Improving Assisted Travel: ORR Consultation

Response from Railfuture Passenger Committee

Chapter One - Raising Passenger Awareness

Q1. How can rail operators improve the availability and promotion of Assisted Travel information in stations?
A1. Posters and leaflets in prominent positions in booking offices, waiting rooms and other station locations; Network Rail (NR) should assist in the display of publicity at those stations which they control. Much greater publicity on operators' and other rail ticket booking websites. Assisted Travel should be an option when booking online and on ticket vending machines (see also A6).

Q2. Are there any reasons why passenger-facing documents should not be required to achieve Crystal Mark standard?
A2. They should certainly be written in plain English with no jargon and any technical terms explained. They also need to be focussed and to the point i.e. as short as possible.

Q3. What steps can be taken to increase website accessibility?
A3. Websites need to be more clearly structured and easier to navigate. Regular consultation with DPTAC and disabled persons' organisations should be undertaken, to ensure that they cater for disabled persons' needs.

Q4. How can rail operators use social media to increase awareness of Assisted Travel?
A4. Regular tweets, Facebook postings etc. need to be issued reminding passengers and relatives or friends of passengers of the Assisted Travel facility. These should be increased prior to popular travel periods e.g. Christmas/New Year.

Q5. Are there any obstacles to providing Assisted Travel information no more than 'one-click' from rail operators' website home pages?
A5. There doesn't appear to be any reason why a prominent button could not be put on the home page which would take the user into an assisted travel booking form (see also A9). Current practice seems to be to discourage use of assisted travel by hiding the information away! For example, on the VTEC site, assisted travel comes under 'Journey Care', which is hidden away at the bottom of the page under 'Customer Services'. There is then another link to click before you reach a form.

Q6. Should the ticket buying process be intrinsically linked to Assisted Travel booking? Are there any barriers to doing so?
A6. It should form an integral part of the booking process – whether online, through a ticket vending machine or in person. Some work is needed on websites and ticket machines to make this an automatic option, plus improving staff training (see also A13).

Q7. How can rail operators improve the availability and promotion of Assisted Travel information to third-party agencies?

A7. The Rail Delivery Group (RDG) should help rail operators by producing and promulgating central guidance – either through operators or direct to third-party agencies - on the operation of the Assisted Travel Scheme and the importance of including prominent information on their websites.

Q8. How can rail operators engage productively with third-party agencies? If there are particular obstacles to doing so, how can these be overcome?
A8. By keeping third-party agencies fully informed about timetable changes and changes to fares; these should include changes to disabled facilities at their stations; the RDG should also play a role here (see also A7). Contracts with third-party agencies need to build in the requirement to include an assisted travel option as part of the ticket booking process.

Chapter Two - User Experience; Improving the Reliability of Communications

Q9. How might the reliability of communications be improved?
A9. The booking process needs to be reviewed with the aim of streamlining it and reducing the number of questions. Telephone bookings under the present system can be lengthy and off-putting. People often make the same journey on a regular basis, so the information needs to be captured (subject to Data Protection requirements) to avoid having to repeat a lot of the information for subsequent journeys. The system needs to recognise that the assistance request may be submitted by someone else - a relative or friend – and that the person travelling may not be disabled, but simply elderly and carrying heavy luggage. Operators need to ensure good communication between each other where connecting and/or or other transport services are being used e.g. by passengers crossing London as part of a through journey. All large stations should have a designated, well signposted, point at which Assisted Travel Users should wait for a member of staff to meet them. This is a particular issue where the user is escorted to the main line station concourse from the London Underground, Tram or Metro platforms or arrives independently e.g. by taxi or by a friend or relative dropping them off. The requirement to designate a suitable point on the station and the procedure to be followed should form part of the RDG guidance to operators and NR (see A10).

Q10. Would a cross-industry protocol overcome the difficulties experienced by Assisted Travel users? Can RDG play a leadership role in this area and deliver near-term improvement to the reliability of assistance provision?
A10. Yes, this would certainly help. But direct communication between users and operators while on their journey would help to mitigate problems. Users should be provided with a telephone number they could call or text if their booked assistance does not arrive at the station; this is very important at unstaffed stations. The use of text messaging could be explored to warn passengers of any potential difficulties en route RDG should play a key role in promulgating guidance and publicity to NR, operators and third-party agencies about the scheme. It should require NR and operators to put in place ongoing monitoring procedures and to publish regular reports on successes and failures.

Q11. Would a commitment from rail operators to refund the cost of the journey if booked assistance was not provided as requested be of benefit to both operators in demonstrating their commitment to providing a reliable service and give passengers a form of remedy when failures occur?
A11. Yes, fully support this approach.

Q12. Are there any obstacles to individual rail operators introducing their own redress policy when the service for these passengers fails?

A12.Not as far as we are aware, but central guidance from the RDG should ensure a consistent approach. There may be a need to link this with the operators' normal approach to refunds, which can vary.

Chapter Three – Strengthening Staff Training

Q13. How can consistency in training for company staff across the industry on disabilities be achieved?

A13. The RDG (in conjunction with DPTAC) needs to lead on a standard approach to training that all operators are obliged to follow. This should include emphasising that disabled passengers may have other types of disability, including autism, dementia or other mental health issues, instead of or as well as, physical disabilities. Users of the assistance scheme may not be disabled, but simply elderly and carrying heavy luggage.

Q14. How frequently should disabilities training take place and its content be refreshed?

A14. DPTAC advice should be sought, with recommendations drafted in conjunction with RDG and NR.

Q15. Should adherence to the DPTAC training framework become a mandatory element of the DPPP guidance?

A15. The DPTAC Training Framework says that it is "designed to be used by all those involved in the delivery or commissioning of training for transport staff within the UK". Unit 1 is entitled "Recognise Disabled Passengers and Assess Their Needs". Adherence should therefore be a mandatory element of the DPPP guidance. However, since the guidance appears to have been prepared in 2008, it may need to be refreshed to take account of changes in legislation etc. since.

Q16. Is there a role for annual independent verification of the quality of training? If so, who could do this; ORR/DPTAC/Another? Could the results be used to rank performance to highlight good performers and require improvements of those who are struggling?

A16. Yes. DPTAC or a professional body e.g. CILT should carry out the verification role. Performance is probably best measured by comparing results of the delivery of assistance.

Chapter Four – Strengthening Monitoring

Q17. We are particularly interested to hear about any pre-existing data collected within the rail industry, or beyond, which has the potential to be included in our monitoring to strengthen our oversight of licensees' activities on Assisted Travel. What further data is currently collected?

A17.We are not aware of other data sources.

Q18. Beyond our current or planned activities, are there any further suggestions as to how we might strengthen our monitoring of how well licensees are meeting their obligations in relation to Assisted Travel?

A18. A small number of licensees currently have a franchise obligation to assess the quality of assistance they are providing to passengers. This obligation needs to be extended to all franchises and to NR; Open Access operators should also be encouraged to carry out such assessments. The results of the assessments should be made available to both DPTAC and Transport Focus.

Q19. Are there any technological innovations, programmes or initiatives, beyond those described above, which could further bolster our Assisted Travel or DPPP compliance monitoring in the long-term?
A19. The new Rail Availability Reservation Service (RARS) – once it includes assisted travel bookings as a part of ticket bookings - should enable improved compliance monitoring.

Chapter Five – Reviewing DPPPs

Q20. Do you agree with our proposed approach to updating the guidance?
A20. We agree with your proposed approach, given the importance of taking into account legislative, technological and other changes since 2009.

Q21. Do you agree with our proposed approach to reviewing DPPPs?
A21. We agree your proposed changes to the current review system for DPPPs.

Submitted on 30 January 2018 by Graham Collett, Joint Vice-Chair, Railfuture Yorkshire on behalf of the Railfuture Passenger Committee.