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Charlie Woodhead  
Accessibility and Integrated Travel Manager  
London North Eastern Railway  
By email

26 June 2024

Dear Charlie

**Approval of London North Eastern Railway's proposal to use an alternative process for communicating between specific stations on booked assistance**

Thank you for your [letter](#) dated 22 April 2024, updating us on London North Eastern Railway's (LNER) trial of an alternative process in place of the handover protocol. The alternative process was trialled for booked assistance on journeys between stations where LNER is responsible for delivering assistance. You proposed that the process implemented during the trial should remain in place. I am writing to confirm that ORR accepts LNER's proposal.

Background

Reliable delivery of assistance depends on clear and timely communication between departure and destination stations, to ensure that staff are expecting the passenger at the destination and are aware of relevant information such as assistance needs or location on the train. To mitigate the risk of failed communication, ORR developed a handover protocol that operators must follow when assistance at the destination station will be provided by station staff. The key requirements are for each station to have a dedicated phone number for assistance communications, and for staff at the departure station to call the destination station to communicate the information necessary to ensure that the passenger receives the assistance when they arrive.

The handover protocol is set out in section A1.2e of ORR's [ATP Guidance](#). The Guidance also allows an operator and ORR to agree an alternative process or technology, provided it has the equivalent functionality and effectiveness.

In August 2023 you made an application to use an alternative to the handover protocol. This application was submitted in view of LNER's own concerns about its compliance with the handover protocol, and the associated resource demand at peak times at busy stations. The application was also in the context of LNER having

made a significant investment in deployment and training for the Passenger Assist (PA) staff app. The PA staff app is designed to help frontline staff support passengers better and, for example, enables staff to see assistance tasks that have been allocated to them on their smartphone, and to register when assistance has been delivered. You proposed that use of the PA staff app could replace the need for a telephone call between departure and destination stations. Your full proposal and reasoning behind it are set out in your [letter](#) of August 2023.

We considered your application in the context of the requirements set out in our ATP Guidance, [accepting](#) your proposal on a trial basis through to 30 April 2024 (subsequently extended to 30 June 2024). Only booked assists on journeys between stations where LNER is responsible for provision of assistance were in scope of the trial – these are LNER’s managed stations and, in addition, London Kings Cross and Edinburgh Waverley.

For unbooked assistance and booked assistance on journeys to/from stations where assistance was the responsibility of other operators, LNER were to continue to use the handover protocol.

We reached this decision after engagement with LNER, station visits, engagement with relevant industry colleagues, consideration of the findings of our [audit](#) of passenger assistance of five train operators (including LNER), assessing LNER’s performance in our annual [survey](#) of booked assistance, and engaging with ORR’s Accessible Travel Stakeholder Forum.

#### LNER post-trial proposal and findings

You have proposed that the process implemented during the trial should remain in place. You have confirmed that at this time you do not wish to extend this proposal to include journeys to or from stations managed by other operators, or to unbooked assistance.

In your letter of 22 April 2024 you provided a range of data, and you have since supplemented this with additional data. We have also interrogated our own data. We have summarised the key findings below, noting the data source.

#### *Failed assists (data source: LNER)*

You have told us that, for journeys between stations where LNER is responsible for assistance, there have been no booked assistance failures that were the result of communication errors during the trial period.

There were some communication errors that led to failed assists during the trial period, on journeys that were outside the scope of the trial – as outlined below.

A single failed assist occurred for an unbooked assist between two stations where LNER is responsible for assistance. We note your description of this incident, which explained that this was not caused by the ongoing trial. In this case, the destination

station had reduced staffing due to the time of night, and the staff member did not check their PA staff app because of other duties between the train departing its origin and arriving at its destination. You point out that this demonstrates the importance of still making a phone call for unbooked assists.

You also reported a small number of failed assists for journeys from stations where LNER is responsible for assistance to stations where this is delivered by other operators. You have described your investigation into these incidents, which found that they were likely caused by risks specific to shorter journeys and unrelated to the trial. We note that you have implemented a new process to mitigate the risks presented by shorter journeys. This process sees the frontline staff member responsible for delivering the assistance at the departure station calling the destination station themselves, instead of the station's control centre doing so.

#### *PA staff app usage (LNER)*

Consistent use of the PA staff app is essential for the effectiveness of LNER's alternative process and an accurate audit trail. You have reported high levels of PA staff app usage by staff both before and during the trial. You demonstrated usage using data on the extent to which assistance is reported as complete through the PA staff app once the journey been made. The data showed some variation between stations – excluding period ten, this ranged from 95% during some periods for York and London Kings Cross, to 100% for Berwick-upon-Tweed, Newark Northgate and Retford.

You consider that figures below 100% are mostly attributable to staff not marking assistance as complete once it has been provided, rather than a failure to deliver the assistance. During period ten specifically, figures were as low as 87%, however you have indicated this was because of storm-related disruption and passengers choosing not to travel. We ask you to take steps to ensure consistent usage, and to report on these steps in the next ATP annual review process.

#### *Research on the passenger experience of booked assistance (ORR)*

We analysed the results of our 2023-2024 passenger survey of booked assistance, which includes a significant sample (1,941) of passengers booking assistance on journeys to/from stations where LNER deliver assistance. Our analysis indicates that the trial did not have any adverse impact on the successful delivery of assistance, for those responding to the survey. As in previous years, LNER remains among the best-performing operators.

#### *Passenger complaints to LNER (ORR)*

We analysed LNER's complaints data, comparing the first four periods of the trial period to the prior four months. There was a slight reduction in the proportion of complaints made to LNER that were accessibility-related, and also the number of accessibility-related complaints per 1,000 booked assists.



### *Views of other operators (ORR)*

We approached operators including some who call at LNER stations and others whose stations are called at by LNER services. Those operators raised no substantive concerns about LNER's proposal. One noted challenges during the initial stages of the trial, but reported that these had been quickly dealt with.

### ORR decision and next steps

**We approve the continued use of LNER's alternative to the handover protocol for booked assistance on journeys between stations where LNER is responsible for delivering assistance. LNER's alternative uses the PA staff app to communicate between stations. For all other assists LNER should continue to comply with the handover protocol.**

We have reached this decision based on the evidence outlined above, which we consider demonstrates that LNER's alternative has at least the equivalent functionality and effectiveness of the handover protocol for the circumstances in which it will be used.

ORR reserves the right to require LNER to return to complying with the handover protocol on all journeys. This action may be taken if there is a change in circumstances or if we have concerns with the standard of assistance provision (both booked and unbooked) on journeys involving a station where LNER delivers assistance.

We expect LNER to continue engaging with the collaborative industry processes for agreeing improvements to the capability of the PA staff app, and implementing them where appropriate. Other operators are also investing in the rollout of the PA staff app, which we welcome, and we are aware that some are now also considering bringing forward proposals for alternative processes to the handover protocol. We may require adjustments to LNER's alternative process, to help ensure consistency, reliability for passengers, and the realisation of wider benefits offered by the PA staff app. We will engage with LNER on any such adjustments to seek your views.

As part of the January 2025 annual review process, LNER should provide us with an update on the alternative process's continued implementation. Outside of the annual review process, LNER should alert us to any issues being experienced as soon as they occur.

This letter will be published on our website.

Yours sincerely

*Jacqui Russell*

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