



Podcast transcript:

The Rail and Road Pod – Episode 1: Accessible travel

Scope's Executive Director, James Taylor and the Office of Rail and Road's Deputy Director of Consumers, Stephanie Tobyn join the Rail and Road podcast for the very first episode. James and Stephanie discuss accessibility on the railways, the issues people face and the work being done to help people travel with confidence.

Kenny Walker

Hello, folks, my name is Kenny Walker, and you're listening to the Rail and Road podcast. On this episode, we're discussing accessible travel and looking at what is being done to help passengers that require assistance to travel, to be able to do so safely with confidence and ease, and what more needs to be done.

I'm joined in discussion today by James Taylor, executive director of Scope, the disability and equality charity, and Stephanie Tobyn, deputy director of consumers at ORR. Hi, Kenny (James and Stephanie).

Hi, both. OK, so before we kick things off, it's worth mentioning that in the year to March 2020, there were 1.2 million passenger assists on the railway in Great Britain. That's assistance ranging from ensuring station staff are aware of the help required, be at the deployment of a wheelchair ramp or guiding someone who's visually impaired to the right place on the right platform at the right time. That's 1.2 two million booked passenger assists, plus on top of that, you've got all those turn up and go passengers who don't work ahead, but also require help at the station.

Now, that's a lot of assistance and thankfully, most of the time it works well, but it isn't 100 percent feel safe. And obviously, COVID-19 has had a massive impact on numbers of people traveling as well, but they still are. And a recent survey by Scope shows that one in

five disabled employees has had requests for working from home or to be furloughed or redeployed during the pandemic rejected by their employers. That means one in five disabled staff need to choose between keeping their jobs or staying safe.

So let's bring in James. James, I know Scope campaign for better travel for disabled passengers. Just how important is it that train and station operators get the assistance, right?

James Taylor, Scope

Yeah, thanks Kenny. I think it is vitally important. Public transport and travelling by public transport can be at the best of times frustrating for everyone, I think, for disabled people in particular there are many more added frustrations and uncertainties that can turn what on the face of it should be a straightforward journey from one place to another, into a bit of a nightmare. Whether that's missing a stop, because assistance doesn't turn up, whether it's being ignored by fellow passengers and getting around can be really difficult.

So I think a lack of assistance and a lack of up to date information means that getting to work, getting out and about and crucially, I think disabled people feeling that they have independence can all be hard to achieve if assistance isn't there or isn't working.

Now, research Scope conducted with 1,000 disabled people last year found that one in three disabled passengers said that difficulties with public transport reduced their independence and two in three had experienced some form of issue with the transport network in the previous 12 months. So I think those two points really highlight how critical it is for train and station operators to be getting assistance for disabled passengers right. And I think it's important to do that for a number of reasons, both to meet legal duties under the Equality Act and regulations, but also to improve customer satisfaction and to get disabled customers coming back to use your service again.

I think something we, at Scope, and many others hear about is at times unreliable nature of assistance. It's a recurring theme. Of course, last year, a quarter of disabled people said last year they weren't satisfied with it. And a similar similar number said that pre-booked assistance failed to turn up. So I think it's really disappointing when assistance isn't right, because there's often a lot of effort and forward planning that goes into organising a journey by a disabled person.

But I think just to temper some of that, I think it's also really important to recognise some of the positive moves that have been made over the last well, certainly over the last 12 months in the industry to improve passenger assistance for disabled people and to try and improve the overall experience of a passenger journey for disabled customers. The

assisted travel policy guidance provisions for reducing the notice period to the passenger assist and for strengthening consistency, I think of really good moves and something we at we Scope and other charities, but also disabled people of sorts have been wanting for quite a long time.

So I think that's very positive. I think on top of that, we have the forthcoming passenger assist mobile app, which we certainly believe could help lots and lots of disabled people have a better experience with assistance, be able to communicate with a station, with a member of staff, with a train operating company much more easily, and hopefully reduce some of that frustration, certainly but I think also try and reduce some of that effort and huge amounts of planning that I was talking about that often many of us have to put in before we even get to a station.

And hopefully the assistance app can improve some of that and reduce some of that time needed to do that.

OK, thanks, James. So obviously, I had mentioned earlier it's not 100 percent fail safe and there is frustrations, there, amongst passengers, as James describes. And Stephanie, if I can bring you in. So what is ORR doing to make sure the train companies and station operators get things right?

Stephanie Tobyn, ORR

Thanks, Kenny and thanks, James, because I think James mentioned quite a few of the things that we are doing, which is very helpful, but I think just to start, I think it's really, really important that we are thinking across the piece, you know, this is so important for the independence, for traveling to work, for health care, for education, you know, for going out in social events. This is this is basically life. You know, this is so important to people to be able to travel independently.

So what we've done and we've been working on this for a number of years now is we got thousands of disabled travellers on rail road to actually come back with their feedback on their experiences of their journeys and looking at that and working with experts like James and looking at the train companies and Network Rail and also government, we developed this guidance, which we call our accessible travel guidance, to help operators develop the policies in this area. So that was it. That was a huge piece of work that was only published last year.

And as soon as the guidance was published, then we require the operators to actually develop this policy that they're actually going to apply when they're trying to help passengers. And a lot of the things James mentioned is actually in that policy document,

things like reducing the notice period for booking assistance. It was 24 hours. We couldn't go anywhere unless you just turn up and go. You couldn't book assistance in less than 24 hours - it is now at 10 pm the night before.

It's moving down to six hours before travel next year and then to two hours before travel in the year after that. So that's a real big step change that we put in place there. So we look at we look at this guidance, we look to the policies and we try and ensure that the companies are actually doing what they say because it's all very well talking about all the stuff on paper. But actually then going on to monitor how it's working in practice. Is it delivering? are people traveling, are more people traveling, which would be very helpful and if not, how then can we change it or what action can we take? Because we do have legal powers in this area. So I think we've got a lot of tools Kenny, but also we've been doing it before.

Kenny Walker

Thanks, Stephanie. James, you mentioned the independence this gives disabled passengers to be able to travel and a feeling of independence that the rest of us will take for granted. You must hear some heartwarming stories of how passengers assistance improves people's lives, but also I'm sure you're aware of sometimes when it doesn't go quite well.

James Taylor, Scope

Yes, definitely to both and you know, I think the figures that you shared at the beginning around just how many journeys are made with passenger assist each year. There are some, you know, phenomenally positive stories. And many disabled people, thankfully, have a stress free, issue free journey. And I think a lot of that is down to both the individual staff at stations. Many well, all of whom are incredibly helpful. And I think we've heard from some disabled passengers, particularly during this year and during lockdown, how helpful staff have been in terms of providing masks, offering sanitizer, supporting with guidance to and around the station concourse. As well as stories around staff who just know what they're doing, are incredibly kind, well aware of what they can and can't do in terms of social distancing and being extremely supportive.

So there are 1.2 million, as you said, passenger assists journeys each year. I think thankfully many of those go without, go off without a hitch and completed without a hitch. But of course, there are a significant number where there are issues and those are the areas that we we need to focus on. And I talked about in broad terms, a few of them as to whether that's assistance failing to turn up a station, if a taxi or private hire vehicle or cab is being needed for an onward journey from a station, occasionally that doesn't turn up.

I think one of the biggest gripes for want of a better word is around people's attitudes, whether that's, you know, perhaps staff lack of awareness on occasion, potential misunderstanding, but also from fellow passengers not having that understanding either, not being particularly supportive. It's those occasions where I think certainly many disabled people who've experienced them would feel potentially like a second class citizen and where sometimes we see potential discrimination playing out. So it's really important we focus on how we can improve journeys for everybody by looking at things like training, public awareness campaigns.

I think in the time that we're living in now, a big focus on both face masks, but also face masks exemptions, what support there is available for disabled people to get around and use public transport safely at the moment too.

Kenny Walker

It underlines there's an onus on us all to be aware when we're traveling of those around us and be mindful of people with not just disabilities, the physical disabilities, you can see, but a lot of people with disabilities that aren't visible for the rest of us. So it is important to be mindful when we do travel. Stephanie, just to bring you back in again. So how do ORR become aware when things don't go right? And what action do you take or what action can you take?

Stephanie Tobyn, ORR

Yeah, to be honest, there's multiple sources of information. There are loads of listening posts for us on a daily basis to come in with whether things have gone wrong or whether they've gone particularly well or whether people just want to talk about things. I mean, this is a really interesting area where a lot of people have a lot of views and experiences. And I recognize some of the things that James was talking about.

But on a sort of formal basis, we monitor how the companies are performing and how we do that is really by asking passengers who've just been through the experience of, you know, having assistance, whether it went well, whether it didn't go well, whether they were satisfied. And literally we do that or, you know, within days of the experience actually happening because the industry have their contact details and then we can approach them and say, would you be interested in giving us feedback on that experience?

We gather that, you know, throughout the year, we gather it in a big enough sample for all of the operators so that we can look at their performance across the piece. And then we can start asking those questions about what why it that it is 90 per cent of passengers are happy in this area, yet it's, 75 per cent here. What are the differences? What is going on

there? But apart from that, as I said, you know, issues are raised to us through social media, by stakeholders like James, whether it's direct complaints into the ORR or just generally in the media. So there's often a lot of noise and the opportunity to go back to operators and really ask for an explanation to ask them to investigate exactly what has happened, and that might be something very simple, you know, that can have a huge impact on passengers but it seems quite simple to the operator when someone didn't either answer the telephone or a piece of information wasn't passed on or somebody was doing something else important, no doubt, to their job at the station. But actually then something failed in the process to help the passenger.

We can explore how that can be changed. We can look at whether it is actually something deeper that needs looked at. And ultimately, you know, we can take action, we can take enforcement action if we feel there is a systemic issue, if we feel the industry and the operators are just not moving forward and trying to tackle some of the failures that happen and trying to improve in this area, we can move forward to say, well, no, OK, we have powers available to us that we can use to ensure things are improved in this area.

So there is a lot there's a lot you could say about that subject. But it's vitally important that we continue to get information in, to understand the experiences of passengers. We speak to passengers all the time and understand, you know, first-hand exactly what is actually happening to them.

Kenny Walker

Thanks, Stephanie. So I am going to put you on the spot here and ask both of you, what do you think's working right now? James first please.

James Taylor, Scope

Yeah, I think there are lots of things that are working well. I think from a well, from my personal perspective, I think it's been really good to see an increased focus of attention on this area, particularly from yourselves, but also from government in terms of the inclusive transport strategy. I think that's something that has been much needed. Now I don't think we've got necessarily the answers to all of the problems with solutions to the problems and there are many disabled people who, as we've been talking about, are having some truly awful times and having some bad times because having some good times. But I think the fact that it feels like there's more concerted action on passenger assist on disabled passengers, now than there perhaps has been over the last three to four years, that, to me, feels like the start of something and something that feels like it's working well now and will be working even better in the future.

Kenny Walker

OK, and Stephanie, what is it do you think is working work well now in this area?

Stephanie Tobyn, ORR

I do quite agree with James. I think there's a huge amount of focus just now. And I think what's really helping is a lot of collaboration because this is not something that can improve in one particular area. It is important that the whole industry really comes together and realises its obligations and responsibilities in this area and works together to look at the experience of passengers and to think about how things can be improved.

So I have a lot of confidence that that is actually working. But I think you just have to come back to that, that there are some just really committed staff who provide a great service and often go above and beyond what you might expect. And we hear some fabulous stories about, you know, things work for someone who isn't perhaps able to get in contact with a member of staff at another station, but they actually knew who they want to get in contact with and they sent a text and that text was received by this person who was actually on holiday on the beach, who then obviously couldn't do anything but knew who to contact, got back in touch with the person at the station, the passengers arriving at and ensured that assistance was provided.

And it's such a slightly comical it shouldn't work like that, but that what a level of commitment for staff to do things like that. So I think there are some great stories to be told as well as some of the difficulties.

Kenny Walker

Thanks, Stephanie. So I read recently that ORR took action over a station that was inaccessible for passengers using wheelchairs. How is that possible, if you can explain and can you say more about that for us?

Stephanie Tobyn, ORR

I can say a little bit. It was a particular station. It was called Liphook Station. And what was happening was the operator was habitually or constantly really providing passengers with taxis instead of assisting them on and off the train.

And when we looked into this, it was actually our safety inspectors who looked into this. We discovered that they didn't actually have a ramp available for staff and passengers to use. And the difficulty at that particular station was actually that the type of platform and the gap between the train and platform and the narrowness of the platform. It was a

bespoke ramp that was actually required on that occasion, but it had never been purchased, that had never been looked into.

And I just think that that just shows that you get into this sort of difficult situation where you just accept as the norm that OK. But actually, when we looked into it, we looked at the legislation that applied and we looked at the trains that were stopped when we thought, well, no, actually, that is that's not acceptable. And we can take action here. So we've issued an improvement notice to ensure that action is taken and hopefully that the operator will go for a bespoke ramp, it could make other adoptions at the station. But I think actually taking action to ensure this changes is the important point here.

Kenny Walker

Thanks, Stephanie. It's an interesting one and one I'm sure we'll watch with interest as time goes by.

I really appreciate both of your time. One final question to both of you. With 2021 almost upon us, we'll go to you James first. What is number one on your wish list for the year when it comes to passenger assistance?

James Taylor, Scope

I think perhaps going back to how we, how we started this conversation on passenger assistance and passenger assist. And I think the one thing that, you know, Scope but I'm sure many disabled people would wish for in in the New Year is for assistance to work first time and to work all the time. And I think being able to travel fairly and not having to worry about whether someone is able to meet you and your onward journey or that taxis will fail to turn up.

I think it's that getting that assistance, getting all of those 1.2 million journeys working first time for disabled people and working all the time would be, I think, our wish for next year.

Kenny Walker

So we know what James' number one wish list is for the New Year? So, Stephanie, what's the number one priority for ORR in 2021?

Stephanie Tobyn, ORR

James has stolen my thunder, Kenny, because that is exactly what I would wish for. I was trying to come up with a way of expressing it that captured more than one of the areas. But effectively, it's all around reliability and really giving confidence to people that things will

happen when they're supposed to. And we genuinely think that the industry app that they've developed to try and help with assistance should go leaps and bounds to providing that confidence.

You know, you should be able to know who the name of the actual member of staff that's going to come and assist you. They should have, you know, information on telephone to tell them, you know, what your assistance needs are, what your name is, where you're going to meet them. And you can just even by talking that through and thinking about it, it's just so much better than maybe having an email and hopefully everything will be OK on the day.

I think it's just people are used to that now, they're used to that level of certainty, whether it's, you know, if you think about the amount of information you get when you receive a parcel, at the moment, it's incredible. And there's a lot of information you make, not really require the driver's name, etc. But, you know, when it comes to assistance, this is all vitally important for passengers. That is exactly the sort of information you want and you want the confidence that somebody is waiting for they are going to be able to help you. So exactly the same reliability and we think technology can definitely help there.

Kenny Walker

Thanks very much. And thanks, Stephanie and James, thank you all for listening to the Rail and Road podcast. If you have any questions. And I think we've discussed today. Feel free to drop us an email at podcast.orr.gov.uk and we will aim to bring you an answer on the next episode. Until then, goodbye.



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