

Rail passengers with access needs and disabilities: experiences of complaints

Research report prepared for the Office of Rail and Road

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TRAJECTORY



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1. Executive summary

Passengers with disabilities and disabling access needs

All respondents in the survey and the qualitative stage of the research either identified as disabled or, if not, having a disabling access need.

- Just under a third (31%) of rail passengers with access needs are frequent travellers (travelling by rail at least once a week). 46% are moderate travellers (using rail a few times a year), while 24% travel by rail infrequently (only once or twice a year or less).
- More frequent rail travellers often have a very different travel purpose compared to those who travel by rail infrequently, with more frequent travellers using rail for work and commuting, whilst infrequent travellers are more likely to travel for leisure reasons.
- Overall, three quarters of respondents (75%) say that they are either satisfied or very satisfied with their rail travel experiences over the last twelve months.
- However, a significant proportion of passengers with an access need have felt there has been reason to raise a complaint within the last two years. 44% have had a reason to complain to a rail operator, 29% of those requiring assistance (77% of the total sample) have had reason to complain to an operator when this assistance failed, and 21% had a reason to escalate a complaint to the Rail Ombudsman.
- Negative experiences have a damaging impact on passengers with access needs. More than a fifth (22%) say they are less inclined to travel by rail as a result of the issue that could have caused them to complain to a rail operator. A similar proportion (21%) say the incident has given them less confidence when travelling by train.
- Qualitative findings indicate a range of specific issues that passengers with access needs face when travelling by rail. These include a number of physical or support barriers when arriving or departing a station, a lack of staff availability, and a greater amount of planning being required when arranging assisted services.

Awareness of complaints and seeking redress

- Most passengers with access needs or disabilities are at least partially aware of the complaints process for a rail operator (86%). However, levels of awareness decline regarding seeking redress for failed booked assistance (71%) or escalating a complaint to the Rail Ombudsman (63%).
- For each of the three processes, a significant proportion are also only 'somewhat aware', meaning that they may have a general awareness but may lack the knowledge in where or how to complain.
- The vast majority of passengers with access needs say they would consider using the Rail Ombudsman (93%), with the same proportion of those requiring booked assistance saying they would seek redress if their booked assistance failed.
- Amongst passengers with access needs, the most common source of awareness for each of the three processes is friends and family, with rail services themselves also a primary source of information – either on websites or through staff at stations.
- Feedback from those interviewed reflected the need for multi-source, multi-format and repetitive messaging at all journey stages in order to drive greater awareness.
- Just under half (44%) of passengers with an access need have had at least one reason to complain to a rail operator in the last two years.

- Complaints escalated to the Rail Ombudsman are, understandably, less frequent than a complaint to a train or station operator, however there is a similar gap in terms of follow through, with fewer than half (49%) of those who had reason to escalate a complaint to the Rail Ombudsman actually doing so.
- Over half (59%) of those who sought redress for failed booked assistance said it was easy to find out information on how to make a claim, whilst 57% said it was easy to find out who to submit the claim to.
- Just over six in ten (63%) said it was easy to access information about the Rail Ombudsman, whilst 61% said it was easy to escalate the complaint itself.
- There is a significant proportion in each of the processes who did not end up raising a complaint or claim, despite having reason to do so. Most commonly for general complaints to a rail operator, this was because the process was not seen as a worthwhile use of their time (41%).
- Other common barriers to raising a complaint to the train or station operator include lacking the time or energy (35%), not thinking they would be taken seriously (29%) or not knowing how or who to complain to (21%).
- Regarding seeking redress, or escalating a complaint to the Rail Ombudsman, not knowing how to raise a complaint or seek redress was instead the main reason for not actually going through with it.

General complaints to operators

- Complaints to operators are made for a variety of reasons, with no single cause standing out. Staff conduct and availability was most commonly cited (15%), closely followed by accessibility issues and train performance (14% and 13%).
- Those with a physical access need, or those who identify as being disabled, are more likely to cite accessibility issues as being the reason for their complaint.
- The majority of respondents had their complaint either resolved or had dropped it. 37% say it was resolved to their satisfaction, one in four (25%) say that it has been closed but not to their satisfaction.
- Amongst the 15% who dropped their complaint, almost half (46%) did so because of the amount of time it took for them to receive a response, whilst one in three did so because they did not expect it to be taken seriously.
- Fewer than half of those who raised a complaint to a rail operator would describe the process as being 'definitely accessible'. The most common reason for a complaint being raised to an operator was to seek financial compensation (46%), whilst 38% were looking for an apology, 34% wanted an explanation and 29% wanted reassurance that it wouldn't happen again.
- Fewer than half (47%) of those who raised a complaint felt they got the outcome they were hoping for, with 28% directly saying they did not.
- Additionally, just over a third (35%) feel confident that the reason for the initial complaint won't happen again in the future.

Seeking redress from an operator about booked assistance failure

- Seeking redress about booked assistance failure is most commonly raised due to the assistance not being provided at the station (28%).
- The majority of those seeking redress say the process was at least somewhat accessible (86%), 39% say it was definitely accessible.
- More than one in four (27%) of those seeking redress feel that steps have not been taken to mitigate the same issue in the future.
- Passengers seeking redress are most often looking for financial compensation (42%), whilst a notable proportion were also looking for an apology (40%).
- 41% of those who sought redress feel it has been resolved satisfactorily and 48% say they got the outcome they hoped for.
- Despite this, one in four passengers (25%) say the claim has been resolved, but not to their satisfaction, and around the same proportion feel dissatisfied with various aspects of the process.
- More than half (55%) are satisfied with the accessibility of the information provided by the rail operator, whilst more than a fifth (22%) are dissatisfied.
- The qualitative findings indicate a notable degree of dissatisfaction regarding the perceived lack of tangible improvements in services following the complaint being resolved.

Escalating complaints to the Rail Ombudsman

- Just over one in ten (11%) passengers with an access need or disability have escalated a complaint to the Rail Ombudsman within the last two years.
- Staff conduct and availability was marginally the most commonly cited reason for escalating a complaint to the Rail Ombudsman (14%).
- The majority (86%) of passengers with access needs or disabilities report that the Rail Ombudsman process was accessible to them, although only 53% say 'definitely' and 33% only 'to some extent'.
- 38% say that the complaint that was escalated to the Rail Ombudsman has been resolved to their satisfaction. More than a quarter (28%) say that whilst the issue has been resolved they are not satisfied.
- Whilst other forms of complaint are most often looking for financial compensation, those that escalate a complaint to the Rail Ombudsman are instead most likely to be seeking an apology, an explanation and reassurance that the issue won't happen again.
- 58% say they got the outcome they wanted, and almost three quarters (72%) consider the matter to now be closed.
- Around six in ten felt satisfied with the accessibility of information about the Rail Ombudsman, how informed they were kept about the progress of the complaint, and the clarity and quality of information provided.
- Those who felt they received the outcome that they were hoping for were generally more positive about the process, with 72% of those saying the complaint was resolved to their satisfaction feeling that the process was definitely accessible.

2. Introduction

The Office of Rail and Road (ORR) collects a range of information on passenger complaints and wider customer experiences. Over time it has expanded the breadth and depth of the data it collects. ORR is now looking to specifically strengthen its understanding of the experiences of passengers with access needs or disabilities as part of train and station operators' complaints processes.

The specific aims of the research were to provide ORR with a greater insight into the perceptions and lived experiences of disabled people in the following areas:

- general complaints to train or station operators (referred to as operators throughout), seeking redress about booked assistance failure from operators, and
- escalating complaints to the Rail Ombudsman.

The research described in this report was commissioned to help address that.

ORR engaged Trajectory, a specialist insight consultancy, and Open Inclusion (Open), a pioneering disability research agency, to conduct quantitative and qualitative research with people with access needs or disabilities. The research took place in two stages:

1. Firstly, a quantitative survey was conducted with 1,153 respondents. All respondents have a disabling access need or disability of some kind and 93% have travelled by rail in the past year. The survey was carried out online, using both market research panels and Open's own community of people with disabilities. The data was collected between 21 December 2023 and 8 January 2024.
2. Secondly, in-depth-interviews were carried out with 12 participants with differing experiences of rail services and complaints processes. These interviews were conducted online in February 2024.

The research described in this report profiles passengers with access needs or disabilities and reports on their general experiences of travelling by train. It focusses on those occasions when things go wrong, and the way in which rail users with access needs or disabilities engage with complaints processes.

The research covers two tiers of complaints. The first tier is an initial complaint to an operator concerning a general complaint. The second tier is a complaint which is escalated to the Rail Ombudsman. Rail passengers who make a complaint to an operator and cannot reach a resolution with the operator, can ask the Rail Ombudsman to investigate the case once certain criteria have been met.

The research also includes seeking redress from an operator for assistance failure. ORR requires operators to provide some form of redress where passengers do not receive the assistance they have booked. This requirement is in addition to requirements on complaints handling. In this report, when redress is referred to, it means redress for booked assistance failures.

Specifically, the research covered a number of different aspects across all three processes. These included general awareness of each process, perceptions of the processes and the experiences of those who have gone through any of the three processes within the last two years. The research also included specific questions for people who could have complained or sought redress, but chose not to.

3. Passengers with access needs or disabilities

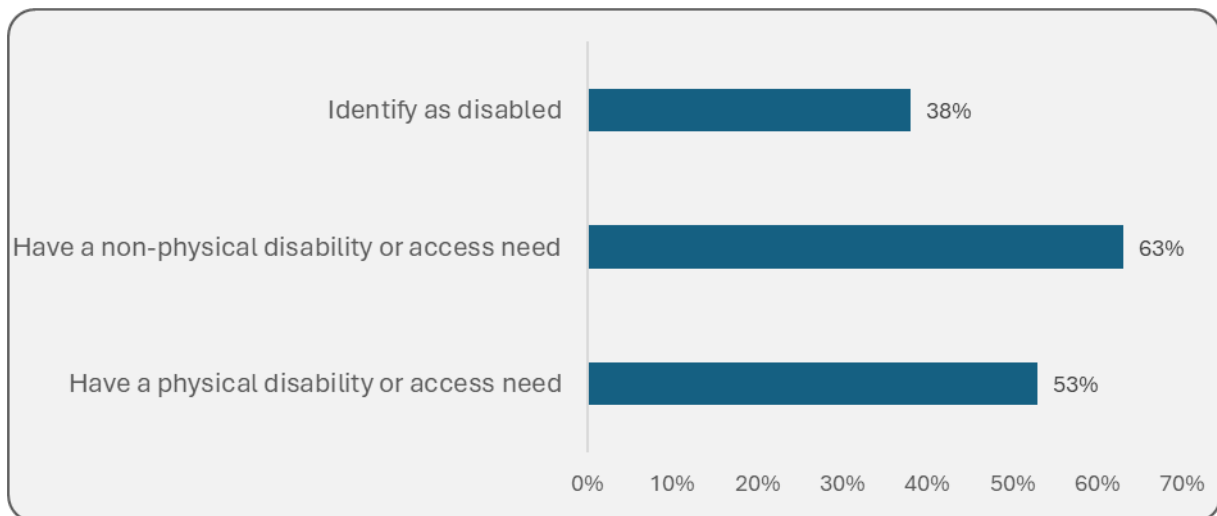
There is no single experience of rail travel for passengers with access needs or disabilities. The nature of the need or disability might mean varying levels of support are required and frequency and reason for travel differ.

The research found that passengers with access needs fall into three groups in terms of rail travel frequency:

- 31% are frequent travellers. This group travel by train at least once a week, with 14% travelling three times a week or more.
- 46% are moderate travellers. They use rail services at least a few times a year.
- 24% are infrequent travellers, using rail services once or twice a year at the most. Of this group, 7% are ‘lapsed’ users. This group haven’t travelled by train at all in the last 12 months but did use rail services before then.

Everyone included in the quantitative research has an access need of some kind, and of this group 38% also identify as disabled. Access needs can and do overlap. Just over half (53%) of the sample have a physical disability or access need (for example, a need affecting their mobility, dexterity or vision). At the same time, just under two thirds (63%) have a non-physical disability or access need (such as a mental health condition or neurodiversity)

Figure 1: Nature of need/disability (sample: 1,153)



Travel purpose, or why someone might be using rail services for that particular journey, are also important. This varies very little by nature of access need, but much more sharply by frequency of rail use. For example, frequent rail users are much more likely to use the train for work or commuting (51%, compared to an average of 24%). Less frequent rail users are more likely to use rail services for leisure reasons. This means it is possible that those travelling less frequently are travelling further distances with less familiarity about the routes they’re using.

The depth interviews explored motivations for using rail services and how these compared to other forms of public transport. These interviews provided some more nuanced insights about the importance of rail services for people with disabilities.

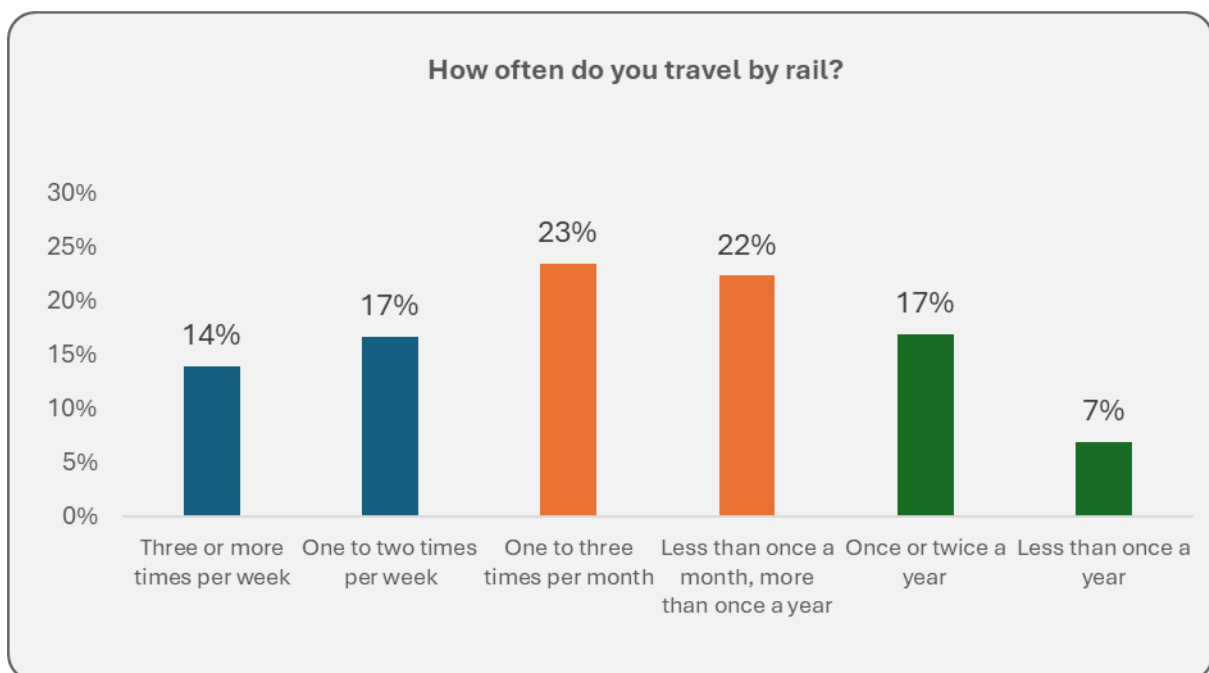
For some participants, alternative travel mode options to rail could be limited. Limitations could be due to their access needs excluding some modes of transport (i.e. driving), a lack of

alternatives for their desired route, and/or cost of the journey itself. There were a number of distinct advantages for using rail described by a number of the respondents. When rail works well, it can:

- Provide comfort and ease for long distance routes, for instance being able to move around the carriages and having facilities on board.
- Offer the opportunity to book and receive assistance and support which was appreciated and exceeds the assistance offered on bus and coach services.
- Provide a less crowded environment and easier and quicker routes when compared to bus and coach services (fewer changes and waiting in between services are important for some disabled travellers).
- Provide an easier and cheaper alternative to driving (and parking) or being driven when compared to using the car or taxi.

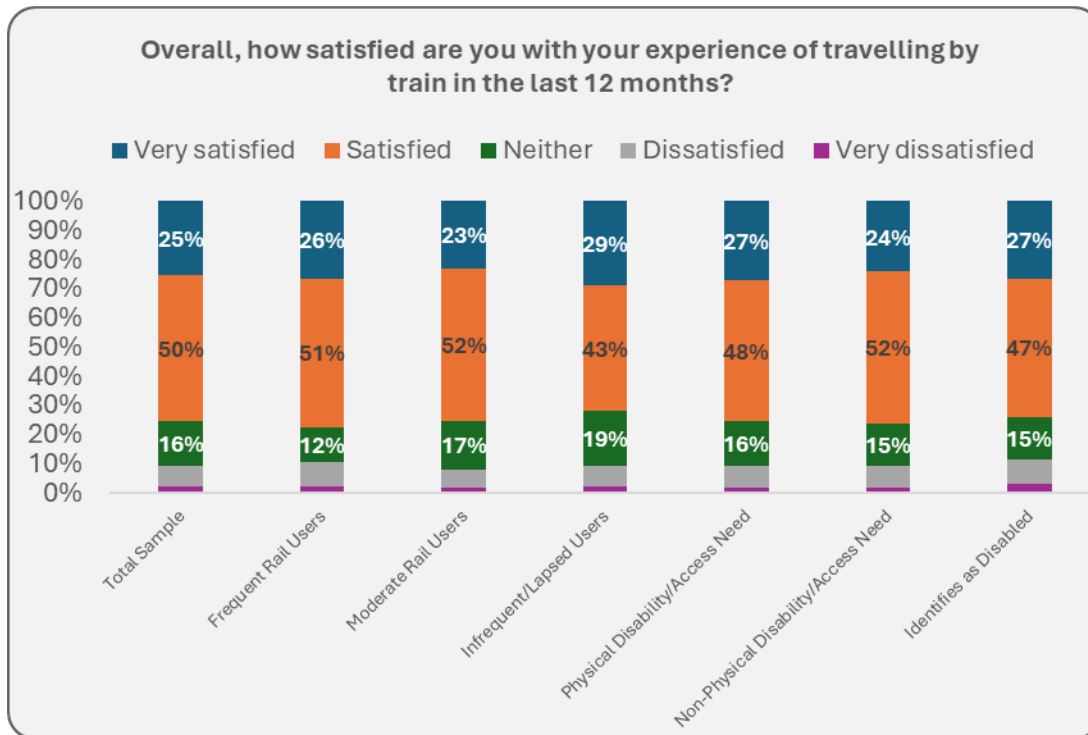
Overall, 57% of people with access needs or disabilities also require assistance when travelling by train. Of this group, the majority (77%) have booked assistance at least once in the last two years. Those travelling frequently, and those with physical access needs or disabilities are most likely to have booked assistance.

Figure 2: Frequency of travelling by rail (sample: 1,153)



The research in this report has focused on those journeys where something goes wrong and the customer has reason to complain. However, it is worth highlighting that the majority of rail users with access needs or a disability are satisfied with their experiences of travelling by train. Three quarters (75%) of the total sample say they are either very satisfied or satisfied with their experiences over the past 12 months, with little difference by either frequency of travel or need type. Just under one in ten (9%) people with access needs or disabilities are dissatisfied with their experiences.

Figure 3: Satisfaction with rail travel, by disability type & frequency of travel (sample: 1,076)



Despite these broadly positive experiences overall, there are times when passengers with access needs or disabilities have occasion to complain. Not all of these occasions to complain necessarily result in a complaint, but a significant proportion of passengers have had a reason to complain or seek redress in the last two years.

Specifically:

- 44% of passengers have had a reason to complain to an operator.
- 29% of those that require assistance have had reason to seek redress from the operator when that booked assistance has failed.
- 21% say they had a reason to escalate a complaint to the Rail Ombudsman.

When things do go wrong the impact on that affected passenger can be profound. The most common impact amongst those who made a complaint to an operator is to make that individual less inclined to travel by train in the future. Poor experiences also affect perceptions of value for money when using rail services, and affect behaviour in the future. One in five (21%) people who made a complaint to an operator said they now allow more time for travelling by train, and the same number said they feel less confident travelling by train.

Figure 4: Impact of reason for complaint on the individual (sample: 369)



These impacts tend to be even greater amongst those already travelling less frequently. For this group, there may be less comfort or familiarity with train travel generally and with the route that they are travelling (in contrast, for example, with a passenger with access needs who typically commutes on the same route every day or week). Among infrequent travellers who made a complaint, 35% now say they are less inclined to travel by train and 26% say they are less confident doing so. The impact can extend beyond rail services too: 19% of this group say the incident has taken a toll on their health or wellbeing.

There are similar impacts evident among those who sought redress. Nearly a third (29%) of those who made a claim of this nature say they are less confident travelling by train and one in four (24%) say they now do more planning when travelling by train.

The depth interviews further explored where dissatisfaction with rail experiences had occurred in the past two years.

Unsatisfactory experiences occurred for a range of reasons across the breadth of the customer journey:

- **Booking train travel** required more planning, investigation and organisation, especially when Assistance Services need to be organised. Additional effort included the purchasing of disability-specific ticketing and checking that stations are accessible. For those who had previously experienced disrupted journeys, some will seek reassurances that accessible and alternative routes are available in case a train is late or cancelled. For planning, decision making and booking rail travel, including disability-specific considerations, the digital experience (websites or apps) needs to be as clear, accessible and easy to use as possible. All customer communications offered by a rail operator need to be provided in formats that disabled customers can use. For example, anything requiring a phone call will need accessible alternatives for deaf passengers.

“You can no longer book a disabled priority seat, which means I can no longer be guaranteed a seat. I've had to change my work quite radically. I travel to work by train maybe once or twice a month.” Female, 55-64, mobility/sight loss/neurodivergent/long-term conditions

- **In the departure or arrival station** participants reported a number of physical and support barriers. These included a lack of help from drop off to get into the station, the

availability (or lack of) lifts and step-free or suitable access to platforms, issues with assistance that was pre-booked not waiting for the train, and mixed levels of helpfulness from staff. Sometimes a lack of staff helpfulness was due to no one being available when needed. Other times staff were available, but not so helpful due to a limited understanding or confidence supporting someone with access needs. A couple of participants noted problems relating to accessible communication to help them manage changes or cancellations in services. These issues included a lack of visible or auditory signage and a lack of support available from train staff causing general confusion and heightened difficulty working out an alternate journey.

“If something changes, or things don't go as planned, or there's a delay, and then that's where passengers get notified of something. That's the point at which I would then have barriers to accessing it.” Female, 35-44, hearing loss

- **When on board** a lack of staff availability for general help and support has provided issues for some respondents. In other situations, staff conduct was seen to have been unsatisfactory.

“I have a disabled railcard and I have complained a couple of other times about the fact that they've [on board train staff] had arguments with me on the train about "are you actually?" and all this kind of stuff. I've had it [my railcard] not accepted where they've said we don't believe you. They asked if there was any other proof.” Female, 25-34, mobility/dexterity/neurodivergent/long-term health conditions

The depth interviews highlighted how deeply felt, and long lasting the impacts of a disrupted or stressful experience have been. A poor experience can cause both immediate and longer-term emotional impacts.

- Interview participants noted increased anxiety or a trauma response from managing the situation both in the moment and longer term when describing some specific experiences.

“During the journey, the train stopped because of a problem. Nobody came on the train to assist me, so I was left for quite some time. I then had to make my way off the train remembering what direction I had walked to get on. I was scared that the train might start moving, or be left there for even longer.” Male, 25-34, sight loss

- Managing the fallout. Poor experiences can lead to rail and journey avoidance.

“And in the past, I found that the staff were either too busy, and couldn't help me or I had to wait and find a passenger I thought might be helpful. So now I have to avoid that station altogether.” Female, 65-74, mobility/dexterity/long-term and mental health conditions

4. Awareness of complaints and seeking redress

4.1 Levels of awareness

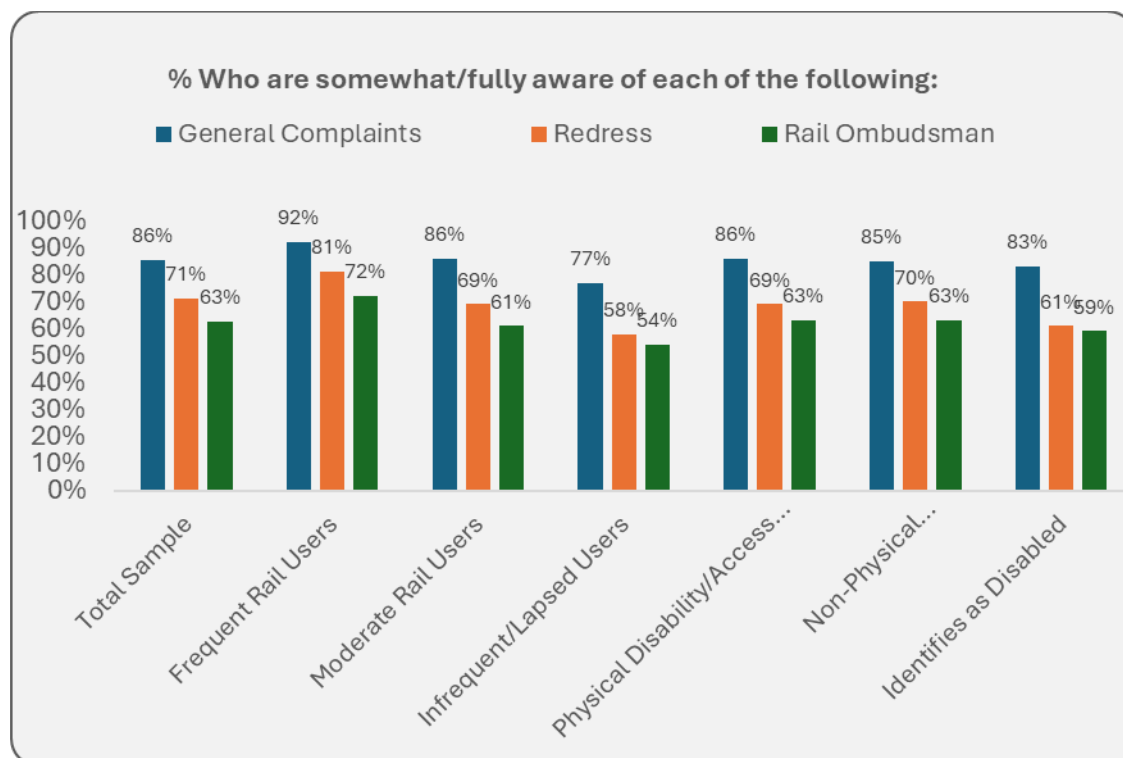
Most passengers with access needs or disabilities are at least partially aware of the complaints process and the ability to seek redress. However, this awareness is not always detailed, and there are some parts of the process which are less widely known about. In total:

- 86% of rail users with access needs are at least somewhat aware that they can complain to the operator.
- Of those who require booked assistance, 71% are at least somewhat aware that they can seek redress if there is a problem with their booked assistance.
- 63% are at least somewhat aware that they can escalate a complaint to the Rail Ombudsman.

Although most people have some awareness of the initial complaints process and the ability to seek redress, awareness of the Rail Ombudsman is lower. For each of the complaints processes, there is also a significant number who say they are only 'somewhat aware'. This might mean that they have some awareness of the process but may lack knowledge of where to start or how to formally complain or seek redress. Removing those who are only somewhat aware of each complaints process reduces the awareness figures considerably: 62% are fully aware of train or station operator general complaints processes, 39% of processes for seeking redress and 38% of the Rail Ombudsman.

In each case, there is little difference in awareness by access need or disability type but much greater difference by frequency of use. Those who travel more frequently are more likely to be aware of each process.

Figure 5: Awareness of complaints (sample: 1,153/654)



Consistently, awareness of both the Rail Ombudsman and the ability to seek redress are lower than awareness of the general complaints process to operators. This is true at both an overall level, when considering only 'full' awareness and when disaggregating between travel frequency and access need type.

However, the vast majority of rail users with access needs or disabilities would consider either using the Rail Ombudsman or seeking redress. Almost the entire sample (93%) said they may use the Rail Ombudsman, depending on the circumstances, with just under half (47%) saying they would definitely use it. The potential use figures for seeking redress are similarly emphatic; again, 93% of those who use booked assistance would consider seeking redress. More than half (54%) say they definitely would.

This suggests that engagement in the processes could be improved by greater awareness of them. For the total sample and for each travel frequency and access need subgroup, there is a greater proportion who say that they would definitely complain or seek redress than are fully aware of each process at the moment. This suggests that increasing awareness may prompt passengers to complain when they need to.

Levels of awareness and impact relating to the Rail Ombudsman were explored in the depth interviews. These discussions revealed a low level of awareness amongst those who had not engaged with the Rail Ombudsman previously, and a few misunderstandings about its role:

- There was some confusion about when and how to use the service (there was a presumption that the Rail Ombudsman was there for serious incidents only).
- It was considered that the language associated with Ombudsman organisations in general was quite formal and might have the potential to be overwhelming.
- There was a perception that the Rail Ombudsman might be biased toward the rail operators.
- There was an expectation that the process could be complex and time-consuming.

However, when the role of the Rail Ombudsman was explained further, noting its role as an independent and impartial service, it was perceived positively. With more promotion and awareness raising, some participants felt that knowing about the Rail Ombudsman could increase confidence in engaging in the complaints process.

“[When] falling off the train this service would have been useful. It was so wrong that this wasn't investigated. It's very difficult to make a complaint so this service would have helped.” Female, 55-64, mobility/sight loss/long-term conditions

“It is good to know they exist – without using them I can't say I have confidence in them but good to know they are there.” Female, 35-44, sight loss

“It reassures me that if anything goes wrong and nobody can help, I can go to the Ombudsman.” Female, 35-44, mobility/dexterity

4.2 Key drivers of awareness

Among those who are at least partially aware of the complaints process and ability to seek redress, word of mouth is an important source of knowledge. Across all passengers with access needs or disabilities, the most common source of awareness for each of the three processes is

friends and family. After this, rail services themselves are a critical conduit of information, particularly digital services and staff on trains or at stations.

Top five sources of information for operator general complaints process:

1. Friends/family (27%)
2. Operator website (26%)
3. Not sure/general awareness (20%)
4. Staff on train or at station (19%)
5. Social media (16%)

For most groups, being informed by friends and family was the biggest single driver of respondent awareness about operators' general complaints processes. For more frequent travellers, this was displaced by the operator website and for infrequent or lapsed rail users, 'not sure/general awareness' was the largest individual source.

Top five sources of information for operator redress process:

1. Friends/family (31%)
2. Staff on train or at station (19%)
3. Social media (19%)
4. Operator website (19%)
5. Operator complaints procedure (15%)

Friends and family dominate as a source of awareness for redress more than either of the other processes. For every group – by both travel frequency and need type – they are the top source, often by a wide margin. Generally, awareness of redress processes is more specific than others, with a diminished role for 'general awareness' and a stronger one for specific touchpoints, either train or station staff or websites.

Top five sources of information for finding out about the Rail Ombudsman:

1. Friends/family (26%)
2. Not sure/general awareness (22%)
3. Social media (17%)
4. Staff on train or at station (17%)
5. Operator website (15%)

Friends and family arguably play an even stronger role in awareness of the Rail Ombudsman. For every group except infrequent or lapsed rail users this is the most selected reason for source of knowledge. 'General awareness' is also widely cited as a source, perhaps reflecting knowledge of Ombudsman schemes in other sectors, or even the expectation that there would be a body of that kind.

Insights from the depth interviews highlighted the importance of informal routes of awareness raising and the reliance on friends and family for information. This access to informal word-of-mouth information contrasted with a lack of more formal marketing or rail communications about the processes. The interviews explored the best way to inform rail users of complaints and redress processes, and feedback reflected the need for multi-source, multi-format and repetitive messaging at all journey stages.

“Different points of the process. Planning, tickets etc. – if it came up at different intervals it would register in your mind. Posters don't hurt but you are more likely to

notice at the point of booking or opening your ticket. I would want assurance that doing that is not only easy, but it leads to change.” Female, 35-44, hearing loss

Ideas included:

- Direct Communication with passengers, especially those requiring assistance. This included mentions of the complaints process and ability to seek redress on the booking pages on websites, email confirmations of the journeys booked on the ticket itself and clear links on the Booking Assistance app and also on phone calls if the assistance was booked that way.

“[A good place would be] the email confirmation of your assistance. It outlines the journeys on the legs that you're going to take so I often read those anyway, just to make sure that they've understood what I've said over the phone, and that my journey, the timings and the stations correlate with where I'm going. I'd say if they put it in that email if anything does go wrong, that you are entitled to financial redress. That's probably the simplest way.” Male, 25-34, sight loss

- Messaging placement suggestions around where/how to start a complaint or redress claim included at the station/platform/on the train via posters and also signposting by staff at the station or on the train.
- Communication and awareness raising via other organisations such as disability specific organisations such as the Royal National Institute of Blind People or Disability Rights UK (organisations that have information, signposting and advisory functions).

Aside from where the communication appears, participants also discussed the importance of describing the process style, time demand and how the complaint or redress claim will be treated and used to drive improvements. All of these factors would increase engagement in the complaints process. The following messages and style were considered important in order for marketing to be impactful:

- To tackle logistical and energy barriers, it should be highlighted that the process is easy and quick and offered in various formats (if this is the case).
- To tackle motivational barriers the message that feedback is taken seriously and can lead to change is needed.
- A frame of reference can ensure complaints and redress services seem relevant for the user, for instance indications of what people can complain or claim about.
- The overall style should feel welcoming and inviting ‘we want your feedback’, ‘tell us how the journey was’.

4.3 Frequency of making complaints and seeking redress

4.3.1 Frequency of general complaints to operators

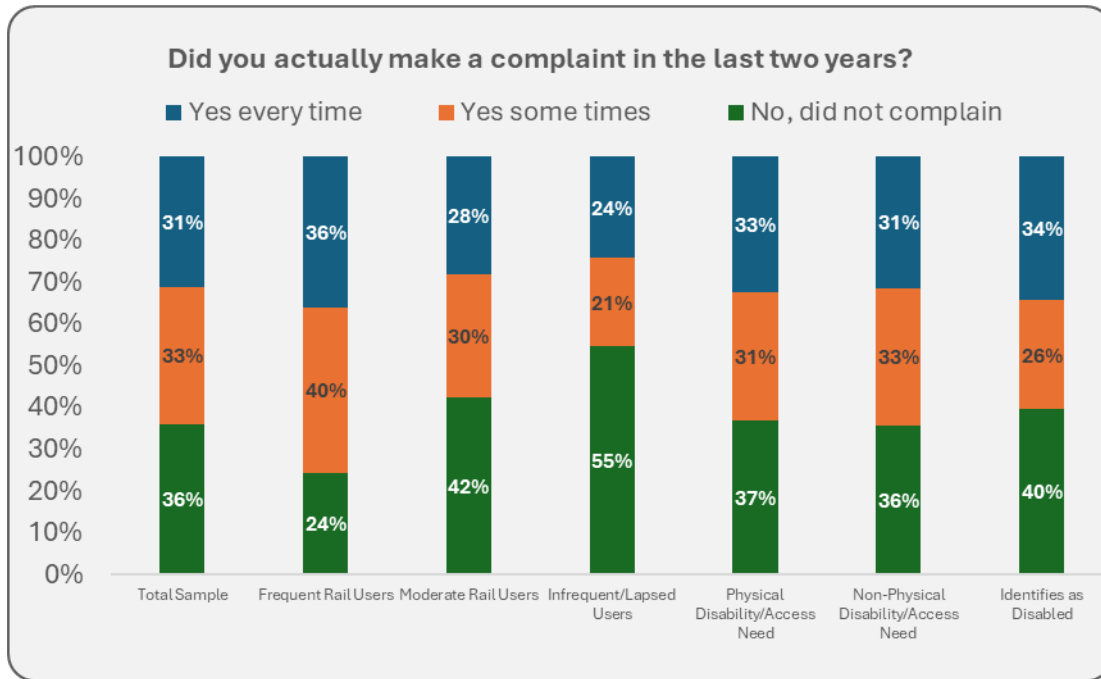
Just under half (44%) of passengers with access needs or disabilities have had at least one reason to raise a general complaint to an operator in the last two years.

This is most likely to be a single incident. One in four people (25%) have had one reason to complain and 19% more than one, with a very small minority (6%) having had more than three separate reasons to complain. Unsurprisingly, the frequency of complaint-reasons increases

with frequency of travel. Among the most frequent travellers, 64% have had occasion to complain in the last two years, 33% more than once.

Not all causes for a complaint result in a complaint. Of those that had reason to complain in the last two years, only about two thirds (64%) actually did.

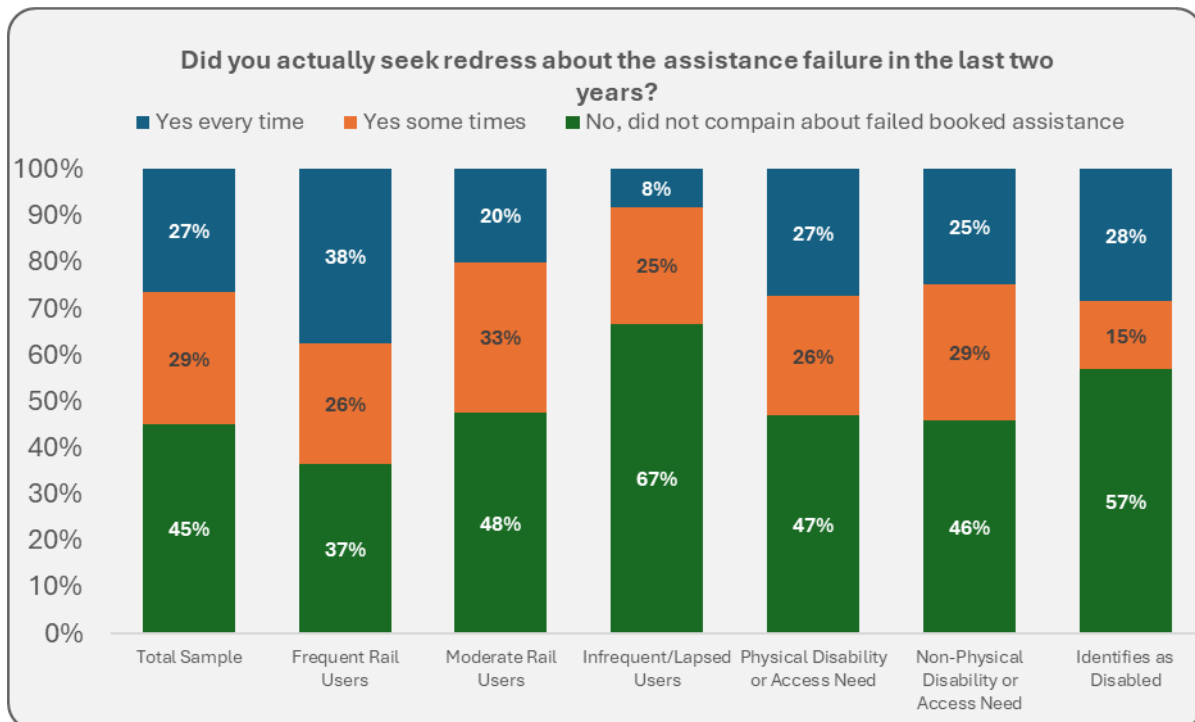
Figure 6: Frequency of complaints to operators (sample: 510)



Around a third (31%) of rail users with access needs complained on every occasion, which ranges from 36% of frequent travellers to 24% of infrequent ones. The starkest divide is in those that didn't complain at all – more than half (55%) of infrequent travellers that had reason to complain didn't. That is more than double the proportion of frequent travellers (24%) who did not complain at all. These data correspond to figures on the *number* of complaints made too: 54% of frequent rail users made more than one complaint, compared to just 34% of infrequent ones.

4.3.2 Frequency of seeking redress

Figure 7: Frequency of seeking redress (Sample: 189)



Those who travel by rail more frequently are considerably more likely to have sought redress if they had reason to do so. 38% of frequent travellers say they claimed on every occasion, compared to just 8% of infrequent travellers – with two thirds of this group (67%) saying they never sought redress about their booked assistance failure.

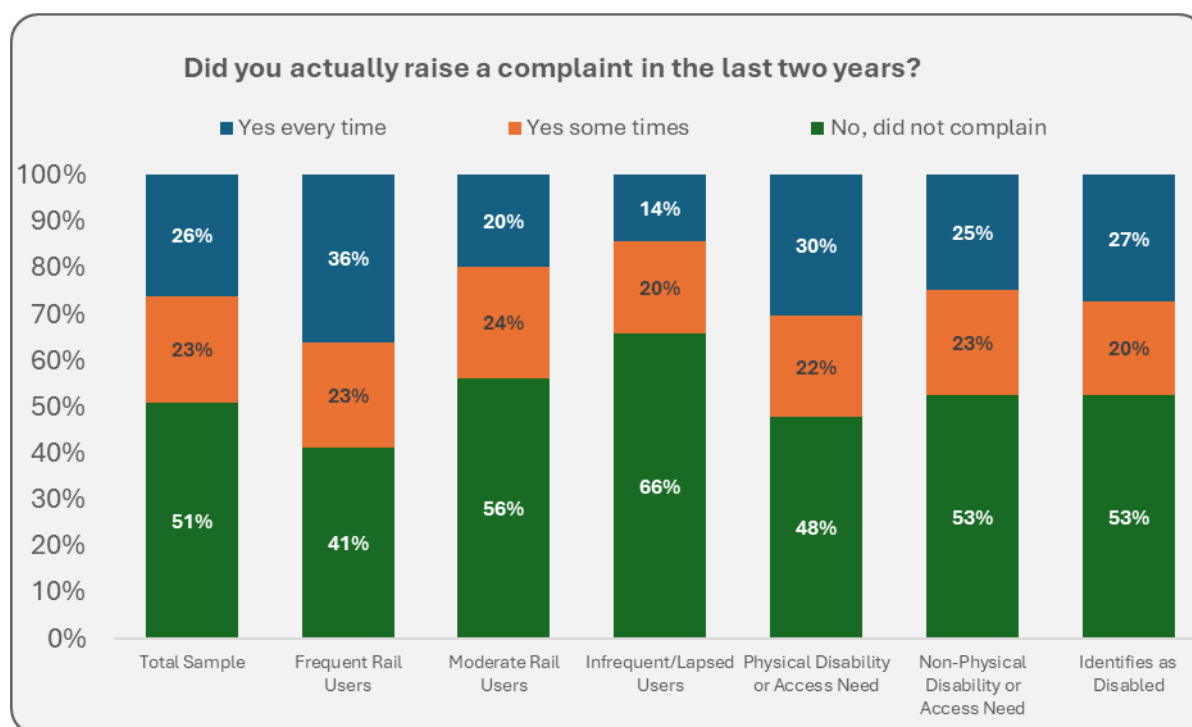
4.3.3 Frequency of complaints to the Rail Ombudsman

As would be expected, complaints escalated to the Rail Ombudsman are less common than complaints to operators, but the data shows similar patterns in terms of the gap between having a reason to complain and actually doing so, and in who makes complaints.

Overall, a fifth (21%) of passengers with access needs or disabilities had had reason to escalate a complaint to the Rail Ombudsman in the past two years, a figure which rises to 32% of frequent travellers and falls to 13% of infrequent ones. There is no difference by disability or access need type.

Just under half (49%) of those who had reason to make a complaint to the Rail Ombudsman did so on at least some occasions, with just over one in four complaining on every occasion (26%). Those who travel by rail more frequently were more than twice as likely as infrequent travellers to have complained on every occasion (36% to 14%).

Figure 8: Frequency of complaints to the Rail Ombudsman (sample: 180)



4.4 Ease of making complaints and seeking redress

Generally, rail users with access needs or disabilities found it moderately easy to raise complaints and seek redress, but the data suggest that not all submitted their complaint/claim without difficulty.

More than half (59%) of those who sought redress when their booked assistance has failed said it was easy or very easy to find out information about how to make a claim, while a slightly lower (57%) proportion said it was easy to find out information about who to submit the claim to. A minority (14%) reported difficulty with the process.

Amongst the small number of respondents who felt it was difficult to find out information on how to seek redress, verbatim quotes indicate that a more streamlined process and a simplified website could improve this ease of access.

E4C: In your own words, why was it difficult to find information about claiming redress?

- “I was passed back and forth between two different train companies”.
- “Trying to get the options on the website”.
- “Because it took me ages to get to the right place”.
- “It’s just not an easy process to follow”.

The data for complaints about the Rail Ombudsman paints a similar picture. Overall, 63% said that it was very easy or easy to access information about the Rail Ombudsman service and 61% that it was very easy or easy to raise the complaint itself. Around one in seven (14%) people who made a complaint to the Rail Ombudsman said it was difficult or very difficult.

Figure 9: Ease of escalating complaint to the Rail Ombudsman, by complaint outcome (Sample: 121)

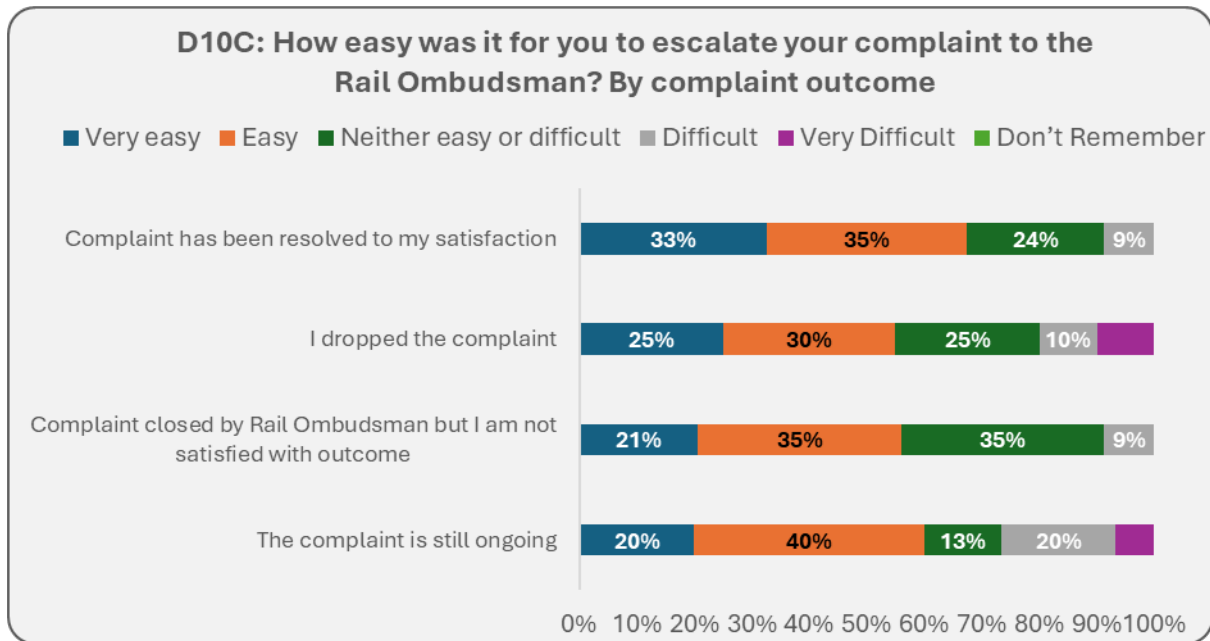
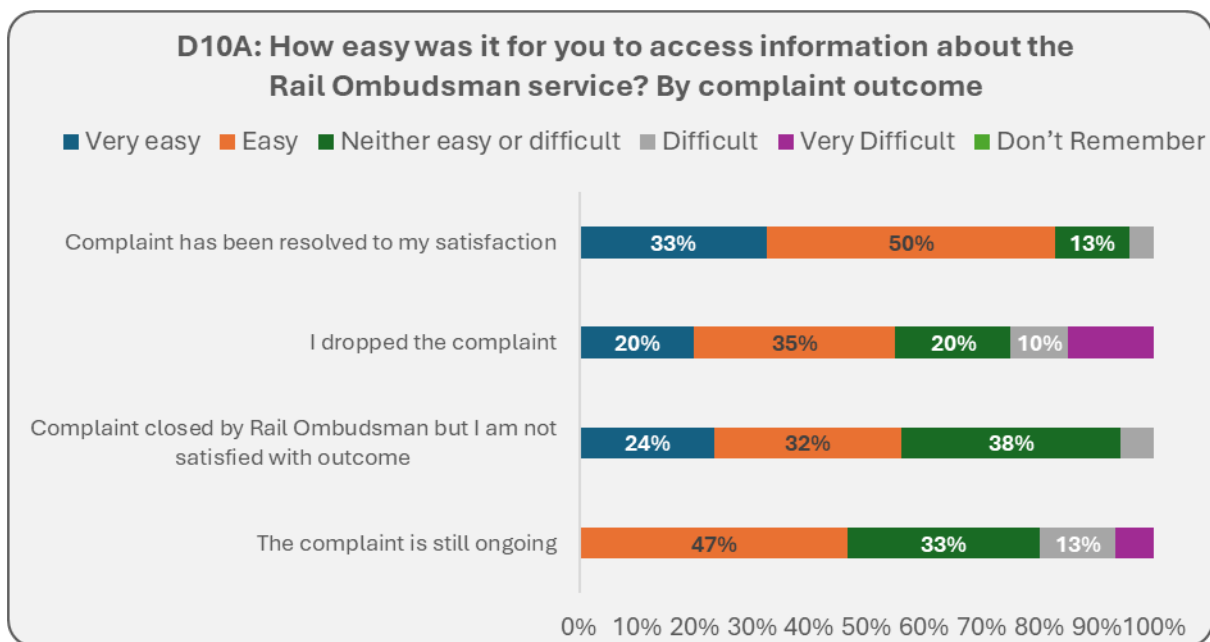


Figure 10: Ease of accessing information about the Rail Ombudsman, by complaint outcome (Sample: 121)

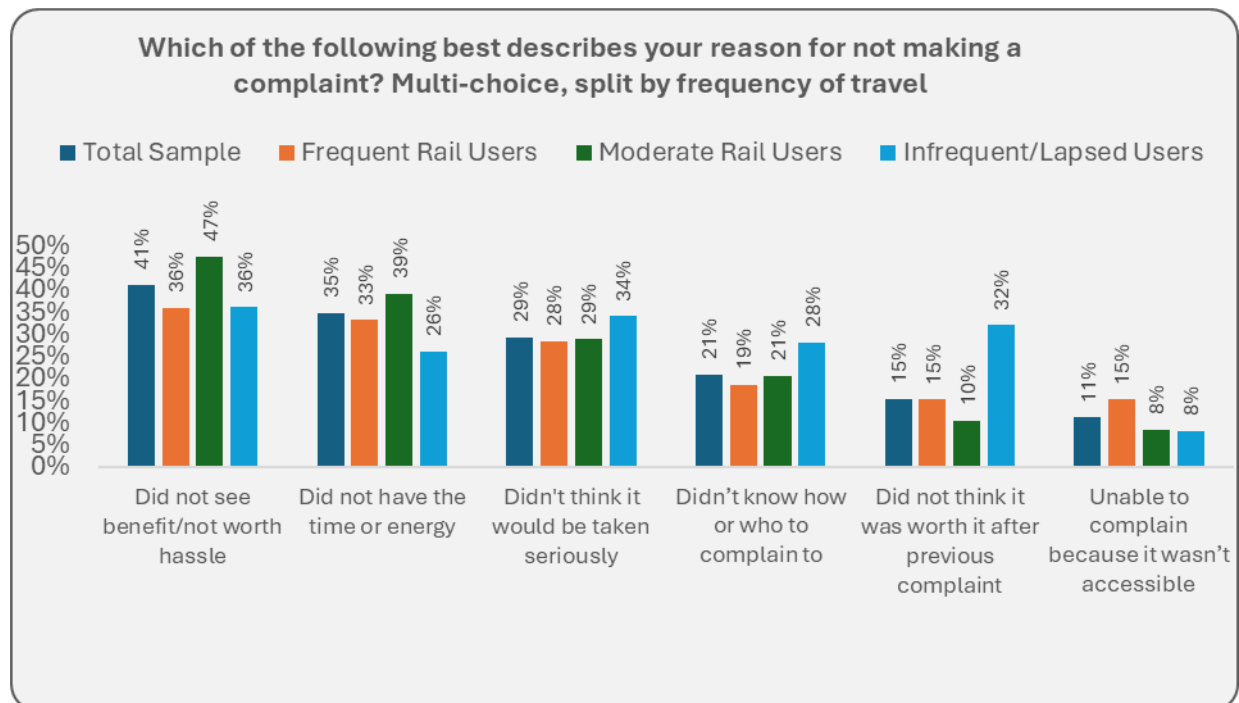


4.5 Reasons for not making complaints or seeking redress

In each of the processes, there is a significant drop-off between having a reason to complain or seek redress and actually doing so. There are several reasons for this. Most commonly, rail users with access needs or disabilities do not see the processes as a worthwhile use of their time.

Reasons for not complaining or seeking redress vary slightly depending on the process. For operator general complaints, the most typically cited reason is that the user did not see the benefit in complaining or did not think it was worth the hassle.

Figure 11: Reasons for not making a general complaint to operator (sample: 351)

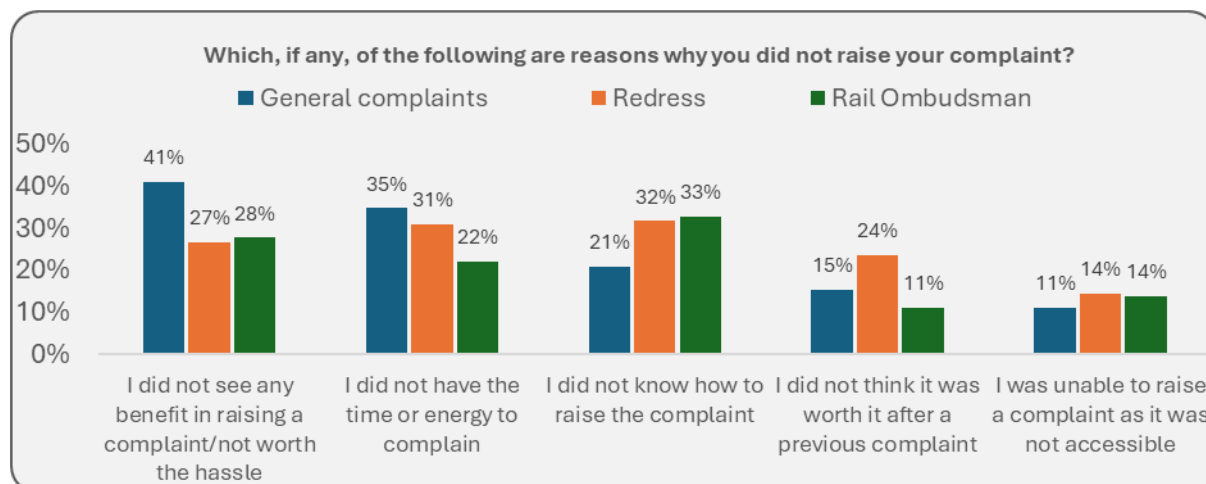


Other dominant reasons echo both that lack of faith in the complaints process and the perceived effort it would take to complain relative to the perceived benefit from doing so. More than a third (35%) say they lacked the energy or time to complain, and slightly fewer (29%) say they didn't think it would be taken seriously. Other reasons, such as not knowing who to complain to, or how to complain (15%) or not being able to complain because the process wasn't accessible (11%) point to more specific barriers in the process.

Those that travel less frequently (including moderate rail users that travel less than once a week) are most likely to see complaining as not worthwhile. But those who travel rarely (or who are lapsed rail users) are much more likely than others to avoid the complaints process because of a previous complaint.

Feeling that the process is not worthwhile is a notable reason for not escalating a complaint to the Rail Ombudsman and not seeking redress. But in these processes, it is not the main barrier.

Figure 12: Reasons why complaint wasn't raised to an operator or escalated to the Rail Ombudsman (sample: 350/180/139)



Instead, not knowing *how* to raise the complaint or seek redress is the main reason why these avenues were not pursued. Additionally, around one in seven (14%) cited lack of accessibility in the process as a reason for not pursuing either process.. Nearly one in four (24%) of those who could have sought redress said that previous experiences made them think it wouldn't be worthwhile. Those that travel by train more frequently are less likely to cite knowledge barriers as a reason – but are more likely to say that seeking redress wasn't worth it after pursuing a previous claim.

In the depth interviews participants talked about a range of occasions when they felt they could have made a complaint or sought redress and why they did not do so.

The reasons for potential complaints and redress claims that were not made varied but were significant. They included falling off a train, being unable to leave the train and having no support to disembark, train staff being unhelpful and/or booked assistance not being available. Inaccessible in-journey communication was also an issue on multiple occasions when navigating cancelled trains or disrupted services, due to a lack of auditory or visible announcements or staff on hand to help.

Their reasons for not raising a complaint or seeking redress on all or some occasions resonated with the findings in the survey. Generally, they were either process related or reflective of the response they thought they would get or impact that it would make.

Process related barriers included:

- Knowing how to commence a complaint.
- Feeling unable to effectively communicate the issues due to access needs and also the possibility of being able to remember all the details such as the name of the station where an incident occurred, the time of the service travelling etc.
- General anxiety and stress when filling out forms.
- Previous poor experiences of complaint making.
- Anxiety and stress: the process would be personally triggering.

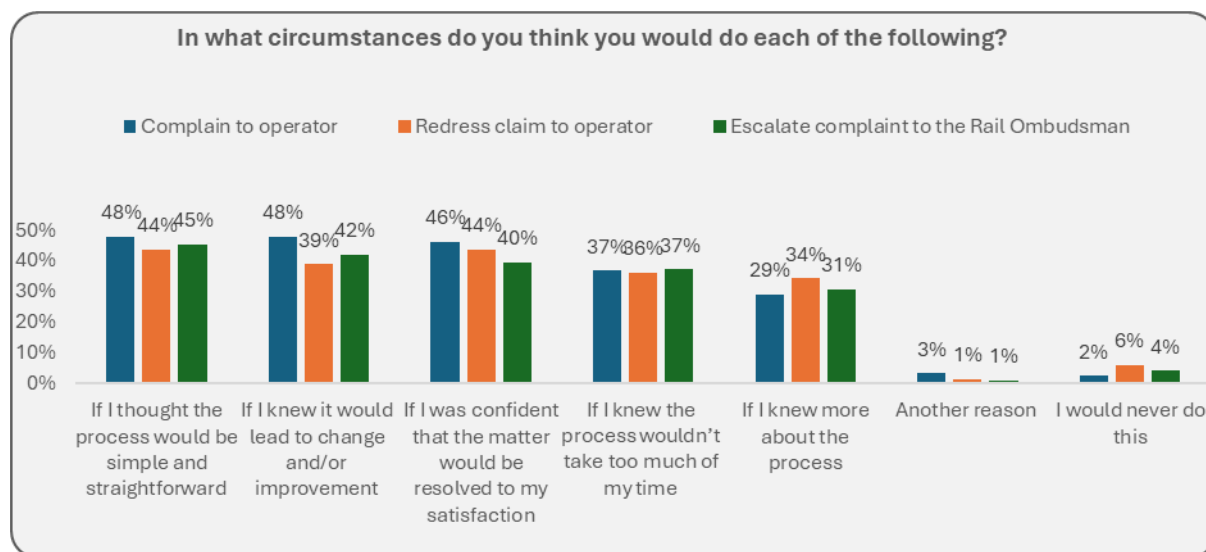
Previous experiences of, or perceptions relating to, complaints and redress highlighted a preference not to complain in order to preserve energy, this is in a context where everyday frustrations due to access needs can be barriers.

4.6 What would persuade people to make complaints or seek redress

Those who've had reason to complain or seek redress, but have not done so, would like to see a simpler process that had a higher chance of a satisfactory outcome.

These sentiments are consistent across the two tiers of complaints we asked about. Just under half of people who had reason to complain to an operator but didn't, say that they would have done so if the process was simple and straightforward, which ranges from 48% of those of those considering a general complaint and 44% of those considering seeking redress about their booked assistance failure.

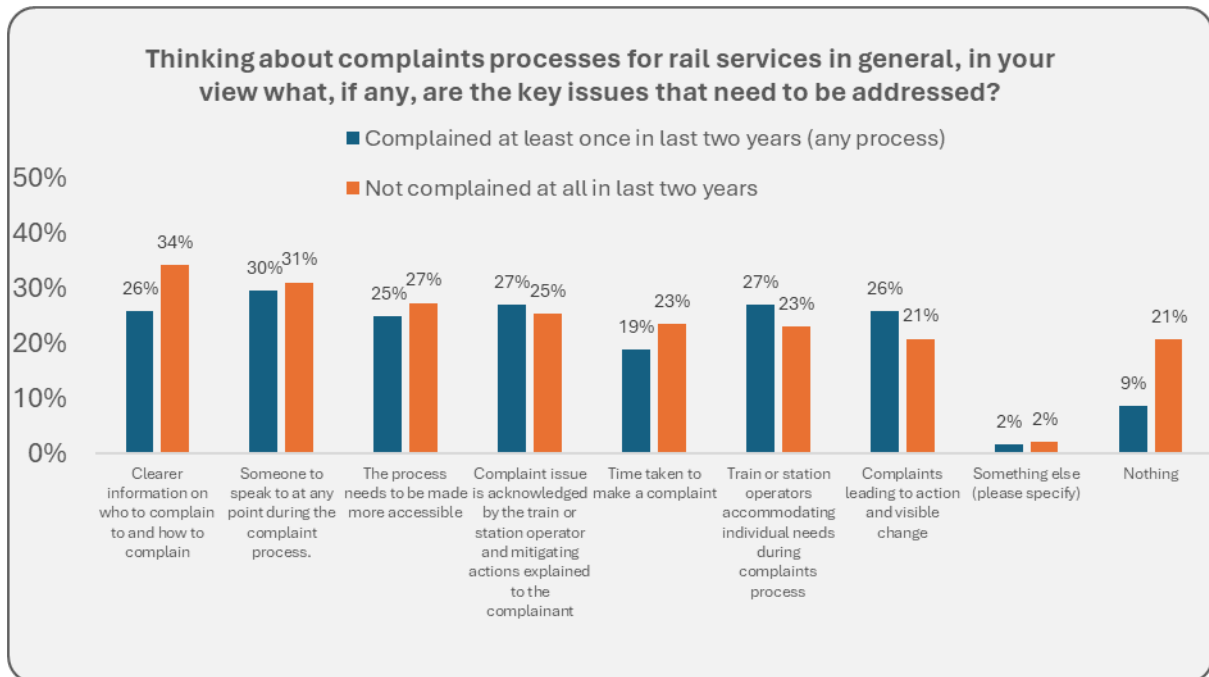
Figure 13: What would persuade those passengers who didn't complain or seek redress to do so? (Sample: 128, 85, 124)



There are also notable differences in views about the complaints process between those that have and haven't engaged in them. When asked about what, if anything, should be improved with regard to complaints processes for rail services in general, those that *had* complained (any complaint) in the last two years were more likely to say that complaints need to lead to action and visible change (26%), and that operators should accommodate individual needs.

However, those that haven't complained are more likely to say that clearer information on who to complain to and how to complain (34%) is a key issue to be addressed.

Figure 14: Issues in complaints processes that need to be addressed (sample: 1,153)



Three main themes emerged from the depth interviews in terms of what a well-designed and managed complaints process should consider and deliver:

- How I engage: Reducing barriers at a practical process level
- How it will make me feel: Recognising the importance of appropriate, respectful, fair and open conversations which elicit the detail needed, and
- The future impact it will have: Ensuring that highlighting a failure in the system will help serve the greater community good.

When discussing how to reduce barriers at a practical level, participants mentioned:

- There should be clear links to the relevant complaints process and easy to understand information on next steps (how to navigate the process).
- Communication should be offered in multiple formats and so that a user can select their preferred format and one which is more accessible to them.
- Clarity about the steps required in the process.
- Process needs to minimise the information and recall burden.
- Questions need to allow easy description of what happened and what was relevant.
- Time and benefit must outweigh the energy needed to engage.

"It just feels like it would involve a lot of steps. To recall precise information – they would want to know the time and place so they could trace it. With other things you do not need to give such detail." Female, 35-44, hearing loss

"The time it takes to go through everything creates all sorts of issues with my mental health. Those things when they go wrong, it comes back to you each time. It knocks your confidence." Male, 25-34, sight loss

To get the best out of a process there is an importance in recognising how events have made the complainant feel and in validating this, participants wanted exchanges to feel:

- Respectful: recognition of the issues.
- Meaningful: feedback should discuss how processes might work better.
- Validated: where relevant complainants should feel justified in their need to complain.
- Confidence: a sense a complaint could trigger potential improvements.

For many, the main motivation for complaining is to trigger change in services so that others do not have to go through the same ordeals. Participants called for 'healthy' complaints processes that feed data into service design to serve a greater community good:

- Processes should provide data for the operators to understand and review what is not working.
- Train operators should have a willingness to learn from their customers' experiences.
- Ongoing complaints recognising repeated failures should lead to changes in processes.
- Processes and service delivery should consider and be designed to better support disrupted journeys.
- Staff training and conduct on board and in station can be improved.

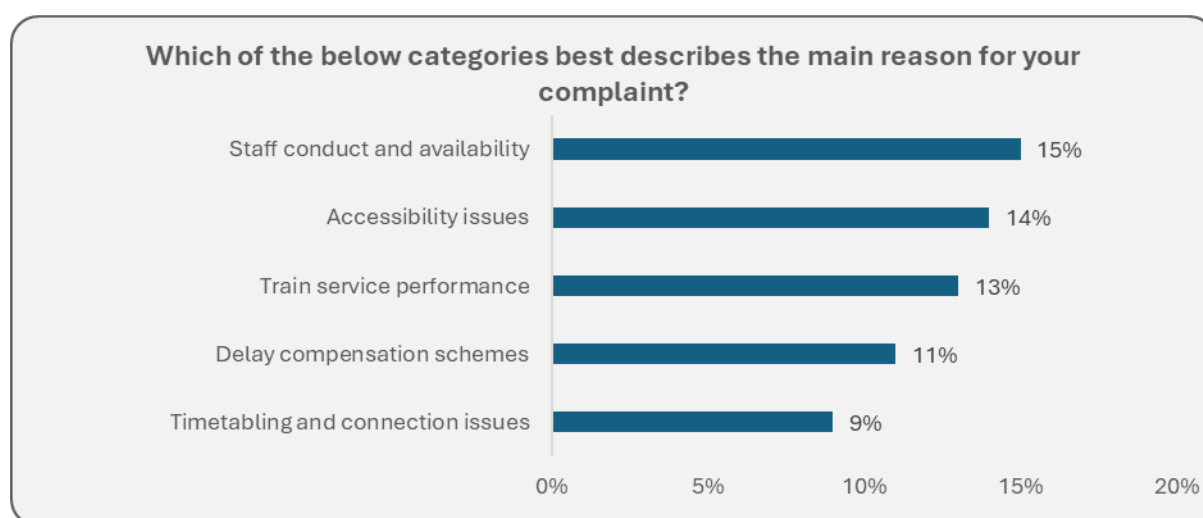
"Deaf people have been telling train operators to make audio announcements more accessible for a long time, you want to get that sense they are acting on it – some accountability is needed." Female, 35-44, hearing loss

5. General complaints to operators

5.1 Reasons for complaint

There are many reasons why complaints to operators are made, with no single cause standing out. Staff conduct and availability was the most widely cited reason for the individual's (most recent) complaint, but by just 15% of rail users who had made a complaint in the last two years. This was very closely followed by accessibility issues (14%), train service performance (13%) and delay compensation schemes (11%). The fifth most common reason for a complaint was timetabling and connection issues (9%).

Figure 15: Reason for complaint (sample: 369)



There are some variances in the reason for complaints by travel frequency and access need type, although staff conduct and availability is either the most or second most cited reason why rail users in every group made a complaint. But accessibility issues are notably more prominent for certain groups. They are the most likely reason for complaints among those that have a physical access need (19%) and those that identify as disabled (20%).

Safety and security is also a prominent reason for complaints among some groups - especially moderate rail users (10%) and infrequent or lapsed users (12%).

5.2 The complaints process

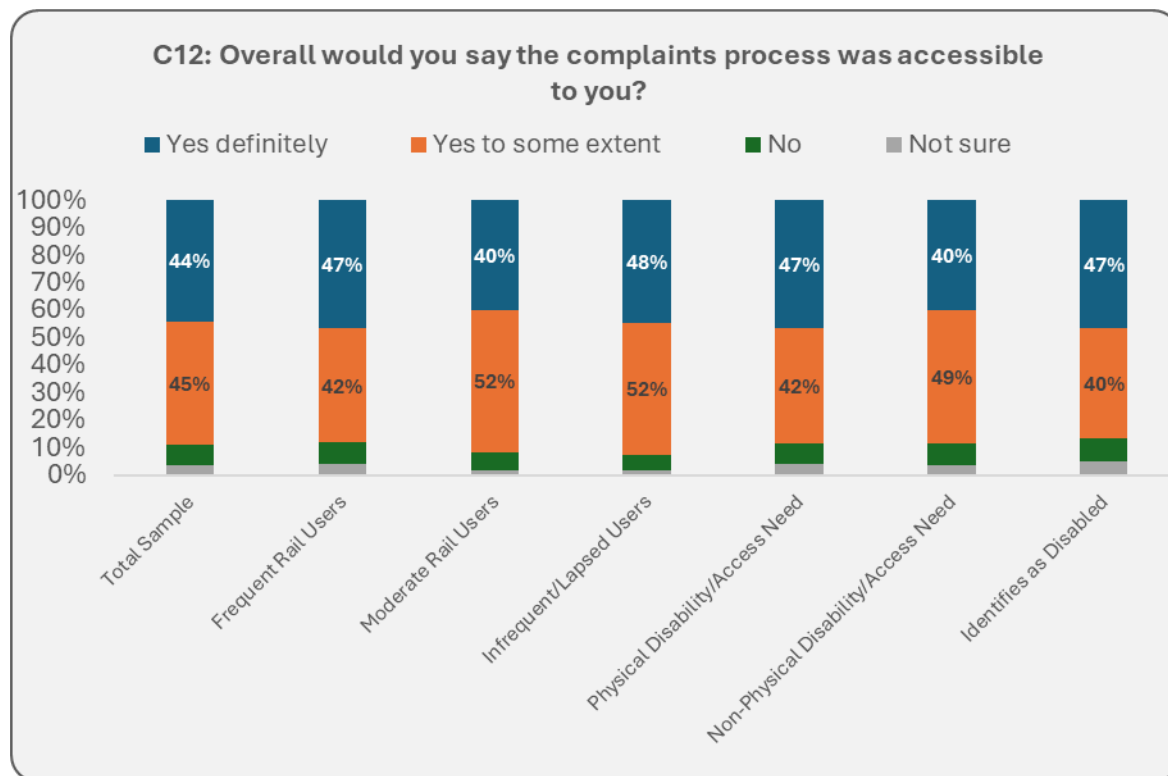
General complaints to operators are made in a variety of ways. Online processes are the most common, with 43% of passengers saying they made their complaint by email or using a webform. But other channels are also fairly widely used, including in person (22%, including 'meet the manager' opportunities), by telephone (15%), and through social media or an online forum (12%). A small number of complaints (7%) are also made by post.

Most complainants in the research had either had their complaint resolved or had dropped it. Only a small percentage (8%) reported that the complaint was still ongoing.

Of those for whom the complaint was over, 37% said it had been resolved to their satisfaction, with 25% saying it had been closed, but *not* to their satisfaction. Additionally, 15% said they dropped the complaint.

Amongst those who dropped their complaint, almost half (46%) did so because of the time it took for them to receive a response. Additionally, a third (33%) of those who dropped their complaint did so because they felt that their complaint was not being taken seriously.

Figure 16: Whether or not respondents felt that the complaints process to operators was accessible to them (sample: 327)



Most complainants report that the complaints process was at least partially accessible. But fewer than half say that it was definitely accessible, suggesting some room for improvement. When prompted further, respondents indicated that the process was too long and complicated to be fully accessible, that online forms weren't always compatible with screen readers and the demands for evidence were too great or too specific.

Overall, 45% of complainants said the process was accessible 'to some extent' and 7% said it wasn't accessible.

There is a similarly mixed response to how seriously complainants feel their complaint was taken and how listened to, they felt in the process. On both matters, a substantial minority are negative about their experiences, with lapsed and infrequent users most likely to be affected.

- 21% don't think the operator took them seriously. This rises to 35% of lapsed or infrequent users and 24% of people who identify as disabled.
- 19% don't feel the operator listened and understood the issue. This rises to 29% of lapsed or infrequent users.

The accounts in the depth interviews relating to complaints to operators covered a range of issues including challenges trying to get fares reimbursed for cancellations, a lack of help from platform staff when lifts were absent and incidents on board services where the validity of a Disabled Railcard has been challenged.

Collectively the impacts of such experiences across this group were a heightened stress at various stages of the journey and concern about feeling safe and supported using rail. Participants talked about feeling unvalued by the operator and station staff and the motivation to complain was driven by a need to see a change in services for themselves and others.

"Those that are even less mobile than myself would have a problem. It should be signposted very clearly. I mean, there's no way they could have carried a wheelchair down those stairs, if I'd been in a wheelchair, it would have been impossible." Female, 65-74, mobility/dexterity/ long-term and mental health conditions

5.3 Outcomes and satisfaction

Most commonly, passengers who made a general complaint to an operator were hoping to receive financial compensation. Almost half (46%) of complainants to operators hoped that financial compensation would be an outcome of their claim. This figure is consistent across most groups (across travel frequency and need type) but rises to 53% among infrequent/lapsed rail users.

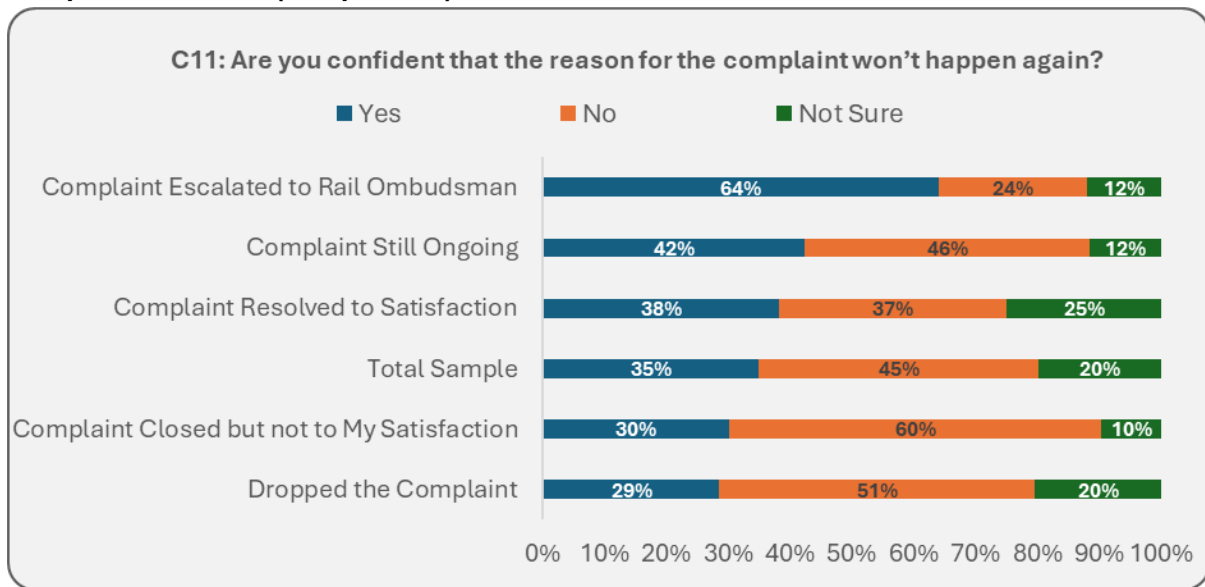
However, financial compensation is only one desired outcome. Significant numbers were also hoping for other outcomes, including an apology (38%), an explanation (34%) and reassurance that the issue won't occur again (29%). Those identifying as disabled are likely to have slightly different outcome priorities. Nearly half (44%) said that an apology was their desired outcome, and 41% wanted reassurance that it won't happen again.

Overall, satisfaction with the outcome of general complaints to operators is mixed. Just under half (47%) say they got the outcome they were hoping for, with 28% saying they didn't, and 24% saying only partly. More negatively, only 35% are confident that the reason for the complaint won't happen again.

The outcome of the complaint can correlate with satisfaction with different elements of the process. For example, those whose complaint was resolved satisfactorily were more likely to report that the process was 'definitely' accessible (60%, compared to 44% overall and 40% of those dissatisfied with the outcome).

However, the nature of the outcome has a much more limited impact on confidence that the issue for the complaint won't reoccur. Overall, just 35% are confident that the reason for the complaint won't happen again. Among those whose complaint was closed to their satisfaction this rises only slightly, to 38%.

Figure 17: Confidence in reason for complaint to operator not happening again, by complaint outcome (sample: 327)



Whilst one participant seeking fare reimbursement was happy to get it, satisfaction amongst participants in the qualitative stage was generally low. This was due in part to a lack of a personal and relevant response from operators but also because the main driver to complain was to see improvement on a wider scale. Across these discussions participants highlighted the need for:

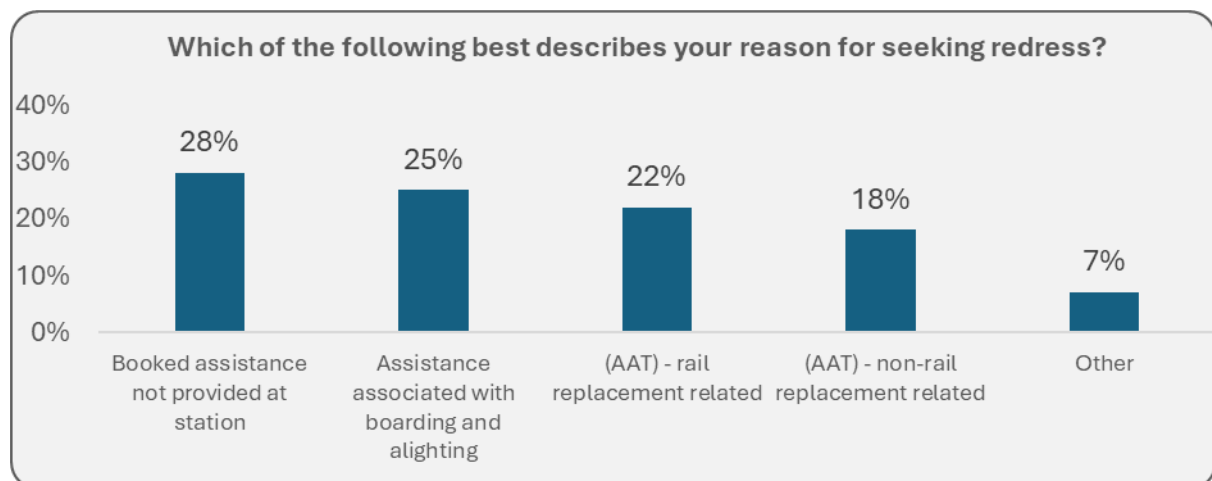
- Consistency of service and ensuring all staff understand various procedures and processes from ticketing to checking railcards and also steps to provide help when needed on-board and on trains (disability awareness training).
- Ensuring responses to complaints are personal and relevant (appeared like a copy and paste exercise with no direct reference to the complaint itself).
- Needing a process that offers communication in various formats (alternatives to talking or emailing or being told to go to the station itself to talk to staff which is what happened in one instance).

6. Seeking redress from operators about booked assistance failure

6.1 Reasons for seeking redress

Most commonly, those seeking redress say the reason for their claim is because the assistance was not provided at the station. This accounts for 28% of claims, with a further 25% saying their claim was due to assistance when boarding and alighting.

Figure 18: Reasons for seeking redress (sample: 267)



6.2 The redress process

The majority (86%) of those seeking redress say the process was accessible to them, but only 39% say it was definitely accessible. A slightly larger group (47%) say it was accessible only 'to some extent'. About one in eight (12%) say it wasn't accessible.

There is a similarly nuanced picture when it comes to how seriously passengers feel they were being taken at the start of the process. The majority (85%) do feel they were taken seriously, for almost half (48%) this is caveated: they only feel they were taken seriously to 'some extent'. A slightly higher proportion (63%) feel the issue was acknowledged and steps taken to prevent it in the future, although more than one in four (27%) do not feel this way.

Discussions in the depth interviews were related to failed assistance caused by disruption and inadequate communication about rail services. In terms of the redress process itself, participants did not highlight any issues with inaccessibility of process, but they did give some ideas on how to make it more effective.

They suggested that integrating information about the steps of the redress process more visibly into the ticket and assistance booking procedures would be beneficial. This allows them to be more knowledgeable about the process itself before entering into it.

Additionally, more supported conversations were needed, perhaps using the booking information on the database. Articulating the detail of events can be challenging (i.e. the station names, times of day, order of events) both in terms of recall and also, depending on the event

itself, triggering the emotion of what was a traumatic experience. If the operator has access to the information through for example the booking or ticket then it doesn't need to be asked of the complainant. It could be programmatically added reducing the effort for the individual. Anything that could be done to limit the energy and burden for the passenger would be a positive move.

6.3 Outcomes and satisfaction

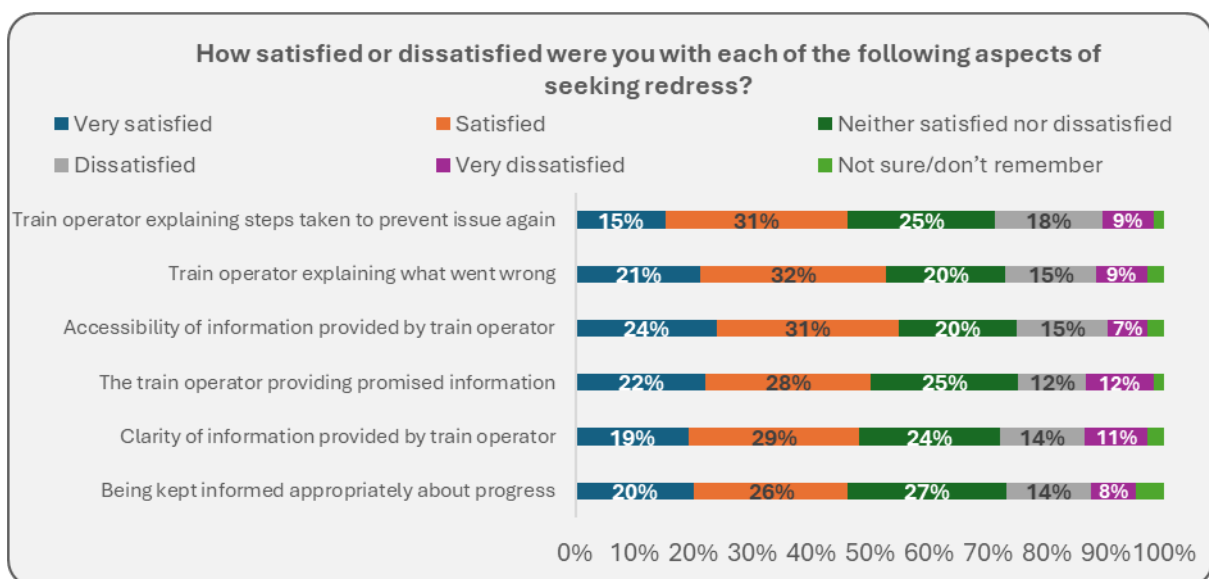
Financial compensation is narrowly the most commonly selected desired outcome for a redress claim. Two fifths (42%) of complainants selected this, just ahead of the proportion seeking an apology (40%). However, other reasons were also selected, including receiving reassurance that it wouldn't happen again (37%) and that they'd receive an explanation (35%).

Of the three processes explored in this research, seeking redress for booked assistance failure has the highest proportion of passengers reporting that their claim has been resolved to their satisfaction – 41%. However, overall results are quite mixed. One in four (25%) passengers say the claim has been resolved, but *not* to their satisfaction. Overall, 48% say that they got the outcome they were hoping for, with a further 16% saying they *partly* got their desired outcome. A third (33%) didn't get the outcome they wanted.

Overall satisfaction with the process is mixed. On each measure, a significant minority report dissatisfaction and around half say they are satisfied. Specifically:

- 46% are satisfied that the operator explained the steps taken to prevent the issue happening again, 27% are dissatisfied.
- 46% are satisfied that they were kept appropriately informed about progress, 22% are dissatisfied.
- 48% are satisfied with the clarity of information provided by the operator, 25% are dissatisfied.
- 53% are satisfied that the operator explained what went wrong, 24% are dissatisfied.
- 55% are satisfied with the accessibility of the information provided by the operator, 22% are dissatisfied.

Figure 19: Satisfaction with aspects of seeking redress (Sample: 104)



As with the Rail Ombudsman and other kinds of operator complaints, there appears to be a relationship between outcomes and perceptions of the process. The sample size for those seeking redress is too small to make definitive judgements, but the data indicates that those whose redress claim was resolved to their satisfaction are more satisfied with other aspects of the process. Specifically, those whose claim was resolved to their satisfaction are more likely to say they got the outcome they wanted (63%, compared to 48% overall) and are more likely to say that the process was accessible to them (49%, compared to 39% overall).

The depth interviews revealed a mixed level of satisfaction. Whilst all participants acknowledged and appreciated any financial compensation they received for failed booked assistance, the gravity and impact of the incidents and the perceived lack of tangible improvements in services, often outweighed this sentiment. It was evident that financial compensation, while appreciated, was not the primary motivator for seeking redress about the types of issues relating to failed assistance. Participants wanted change and redress data was thought to be a good way to initiate improvements. That would include importance of disability awareness programs for staff as part of this improvement.

"I think my frustrations and anger came from I genuinely felt I was forgotten about. I was just left on a train with nobody to even check if everybody had got off." Male, 25-34, sight loss

7. Escalating complaints to the Rail Ombudsman

7.1 Reasons for complaint

A small proportion (11%) of rail users with access needs or disabilities have escalated a complaint to the Rail Ombudsman in the last two years.

The reasons for their escalated complaint tally closely with those complaints to operators. This is particularly true of ‘staff conduct and availability’ which was the most commonly cited main reason for escalating a complaint to the Rail Ombudsman (14%). This is followed by timetabling and connection issues (12%), safety and security (10%) and quality of the train (10%). An additional reason for escalating a complaint to the Rail Ombudsman is complaints handling itself, which was cited by 10% of those raising a complaint. Only a small proportion (5%) of those complaining to the Rail Ombudsman said that accessibility issues were the reason.

In the depth interviews, motivations for escalating complaints to the Rail Ombudsman included asking for an apology or acknowledgment of the impact of inadequate service, and reimbursement for expenses incurred due to cancelled trains or other inconveniences. Participants hoped to effect meaningful changes in what they perceived as flawed service provision. Positive outcomes were noted when:

- A participant with challenges related to mobility, dexterity, and neurodivergent conditions escalated an initial complaint concerning several instances of misunderstanding with station guards and a reluctance to provide assistance. These concerns primarily revolved around accessing alternative services during train cancellations and experiencing a complex refund process. Following the escalation, there was an acknowledgment of the issues raised and a commitment to review and improve existing processes.
- A participant had experienced a failed ramp assist at a station and was left at the platform. A complaint was made to the train operator and no reply received. A positive experience came with escalation to the Rail Ombudsman service via financial compensation.

7.2 The complaints handling process

The Rail Ombudsman performs slightly better than operators in terms of complainants’ perceptions of the complaints process, although there are still issues and areas for improvement.

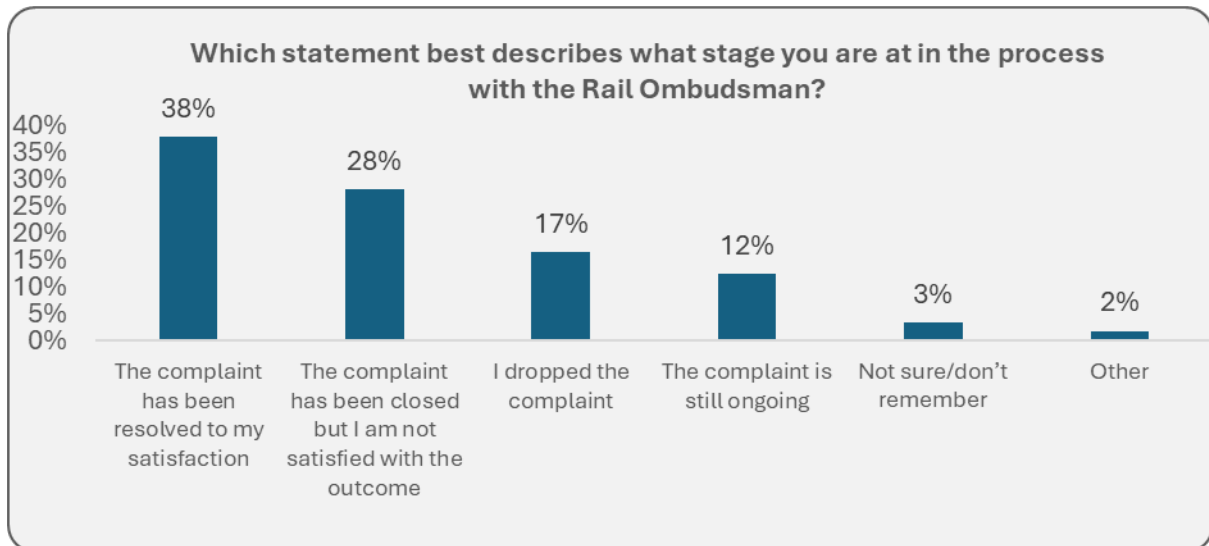
The majority (86%) of passengers with access needs or disabilities report that the Rail Ombudsman process was accessible to them, although only 53% say ‘definitely’ and 33% only ‘to some extent’.

A slightly higher proportion of Rail Ombudsman complainants say that their complaint has now been resolved to their satisfaction: 38%, compared to 35% for operators. But a significant minority (28%) say that although the complaint has been closed by the Rail Ombudsman, they are not satisfied with the outcome.

Around one in six (17%) people who escalated a complaint to the Rail Ombudsman have dropped it. In the survey, those who dropped their complaint were able to cite the reasons why in an open-text response. Of the twenty individuals who said they dropped their complaint five

said that the process was not accessible, five did not think the resolution would be worthwhile and five said it was taking too much time and energy. Additionally, three people said the process was too complicated, and three said it took too long to get a response. Some respondents gave more than one reason for their decision.

Figure 20: Stage in the process (sample: 121)



Two participants in the depth interviews had experience of dealing directly with the Rail Ombudsman. One of these received compensation and found the process easy, accessible, and quick. Another participant with multiple complaint cases struggled with evidence provision, so the process was challenging.

7.3 Outcomes and satisfaction

The motivations for escalating a complaint to the Rail Ombudsman are quite different to those for making an initial complaint to or seeking redress from an operator.

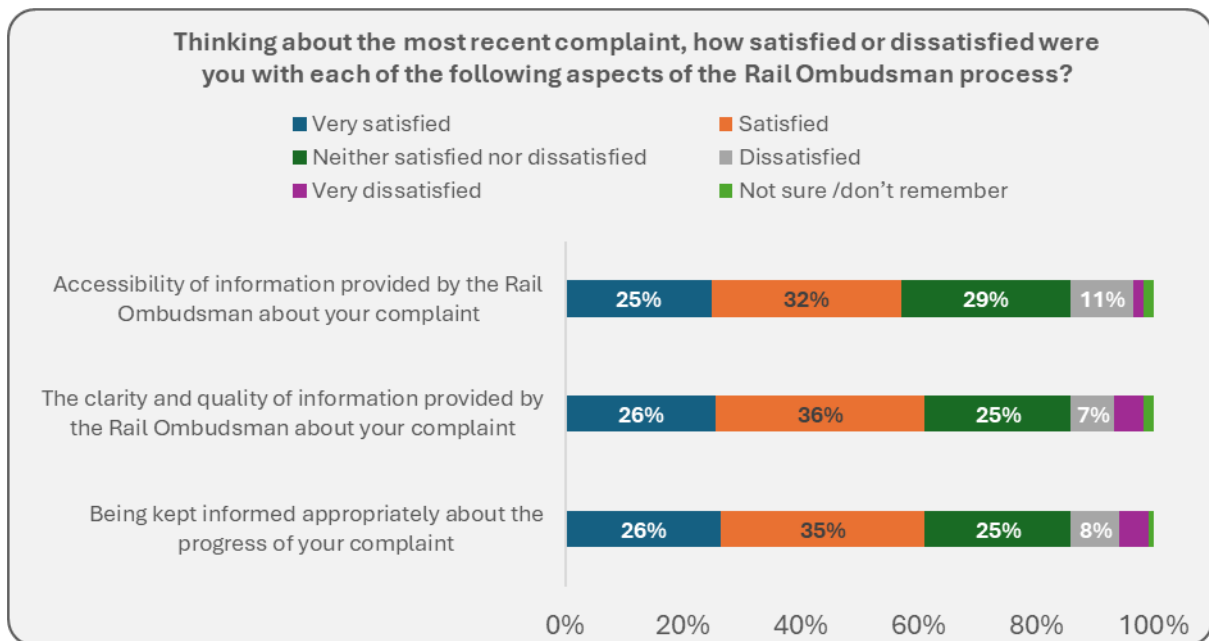
Only 25% of those raising a complaint to the Ombudsman say that financial compensation was their desired outcome. Instead, complainants are more likely to cite wanting an apology (30%), an explanation (34%) and reassurance that steps have been taken to prevent the issue happening again (also 34%).

Outcomes are slightly more positive, too. Over half (58%) say they got the outcome they wanted (compared to 47% at the first tier), with a further 13% saying they partly got their desired outcome. Most (72%) who've been through the Rail Ombudsman process now consider the matter closed.

More than half of complainants are also satisfied with various aspects of the process. In total:

- 57% are satisfied with the accessibility of information provided by the Rail Ombudsman about their complaint. 13% are dissatisfied.
- 61% are satisfied with how they were kept informed about the progress of their complaint. 13% are dissatisfied.
- 62% are satisfied with the clarity and quality of information provided by the Ombudsman about their complaint. 12% are dissatisfied.

Figure 21: Satisfaction with different aspects of escalating a complaint to Rail Ombudsman (Sample: 121)



As with operator complaints and redress, there does appear to be a relationship between the outcome of the complaint and perspectives on the process. Sample sizes in the survey are quite small at this stage, and do not provide definitive evidence, but do suggest that those who got the outcome they wanted are more positive about the Rail Ombudsman process.

For example, 72% of complainants whose complaint was resolved to their satisfaction say the Rail Ombudsman process was ‘definitely’ accessible to them, compared to 53% of all complainants, and 43% of those who are not satisfied. Similarly, 81% of those satisfied with the outcome say they are also satisfied with the clarity and quality of information provided by the Rail Ombudsman, compared to just 50% of those dissatisfied with the overall outcome.

An interview participant who was satisfied with their experience of escalating a complaint to the Rail Ombudsman found that accessibility of communication had been good, particularly since they could communicate in their preferred format. They also valued being kept informed about the process and highlighted the efficiency and simplicity of the process.

“The process was quick and straightforward. No issue and that element was good. Just having an acknowledgment and got the money back.” Female, 35-44, mobility/dexterity

8. Conclusions and implications for passengers with access needs or disabilities

Rail travel is incredibly important and, for some, offers independence when other forms of transport are not as accessible. An individual's experiences of train travel is influenced by three important factors:

- Rail travel presents different barriers throughout the passenger journey, which starts with planning, depending on type of disability or disabling access needs.
- The specific journey context then provides the backdrop for specific route choices and impact of travel on the day, for instance familiarity of route, length of journey, number of changes, and disruption can all exacerbate challenges and concerns.
- The resulting outcome (good or poor) can be emotional and functional and impacts both the journey on the day and also the use of train travel going forward.

This research has found that while barriers exist in the experience of rail travel, most passengers with access needs are broadly positive about their experiences. However, when things do go wrong, the impacts on the journey itself can be severe. These events can also negatively affect confidence to use rail services again. In some cases, this manifests in reduced or changed use of trains: allowing more time for travelling by train or only using familiar stations or routes. In some cases, the incident that caused the reason for the complaint has an impact on the individual's health or wellbeing. This makes an effective, accessible and responsive complaints and redress process important, and the research highlights that both awareness and experiences of current processes could be improved.

In the quantitative research, just under half of all respondents had a reason to complain or seek redress but just over a quarter went on to do so. When people do complain or seek redress, around a half are satisfied with the outcome. Satisfaction with escalating complaints to the Ombudsman is higher, but awareness of this tier is lower. The qualitative research provided direct testimony about the experiences of people with access needs and disabilities when travelling by train.

Below we present the implications of these findings and provide ways to improve the provision for passengers. These have been made with a view to improving the experiences of people that have disabilities or access needs when making complaints.

Improve awareness of complaints and redress processes

- Many passengers with access needs or disabilities have reason to complain or seek redress – more often than they actually do. Although most passengers are broadly positive about train travel generally, almost half had a reason to complain and/or seek redress.
- Clarity, transparency and simplicity are key for the complaints process. There is a perception that complaining and seeking redress is more trouble than its worth (among those who haven't been through the process) and can be arduous for those that do. This is particularly acute for less frequent travellers.
- Awareness of complaints and redress processes is shallow. A deeper understanding of how to complain and seek redress, who to complain to and seek redress with and the

step-by-step process for completing this could increase engagement amongst passengers with access needs.

Improve awareness of the Rail Ombudsman specifically

- Awareness of the Rail Ombudsman is lower than that of the complaints and redress processes. In one sense it is shallower too – people generally assume an initial complaints process is available but are less certain that there is an overarching body to escalate complaints to.
- Raising awareness of the Rail Ombudsman might have dual benefits: firstly, the direct benefit of more passengers being aware of who to escalate a complaint to. Secondly, the reassurance that there is an additional body to complain to if they are not satisfied with the response to their initial complaint. The latter might encourage those who are deterred from engaging in the overall complaints process some or all of the time.

Better disaggregation between the Rail Ombudsman and the initial complaint stage

- There may be potential for disabled passengers to confuse the Rail Ombudsman with other phases of the complaints process, or to be unsure about its role. It must be made clearer exactly when and why you would contact the Rail Ombudsman.
- Advertising of the Rail Ombudsman should be made elsewhere other than on trains/at platforms such as on information provided with booked assistance and also via other organisations and community groups. Websites and apps should have more visible advertising of the Rail Ombudsman complaints process, since infrequent travellers consistently have lower awareness of the process.

Recognise the motivations for making a complaint and seeking redress

- Financial compensation is a prominent reason for complaining – but not the only one. Passengers also want an apology, an explanation and confidence that the issue won't reoccur.
- This is particularly important because the impact of a poor experience is not purely financial. It is emotional too. After some bad experiences, passengers with access needs are less confident travelling by train, and may avoid it altogether.
- Responses to complaints and redress claims tier should be meaningful and recognise the impact that events have had for individuals. Respondents and participants reflected a need for reassurances that rail and passenger support services will be reviewed and improved (where appropriate).

The process for complaining and seeking redress needs to be accessible

- There is a need for a process that is clear, simple and straightforward. Sometimes people with access needs or disabilities, particularly those with fluctuating conditions, have limited energy and will preserve and prioritise this.
- Communication needs to be accessible and offered in a preferred format. Online forms and email are widely used but not universally preferred. Letters and telephone are used to make the complaint by a significant minority of complainants. All formats should be offered to complainants. There should be some supported conversations as and when needed to help the user describe the events and the questions asked should be relevant and easily understood.