

Speech: Office of Rail and Road's role in improving travel for disabled passengers

Introduction

I welcome the publication of these [3 pieces of important research today](#) (15 November 2017).

I am grateful to the [Office of Rail and Road](#) (ORR) for carrying them out.

And I am grateful to those in the rail industry who assisted in the research.

Many of whom are here today.

I take that as a sign of your commitment to learn from this research and to take action where it's needed.

Because it is through research of this kind that we gain the hard evidence we need to improve services for passengers.

We learn what is being done well.

For instance, we learn how much of a difference can be made by helpful, caring, considerate staff.

And it's right that we recognise those members of rail staff who not only fulfil their formal obligations to disabled passengers, but do so with a smile, with kindness, while allowing passengers to sense that their custom is valued.

And I know that later you'll be hearing some case studies of good service provided by Network Rail, Virgin Trains East Coast, and the work of the [Disabled Persons Transport Advisory Committee](#).

But we also learn from research of this kind what is not being done so well.

And in this research we do learn rather a lot.

And, again, it's right that we recognise what's not working – and the need to improve.

So I'd like to spend a little more time discussing these areas.

Awareness of support

For me one of the most striking features of the research is that today disabled passengers are not sufficiently aware of their rights to access help.

In fact, over 71% of those eligible to use passenger assist don't know anything about the scheme.

Of those who did know about their right to help, most learned through word of mouth.

Either from helpful rail staff, or from friends and family.

That's not a bad thing in itself.

But word of mouth isn't enough.

After all, if you don't know about help available in the first place, how can you tell others?

Greater awareness must come from better communication by train operating companies themselves.

Reliability of service

The next striking finding of the research is that customer satisfaction is most commonly linked with 3 elements.

The first is whether passengers actually receive the help they request.

Now, I understand that things can go wrong.

But if there's one thing train companies need to be good at, it's getting people to the right place at the right time.

But at the moment, most of the explanations put forward by passengers for assistance failures include:

- staff not arriving to meet them at agreed points
- staff being late
- trains not arriving on time, so staff or equipment to help with alighting are not available as they should be

or stations at either end not being aware of their journey.

These should be easy things to fix.

Getting people to the right place at the right time, and communicating information down the line; this is the bread and butter of any rail company.

But for a variety of reasons, disabled people aren't getting the service they are owed.

Staff attitude

Then there's the second big concern of passengers – the attitude of staff.

I've already said what a positive difference caring, considerate staff can

make.

And the overwhelming majority of staff on the railway are exactly that – often going above and beyond the call of duty to deliver a quality service to vulnerable passengers.

But it is equally true that it can only take one disappointing interaction to rob someone of their confidence in using the transport network.

Passengers have talked about being made to feel an inconvenience.

When a disabled passenger turns up at the station, they are maybe asked “have you booked?” – in what can seem like accusing tones.

Staff may be unable to spot or react properly to hidden disabilities, such as learning difficulties.

Or they may seem sceptical whether help is really needed.

Yet as the prevalence of hidden conditions such as dementia increases in our society, the ability of the railway to respond properly must increase accordingly.

Again, this shouldn't be too difficult to remedy.

A lot of it is about good and thorough staff training.

Of the kind that should be elementary for anyone working in a customer-facing role today.

In my own constituency, I've seen the superb work done by Jane Cole of Blackpool Transport to improve the understanding of bus drivers of the needs of disabled passengers; work informed by Jane's previous role in setting up Virgin's original passenger assist programme.

[Jane is now the government's Champion for Accessible Transport](#) working with the Disabilities Minister, and I hope we can tap into her undoubted expertise.

Facilities

The third major influencing factor – after whether requested help is received, and staff attitudes – is whether facilities are up to scratch.

General accessibility, toilets, lighting, seating, lifts and everything else.

Now I recognise that, of the 3, in some circumstances this can be the most challenging to get right.

That's one legacy of operating the oldest rail network in the world.

Built to Victorian standards.

And I am glad that Network Rail and others have worked hard to find creative ways to fit accessible solutions within historic architecture.

But while getting it right may be challenging, it's still essential.

We need to do more to ensure more toilets on board trains are in service more of the time.

But where they are out of order, we need to fix them, and do it fast.

And until they're fixed, inform passengers in sufficient time before they board.

No one should suffer being caught short while trapped on a train.

Just as no one with vision or spatial awareness challenges should find themselves on a dark platform, illuminated only by a flickering light.

I could go on, but you don't need me to spell out all the possible scenarios in which things can go wrong.

The research is already quite clear on what the issues are, and what needs to be done about them.

Need for enforcement

And all of the above explains why enforcement of these duties is so important, and why the ORR has such an important role to play.

Not only is it the railway's economic regulator, but it is also the passenger's champion when it comes to the handling of complaints, the provision of information during disruption and the provision of services to disabled passengers.

These duties are not in conflict, but rather are complementary.

At the same time, each duty requires a very different mind-set.

I know the ORR has always fought to make sure operators do the right thing for passengers – including holding train operating companies to account for their finances.

And I strongly believe there is no-one better positioned to influence operators, to re-balance the railway in favour of the passenger.

In this role, I see ORR having a visible presence, upholding the legitimate expectations of the fare-paying passenger.

ORR cannot do this alone.

It needs to bring the industry with them on the journey towards higher standards.

But just as justice delayed is justice denied, so is justice in the shadows justice denied.

My inbox and postbag overflows with complaints from those who have not received the level of service they are entitled to when seeking passenger assistance on the railway.

People need to see the strong hand of the ORR guiding these improvements.

ORR holds many enforcement powers that it could be using right now to deliver justice.

As the ORR builds up its evidence base, and negotiates improvements by consensus, I would like to see them wielding these powers.

To become an earnest advocate for passengers who need them the most.

To think creatively about how its consumer-facing role requires an outward-facing advocacy on behalf of disabled passengers.

To seize the opportunity presented by the impending arrival of the Passenger Ombudsman to complement that work by ensuring that the consumer duties it has are explored to their fullest extent.

And by challenging the industry at each and every opportunity.

So as a next step, I would welcome the thoughts of the ORR on how it intends to respond to complaints about levels of accessibility on the railway.

Whether through published league tables, through examples of bad and good practice, or through naming and shaming the very worst.

With creativity, I know that the ORR can truly make a difference.

Conclusions

So, thank you again for this vital work.

It gives us the evidence and the information we need to make things better.

It give us a new opportunity.

So let us be the ones who seize that opportunity.

And make travelling better for everyone.

Thank you.