



Audio transcript

The Rail and Road Pod

Episode 9: How the rail industry is delivering disability awareness and equality training

On our 9th episode, we're taking another look at accessibility on Britain's railway.

We're discussing disability awareness and equality training that forms an integral part of the requirements set out in the Office of Rail and Road's Accessible Travel Policy Guidance.

In this year alone, tens of thousands of railway staff have undertaken the training that is designed to help with understanding disabled people's needs, allowing staff to communicate more effectively with disabled passengers, to understand the challenges they may face when travelling and to refresh their knowledge and skills to provide any assistance needed.

We're joined by a number of guests including Claire Clark from the Consumer Policy and Compliance Monitoring team at ORR; Caroline Eglinton, Access and Inclusion Manager from Network Rail; Greg Suligowski, Head of Customer Strategy from Merseyrail; and Jenny Saunders, Customer Services Director and Sophie Court, Accessibility Improvement Manager from Thameslink and Great Northern.

Kenny Walker, host

Hello folks. My name is Kenny Walker and you're listening to the *Rail and Road* podcast...

Claire Clark, Consumer and Policy Compliance Manager ORR

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Greg Suligowski, Head of Customer Strategy, Merseyrail

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Caroline Eglinton, Access and Inclusion manager, Network Rail

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Sophie Court Accessibility Improvement Manager, Govia Thameslink Railway

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I am joined by a number of guests today. Claire Clark joins us from the Consumer Policy & Compliance Monitoring team at ORR, - as does Caroline Eglinton, Access and Inclusion Manager from Network Rail, Greg Suligowski (Head of Customer Strategy) from Merseyrail and also Jenny Saunders, Customer Services Director and

Sophie Court, Accessibility Improvement Manager from Thameslink and Great Northern.

So I guess a good place to start would be with Claire. As I've mentioned, Claire, this training is a key part of ORR's Accessible Travel Policy guidance. Can you tell us how it all came about and what were the driving factors behind its introduction?

Claire Clark, Consumer and Policy Compliance Manager ORR

So it all started back in 2017 where ORR commenced work on revising the former Disabled Person's Protection Policy, into the now known Accessible Travel Policy Guidance. This work involved extensive research into the awareness and passenger experience of assisted travel. From this research, we knew there was a need for change and that we needed to drive change across the industry.

To give you a brief indication of our findings, it showed that mystery shoppers of unbooked assistance about staff attitude and training were key areas for improvement. Some passengers felt hurried or dehumanised when they had their assistants at stations. Passengers with non-visible disabilities reported lower satisfaction, 86% compared to 90% of those with visible disabilities, and also lower incidents of receiving all-booked assistance, which is around about 75%.

On top of this research and also to help further develop our understanding, we went out to public consultation three times, but we also sought expert advice on what the training should look like. With that, we held multiple workshops and events with a range of interested and affected bodies including disabled people's organisations. So, all of that work helped us to significantly strengthen the existing staff disability awareness training so that all operators would be in a much better position by the deadline that we put out for July 2021.

And one of those key changes was making sure that there is involvement of disabled people as part of the training, and that the lived experience and expertise of people with a range of disabilities is always utilised in the development of the training but also the delivery.

Kenny

So you've done the research on what was needed. You spoke to the experts like you say, and you set the deadlines for train and station operators to implement the training. So how does ORR view the progress made so far by the train and station operators?

Claire

We're really pleased, that from meeting the deadline of July 2021, around half of train and station operators have taken the opportunity to work with disabled people to develop entirely new disability awareness and equality training courses. So we're really pleased at this stage that significant progress has been made. Our next step is to look at the impact of that training.

Kenny

And that teases up nicely for our next guest from today's panel to discuss the disability awareness training is Greg from Merseyrail. Just to start off, could you tell us how Merseyrail went about developing your training and how you consulted disabled people as part of this?

Greg Suligowski, Head of Customer Strategy, Merseyrail

We have some experience in this regard. We'd already started to use our connections from that, as early as 2018, to shape some of the training that we were giving to our frontline staff. Then when the ATP guidance came along from the ORR, it was really a case of taking that to the next level. We'd already had what we loosely termed an accessibility forum, but we really stepped that up. Now our accessibility forum has been meeting for just over 12 months. It's made up of 17 organisations from across the city region that represent all kinds of disabilities from those that are more obvious to hidden disabilities.

That group have really played quite a big role in the development of our training processes. So for example, Danny, our HROD manager who's helped me to develop the training came along to the forum and we ran through the training in quite a lot of detail with the forum members and their service users who also attended. It was really useful because it allowed us to frame particularly around the issue of non-visible disabilities, our training in a much more dynamic and realistic way. We were able to use some great real-life examples in our training, and that's something that we've not been able to do before.

Kenny

Obviously, the input from the group sounds invaluable to the work that you're doing. Can you talk us through now how you adapted your training in response to the pandemic?

Greg

The pandemic like for most organisations has been a really testing time for us here at Merseyrail. We face the same challenges that many of our colleagues in the industry and beyond have faced. I think, initially, we looked at how we could move as much of the face-to-face training onto Microsoft Teams, which is the product that we have chosen as a business to use for our remote working as possible. There was some benefits to that. There was also some drawbacks. Whilst it worked while the country was in the most severe of lockdown measures, what we found was that there's no substitute for actually getting people together in smaller groups. So that's what we did.

We managed risk really carefully, but we'd normally have taken maybe a dozen to 20 staff through this in one go. We cut those groups down to 4. As you can imagine, that slows down the rate at which you can train people and meant that the process took longer than anticipated, but it ensured, vitally, that everyone was safe and everyone felt comfortable because you've got to be in a comfortable place to learn, I always think, and that really worked quite well.

We also worked really closely with ORR to make sure that you guys were aligned and knew what we were doing at each stage because obviously within the guidance, there was a deadline that we had to hit. We were really mindful that we wanted to hit that, mainly from a passenger perspective more than anything else. We want our staff to have the best skills and the most up-to-date knowledge that they can have, but we work with you to manage expectations and make sure that the training was delivered properly.

I think the feedback on it from staff, more importantly from our disabled customers when they come and sit with us as part of the Accessibility Forum is that Merseyrail is, and rightly so, is very proud of being one of the most accessible networks in the country and what we've done with the training builds on that. I think we're all really proud of that.

This training is powerful and actually moves away from being simply some operational knowledge that staff need to have to be something that they really care about, and that's obviously really important to us.

Kenny

Just to wrap things up with yourself, what would be the key improvements passengers can expect to see on Merseyrail as an outcome of the training?

Greg

I think that's a really good question. As mentioned before, we've always been really proud to be a really high up performing operator when it comes to accessibility on the network. You only have to look at the number of customers that just turn up and travel with us; they don't need to book and the really low level of complaints that we get around accessibility issues to know that.

I think what the training does for me is twofold. It broadens that knowledge a little bit around nonvisible disabilities and I do feel like guidance and the way that the industry has developed in its knowledge and understanding of how to support customers with nonvisible disabilities is getting better every year.

Kenny

We're also joined today by Caroline Eglinton, who's the Access and Inclusion Manager for Network Rail. Thanks for taking part, Caroline. I guess a good place to start is by welcoming the news that Network Rail plans for everyone to receive training. Considering how huge an organisation Network Rail is, that is to be commended. Caroline, can you tell us why it is important to Network Rail that all your staff receive a form of training on disability awareness?

Caroline Eglinton, Access and Inclusion manager, Network Rail

Well Network Rail has got 45,000 employees and not everybody at Network Rail is working on frontline station roles, but that doesn't mean that they shouldn't have an excellent understanding of disability equality. The way that we interpreted the ATP guidance was that all staff, and it does say something commencing it to their role, should be trained in the first six learning outcomes. We translated that as all staff at Network Rail, no matter whether they're in a frontline station role or whether they're working in any other role at Network Rail should have an excellent understanding of that.

For us, we had quite a lot of existing training that did cover some of the learning outcomes, the requirements in the ATP, but because it was snippets that built up to that, what we felt was that it would be far better for our employees to go through all of the information for the learning outcomes in one go, and actually appreciate it as a package and not just sitting alongside other inclusion training or other training. Just to give them a really good base-level understanding.

The way that I see it is that people have different experiences of disability and different understandings of it and unless they are offered that outline view, it's difficult for us as an organisation to feel that we understand everybody has made that level of understanding.

For us, it was a great opportunity to actually give the information to people to invest in learning products, deliver great products to our employees, but also have the confidence that people have had the same experience and have taken away the same sort of learning.

Kenny

Thanks, Caroline. Just to reiterate what you said at the very beginning there. 45,000 staff are taking this training, so impressive figures. Can you tell us just about any particular challenges in managing and delivering assistance at large busy stations? I'm not just talking about the large busy stations that we think of in London, but stations such as Birmingham and Manchester Piccadilly and how the training that you're delivering has been adopted to the different challenges that are met at these stations?

Caroline

First of all, I would say that the training that Network Rail is delivering has been done in a couple of different ways. So the training for non-passenger facing staff is being delivered by a set of e-learning that's got lots of film content in it delivered by disabled people themselves.

The training in our stations, in our managed stations, that has been delivered by disabled facilitators virtually at the station. That means that we've actually been able to get station teams together across the country in smaller groups, and really focus on what meets their requirements. As we said, everyone's got different levels of understanding. So that training is tailored although we cover the main aspects, so we have time for questions and things like that. I think the challenge in delivering assistance at larger busy stations is about managing and delivering consistently this Turn Up and Go assistance.

At Network Rail, at all of our managed stations we offer Turn Up and Go. That means that any passenger who's requiring assistance can turn up at the station and get assistance without having booked it in advance. The challenge there is delivering it consistently, making sure that we have the resources available to deliver it, and challenging people's assumptions who are working in the stations. It's difficult when you do have the booking system because there's an inclination for employees to say

something like, "We'll do it for you this time as you've turned up to go, but next time, it would really be good if you can book ahead." Saying things like that just really makes it seem to that passenger that you're doing them a favour, you'll do it on this occasion, but in future, you really should book.

That's one of the things that we are really focusing on in our training as that Turn Up and Go assistance is a right for a passenger.

Kenny

So you've obviously mentioned the importance of Turn Up and Go particularly to a disabled passenger and their rights to that and challenging assumptions. What changes could a disabled passenger expect to see or experience at one of your stations, say if it turned up at Victoria Station in London, the changes that they'll see as a result of the training?

Caroline

I would say an understanding and awareness of those non-visible conditions, breaking down those misconceptions that people might have. So I've heard a while ago, it was a number of years ago now and I would hope that this would not be the same now, but I did hear a manager say, "Most of the people who get assistance at the station are not disabled." I challenge that idea, I think most of the people who get assistance at a station is because they need the assistance.

It's really quite likely that they have some kind of non-visible condition that you can't see and really challenging that misconception is something that our training focuses on and that 90% of conditions and impairments, you're not going to be able to tell by looking at somebody. So really challenging that idea that people are getting assistance, and that are not disabled or require it, so I think challenging that.

But I do think that having an understanding of how language impacts on how we think about disabled people, and how we use it in our passenger communications, how we use it in our social media, I think that's really important. I think that's something that Network Rail is looking at, is focusing on. I'd really like to get the whole industry on the same page about using social model language. It is great to see that that's very much backed up in the ATP guidance as well, really focusing on the correct use of terms.

Kenny

The final question for you, Caroline. Obviously, if we're looking to the future, you've mentioned the social model language and bringing that in for Network Rail employees but can you tell us what else is next for Network Rail in terms of your focus on improving your service for disabled and older passengers?

Caroline

There's a lot of work going on at Network Rail at the moment. We've actually just set up a new Accessibility and Inclusion team at Network Rail. It's within the passenger experience part of Network Rail. So really having a lead on the strategy. For example, we are developing a whole industry plan for accessibility inclusion, I think that will be really important. Working as one team with our TOC colleagues so not just in the stations, but also across the rail industry.

Working with Rail Delivery Group and their access and inclusion forum and alongside the other access and inclusion managers at TOCs. That really helps us focus on service because the service for a passenger is not just about what they experience, a Network Rail station. It's about what they experience on their journey, so really focusing on that, and working on embedding this disability inclusion and customer service delivery in our wider station training, which is not just about the disability equality training. So for example, we've created some bespoke content for our customer service professional training, including station tool kits that we've created for our people.

I think it's about not sitting on our laurels and thinking, "Well, we've done some work to deliver good disability equality training." It's really about how we measure that impact. We are measuring our performance, looking at where the assistance goes really well and where it's not going so well. And again it's not just about Network Rail but it's about working with industry on that.

Kenny

I'm also joined today by Jenny Saunders, Customer Services Director for Thameslink and Great Northern, and Sophie Court, Accessibility Improvement Manager. Thanks for coming on the *Rail and Road* podcast today. Can you tell us how staff reacted to the training and have they told you this has helped in their interactions with people needing assistance?

Jenny Saunders, Customer Services Director for Thameslink and Great Northern

I've been on the training course myself. I have to say, it was an incredibly eye-opening experience for me. It gave me a fresh perspective as I know it did for all of the attendees on the course.

I attended the course alongside our frontline customer-facing colleagues. I have to say the training has been a real step change for us here at GTR. It's given our station and our onboard customer service teams a really unique insight into the challenges our disabled customers face. The trainers, shared their real lived experiences with those on the course. Just hearing and understanding how that made them feel was really powerful. Our colleagues were invited to think about how they might deal with those situations differently to drive a much better and more positive situation for our disabled customers.

The feedback I've had from our teams has been really positive. Our colleagues have been so enthusiastic about it. They really did enjoy the course and they were hungry for learning about the issues that our disabled customers face.

In fact, I remember while speaking to one of our colleagues who describes the training as eye-opening, and then he said he went on to put that training to really good use during our recent blockade at Finsbury Park station. He got some fantastic feedback from our disabled customers as a result of the things that he put in place that came from the training.

What is really clear to me is the training has changed working practices for us here at GTR, and it's an important part of our ongoing journey to improve accessibility across all of our railway.

Kenny

And with an eye to the future, can you explain how you'll ensure that this learning remains embedded in your processes and interactions with disabled people?

Sophie Court Accessibility Improvement Manager, Govia Thameslink Railway

I think we see this as kind of just the start really. We're now rolling out the training across all grades across the business. It's also going to be a core part of our induction programme for all new starters. We also have our access advisory panel

members involved in the training as well. We're going to keep refreshing it with their lived experience as well, and really show that human side for our customers.

Jenny

The training programme has been a vital part of our journey of improvement, but we do know that we've got more to do and we'll continue to champion these really important messages. The training will, of course, give us an extra tool to help our passengers who need assistance and to help them travel more independently. We'll continue to use that training as a refresher tool for our existing colleagues and our managers can signpost colleagues to refresh on the content as part of their normal everyday coaching. That's both formally and informally.

Sophie

Since rolling the training programme out, I've had a lot more colleagues across the business, come to me with new ideas and things they've seen that they think could make improvements to accessibility. It's just really positive to hear all this messaging and it's definitely a big step change and a big positive step in the right direction.

Jenny

I think I'll just add that we've got some real momentum on this within our organisation at the moment. Our colleagues are very engaged, they're hungry to learn more, and this is definitely something that we will continue to push with our teams.

Kenny

Jenny, Sophie, it's been a pleasure hearing all about the good work that's already went on and the ongoing momentum as you mentioned. It's definitely pleasing to hear and on all that's planned for the future. On that note, thank you.

Thanks also to Claire, Greg and Caroline. That's all we have time for on this the latest episode of our Rail and Road Podcast. I hope you enjoyed listening and finding out about the good work that is going on train staff to make journeys better for those needing assistance. Until next time, goodbye.



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