



Passenger Assist

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Department for
Transport

NetworkRail

Passenger**focus** 
putting passengers first

Passenger Assist

Foreword

It is important that passengers with disabilities can travel freely on the rail network.

Passenger Assist (PA) is the system which disabled passengers use to book assistance and reservations on the national rail network. It replaced the previous booking system, Assisted Passenger Reservation System (APRS), in spring 2012.

In 2008 and again in 2010 we carried out research into the efficiency of APRS. The results showed the industry had some way to go to give disabled passengers full confidence in using the railway. Since we presented those findings and made a number of recommendations, the industry has made changes based upon them. For example, they increased the number of meeting points and standardised the provision of booking confirmation. It also introduced the new PA system.

With support from Network Rail (NR) and the Department for Transport (DfT) we have now repeated the previous

research to test the service again. As before, we asked passengers with disabilities to make a series of journeys and to report back on their experiences – the best judges of a system being those who actually use it. This report is based on their experiences.

We welcome the fact that the research shows the booking process generally offers a good experience for passengers, but it also found that there is a need for a more consistent delivery of assistance. While many passengers receive the service they book, others still do not. Uncertainty creates a stressful experience for some passengers. Our recommendations, starting on page ten, point towards focussing on continuous performance improvements across the whole delivery process.

The challenge for the industry is to build on the foundation already established, to maximise the potential of the new system and to identify where the delivery of the service to passengers needs improvement.

The information contained in this report is available in chart and table format, together with the journey details, on our website: www.passengerfocus.org.uk

What we wanted to find out

In summer 2013 Passenger Focus commissioned SPA Future Thinking to undertake mystery-shopping research to audit disabled passengers' experience when travelling by rail. The research looked at Passenger Assist (PA), the Assisted Passenger Reservation System's (APRS) replacement.

The key objectives were:

- to audit the effectiveness of the booking system and the assistance provided by rail companies during the booked journey and
- to compare the findings to the research carried out in 2010.

The sample

The mystery shoppers were existing rail passengers with disabilities. Whilst we trained them fully on all aspects of booking and making their journey, they still experienced barriers related to travel. This reflects the experiences of real passengers. For the first time we also recruited two passengers with cognitive impairment, in this case, Asperger's Syndrome.

In total, 238 survey forms were completed from 119 return journeys. Some trips involved going out on one route and returning on another. However, as some journeys involved changing trains, the number of responses can be as high as 383. The 119 journeys were broken down as follows:

- 10 wheelchair users undertook 40 return journeys
- 11 mobility-impaired shoppers undertook 44 return journeys
- nine visually-impaired shoppers undertook 28 return journeys
- two cognitively-impaired shoppers undertook seven return journeys.

All mystery shoppers' itineraries were specified by Passenger Focus. This ensured the journeys covered a wide range of scenarios and a good geographic spread across England, Wales and Scotland, involving the trains and stations of most operators.

What the mystery shop involved

Shoppers were asked to book assistance at least 24 hours prior to the journey. Most shoppers did book in advance which mirrors the behaviour of actual passengers.

On 227 occasions shoppers booked assistance by telephone. However, on seven occasions shoppers booked their journey online and on four they booked at the station. We advised shoppers booking over the phone to contact National Rail Enquiries (NRE) for the appropriate train operating company's (TOC) telephone number and use it to book assistance.

Almost all journeys were made at off-peak times with the shoppers spending a period of time at the destination.

What did we find out?

This section summarises the key findings, looking at mystery shoppers' experiences of NRE, PA and staff assistance on the day of travel.

Overall journey experience

75 per cent of shoppers were satisfied with the assistance provided overall; 44 per cent were 'very satisfied' and 31 per cent 'fairly satisfied'. This is broadly similar to 2010 (71 per cent were 'very/fairly satisfied').

17 per cent were dissatisfied (of whom four per cent were 'very dissatisfied'). Despite encountering difficulties, shoppers still rated the service highly, which may be influenced by their low expectations.

"Assistance was waiting. Manually helped me from train and held my crutches. Excellent."

Mobility-impaired

"The staff that did help had not been informed by Passenger Assist to help. However, I think you will have concluded that they did an excellent job on the day...."

Mobility-impaired

"Everything great except wasn't met off the train."

Mobility-impaired

“I think I had a trainee staff member who was very nice but had no idea what to do.”

Wheelchair user

“I got off the train and waited on the platform. Although staff were present and I had a white cane, no one came forward to offer help.”

Visually-impaired

Shoppers were asked if the assistance they had received overall matched what they had been advised by PA booking staff:

- less than half (45 per cent) felt the service ‘fully matched’ (47 per cent in 2010)
- 40 per cent felt ‘some matched and some did not’
- 15 per cent felt ‘most did not match/nothing matched’.

“The train was 20 minutes late coming into the station so the buggy driver was there waiting for me. I found the staff in London very different, they seemed to do the minimum they could, lots going on. I might just as well have been a parcel to them.”

Cognitively-impaired

“Passenger Assist [staff] need some further training – train/station staff [are] brilliant!”

Wheelchair user

Shoppers who had previously booked assistance were asked how this journey compared:

- 29 per cent felt it was better (30 per cent in 2010)
- 40 per cent felt it was the same (46 per cent in 2010)
- almost a third (31 per cent) felt it was worse (24 per cent in 2010).

National Rail Enquiries (NRE)

NRE staff are considered to be polite and 91 per cent of callers were either transferred to PA direct or provided with the correct train company’s number.

There has been a significant rise in the number of callers being transferred to TOCs (62 per cent

in 2013 versus 10 per cent in 2010). However, when calls are transferred, passengers may continue to accrue a higher charge than if they were to dial the TOC’s number direct; TOCs normally offer a cheaper call rate than NRE.

“Biggest moan is about National Rail Enquiries being [an] 0845 number, as on many phones this call could have cost £2 to £3.”

Wheelchair user

Passenger Assist booking service

PA booking staff were generally perceived as professional, friendly and helpful. Overall, 87 per cent of shoppers rated the booking experience as ‘excellent’ or ‘pretty good’ and 88 per cent felt confident that their needs would be met (83 per cent and 84 per cent respectively in 2010).

“Staff were helpful and friendly. They explained to me that it was not possible to reserve a seat on the train, and I noticed she had typed on to the Assist email that they were to take me to the priority seating.”

Mobility-impaired

“A general comment I’ve made before but is relevant to all my bookings. Depending on which train company I call, I get asked different questions. Even when calling the same TOC this happens too. Questions need to be more systemised to ensure the right info is given. I shouldn’t have to prompt but sometimes I have to.”

Wheelchair user

There was a significant increase in PA staff advising shoppers to get to the station early (82 per cent in 2013 compared to 72 per cent in 2010).

PA staff consistently failed to ask for shoppers’ details and full requirements, and failed to give them essential information at the time of booking:

- less than half (45 per cent) of shoppers were informed of a meeting point at the station (38 per cent in 2010)

- 78 per cent were told to inform a member of station staff on arrival (70 per cent in 2010)
- 81 per cent were provided with a reference number for their booking (compared to 84 per cent in 2010). Of those who were given a reference number, 67 per cent received a confirmation of their booking, most via email, but 33 per cent received no confirmation.

When shoppers enquired about station facilities:

- seven per cent were given incorrect information about station accessibility
- 12 per cent were given incorrect information on the provision of toilets at stations.

“Whilst the staff member was very polite I was left wondering ‘How will they know who I am?’ I don’t look disabled, [there are] no outward signs of my disability.”

Mobility-impaired

Arriving at the station

Despite all shoppers booking assistance, station staff were prepared for them only on 66 per cent of occasions (65 per cent in 2010). Of those who were given an appointed meeting place, 70 per cent were actually greeted by staff there (similar to 2010).

More shoppers (78 per cent) were advised to seek out a member of staff when they arrived at the station (compared to 70 per cent in 2010). This includes a large proportion of visually-impaired shoppers for whom it proves even more challenging.

Staff were most likely to be prepared when expecting wheelchair users or passengers with a visual impairment.

“I went to the main desk and asked for assistance. When I informed her that I was visually impaired she indicated where the member of staff was rather than asking them to come to me.”

Visually-impaired

Inaccessible stations

On eight per cent of journeys, shoppers were travelling to or from a station which was inaccessible to them. All shoppers who could not use the inaccessible station were provided with a taxi to/from an accessible station or advised to use a nearby alternative station.

There were instances where shoppers who, once underway, discovered that some stations were far less accessible than they had been led to believe. Although they managed to use them, sometimes it was only with great difficulty. This underlines the importance of booking staff finding out passengers’ actual requirements and having knowledge of station layouts and facilities.

Ramp provision

Wheelchair-using shoppers were provided with ramps on all journeys. Mobility-impaired shoppers were not always made aware that ramps were available if they needed them. As a result they found it more difficult to board and alight from the train than they need have.

“Although I use a wheelchair, it appeared that on-train staff were unaware that ramps were needed until the train pulled in.”

Wheelchair user (at an unstaffed station)

“I wasn’t aware that I could have requested a ramp to help me on/off the train. Passenger Assist didn’t ask the question. I did advise them that I required help boarding/alighting as I used two crutches to walk.”

Mobility-impaired

Boarding the train

Most shoppers (90 per cent) were assisted by station or on-train staff when boarding. However, on nine per cent of journeys shoppers received no staff assistance (six per cent in 2010) and either had to manage on their own or seek help from fellow passengers.

On 91 per cent of journeys shoppers found boarding ‘very easy’ or ‘quite easy’ (same as in 2010).

However, mobility-impaired shoppers did not find boarding as easy because on 20 per cent of their journeys they received no assistance from staff.

Six per cent of visually-impaired shoppers received no assistance.

Similar to 2010's findings, wheelchair users found it easier to board than mobility-impaired shoppers. This was mainly due to lack of staff assistance for mobility-impaired shoppers as well as ramps not being provided, even though the shoppers needed them.

“I was only shown where the lift was and which platform I was to go to. I was not asked if I needed help. I said I had booked assistance, but staff did not check.”

Mobility-impaired

On 88 per cent of journeys shoppers rated staff as 'excellent' or 'pretty good' compared to 85 per cent in 2010.

Not surprisingly, satisfaction with boarding was highest amongst wheelchair-using and visually-impaired shoppers (96 per cent and 95 per cent respectively). Although sample sizes are small, on 23 per cent of journeys cognitively-impaired shoppers did not find it easy to board the train.

“Safe and easy. I was escorted all the way.”

Visually-impaired

“They took me on a route which involved minimal changes of level and boarding was easy.”

Mobility-impaired

“They need to realise that some people may need assistance, but it may not be obvious that they do. The station staff originally believed that I wanted assistance with luggage, and did not believe that I wanted assistance boarding the train, until presented with the print-out from Passenger Assist.”

Cognitively-impaired



“Staff did not arrive until asked to by a cleaner who boarded the train.”

Cognitively-impaired

Connecting journeys

The findings when broken down by connecting journeys showed broadly the same results:

- 11 per cent of shoppers were not assisted to their connecting train by staff
- wheelchair-using shoppers were assisted more often than mobility-impaired shoppers (98 per cent versus 70 per cent).

“Experienced staff said he would radio ahead as we were on a later train.”

Wheelchair user



Getting to the seat

Shoppers were not always accommodated in the seats which had been allocated to them when assistance was booked. This can cause difficulties for staff further down the line at the connecting or destination station as they cannot locate the passengers needing help. Staff assisted shoppers to a seat on 73 per cent of journeys. However, only 59 per cent of shoppers sat in their booked seat.

Getting to the wheelchair space

Generally wheelchair users were assisted by staff to the wheelchair space (84 per cent compared to 77 per cent in 2010). However, even where a wheelchair space had been booked, it was only available in 68 per cent of instances. It was generally occupied by another wheelchair or obstructed by luggage. Staff did not always proactively clear the space for the wheelchair user but would instead leave the shopper to resolve the situation alone. In some instances, wheelchair-

using shoppers were left in the vestibule near the doorway or in the space intended for cycles.

“I was parked in the gangway. It was quite unnerving.”

Wheelchair user

On-board experience

Shoppers could see on-board electronic visual information screens on 52 per cent of all journeys; of these, only four per cent were ‘not working’.

On nine out of 10 journeys announcements were made, of which 81 per cent were clear and audible, compared to 91 per cent in 2010. In one instance a visually-impaired shopper got off at the wrong station because no announcements were made, no on-board visual displays were provided and when she asked another passenger, she was given wrong information. Her situation was aggravated in that throughout her two-hour journey no member of staff had appeared.

Two in five shoppers (42 per cent) said they had no interaction with staff aboard the train and so could not rate their performance. We recognise that some local and metro trains do not have staff aboard. However, it is worrying that shoppers using longer-distance services, on which we know that staff are present, reported that they either had no interaction with staff at all or indeed saw no staff member throughout the journey.

Of those who did interact with staff, 83 per cent rated staff as ‘excellent’ or ‘pretty good’.

Once again shoppers with visible disabilities, such as those who were wheelchair users or visually-impaired, gave a higher satisfaction score than mobility and cognitively-impaired shoppers.

In general there was a lack of clarity from booking staff on what service passengers can expect from on-board staff.

“To sum up my last few journeys, the weak point as far I’m concerned are the train managers, as they don’t always make themselves known to you.”

Visually-impaired

Alighting from the train

Only 79 per cent of shoppers were assisted off the train by staff (78 per cent in 2010), five per cent were helped off by another passenger and 15 per cent did not receive any help at all when alighting.

33 per cent of mobility-impaired shoppers received no staff assistance compared to only two per cent of wheelchair-using shoppers. Although the base size is small, shoppers with cognitive impairments did not receive assistance from staff on 41 per cent of their journeys.

Overall 87 per cent of shoppers said alighting was 'very easy' or 'quite easy' including those who got off without help. However, on two occasions shoppers were unable to get off the train at their destination as assistance failed to arrive and they had to travel on to the next station.

“Support was good, staff were there to meet me with a ramp to help alighting.”

Mobility-impaired

“This was my worst experience. There was a big gap off the train to the platform and I had no help at all to get off.”

Visually-impaired

“I could not get off where I wanted to as no assistance arrived.”

Wheelchair user

Shoppers rated staff helping them to alight as 'excellent' or 'pretty good' on 79 per cent of journeys, lower than for boarding (88 per cent). However, on four per cent of journeys staff provided no assistance despite being present on the train/station and were rated 'poor'.

“The guard happily assisted me to alight by ramp at my destination.”

Wheelchair user

“The staff were waiting for the train to arrive, and knew exactly where I would be sitting on the train.”

Cognitively-impaired

“They made me feel like I was a pain to need their help.”

Wheelchair user

“I had to be very careful with my communication about what I needed and I don't like confrontation, so I don't make too much of a fuss, but I feel like I had to almost beg for assistance rather than it being offered freely.”

Cognitively-impaired

Hidden disability

Some mobility and cognitive impairments are harder to recognise. The research showed these groups find it far more difficult to negotiate their way around the railway as customer-facing staff can fail to understand their needs and requirements. Our evidence shows that some staff appear to judge these shoppers as not requiring help or question their entitlement to it. PA staff will book the assistance required on the basis of need and it is up to station/train staff to provide it.

“I had to ask station staff to help me and show me to my seat. It was a bit awkward to have to ask him to help me. He didn't tell me what he was going to do and I need to be told as it helps me to understand.”

Cognitively-impaired

“It would be nice if staff had some understanding about what people of my condition need. It's the lack of communication that upsets me or leaves me feeling nervous.”

Cognitively-impaired

“I don't think he understood what I needed. I had to think about my situation and what I thought I needed and he told me they only cater for mobility issues. I told him I used a similar system at the airport and they used a wheelchair and he said, 'okay we'll use a wheelchair' [at the station].”

Cognitively-impaired

Conclusions

The purpose of this research was to understand the passenger's experience of using the new Passenger Assist (PA) system and compare the findings to the research we carried out in 2010, when we made recommendations for improvements. Some of them have been implemented by the industry, at least in part. More passengers are being advised to arrive at the station early, are being given booking reference numbers and told where to meet staff. This is a useful starting point, but greater consistency would offer greater passenger benefits.

In this research we found that the booking process offers a good experience, but it also needs to feed through to a better service consistency for passengers once travelling.

Satisfaction with the booking process has moved from 83 per cent in 2010 to 87 per cent in 2013. The overall experience of using the PA service has also risen slightly to 75 per cent in 2013 from 71 per cent in 2010. This shows little improvement in passenger satisfaction from 2010, before the new booking system was introduced. Passengers who require assistance to travel are guaranteed access to rail services by law. They also generally book assistance at least 24 hours in advance. The industry needs to undertake further work to ensure that far greater numbers of disabled passengers receive the full assistance they book.

The research points to current good practice, and also to areas where the industry might usefully focus attention on driving improvements. These points are outlined below, but the need for improved communication and staff training remains high.

The booking system

NRE is directing passengers to TOCs effectively, but sometimes at a greater cost for the caller than if they redial. TOCs normally offer a cheaper call rate than NRE.

TOC staff are generally perceived as professional, friendly and helpful. However, passengers are not always given the most

complete or helpful information at the time of booking, such as being told booking reference numbers and where to meet staff at the station.

PA did not book seats or wheelchair spaces (where reservations are available) in a consistent manner or ask for information on ramp requirements, even to passengers with mobility impairments.

There is a lack of uniformity in service delivery – passengers get different information even from the same TOC.

The journey

Passengers' assistance requirements are not always reaching station and on-train staff.

The industry fails to consistently provide assistance to board/alight from trains to passengers who have booked.

Some passengers are confused about key information such as where to meet staff and who will be providing assistance.

TOCs have different trains and reservation systems, so passengers need greater clarity about whether priority seats and wheelchair spaces are available.

Recommendations

The research shows that Passenger Assist is providing a positive service for many passengers. It also indicates where further improvements are likely to improve reliability and enhance the passenger experience.

Booking

1 Passengers would benefit if information provided at the booking stage were standardised both within and across train operating companies.

For example:

- What assistance to expect at the station and on the train
- Whether there is a meeting point or where a member of staff will meet them. Each station should have at least one recognised meeting point, such as the ticket office or barrier at smaller stations. This may assist those who find it difficult to locate a member of staff unaided.
- Information about where to sit if a seat cannot be reserved for them. This will only be possible if the industry agrees how to manage the situation. For example, staff at boarding stations should advise staff at interchange and destination stations where in the train the passenger needing assistance is located.
- Information about on-board facilities and availability of staff assistance as promised in the operator's Disabled People's Protection Policy.
- What to do and who to contact if assistance fails.

2 Passengers would benefit from being given a reference number at the time of booking. Offering text confirmation stating the assistance to be provided for the journey would be helpful for some. For others, email confirmation has proved useful. It would improve the passenger experience if everyone booking assistance received confirmation in the form most useful to them. This is especially true in the case of mobility-impaired passengers who are not consistently asked if they require a ramp. Upon receipt of confirmation passengers can check if the details are correct and, if not, can amend them with the TOC.

3 It appears that information is not always being stored on the system, or if it is, staff are not using it consistently. It is important that information is routinely stored and used for booking to avoid passengers having to repeat details, such as the type of assistance required.

The journey

4 Some passengers are still not receiving booked assistance, for example, being assisted to board and alight. A failure rate of 21 per cent in our research for alighting equates to a lot of passengers each year. This figure must be reduced. One option could be for the industry to set targets for reducing failure to deliver assistance as booked. As a starting point, we recommend that the industry audit reports failures and identifies where the process failed. Some TOCs already undertake work in this area, but a nationally-agreed approach would provide TOC managers with information to produce continuous process improvements.

5 Staff, in some cases, are still not receiving information about passengers who have booked assistance. Why? Again, the industry must audit cases where the system has failed to deliver for passengers.

6 Further training on identifying and assisting passengers with hidden disabilities is likely to improve service to this group. This research shows noticeably poorer outcomes for passengers with mobility and cognitive disabilities.

7 Staff on the train need to take a greater interest in disabled passengers. On many of these journeys not only were tickets not checked, but staff either passed through without even acknowledging the disabled passenger's presence, or did not pass through the train at all. Passengers can feel reassured when their booking and their needs are acknowledged and met by staff on trains. This is especially relevant in times of disruption to journeys. It is not clear from the

research whether train staff are consistently provided with information about passengers who have booked assistance. The industry might focus on this to improve passenger satisfaction.

8 Further consideration of the following operational issues is likely to lead to improved services to passengers:

- Advising staff at the destination station where a passenger is sitting on the train. Currently this is inconsistent.
- Ensuring that staff assist passengers to the train they are booked on. If staff put passengers on a different train they must advise those providing assistance at the next stage.
- On-board staff are likely to benefit from having a copy of the booking details. This would help them offer a more helpful service.
- Improvements are required to the way passengers are kept informed when disruption occurs as many will not be able to access information via screens or audio announcements. Passengers' specific needs should be asked during the booking process.

Our research shows that staff are often delivering an excellent service. However, it still lacks consistency. From the booking stage onwards passengers receive varied levels of service. Consistency in the information and services provided by those delivering passenger assistance is the key to promoting confidence in the service. Where all else fails, passengers need a back-up plan, a helpline or a way to access help. The industry needs to ensure that this is available and thereby increase the confidence passengers have when they travel.

After the journey

Train companies should commit to undertake PA satisfaction audits and to collect data to show how many booking requests are delivered in full. This service is not always easy to deliver in a rail environment, and there can be concerns that such measures may lead to greater criticism of

operators. However, greater transparency can lead to greater understanding and opens the door to improving services.

Looking ahead

Many of these recommendations can be addressed by existing operators. However, some, such as the audit and transparency mechanisms set out above, should form an integral part of new franchise agreements when new contracts are agreed with operators. Building on the foundations of the current service and building in continuous process improvement is the challenge to the industry.



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