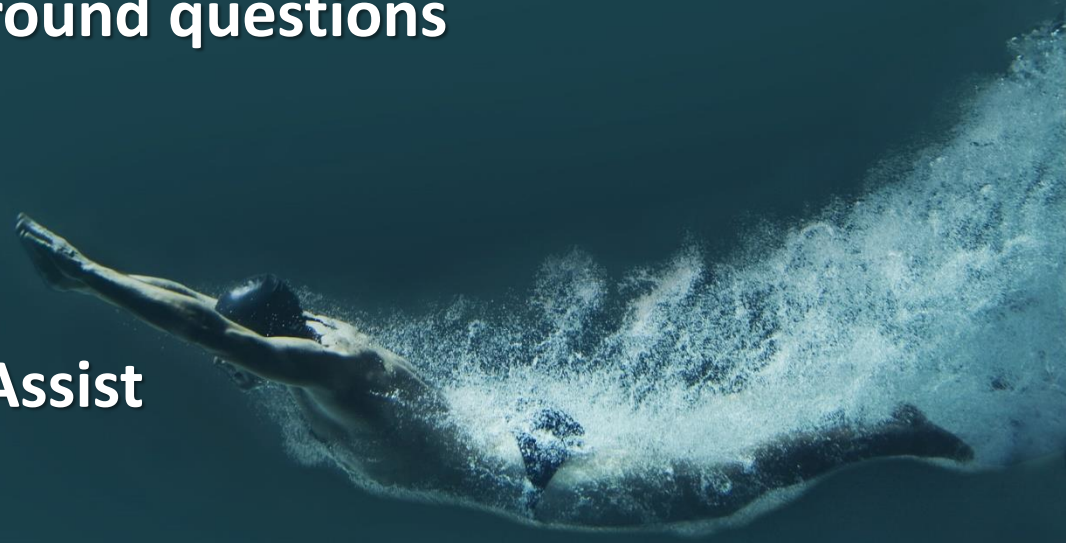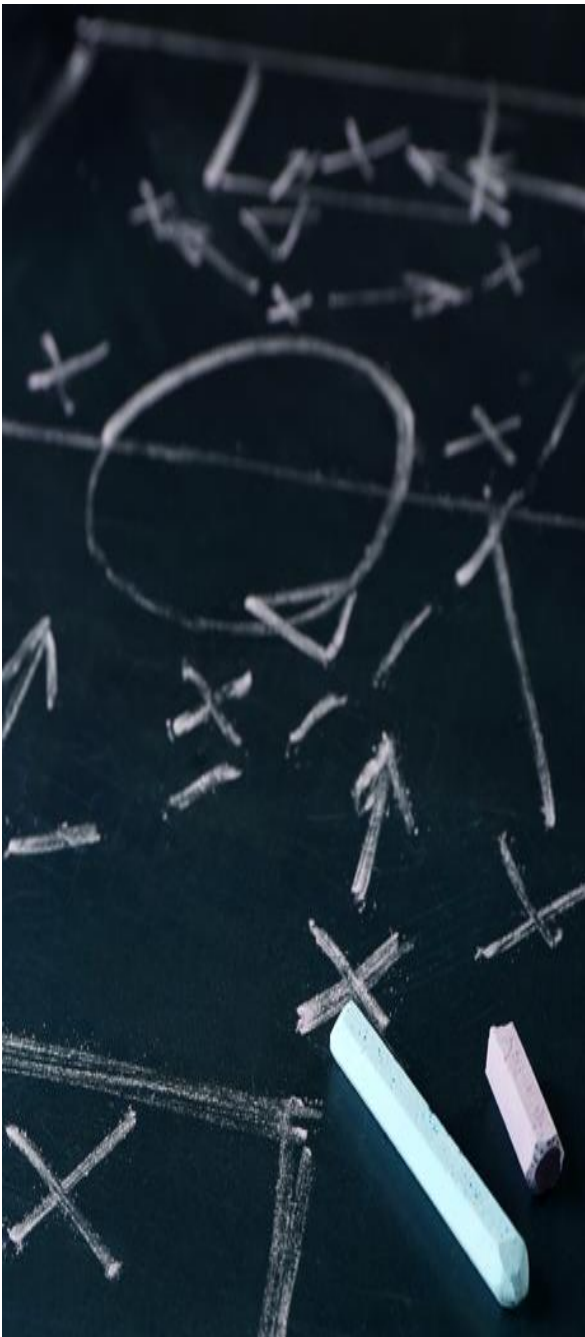
# Background

We recently conducted quantitative research to assess passengers' experiences of Passenger Assist to help the Office of Rail and Road (ORR) better understand how well the service was meeting user needs and expectations. This included the generation of performance metrics for 14 individual train operators (TOCs) and Network Rail (NR) (via assistance attributed to relevant SFO) to provide insight into how passenger experiences varied depending on which company provided the assistance. A full description of the wider research context and findings from the quantitative phase of the research can be found in the main report published HERE on the ORR website.

The main finding from the quantitative phase of the research was that satisfaction with Passenger Assist is strongly correlated with whether the assist was actually delivered on the most recent journey and a combination of staff helpfulness at the station and station facilities.

Certain TOCs are particularly successful at providing a good level of service – with high scores on the three key metrics – implying there is best practice which can be transferred. However, lessons can also be learned from those passengers who have experienced a less than satisfactory experience.

ORR commissioned a programme of qualitative research to build on the quantitative research and provide a complete understanding of Passenger Assist in terms of passenger experience and practicalities and considerations in delivering the service. The qualitative research included in-depth interviews with passengers, staff and industry leaders.
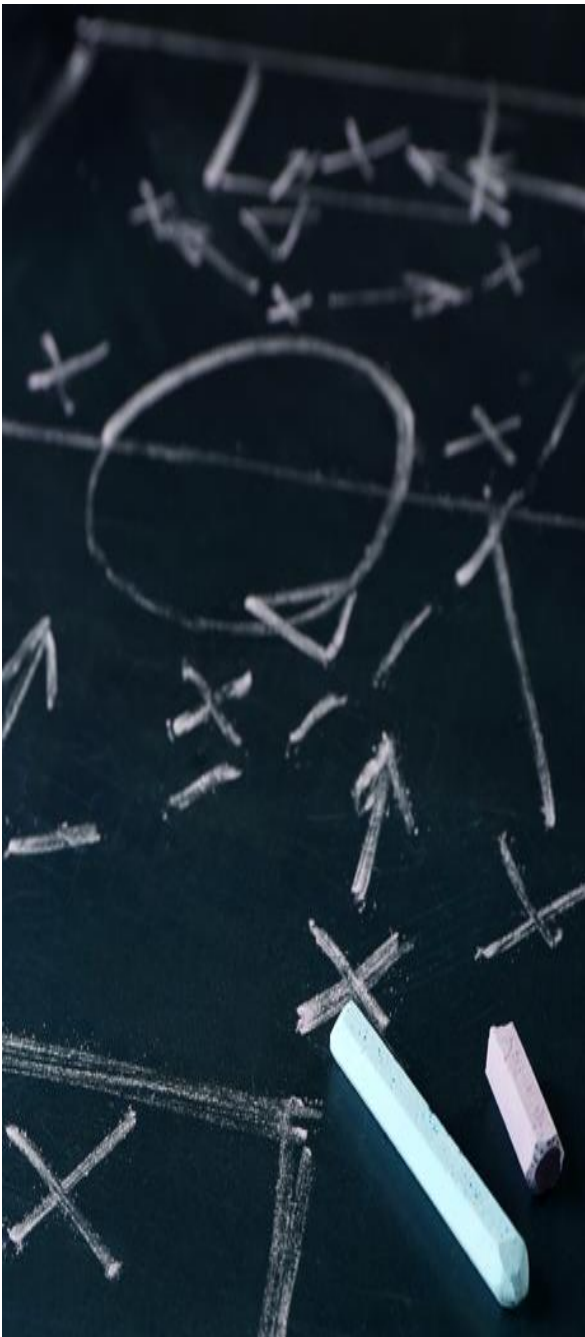
# Objectives

The main objective of the qualitative research was to better understand the main drivers of satisfaction and dissatisfaction for users of Passenger Assist. This was to be supplemented with the views of rail staff who provide assistance and key industry leaders tasked with overseeing and implementing assisted travel to understand the challenges associated with providing the service.

The insight was to be used to identify any practical measures that could improve the quality of assistance going forward.

The resultant key findings and recommendations are intended to inform ORR and the wider industry's thinking about the options for further developing assisted travel policy in the interests of assistance users.

## Specific objectives for qualitative phase

- Learn from passengers what makes a particularly good or bad experience and the reasons behind this

- Determine how passengers would like to see the service improve

- Understand the key challenges rail staff face in delivering a good service

Background and objectives

**Methodology**

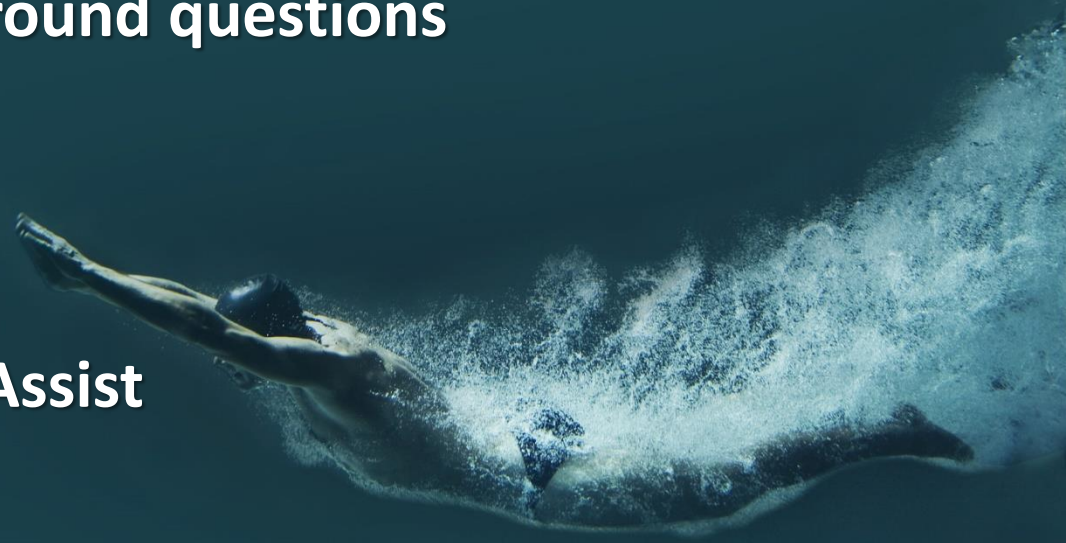Key findings and recommendations

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# Methodology: Passengers

- Participants were recruited from recent Passenger Assist booking records

- All participants had previously taken part in the quantitative research we conducted

- To be sensitive to the various needs of Passenger Assist users, we offered participants the option of a face-to-face or telephone interview

- In theory the face-to-face interviews provided the opportunity for a slightly longer questionnaire (45 mins vs. 30 mins). In practice telephone interview participants were willing to discuss the entire longer topic guide

- To ensure a detailed understanding of the passenger experience, we sought to achieve a mix of respondents according to disability type / condition, age, journey length and whether the passenger was travelling with a companion.

- We also spoke to people who consider themselves either very satisfied or dissatisfied/very dissatisfied with their overall experience of Passenger Assist.

# Methodology: Passengers who we spoke with

**20 depth interviews**

- 4 participants opted for face-to-face interviews

- 16 participants opted for telephone interviews

| 20 x Interviews | Disability type | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **Vision** | **Hearing** | **Physical** | **Mental health, social & behavioural** | **Other long term** |
| AGE | 1 x Up to 35<br>1 x 35 – 49<br>1 x 50 – 64<br>1 x 75+ | 1 x 35 – 49<br>1 x 50 – 64<br>1 x 75+ | 1 x Up to 35<br>1 x 35 – 49<br>1 x 50 – 64<br>1 x 65+<br>1 x 75+ | 1 x Up to 35<br>1 x 35 – 49<br>2 x 65+ | 1 x Up to 35<br>1 x 35 – 49<br>1 x 50 – 64<br>1 x 65+ |
| Journey length | Even split of **less than** 2hrs and **more than** 2hrs | | | | |
| With travel companion | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| Experience type | Even split of 👍 vs 👎 experience | | | | |

# Methodology: Rail staff

In addition to passengers, we spoke to **19** rail staff and industry leaders who can provide insight into how Passenger Assist works, challenges associated with providing assistance and ideas as to how these can be overcome and the service improved.

## Station and on-train staff x15

The views of station and on-train staff are particularly important as they are the individuals who provide assistance to passengers and see first hand the challenges involved with this on a day-to-day basis. For this reason we spoke with both station managers, front-line station staff and their on-train colleagues.

## Industry leaders from the train operating companies x4

The views of decision-makers within the rail industry can provide valuable insight into how they would like to see Passenger Assist develop, challenges/areas for improvement, and advise on some of the wider commercial or strategic considerations related to assistance delivery that frontline staff may be less informed about.

| Qualitative sample size for rail staff interviews | | |
|---|---|---|
| | TOCs | Network Rail |
| Station managers | 2 x small station, 2 x medium station | 2 * NR fully managed large station |
| Front-line staff | 1 x small station, 2 x medium station, 4 * on-train | 2 * NR fully managed large station |
| Industry leaders | 3 | 1 |

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# Passenger depth interviews - key findings

- Passenger Assist is a valued service without which many passengers would not be able to make their journeys, meaning it plays a key role in making rail travel accessible

- When the service runs smoothly and assistance is provided as planned, passengers are overwhelmingly positive about the experience

- Rail staff are a key asset to the service, with many passengers describing instances where assistance staff have gone above and beyond in meeting their expectations

- However, this experience is not universal, with passengers also describing instances of feeling hurried or dehumanised by some staff. Some passengers felt that some staff don't relate to their needs or concerns

- The main failure of the service is reliability – almost everyone reports an occasion when staff haven't turned up to assist them despite their assistance being booked in advance. This impacts on their trust and confidence in the service

  - Whilst the quantitative research showed low failure rates for individual assists, the number of assists per journey and the fact that many passengers use the service repeatedly means many users will probably have experienced a failure at some point.

# Staff depth interviews - key findings

- The majority of staff enjoy helping passengers who need assistance and view Passenger Assist as an important and valued service

- All staff we spoke to receive some assistance-related training, however this tends to focus on practical elements (e.g. how to use a ramp), with soft skills training less frequent

- One of the biggest challenges staff face is the volume of passengers using Passenger Assist, particularly at peak times and during busy seasons (e.g. Christmas)

- Staff spoke of struggling to deal with multiple and/or delayed bookings, and this is exacerbated by increasing numbers of "Turn up and go" (unbooked assistance) passengers. This increases pressure on an already stretched system

- For some staff, it can be difficult to balance other duties - in particular despatching trains - while helping passengers on/off trains, especially at unstaffed stations

- Communication between staff is key to successful delivery of Passenger Assist, particularly relating to train delays or assisting "turn up and go" passengers

- When things go wrong and passengers needs are not met, this tends to be a result of train delays, multiple passengers needing assistance at the same time and poor communication/coordination between staff.

# What next: our suggestions for improvements to Passenger Assist

## Resourcing:

- Both Passenger Assist users and rail staff noted that the reliability of assistance is especially put under strain during peak times of travel

- As demand for both booked and unbooked assistance increases over time this will need to be accompanied by a commensurate increase in staff, or a more efficient use of existing staffing resource, to meet that demand to ensure service quality does not diminish.  Related to that, some staff feel they could work more efficiently if there was greater availability of equipment/facilities (e.g. more ramps, more wheelchair spaces on trains, etc.) to make the task of assisting the passenger quicker and easier

- Strengthening these aspects of resourcing will improve the functioning of the Passenger Assist system itself, but also to avoid adverse impacts on train punctuality.

## Booking:

- Reduce the advance booking time down from the existing 24 hours and publicise "Turn up and go" more

- Introducing a central Passenger Assist help number which passengers can call when they have an issue, such as a member of staff failing to meet them at an agreed station, would provide some reassurance. This service would need to be promoted at the time of booking

- Staff to be given passenger contact details collected at time of booking so they can contact passengers directly when delays occur – we note that at least one train operator already does this

- Promoting the ability to book assistance online would free up call centre resource to support the proposed help number.

# What next: our suggestions for improvements to Passenger Assist

## Training:

- Ensure that all relevant staff training focuses on customer service as well as the mechanics of assisting passengers safely

  - How to deal with different disabilities, especially where the passenger's needs are not obvious – or when the passenger has a mix of impairments that present unique assistance needs

  - Customer service training should include how to deal with disabled passengers in a polite and sensitive manner, recognising the sometimes stressful nature of the journey and reinforcing that it is every member of staff's responsibility to provide assistance services

  - This could be supported by guidance from relevant charities on the best way to deal with different disabilities or by using disabled trainers

  - Training also needs to be refreshed and undertaken at regular periods to ensure staff are fully knowledgeable and competent in the latest insights and best practice in assistance provision

- Potentially, in bigger stations where assistance is provided in larger numbers, training member(s) of staff in basic sign language.

## Equipment:

- Roll-out the universal ramp and use this as an opportunity to review the placement of equipment on stations

- Consider provision of additional equipment at locations where there is heavy "peaking" in the volume of assists (such as London termini).

# What next: our suggestions for improvements to Passenger Assist

## Staffing model:

- Encourage a 'one team' approach at stations that have multiple TOCs (or TOC and NR staff) so that staff work together more flexibly to meet periods of high demand for assistance

- Consider reviewing the provision of free porterage services where the person needing assistance is not elderly or disabled and simply requires help with luggage

## Communication:

- Improve communication between staff with a centralised information source, such as an app, which enables everyone to be informed on a passenger's progress through their journey:

  - The app should be network-wide rather than TOC specific

  - App would ideally also be used by passengers to book travel assist/show availability of staff for "Turn up and go" passengers

  - A "passenger profile" section would enable passengers to store information about him/herself and provide staff with information about their needs

  - Use of an app in such a way would require relevant staff to have access to a mobile device

- Make Passenger Assist staff more identifiable through the wearing of high-vis jackets

- Provide better station signage to enable passengers (and their companions) to find meeting point

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# Passengers

## Passengers with a range of disabilities and assistance needs took part in the research

Discussion focused on:

- Frequency and reason for travel by train

- Difficulties/challenges passengers face when traveling by train

- Use of Passenger Assist, including how long passengers have been using the service, frequency of use and types of assistance needed

- Levels of satisfaction with Passenger Assist and reason for this

- Ease of the booking process

- Examples of best practice from stations/train companies

- Ideas as to how the service can be improved

# Staff

## Interviews took place with station managers, platform staff and on-board staff

Discussion focused on:

- Their role in relation to Passenger Assist

- Attitudes towards providing Passenger Assist

- Challenges faced in providing assistance

- Types of assistance provided and how this is organised

- Types of training provided in relation to Passenger Assist

- Frequency and adequacy of this training

- Feedback on the booking system, particularly what happens when trains are delayed/disrupted and the impact that has on assistance bookings

- Areas for improvement

# Industry leaders

Discussion focused on:

- Planning and delivery of Passenger Assist, at stations and on trains

- How performance is monitored, including how issues are identified

- Staff feedback on provision of Passenger Assist

- Types of training given to staff delivering Passenger Assist

- Structure of the industry, including communication between industry organisations, and how this impacts Passenger Assist

- Current booking system and their views on its effectiveness and efficiency

- Processes in place for when trains are delayed and its affect on booked assistance

- Suggestions as to how reliability of the service can be improved

- Best practice elsewhere that can be learnt from

- Future improvements including the use of technology

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# Positive aspects of the service (passengers) 👍

## When Passenger Assist runs smoothly, it enables passengers to go places and do things they would otherwise be unable to do

Positive experiences centre on three key aspects:

### 1. Friendly and helpful staff that treat passengers with respect 🤝

*"Friendly, happy. They talk to you as a person. They ask you how your day has been. Just treating me like a human. A lot of the time they will ask 'How was the journey here?' and sometimes if it has gone badly they will say 'I will follow that up for you'."* (Under 35, hearing, mobility, mental health and other long term condition)

*"I would say I am very satisfied with it because when you go into the office or the lounge they treat you as a person and not as just someone who needs a lift down. You can have a laugh and a joke with the people behind the counter. Once you start going regularly, they recognise you and you can have a laugh with them."* (35-49, mobility and mental health)

*"You never feel like you are an inconvenience. You never feel that they are thinking 'Oh, I've got to do that again'. Everybody is really lovely."* (35-49, mobility and mental health)

*"Everybody is very friendly. You can't tip people today on the railway so I usually take a packet of biscuits so they can have a cup of tea with them because they are so, so good."* (75+, hearing)

### 2. The service is reliable ☑

*"Now there is a proper call centre to call rather than it being done at the station, I can't remember at any time since then that we have not had the assistance there. If the train is running late then obviously sometimes they are doing another job but if the train is on time then they are always there."* (35-49, vision, mobility, mental health and other long term condition)

*"The staff were two steps ahead of me. They knew where I wanted to be and what carriage number to go on and I didn't have to look. They took care of me all the time which I am very grateful for."* (65+, mobility and mental health)

*"Certainly at Euston when we arrived late and had missed the train, they were all over it in terms of changing the booking, changing the Passenger Assist booking and letting Runcorn know, calming us down and saying "We will get you on the next train and it is no problem."* (65+, mobility)

# Positive aspects of the service (passengers) cont. 👍

3. The booking is straightforward and contains all the information needed

*"I think it took me a while to actually find the website, but having found it the actual booking process is very simple. The first time I used the service I did ring up to confirm a couple of things. Ringing up was very straightforward and people were helpful."* (65+, mobility)

*"The booking process is easy. The people are always very helpful."* (50-64, vision and mobility)

*"It is very easy. I ring up and I speak to them. They ask me all the different types of questions, like what time I depart, what time I arrive, whether I want the Passenger Assist at both ends."* (35-49, mobility and mental health)

When these aspects fall into place, the service works well and is invaluable to passengers. This is consistent across different types of disabilities and assistance needs

*"It is important that I am able to do anything independently. It is less stressful getting the train than it is trying to drive or having to arrange lifts. I am trying very hard to remain independent."* (35-49, mobility and mental health)

*"As far as I am concerned it is good that they are there because I couldn't travel without them. It is good to know that they will get you to the right platform at the right time because if you can't read an indicator board and they change platforms and they do, you would be absolutely up a gum tree."* (75+, vision and mobility)

*"A good aspect is that the service exists for which I am very grateful. It allows me to be independent. There must be huge numbers of people who need it because apart from people with mental health difficulties like mine, I imagine a lot of elderly people need to be met as well. It is a common need."* (65+, mental health)

# Negative aspects of the service (passengers) 👎

## At its worst, poor experiences can leave passengers feeling hurried and dehumanised

Negative aspects centre on the same three areas as the positive, but with polar opposite experiences:

### 1. Inconsiderate staff whose behaviour, at worst, is seen as demeaning

*"They won't acknowledge you. They will sort of talk about you on the radio. They won't talk about you like 'I have a customer here'. A lot of the time they will radio saying 'I have got a chair here' like short for wheelchair. I am not a person. I am just an object to be loaded onto the train."* (Under 35, hearing, mobility, mental health and other long term condition)

*"I had been sitting waiting and waiting and waiting and then he had said 'Hurry up, we have got to go'. The one thing I can't do is hurry."* (75+, vision and mobility)

*"If I am travelling with a companion they will talk to the companion and not me, even though a lot of the time the companion is there to help in situations when nobody else can and not general day to day knowledge."* (Under 35, hearing, mobility, mental health and other long term condition)

### 2. Staff do not arrive on time, leaving passengers without assistance

*"I just stood on the platform. It was really very frightening but somebody [member of the public] came out of the crowd to hold my hand to get me down off the train and said 'Welcome to Edinburgh'. I thanked her profusely."* (75+, vision and mobility)

*"If staff don't show up I usually wait to see if anybody is on their way and if I can't see anybody then I try and find someone. There is usually somebody on the platform somewhere."* (50-64, vision and mobility)

*"Perhaps the staff need to be aware that if someone books assistance, assistance is what they need and they don't need to be ignored and left."* (50-64, vision, mobility and mental health)

# Negative aspects of the service (passengers) cont.

3. The booking process is not perceived as straightforward or convenient for some

*"If the booking could be somehow put online, that would make life a lot easier and would just give that little bit more independence."* (35-49, mobility and mental health)

*"I can be on hold longer [up to 120 minutes] and end up being charged more through my phone bill than is the cost of the ticket. Booking that way is a bit of a problem sometimes."* (Under 35, mobility and other long term condition)

*"I have had really bad experiences with [train company]. I have tried booking assistance through their phone line and the staff are very rude."* (Under 35, vision)

These issues can leave passengers feeling humiliated and insecure

*"Sometimes you will have a miracle journey where everything has gone reasonably okay, but a lot of the time it is degrading to a certain extent."* (Under 35, mobility and other long term condition)

*"I don't have confidence any more in booking the system. I am quite anxious."* (Mobility, 35-49)

*"The guard at no point made any effort to request people to move up so I could get in or anything like that, which made me feel very discriminated against. It felt like everybody who wasn't in a wheelchair was able to get on that train but the one person who had actually booked and who happened to be in a wheelchair was forbidden from getting on the train."* (Under 35, mobility)

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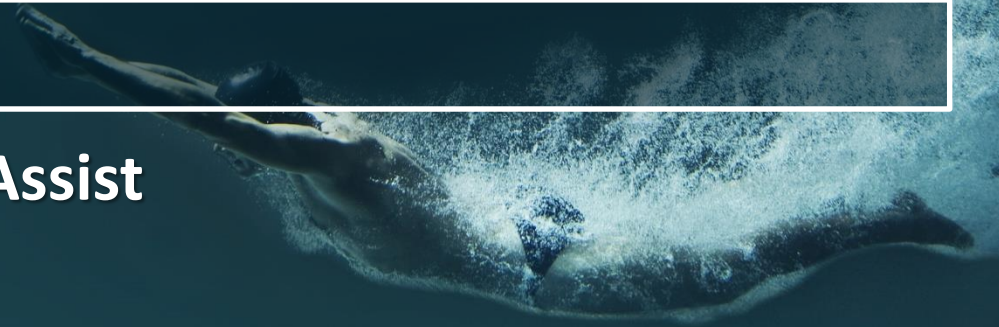Key findings and recommendations

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# Positive passenger case study

**Passenger background:** Jane is in her 30s and is adjusting to life after unexpectedly finding herself wheelchair bound. As well as her mobility issues, she's also suffering from anxiety as a result of the changes her disability has caused.

**Reason for train travel:** She uses the train every 2-3 months to visit her hairdresser in Stockport – she trusts nobody else to colour her hair!

**Passenger Assist:** It's important to Jane that she's able to retain this independence and she couldn't do this without Passenger Assist. She primarily needs assistance getting on and off the train. To avoid having to change trains, Jane gets a lift to a station that's further away, but on a direct line to Stockport.

**Staff:** The staff make a difficult situation easier for Jane. The staff are friendly and respectful and don't treat her differently because of her disability.

*"The staff are always really friendly and they don't talk to you like you must be stupid because your legs don't work which is a nice change because lots of people do. But they don't. They assess whether you are in a good mood and they will have a giggle with you."*

*"You never feel like you are an inconvenience. You never feel that they are thinking "Oh, I got to do that again". Everybody is really lovely. The last time I was being met at the other end, it was absolutely peeing down with rain and the guy that came and got me off the train, he offered to go and get me his own personal umbrella and let me take it with me so that I didn't get rained on. He waited with me. He wouldn't leave me until my lift had arrived. I said it was okay because it might be a little while. He said "I am not leaving you here on your own because if I leave you, you can't do anything. If something happens, you can't get anywhere ". So he stayed with me."*

# Positive passenger case study

**Passenger background:** Christine travels with her husband who has Parkinson's. They are both in their late 60s.

**Reason for train travel:** To visit family and friends. They travel every few months or so. Due to Parkinson's progression, travel for Christine and her husband will be impossible without Passenger Assist. The service allows them to lead as normal a life as possible.

**Passenger Assist:** Staff are always helpful, they go above and beyond. Once they were late but staff ensured they did all they could to ease the situation and help them with their journey. There has never been an issue in any of their journeys.

**Staff:** Warm, polite and would go above and beyond to help. The couple couldn't think about anything negative to say about staff.

*"In terms of going above and beyond, there was an occasion we went to Runcorn and we had booked the Travelodge which is just down the road from the station and the station guard wheeled us all the way down to the hotel. Rather than letting us make our own way down there, he made sure we were in the hotel. It is literally five minutes down the road but he made the effort."*

*"Usually if we get a female pushing she will flirt! But in a nice way. Everyone is always very chatty and friendly and trying to do the best. At Runcorn, coming back last time, we were travelling with Virgin and the station office was saying "I shouldn't really but I am going to let you go in the first class lounge" and we had to say "Well, actually we booked first class anyway" but she was prepared to let us go in there, even if we weren't on first class tickets. We had people checking and standing with us on the platform waiting for the train and getting us on. It was very good."*

*"It is a very good service and they need to keep it up. Maybe possibly advertising it a bit more widely."*

# Positive passenger case study

**Passenger background:** Michael's wife is wheelchair bound, partially sighted and deaf. He accompanies her when they travel by train. They always book Passenger Assist.

**Reason for train travel:** Michael travels for business trips and he takes his wife with him. He doesn't drive, so train travel is the only possible mode of travel. Buses are not a good idea, because they don't slow down enough for the journey to be safe and comfortable for his wife.

**Passenger Assist:** They are both satisfied with Passenger Assist. They need help with getting on the train and off the train with the ramp, assistance with luggage and making sure they are on the right platform. Journeys go smoothly, without any problems.

**Staff:** Staff are always nice and polite. Very rarely there is someone who might be slightly less careful and polite, but overall Michael describes the service as excellent.

*"What stands out about the service is the friendliness. It is not just a case of "Give us your suitcase". They are polite and courteous and treat you with respect rather than just a sack of potatoes so to speak.*

*"Now there is a proper call centre to call rather than it being done at the station, I can't remember at any time since then that we have not had the assistance there. If the train is running late then obviously sometimes they are doing another job but if the train is on time then they are always there."*

*"The staff have always been nice and polite and courteous and if they don't know the information they get straight on the radio and find out."*

# Negative passenger case study

**Passenger background:** John lives in North Wales and is a student in his 20s. He's been wheelchair bound all his life.

**Reason for train travel:** He uses the train several times a week. He is reliant on the train to get to University and work, and he also uses it for longer trips – for both business and pleasure.

**Using Passenger Assist:** John's experiences have been poor. He's had times where assistance has not shown up to get him off the train and as a result he has missed his station. There have also been times when the ramp has not been secured properly and he has fallen out his chair getting on and off the train. As a result, he has lost confidence in the service, but continues to use it out of necessity.

**Staff:** While many staff are nice, there are others that are insensitive. If John is with a companion they speak to him/her rather than John, and there have also been times when they have mistaken the person next to him on the platform as his companion.

*"I don't trust the staff on how they deal with the ramps and my chair, but I now have stolen the secure straps from my wheelchair basketball chair and put them on my wheelchair because I am worried that I will fall between the train and the platform edge. That shows how much I don't trust Passenger Assist."*

Speaking about when nobody shows up to get him off the train: *"In a lot of cases I end up tweeting the train company itself because as a wheelchair user you can't go up and down the carriage to find the guard and obviously it is not an emergency or enough to press the help buttons since it is not a medical emergency or anything."*

# Negative passenger case study

**Passenger background:** Deborah is a housewife in her 40s. She has mobility issues of her own, takes care of her blind husband and autistic daughter.

**Reason for train travel:** She travels with her family to see the doctor and visit family and friends. They don't travel often, but when they do, they always book Passenger Assist.

**Using Passenger Assist:** She feels the service is extremely unreliable. During a train delay there was no one there to help her and her family even though she was told there would be. They were rushed to get off while her daughter was screaming due to the crowds. She was left to handle the situation alone while trying to calm her daughter and her anxious husband who couldn't tell what was going on due to being blind.

**Staff:** Staff are polite but communication between themselves is poor. There was no one there to meet Deborah's family nor was there any member of staff around to assist.

*"There is a part of every journey practically which will entail an issue, whether they don't meet us at the station when they say they are going to or they don't put us on the train or there is no help. It is pretty much every journey. Out of about 15 journeys we have made in the last year, I think maybe two of them were without incident completely."*

"We sat there until all the crowd left because you can imagine the surge of people now wanting to get on this train. We got off. There was no one on the station to meet us. I tried to manage obviously with our bags, with my husband, with my daughter on my own, looking for help, looking anywhere for anybody in an orange jacket that could give us a hand. The assistance assured me that they would pass the information on so the guard should have been aware. He has a printout of a sheet where all the people are with difficulties. Whether he was busy, I don't know but there was no one there."

# Negative passenger case study

**Passenger background:** Martyn (51) had a serious car accident. Because of this he is disabled with severe mobility issues, is partially deaf and has depression and dyslexia.

**Reason for train travel:** Visiting friends or hospitals. He is incapable of travelling without the service.

**Using Passenger Assist:** On this only occasion staff didn't do what he asked during his booking. There was no one there to meet and help him. Neither staff nor passengers helped him. He was in excruciating pain due to having to move by himself. He didn't manage to arrive at this destination and the friend he was meant to visit passed away shortly afterwards. He would never use Passenger Assist again because of the awful experience he had.

**Staff:** No one turned up, so he has no experience interacting with staff.

*"It damaged my confidence and it spoilt the rest of my day in going up to see my friend and we couldn't do it because I was literally in so much pain. I was being taken out to have a meal at a friend's party so I couldn't go because I had to spend the rest of that day and the next day dosed up on all my painkillers because I was in agony… Shortly after that party, the friend whose party it was, he passed away and I never got to see him. It is quite distressing."*

*"What I need is not so much compensation for what has happened, but I need some reassurance that should I continue to use your service, that things are going to be changed and that you are going to follow the rules and practices and the guidance that are put there for this exact reason."*

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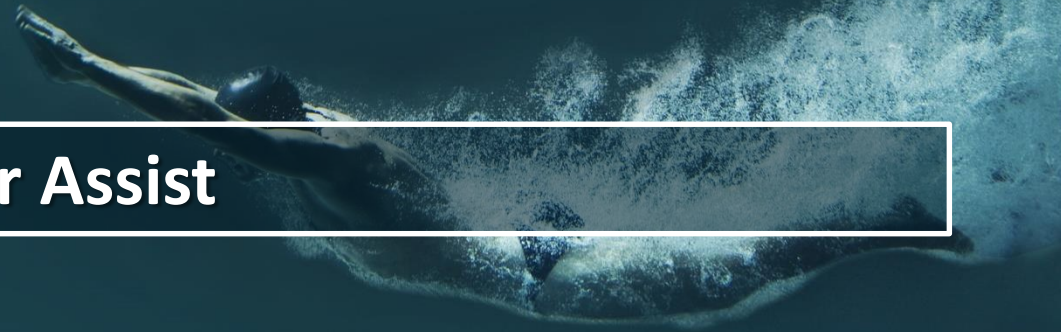Key findings and recommendations

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# Value of the Passenger Assist service

## Most staff spoke positively and passionately about the value of the service

- Echoing comments from passengers, Passenger Assist is viewed as a vital service without which many members of the public would be unable to travel

- Staff commented on the need for train travel to be open to everyone – whatever their disability – and remarked on a growth in use of Passenger Assist in recent years

*"I think it is very important and it is something that is going to become more and more relevant. We are finding more and more people with issues wanting to travel."* (Station manager)

*"We are helping passengers to come on trains as opposed to them using cabs or the roads. If the trains run on time and there is more of them [Passenger Assist users] and if we can get them on and get them to where they want to go and get them there in a stress-free environment then okay."* (On-board staff)

*"You are helping people. I think you do get rewarded and people are so grateful. Most of them turn around and say 'I wouldn't be able to do this journey without you helping' so it is nice and if you have got time it is nice."* (Platform staff)

*"Everyone should be able to travel shouldn't they whether you are in a wheelchair or whatever the situation is? We get blind people that amaze me. Some people do amaze me when I am helping. So everyone is entitled to travel when they want. I know a lot of people do book but they shouldn't have to book if they want to pop out should they?"* (Platform staff)

*"I know for a lot of people that I talk to it is the only way that they could get about."* (Station manager)

# Attitude to providing Passenger Assist

## Most staff we spoke with displayed a genuine desire to provide this important service

- The majority expressed a level of enjoyment in helping passengers who needed assistance – adding to job satisfaction

- This was more prevalent where it represented a larger proportion of their job role; where it is something they have to do in addition to their main role there is less of a commitment to it

*"Sometimes there are certain roles that are purely providing the assistance...I think that is more fulfilling rather than just trying to fulfil it around everything else that you are doing is a bit more difficult."* (Station manager)

*"I do enjoy it, yes, definitely. We have our regular travellers that we have a rapport with so we get to know them quite well and talk to them. They are very nice people."* (Platform staff)

*"I think it [Passenger Assist] is extremely important. I think that everybody should be treated exactly the same."* (Station manager)

*"I think my role [in providing Passenger Assist] is excellent. I feel very positive. I have been doing this for 35 years. I love my job."* (On-board staff)

# Attitude to providing Passenger Assist continued

## However, there are some challenges with ensuring that the service is delivered

- Several station staff expressed frustration with a perceived lack of support from the staff from other companies whose reluctance to help during busy times conveys a "not my job" attitude

- For some staff it is a challenge balancing Passenger Assist with other responsibilities, such as despatching the train

*"We are at the heart of providing good customer service and delivering service and obviously it is a very challenging job. It is also very stressful. You need to know how to learn under pressure and you need to be able to multi-task as well. There is no repetitiveness in this job. There is no repetition whatsoever. There are all these different challenges every day. I just take each day as it comes."* (Platform staff)

*"That is what I am in this business for. Trains don't interest me one little bit but people and helping people is everything. That is what I do it for. It is not a train set. It is about people and to me that is the most important thing."* (Platform staff)

*"Some of our train operating companies absolutely wash their hands of it and say "We pay you to do that" where on their stations on the route they would assist passengers…You have got a visually impaired passenger and they will be standing at the barrier line while three or four members of the train operating company will be standing around chatting."* (Station manager)

*"Most people, if they can't use the railways, it is quite a detriment to their life and it affects them big time. We need to make it as accessible as possible which I think we are doing. There is quite a few things I am looking to improve and that we could do a bit more slicker like working with Passenger Assist."* (Station manager)

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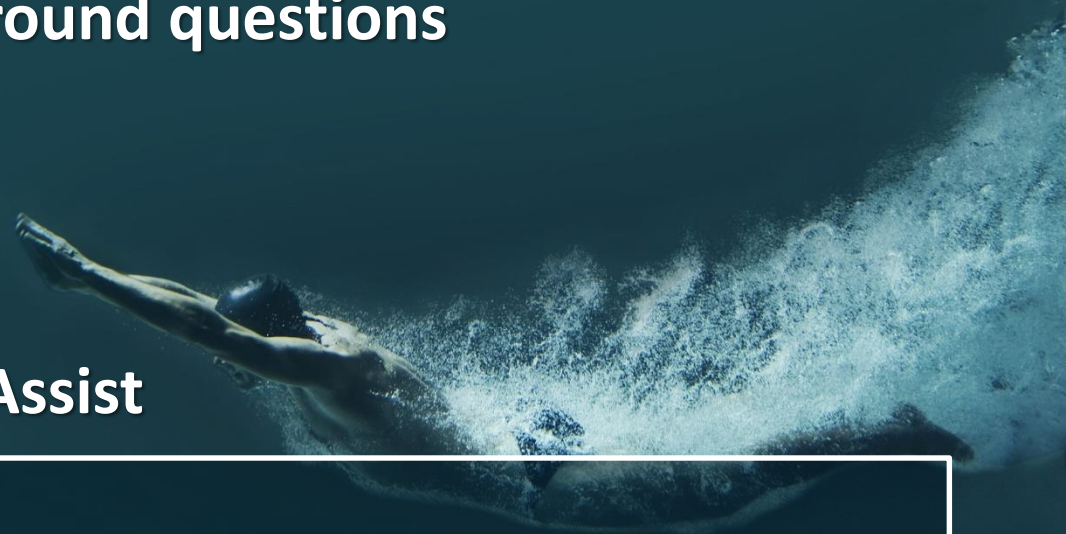
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# Nature of disabilities / needs supported

## Staff assist passengers with a variety of disabilities and needs

- The most common type of disability staff are required to help with is passengers using wheelchairs, followed by passengers with a visual impairment

- Staff also spoke of assisting elderly passengers who require support getting on and off trains – sometimes also with luggage

- Mental health issues and learning disabilities are encountered less frequently, however staff perceive there to have been an increase in passengers with mental health issues/learning disabilities in recent years

*"Wheelchair users, visually impaired customers, people who require a station wheelchair, the mobility impaired, elderly customers and even now you may be getting people with children with buggies. So there is a whole raft of assistance required really.*
(Station manager)

*"Wheelchair ramps, visually impaired blinds. We have a lot – and it didn't used to be – autism. Also people with behavioural problems, mental health issues, physical disabilities, elderly, people with anxiety, panic attacks, people who are dying."*
(Station manager)

*"Mobility and visually impaired is the majority of our assists."*
(Station manager)

*"It is usually visually impaired and just basic wheelchair users."*
(On-board staff)

*"It is the people that are disabled where it is not clearly visible...Some people are quite independent and they may object to you offering help. It is the way you balance that with that person."* (On-board staff)

# Assistance related staff training

## Training varies across the TOCs

- All the staff we spoke with receive ramp/wheelchair training: this covers how to use ramps and ensuring that passengers are assisted on and off trains safely e.g. go on facing forwards and taken off backwards

- Reported frequency of training varied: from once every two years to a single instance of training when they joined the company. There was some difference in the frequency of training reported by management and by other members of staff – perhaps suggesting a discrepancy in what the two groups view as training and what in fact is delivered

- Many staff emphasised the importance of on-the-job experience over formal training

- Some use disabled trainers

*"The only training I have got is when I have come into the job and that was 11 years ago."* (On-board staff)

*"You start off with the ramp, it is how to put a ramp on the platform and onto the train. Other than that, you don't need any more training. It is just common sense to help passengers on and off the train."* (On-board staff)

*"It is not so much refreshed every now and again because they don't get a chance to lose the competency because they won't go any more than a week without doing customer assistance. It is not something that they would forget so they wouldn't need refresher training."* (Station manager)

*"You could waste a whole day explaining how to use a ramp properly but actually if you go out there and just show somebody how to use it and let them have a couple of gos, then within an hour they are on their way."* (Platform staff)

*"Even though it is the same disability, people have very different requirements and I think a lot of it is just interaction. So we were trained a lot in that."* (Station manager)

# Staff training continued

- Several staff spoke very positively about training received from charities, while others mentioned training involving role play or using equipment that mimics different disabilities – however, this training was not standard across those interviewed

- A small number spoke of customer service or inclusivity training – not focusing on the disability, but on meeting the customer's needs

- Some also reported challenges in terms of managing customer expectations – especially when these go above-and-beyond what is required as part of Passenger Assist, such as carrying very heavy bags, providing medication or taking passengers to the toilet

*"Everybody has a level of training or awareness and then that goes right the way down to those front line teams, so right across the front line teams where the level of training they get is far more detailed. It is far more hands on. So they will put on goggles that will see what somebody with a visual impairment is seeing or not seeing."* (Industry leader)

*"The course is called Inclusive Service. It is not about disability awareness which is what our old course was. This is very much about understanding that everybody deserves a great level of service and no judgement should be made about whether someone looks disabled or not. However, one of the other parts of that week would also teach them along with this section that it is also important that you don't allow disabled people, because they are disabled, to behave inappropriately."* (Industry leader)

*"We do refresh that more or less every couple of years but we also change the training if there is a change to the law. So when we got the Disability Discrimination Act in there was a whole raft of training and then when we moved to the Accessibility Act there was a revisit and a talk about those kind of changes.."* (Industry leader)

# Staff training gaps – hidden disabilities

## Hidden disabilities and communicating with hearing impaired passengers are the areas staff would like more training in

- Awareness of disabilities, including signs to look for, is particularly important for hidden disabilities; so that passengers can be provided with the help they need

*"I try to push around that there are a lot of hidden disabilities. Not all disabilities are obvious. We had a guy the other day who shoulder barged me. He was visually impaired and he had no stick and he had no guide dog. I didn't realise at first. You don't know what people have got. Sometimes there might be mental issues as well so it is not always obvious and we can't refuse assistance. I never question disability as well or "What is wrong with you?"* (Station manager)

*"Every 12 weeks we have a training day. Sometimes it is about safety and sometimes customer service. [Charities] have talked about dementia and Alzheimer's and everything else. It is something I don't know much about and a lot of people have enjoyed it."* (Platform staff)

*"They talk about people in wheelchairs. We are well trained in that. It is the people that are disabled where it is not clearly visible."* (On-board staff)

*"You can look at someone and they don't look as though they have got a learning disability but that doesn't mean that they don't have one. So perhaps we could do a little bit more. "* (Station manager)

# Training gaps – hearing impaired passengers

## Hidden disabilities and communicating with hearing impaired passengers are the areas staff would like more training in

- Knowing a few words/phrases in sign language would be welcomed by most staff members

*"What I have found most difficult is dealing with people who are deaf because I don't know any sign language. You write stuff down."* (On-board staff)

*"We possibly could do with some more updated training regarding that because we have got no training on deaf and dumb people or anything like that. It is just your own skills that you use to help them regarding that."* (On-board staff)

*"We have also added in some additional stuff around deafness. There is a taster on lip reading so people can understand how hard it is to lip read and how easy it is to misinterpret things. We have got a taster on sign language, on BSL (British Sign Language) and we also have a recording of tinnitus that we use so that they can understand the challenges of people in different condition with deafness and understand what that means because one of the other things that happens during disruption is that it is on customer information screens and for a deaf person that is really important. So we are very keen that they start to understand how to communicate with deaf people. Someone who is deaf you might perceive as not really needing any assistance but as soon as you start relying on megaphones you have lost that person. If I have to see it a dozen times a week which I probably do and I get told but the deaf person will just go and look out if the platform has changed. The point is they don't know if that is a bomb alert or a fire alert or just a platform change. They don't know that. That is not fair."* (Industry leader)

# Reliability of assistance – information

## For a passenger to receive all the assistance they have booked, information about the booking needs to be accurate

- In general there seemed to be a feeling that more accurate information and a better flow of information, probably enabled by technological advancements, would improve the reliability of assistance

- All staff expressed frustrations with the current booking system. Many complained that in some instances it doesn't contain correct information or contains unnecessary information

- Some reported that despite the requirement to give 24 hours' notice, bookings were still accepted after that, but then they wouldn't be on the list of bookings which is typically printed and allocated to staff the night before

*"I think changes should be made to the whole booking process, especially from Journey Care. They should stop taking bookings on the same day. I think they should stick to the whole it is a pre-booked service and 24 hours in advance. Sometimes they take bookings within two hours prior without even letting us know. Supposedly they inform passengers that assistance is not guaranteed at the station. However, we hear something completely different from the passengers who is fully convinced that assistance would be guaranteed and they turned up 10 minutes before and it is just making our job a lot more difficult. Obviously it is not the passenger's fault but it is the person that makes the bookings' fault."* (Platform staff)

*"There are frustrations [that] the system that we use to book assistance is very old. It is very cumbersome. It doesn't provide you with the information, certainly as managers, that you need in order to look and report on things….For instance, if we know that there is disruption on the day we would like to be able to make proactive contact with those customers and say "We are aware that you are travelling on this service and to let you know that that journey is going to be delayed. Do you want me to book you a different route? Do you want to go on a different train?"* (Industry leader)

# Reliability of assistance – information continued

- All staff felt that the Passenger Assist booking system could be improved in a variety of ways

- Some staff felt that the booking system should be better integrated with assistance delivery in mind. E.g. encouraging those requiring assistance to book seats or disabled berths near exits instead of the middle of the carriage to make it easier for staff to both locate them and then assist them. Or to ensure that wheelchair users don't book assistance for a wheelchair berth on a train that doesn't exist.

- Core information that it was agreed was needed for successful 'handovers' include: passenger's name, assistance required, time arriving, coach and seat number, number of bags and a contact telephone number

- Some felt that the head code for the train would also be useful

*"You help someone on with a wheelchair but then it is right in the middle of the coach. That is a nightmare. When you are getting them on it is bad enough but then when you get them off it is almost impossible when you have only got two minutes to do it on the station when people are blowing whistles and wanting the train moving."*
(Industry leader)

*"A lot of issues stem from when the bookings were taken. On some trains they (the passenger who's requested assistance) have reservations but even on some high speed or cross country services or with reservations available we don't always get given the reservation. So you are having to lucky dip it sometimes because you can't get through to another station to ask where they put them or by the time they have travelled from London, by the time you ring them to ask them where they are going to be [on the train], the person who has put them on has gone home and just put a tick. So when you are doing the trains they will come up to you and say "We didn't know where you were."* (Platform staff)

# Reliability of assistance – communication

## There are some issues with communication across the journey

- Although all staff we spoke to reported that they will call through to the next station where a passenger requires assistance, some staff reported that they did not always receive this information

- In instances where station staff phone through after the train has left, there can be an issue if there are no staff available to assist passengers off the train

*"A year ago they were redoing the [Glasgow Queen Street] tunnel...A lot of the station staff put people onto these driver-operated trains assuming that there was another person checking tickets and there wasn't. People were getting taken further than their destination station."* (On-board staff)

*"For years we have always had a separate identity on the railway in groups. You have got your maintenance department. You have got your on-board team and you have got your station teams and your travel centres. For years they have all been separate. So the travel centre never spoke much to the station team and the station team and the on-board don't get on. What is needed is for all them to be connected. So you have a workforce all thinking about the customer.."* (Platform staff)

*"You sometimes do not know when they [Assist passengers] are getting on that train. To give you an example, at peak times there are six coaches and just two trains joined together. If that person gets on at the front or the back, we have got no way of knowing where they are getting off."* (On-board staff)

*"He [station staff] put them on the train and walked away which is what we do. We don't stand there. So he went off to do his next job. Then five minutes later the control phoned him back and said "That wheelchair passenger, there is no one at the other end".* (Platform staff)

# Reliability of assistance – resourcing and practicality

## There are many day-to-day issues with meeting passengers' needs, ranging from physical resources and the station set-up to dealing with a high number of passengers

- Reaching passengers on crowded peak trains and/or when passengers are seated in the middle of a carriage is often a challenge

- The number of bookings also provides a challenge, and staff discussed instances where they are effectively only providing a porterage service

*"Overcrowding trains is a problem to ourselves, having to reach…the passenger on overcrowded trains."* (On-board staff)

*"Again, [passengers] can be quite difficult to get to when the train is really full because you have got to move everybody out of the way to get it [the ramp] out of the cabinet and then put it down and load the person on and then put the thing away."* (On-board staff)

*"The only negative about the Passenger Assist is that sometimes people travel with too much luggage. They get booked on with suitcases that are over 30 kilograms sometimes and there might be four cases."* (Platform staff)

*"Another issue is bag carrying because to a certain extent it is a fine line between Passenger Assist and porterage. Some of the jobs we do are almost like old fashioned porterage jobs… It might be an old lady with a bag and that is fine but it is when there are three or four sprightly relatives with them at the time and they check in. I say to the guys, you have got to remember you are only seeing part of the journey so in order to get the assistance all the way through from A to Z, you might see them at A where it looks ridiculous that you have helped them out but when they are making changes at B, C and D, if they are not in the system from the front end they are not going to get helped."* (Industry leader)

# Reliability of assistance – resourcing and practicality continued

- Lack of ramps at some stations to get passengers onto trains or old ramps not fit for purpose

*"We don't have enough wheelchair ramps. There are times when you have got a couple of people requiring ramps on one platform and a different part of the train and you are running around trying to use the same ramp."* (Station manager)

*"The ramps are very old now and with some of them you have to push right on the train because if it is a motorised wheelchair, which are getting bigger and bigger...Some of them are like cars and they are too wide for the ramps. "* (Platform staff)

*"There has been a lot sold to us that by 2020 everything will be perfect, that all the doors on the trains will be standardised, the wheelchair ramps will be standardised. Because at the moment we have got five sets of ramps for all the different trains we have got, which is again nowhere near the amount of ramps for the different types of train."* (Station manager)

- Stations that are inaccessible for wheelchair users e.g. stairs only, lack of dropped kerb access and faulty lifts

*"Some stations haven't got ramps for wheelchair passengers. I will give you an example. If you are getting off at Burntisland from Edinburgh and going to Burntisland a disabled person can't get over the stairs there. What we need to do is we need to drop them off at Aberdour."* (On-board staff)

*"Unfortunately the lifts we have...are nearing the end of their working life and need to be renewed. They break down quite regularly. That is a huge problem. We have been pushing for that for a long time but at the moment we are not getting anywhere."* (Station manager)

# Technology and apps

## Technology is seen as something which can improve the provision of Passenger Assist. However, current use of apps is sporadic and varies between TOCs

- Some staff reported using a Passenger Assist app – this is for staff only and not available to passengers

- Access to the Passenger Assist app is sporadic

  o Fewer than half of all TOCs currently provide staff with smartphones with the Passenger Assist app enabled

  o The Passenger Assist app is also not compatible with smartphones that some TOCs provide to staff

- Some of those interviewed recalled using a Passenger Assist app on a work smartphone that has since disappeared

- There is also a more general use of apps by Assistance staff to track trains and monitor delays, but these are not directly related to Passenger Assist

*"We have some apps on our phones that we can use. One is called opentraintimes.com and basically that gives you a set up of different parts of the country. It is what the signalman sees basically."* (Platform staff)

*"We had a Passenger Assist app at one point but it disappeared. There was an issue with it. It wasn't for booking. It was to tell you what was coming. That would be quite useful. If we got a Passenger Assist app up and running then it might be that locally we can tailor it, rather than walking around with bits of papers in their hands because that is what they get."* (Industry leader)

# App development

## Apps were seen by staff as a key way Passenger Assist can be improved and help the flow of information

- ScotRail staff use a Passenger Assist app and spoke positively about the benefits. These include making interactions more personable as it contains information such as passenger names

- At present, print outs are still the way most rail staff are provided with information about Passenger Assist bookings

- As well as being cumbersome and time-consuming, this method is also not conducive to updating bookings, e.g. with train delays. It is also the main obstacle to reducing the current 24 hour notice period for bookings

- Overall it was clear there is a desire from staff for use of apps with the full functionality required to give them accurate, detailed, real-time information about assistance bookings.

*"The thing that I have got on my phone gives you the person's name which is a bit more personal. I can say 'Mr Smith, we will be waiting for you' and it gives you that in-road."* (On-board staff)

*"We are using this new Passenger Assist app and for now it is only for pre-booked services. I think they are talking that you will be able to input when you come on. That is what will happen."* (On-board staff)

*"At the moment the emails are being issued to the stations and the default is 3 o'clock in the morning. The ones that are using the app will get it on their phone but the vast majority of people, if they haven't got a phone they have to use pieces of paper. That is the big area that we could as an industry improve on. The app is a good step forward but it needs to go up a couple of levels so that it is easy for people to upgrade bookings as you go along."* (Industry leader)

# Challenges (staff, industry leaders)

The main challenges staff face fall under four main headings:

## 1. Volume of passengers requesting assistance and balancing this with other duties

*"It is quite difficult because we have the balancing act between delivering Passenger Assist and things like despatching trains or other duties."* (Station manager)

*"But it is really, really busy and your head feels like it is going to explode because you don't know where you are running to."* (Platform staff)

*"It might be just that there is a cluster of jobs all at once. Sometimes you get a train coming from Norwich and you might have three jobs on that train and your other colleague is doing another job so I try and work it okay."* (Platform staff)

*"The commitment level hasn't changed but the requirements are altering in that demand is growing so we are dealing with larger numbers of people than we used to."* (Industry leader)

## 2. Growing number of "Turn up and go" passengers (unbooked assistance) which adds to overall demand for assistance at busy times

*"Sometimes it can be challenging because you have got your list (booked assistance) and you can plan for the people on the list but you have the Turn up and go which you can't plan for. So you get a call from outlying stations and sometimes you could get four or five jobs within about 10 minutes."* (Platform staff)

*"The ones that are booked are fine. It is usually the unbooked jobs [that are difficult]. We get a lot of regulars but they are not booked."* (Platform staff)

*"We are quite lucky with say Birmingham where we run a lot of our trains into. They have got quite a big team of people there. Obviously if they can fit them in they add them to the list and if the list is full and they have got no one available to do it then it becomes our problem to try and help them on and off and then get them to where they are going to go to. Quite a lot of the lads give up their own time and their breaks to help people to go to the next place kind of thing."* (On-board staff)

# Challenges (staff, industry leaders) cont.

## 3. Poor communication/support between station and on-train staff

*"Sometimes when we have the visually impaired passengers join the train they are usually helped on by the platform staff. It obviously helps when they tell us exactly where they are and what seat they are sitting in and what number. If they don't it is hard to go up the train and sometimes spot exactly who they are. Unless they are carrying a cane or they have got a dog with them they just look the same as everybody else on there."* (On-board staff)

*"When we investigate [complaints] sometimes what we find is that they (Passenger Assist user) weren't in the coach that we thought they were going to be in or they weren't on the train that we thought they were going to be on. Sometimes that is because the business or the industry have moved people or facilitated a move but not told the next person that that is what we have done."* (Industry leader)

*"It is quite often not the fault of the person on the ground that was delivering it but a break in the chain somewhere so that that person hasn't had the right information or communication."* (Industry leader)

*"So I have always said 'When you [another station] phone us to tell us let us know where they are on the train'. That is all we want to know. If we have to walk down 12 coaches, fine."* (Platform staff)

## 4. Absence of support from colleagues at busy times

*"When it does get busy, sometimes we do struggle and we do rely on the other train operating companies to help us out. I think it depends who you work with on that side of things. Sometimes you do get help and sometimes you don't."* (Platform staff)

*"You might have platform staff or the information point or reception radioing you with 'We have got a wheelchair passenger waiting in reception' or you get to the information point. They might have a visually impaired person and when you go there, there are five people standing around the information point and not one person can walk a visually impaired person over to the platform. I find that embarrassing."* (Platform staff)

# Challenges (staff, industry leaders) cont.

- These challenges can result in problems with the service, most notably staff not being available for passengers

- It can also put a strain on staff

*"This isn't just about saying if they have a bad experience they will never travel with us again. It is not about them necessarily travelling us with again. It is they will never travel again. If you have knocked someone's confidence with a disability…"* (Industry leader)

*"If everything runs to time and perfectly well then it obviously works really, really well but it is once things start going wrong…. For example, if one train is late and the person who comes to assist should be at one place and then they have got to be at another and there is no way to be at two places at once time and that is when you start to get difficulties where people are standing around."* (On-board staff)

*"You want to offer an all singing and all dancing caring service but can you do that at all times in this crazy world? I am not sure. For instance our assist list here on a day now averages about 120 jobs. At Christmas it is 300 or 400 a day."* (Station manager)

*"Today we have got 22 booked assistances which is quite low so we should have absolutely no problem in managing all of those but then after Christmas it could go up to 300 and we struggle. Some people will get missed occasionally. We used to get emails or we get emails from the company to say that Mrs Jones wasn't met and can you please give us a reason why?"* (Station manager)

*"I would say 75% of the time it is fine and they are there but I can see the service is getting more deplorable and it is not happening. A couple of times I have phoned up and they haven't been there so you run about trying to get your own stuff and then trying to get that person off the train as well."* (On-board staff)

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# Passengers' suggestions for improvements to Passenger Assist

- A procedure that details what to do in the event that Passenger Assist staff don't show up. Related to this, an exchange of contact telephone numbers so passengers and staff can contact each other in the event of train delays or other issues

- Ensure all staff are given regular disability and inclusivity training so passengers are never disrespected unintentionally

- An online booking process that can be completed by passengers and which remembers their travel profile and needs for future bookings – not all participants even knew it was possible to book online

- Alerts during the booking process and/or details in the follow-up email confirmation that note whether trains will have disabled toilet access and information about the accessibility of relevant train stations and if stations are staffed/un-staffed

- Enough staff members to handle multiple passengers needing assistance

- Ability to book assistance less than 24hrs in advance

- Having staff who know sign language

- Improve the complaints procedure which was criticised for being protracted and complicated

# Passengers' suggestions for improvements to Passenger Assist

## Reliability and communication

"Actually be there to deliver the service you are being asked for." (50-64, mobility, hearing, mental health and other long term condition)

"Continuity of care from the time you get onto the train to the time you get off, making sure that where you get on the train and where you get off the train, that the staff are fully aware that they have somebody on board that needs extra help and the train guard will have a printout that they know where they are seated and what their difficulty is or what their needs were. If we had had an accident on that train I dread to think what situation we would be in but if there was that information then people would know." (34-49, vision and mobility)

"I think assistance needs to be looked at. They need to be able to get to the person who is disabled, and get to the platform in plenty of time to feel confident that they are going to get on the train." (65+, mobility and other long term condition)

"I don't know what happens if there is a hold up somewhere else and they can't get to that train in time, which obviously isn't their fault. It really is just being there when the train comes in. It is booked in advance so they know which carriage I will be in so it is really just making sure they are there when the train comes in." (50-64, vision and mobility)

"Simplification of communication. That is probably the main one. There are so many different train companies operating but there does not seem to be a reliable system that works for all of these train companies. I don't know what systems and what methods they use to communicate but it doesn't work. If it means using a phone to another station, that station could be busy and they don't get this message so they are not told what train I am coming off. It is all about communication. It doesn't work all the time and it creates problems." (Under 35, physical)

# Passengers' suggestions for improvements to Passenger Assist

## Improvements to the booking system

*"The booking system could be easier. It would be more helpful if we could book it online. I appreciate that everybody's needs are different so it is complicated but once you have done it once, it would be really useful if there was then an account set up with your needs in it and you could just log on and do it online. The most annoying thing about the whole process is the amount of time it takes sitting on hold waiting for somebody to answer the phone."* (35-49, mobility and mental health)

*"At the moment it is giving 24 hours' notice when you book your assistance so I think having a shorter time would be better. With some things you can't plan in advance so having a shorter time to be able to book assistance and actually having people turn up when I have booked the assistance beforehand would be useful. At the moment when I am travelling I make sure that I am standing next to the door so when I get to my destination I can jump off but if I didn't do that a lot of the time I would be ending up in different stations."* (Under 35, vision)

## Staff sensitivity

*"[Assistance staff] should be trained in disability training. I have run courses myself and they are fabulous. I also think that they should change the way in which they are taught. From the members of staff that I have spoken to, it is not very user centric. It is more getting the job done.... A lot of the issue is that there is no dialogue."* (Under 35, hearing, mobility, mental health and other long term condition)

*"The staff should treat disabled people with respect. Some of them did not show respect.... They forgot about us but they put us in first class so we still got on the train. It is not just one person. It should be others. People have to make sure that the disabled people are actually getting in their right places on the train. Ramps that come out of the train, if a member of staff doesn't come to put the ramp down the disabled person's family can still get the person on and off the train."* (35-49, physical and other long term condition)

*"One awkward thing is if we are picked up by the buggy, that is fine and the luggage can go on the buggy. But if they are wheeling him in a chair I have to carry the bag. Also a station map saying "Here is..." or even a taxi drop off point or a phone that you can ring and say "We are here" if the buggy isn't."* (65+, mobility)

# Passengers' suggestions for improvements to Passenger Assist

## Notification alerts

## Sign language

*"Also having people who can sign for those who are deaf. I know there are deaf/blind people but they can sign as well because there is a sign language where you touch their palm and you sign on their hand so they have got the word. It is little things like that. They are only little but they are big advances."* (50-64, mobility, hearing, mental health and other long term condition)

*"Any change in trains, everybody is notified on your system just by email as a courtesy. You can book Passenger Assist 24 hours beforehand so you might not be aware that there are strikes or if like me you book them six or eight weeks in advance you are not going to think about whether there is going to be a train strike are you? That would be really useful and not too much effort. It is not costly to do that. Staff should be easily identifiable and they should be prompt. They should be there. They need to be trained in how to approach people because I can imagine they get some real awful people that are not very nice because it is a mixed bag. Everyone is different aren't they? I think they do need that."* (50-64, hearing, mobility, mental health and other long term condition)

## More staff

*"I notice the person who was waiting for me, she wasn't only waiting for me. She was waiting for somebody else or putting somebody else on further down the train. So she was running from one end to the other. I thought that is bad. Not so much for the passenger but for the woman. She was doing the job for two people – one at one end of the train and one at the other."* (75+, hearing)

# Staff suggestions for improvements to Passenger Assist

- Direct phone numbers of passengers, so staff can contact them directly in the event of delays and problems

- Assistance staff to have more consistent and comprehensive details about passengers they are assisting e.g. nature of disability and train head code

- A centralised app that can be tailored to local needs and be updated should travel journeys change e.g. train delays

- App to also feature passenger profiles that contain info about passenger (including photos) to make it easier to identify passengers and their needs

- Charged porterage service alongside Passenger Assist for those who are not disabled or elderly – this is to stop abuse of the system

- Regular passenger feedback on Passenger Assist e.g. through "Mystery shopping" and/or 3Cs

- Posters advertising Passenger Assist and how to book the service

- Different coloured train doors indicating coaches with disabled areas

- Ramps locked on the wall at every station, not only larger stations

- More ramps, and better ramps that can cope with all wheelchair specs e.g. including large motorised wheelchairs

# The ideal Passenger Assist app

## The ideal app needs to be industry wide and should be available to both staff and passengers

- Shouldn't only be focussed on Passenger Assist but should be a sub-section of an app that includes all elements of train travel, including booking tickets, planning a journey, monitoring live trains etc.

- Should enable direct communication between assistance staff and passengers who have booked assistance– so that staff know where to meet passengers

- Should also include all information from the bookings system

- Could enable a reduction in the time before travel in which Passenger Assist needs to be booked

- Could track where passengers are and allow communication both across stations and with passengers – so passengers can see that the next station knows to expect them e.g. possibly using the phone's GPS

- Could enable staff to report when they have completed assistance and collect feedback from passengers

# Staff suggestions for improvements to Passenger Assist

## Passenger information/booking system

"[Passenger phone] numbers would be priceless if we could ring them….'where are you?', 'What train have you ended up on?' because that is when the system falls apart. We have disruption and we don't have trains moving for two or three hours out there and then the cork comes out of the bottle and we get all the trains running again but you haven't got a clue where anybody is. You could do with GPS tags on everybody! " (Industry leader)

"Maybe they should be briefed more on what the people that are coming and what type of disability they have. I am not quite sure what their system is because we don't have a system. We just get told by verbal but maybe written paperwork when they are travelling, that the disability person could actually show us which would help us then to look forward ahead for them." (On-board staff)

"For instance, if we know that there is disruption on the day we would like to be able to make proactive contact with those customers and say 'We are aware that you are travelling on this service and to let you know that that journey is going to be delayed. Do you want me to book you a different route? Do you want to go on a different train?'" (Industry leader)

"What we have started to do because it does get quite hectic, we have started putting down all the head codes. So we look it up online." (Platform staff)

# Staff suggestions for improvements to Passenger Assist

## Ramps at station

*"What does help us is when the ramps are already at the station locked on the wall so we use a key to unlock them and we can just load the person on and then put it back and attach it to the wall. Those tend to be at bigger stations. The smaller ones don't have them. If they were to all have them that would make our life a lot easier, if every station, every platform had its own ramp on it that we could use by just accessing it with our key."* (On-board staff)

## Signage

*"What would make it easier for people using it (assistance) would be more signage and if it was brighter colours. The disabled area is always on coach C. If the train came by and that door was a different colour or something like that."*
(On-board staff)

*"Posters on how [passengers] can get assistance for onward travel and phone numbers to call for assistance at manned stations."*
(On-board staff)

## Regular feedback loop

*"We should introduce a mystery shopper [from our own staff] so for one of us to ring up [the booking team] and we ask the questions and see what responses their team give us."* (Station Manager)

## Charged porterage service

*"I think we should introduce a porterage service [for luggage] alongside the Passenger Assist service so that people can still have assistance but they would have to pay for it. That would enable us to take on another resource in order to cope with the numbers and then we could still service the people that we should be servicing which are the elderly and the disabled."*
(Station Manager)

# Conclusions and recommendations

- Passenger Assist is a valued service for both passengers and staff

    - The majority of staff enjoy helping passengers and understand the importance of Passenger Assist in making rail travel accessible

    - Passengers also describe instances where assistance staff have gone above and beyond in meeting their expectations

- When the service runs smoothly and assistance is provided as planned, passengers are overwhelmingly positive about the experience

- However, almost all passengers have experienced an occasion when staff haven't turned up to assist them despite their assistance being booked in advance

- Increasing passenger numbers coupled with a desire for more "Turn up and go" mean there is a need for increased resources in terms of staff and equipment

- Many passengers have reduced confidence in the service and this needs to be rebuilt

    - Giving passengers central Passenger Assist help number they can call would provide some reassurance

- There are frustrations with what is seen as an outdated booking system and improving the structure of this along with decreasing the advance booking time from the existing 24 hours would be welcomed by passengers.

# Conclusions and recommendations

- Some passengers feel that staff don't relate to their needs or concerns. This could be improved through staff training. Training should cover:

    - How to deal with different disabilities, especially where the passenger's needs are not obvious

    - How to deal with disabled passengers in a polite and sensitive manner

- Training also needs to be refreshed and undertaken at regular periods to ensure staff are fully knowledgeable and competent in the latest insights and best practice in assistance provision

- Staff often have multiple responsibilities and balancing these with providing assistance to passengers can be challenging. Encouraging a 'one team' approach at stations that have multiple TOCs (or TOC and NR staff) would enable staff work together more flexibly to meet periods of high demand for assistance

- Develop a centralised app which enables direct communication between assistance staff and passengers who have booked. The app could include a passenger profile/ information from the booking system, track where passengers are and could decrease the time before travel in which Passenger Assist needs to be booked. The app could also be used to collect and react to feedback on Passenger Assist

# Stay in touch

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