

Stephanie Tobyn
Director of Strategy, Policy and Reform



Tricia Williams
Managing Director
Northern Trains
By email only

19 September 2024

Dear Tricia,

Enabling disabled passengers to travel with confidence by delivering assistance reliably

We are concerned with the reliability of Northern Trains' delivery of passenger assistance for disabled people. Passengers should feel confident that the assistance they need to travel by rail will be available and reliable.

In July 2024 we wrote to Northern setting out our concerns, asking for an analysis of the causes of recent failed assists and the steps being taken to improve performance. We have engaged with Northern on the same issue in previous years. Northern's response in August 2024 did not reassure us that it understands its own performance or the causes of its failings, that it has robust plans in place to secure improvements, nor that appropriate progress has been made in delivering previously planned actions.

I am therefore writing to ask Northern to set out a plan that will deliver sustainable improvements for passengers that need assistance to travel, informed by an assessment of current performance, known weaknesses and risks to the delivery of passenger assistance.

We will hold a senior roundtable to enable constructive engagement as you develop your plan, and will invite representatives from the Rail North Partnership (the Department for Transport and Transport for the North) to ensure a transparent and joined-up approach is taken to delivery of improvement.

Background

Our concerns about Northern's delivery of passenger assistance are prompted by poor results in our ongoing [survey](#) of passenger experiences of booked assistance.



We raised concerns with Northern in 2019 and again in 2022 and received assurances that action would be taken. In 2023 ORR commissioned [audits](#) into five operators (including Northern) to examine processes around passenger assistance. The findings raised further concerns about Northern's processes and suggested, in particular, that work was needed to improve the information that was available to staff responsible for delivering assistance.

We published the findings of our 2023-24 passenger survey in July 2024. The survey shows welcome improvements in passenger satisfaction with assistance where it is delivered by Northern, but the reliability of assistance provision remains a significant concern. 18% of respondents who booked assistance at a Northern managed station reported that they did not receive any assistance in 2023-24.

Over time, Northern has described to us planned actions to improve assistance reliability. These have either not been fully implemented or not been successful in tackling the underlying causes of failed assists.

Improvement plan and roundtable

Condition 5 of the Statement of National Regulatory Provisions (SNRP): Passenger and Station licences requires operators to establish and comply with an Accessible Travel Policy (ATP). You have committed, through your ATP, to delivering both booked and 'turn up and go' (TUAG) assistance. Consistent with this licence requirement, **we are asking you to submit an improvement plan to demonstrate to us that you are taking the necessary steps to be compliant with the commitments made in your ATP. Please submit your plan by Monday 28 October.**

As a minimum, we expect the plan to set out: a concise description and assessment of current processes for booked and TUAG assistance; a description of planned actions and how they will make a difference to the reliability of assistance, with delivery dates; and an assessment of risks to delivery and mitigations. Further guidance is set out in the annex.

We will organise the senior roundtable for a date in October.

Once we have considered and accepted your plan, we will monitor its delivery. You should note that failure to produce an acceptable plan or to deliver it may lead us to consider formal measures under your licence to secure compliance with your ATP.

I am copying this letter to Gary Bogan, Director of the Rail North Partnership.

Yours sincerely

Stephanie Tobyn

Annex: Guidance on improvement plan

The improvement plan should include:

A. Assessment of performance

- A concise description and assessment of Northern's current processes for delivering assistance. The assessment should consider the reliable delivery of both booked and turn-up-and-go assistance for departures and arrivals at the network of stations managed by Northern.
- The assessment should be informed by:
 - Analysis of available data and insight on Northern's assistance delivery;
 - Analysis of the root causes of past assistance failures;
 - Identification of risks, gaps and potential points of failure in existing processes;
 - Identification of opportunities for improvement.

B. Actions and anticipated impacts

- A description of the actions that will be taken to deliver improvements for passengers in the reliability of assistance and how those actions will make a difference.
- Key delivery milestones.
- An explanation of how success will be measured.

C. Risks to delivery

- A description of the key risks to delivery of actions set out in the plan.
- An explanation of how these risks will be mitigated.