



# Assisted Passenger Reservation Service: Mystery Shop

September 2008

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Colin Foxall CBE

# 1. Introduction

The Government and the rail industry are investing significantly to enable disabled passengers to use the railway. However, adjustable-level ticket counters, accessible toilets, lifts, ramps, wheelchair spaces and automatic doors are only part of the solution.

**F**or many disabled passengers, the assistance provided by the Assisted Passenger Reservation Service (APRS) is crucial in enabling them to travel on the National Rail network. However there are disabled passengers who do not use the APRS. Perhaps this is an area for future research to understand why these passengers do not use the service.

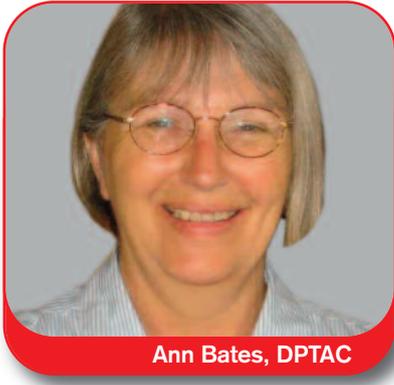
A combination of direct complaints, personal experience and anecdotal evidence led Passenger Focus to investigate the service using mystery shoppers to determine how well rail companies meet the needs of disabled passengers.

The research showed a wide variation in assistance provision and quality. This ranged from instances of excellent assistance to mediocre performance, to no assistance at all on a number of occasions. The research shows that the industry still has some way to go before these passengers can have full confidence in using the railway.

We urge the industry to look carefully at this report and its recommendations so that it gets better at delivering the quality of service that disabled passengers are entitled to expect.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Colin Foxall'.

**Colin Foxall CBE**  
Chairman  
Passenger Focus



## 2. Foreword from Ann Bates, DPTAC

I am delighted to have been asked to write the foreword to this expanded research by Passenger Focus into passengers' perceptions of the Assisted Passenger Reservation Service provided by the train companies and Association for Train Operating Companies (ATOC).

**DPTAC** have campaigned for many years for the effectiveness of this service to be researched, as it is a crucial component of the travel experience by train for passengers with disabilities.

It is in everyone's interest for this system to work smoothly and effectively, from the passenger whose confidence in travelling is enhanced with every good journey, to platform staff who wish to provide a professional and excellent service to their passengers, to train company executives whose profits can be so adversely affected by dwell time delays caused by its failures.

With an ageing population, most of whom wish to travel outside peak hours but are unwilling to follow previous generations in restricting their travel horizons after retirement, the potential market for disabled travel is one that companies cannot afford to ignore.

It is, however in the best interests for many with complex impairments and given the continuing inaccessibility of many stations, that passengers be encouraged to use booking services and be given realistic advice to enable journeys to be successful. Train companies benefit from forward booking as it enables them to deploy staff more effectively.

Only a reliable and statistically robust system, free at the point of booking, will encourage disabled people to travel and build their confidence in what for most, is an ideal form of travel.

*Ann M Bates*

**Ann Bates**

Chair of the Rail Group and Deputy Chair  
Disabled Persons Transport Advisory Committee(DPTAC)

### 3. Executive summary

The mystery shopping research was carried out in two phases. Phase one was undertaken in 2007 in London and the South East. Phase two was undertaken in early 2008 covering Scotland, Wales, and the rest of England. The findings from both phases have been combined, unless specified.

#### **National Rail Enquiries (NRE)**

- On nine out of 10 occasions shoppers were given an appropriate<sup>1</sup> train company number to book assistance through APRS.

#### **Assisted Passenger Reservation Service (APRS)**

- the majority of calls to APRS were answered within a minute
- on average, shoppers spent six to 10 minutes booking assistance for each journey
- three in five shoppers were advised to get to the station early<sup>2</sup>
- fewer than half were told of a reporting point at stations.
- 45% of shoppers were given a reference number for their booking
- on one in three occasions, staff did not inform shoppers whether the station has an accessible toilet
- on one in five occasions, APRS did not advise the shoppers if the stations were accessible
- APRS failed to inform shoppers on over half of occasions that one of the stations was inaccessible, and did not book alternative transport for them
- some train companies telephone passengers who have used APRS after their journey to obtain feedback. On 36 occasions (one in five), APRS offered to call shoppers for feedback - only 15 calls were received
- one in four shoppers were not confident that their needs would be met having phoned APRS, mainly due to staff attitude and the lack of information
- overall, shoppers whose questions were not answered were more dissatisfied with APRS staff.

#### **Staff assistance on journey**

- staff at stations were prepared for shoppers on only two out of three journeys
- of those shoppers given an appointed meeting place, only 58% were actually met there by staff

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<sup>1</sup> We define 'appropriate' in this case as the number of a company operating the station of departure or the train on any part of the journey.

<sup>2</sup> The need to arrive early should reflect the personal circumstances of the passenger needing assistance, the nature of the station and its staffing, if any.

- despite requesting a ramp when booking assistance with APRS, it was not deployed on one in 10 occasions
- in 15% of all cases, no assistance was provided to shoppers to alight from the train, as a result of which more shoppers (especially mobility- and visually-impaired shoppers) found it harder to get off the train than on
- more shoppers (96%) were able to make their connection in phase two than phase one (66%)
- most shoppers missed their connection in phase one due to non-arrival or late arrival of assistance
- despite APRS failing to inform shoppers on over half of occasions that one of the stations was inaccessible, staff at those stations provided alternative transport to all shoppers who needed it on the day
- overall satisfaction with the journey experience was slightly higher in phase two, with three out of four shoppers rating themselves as very/fairly satisfied with the assistance
- only six out of 10 shoppers were satisfied with the assistance in phase one
- those who had previously used APRS were asked to compare their journey experience with their previous experience; around half stated that it was the same, but more than a quarter (29%) found it worse.

## 4. Background

The Assisted Passenger Reservation Service (APRS) is a National Rail service enabling train companies to book assistance for passengers with disabilities without which many could not travel by train.

Research was commissioned to test:

- whether National Rail Enquiries (NRE) directed passengers to an appropriate train operating company (TOC) to book assistance
- the quality of the APRS booking service and information supplied
- the service provided on the day of travel by station and/or train staff.

The aim was not to judge individual rail companies' processes and performance; rather, the intention was to investigate the overall delivery of assistance by highlighting where the system fails and where it needs to be rectified.

This mystery shop research was carried out in two phases by people with disabilities to assess the efficiency and quality of the APRS service.

Phase one<sup>3</sup> was carried out in 2007 in the London and South East area. Phase two was commissioned in spring 2008 to survey other areas of England, and Wales and Scotland.

This report combines the findings from both phases and presents the experiences of passengers using the service. Comments from the mystery shoppers who undertook this research are included in the report (highlighted in red), showing both the positive elements as well as the areas which need to be addressed.

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<sup>3</sup> A summary of phase one research "Mystery shop of the Assisted Passengers Reservation Service (APRS) offered to rail passengers with disabilities" can be found on our website at [www.passengerfocus.org.uk](http://www.passengerfocus.org.uk)

## 5. How we carried out the mystery shops

Passenger Focus carried out:

- journey mystery shops and
- telephone mystery shops.

### 5.1 Journey mystery shops

A survey form was developed for structured and objective assessments. In phase one, we recruited 18 shoppers from the agency's panel of mystery shoppers. In phase two, we recruited 16 shoppers using various means, including advertising online and through disability organisations.

Training was provided to all participating mystery shoppers on the purpose of the research, completion of the survey form, objectivity and health and safety.

#### 5.1.1 What the mystery shops involved

All shoppers were allocated specific journeys. Some journeys were carried out by two people travelling together, not necessarily with identical disabilities. Some shoppers travelled with a companion who remained apart when assistance was provided. Shoppers were required to book assistance at least 24 hours prior to making the journey, so as to replicate the experience of a typical disabled passenger.

- most shoppers called NRE to find out the relevant number to book assistance
- all shoppers booked assistance with APRS by telephone, online or in person at a station (shoppers were advised of the method to use) and
- all shoppers undertook the return rail journey (specified by Passenger Focus) spending some time at the destination.

#### 5.1.2 When they took place

Phase one took place between March and April 2007.

- shoppers were allowed to choose the times of journeys and most of these were undertaken during the off-peak<sup>4</sup>.

Phase two took place between February and April 2008.

- where services were operated exclusively by a single TOC, shoppers were able to travel at a time to suit themselves
- where a choice of TOC was involved, Passenger Focus specified which services to use to ensure all TOCs were covered
- for the full journey experience, shoppers also bought their own train tickets where necessary.

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<sup>4</sup> We define peak hours as 7am-10am and 4pm-7pm, Monday to Friday. Off-peak hours are defined as all other times.

### 5.1.3 Number of journeys

Passenger	Phase one London and South East	Phase two Wales, Scotland and elsewhere in England	
	Number of journey mystery shops	Number of journey mystery shops	Number of telephone mystery shops
<b>Mobility-impaired</b>	12	12	
<b>Wheelchair user*</b>	38	48	
<b>Visually-impaired</b>	32	38	
<b>Total</b>	82	98	100

\* Users of 'reference sized wheelchairs'. Mobility scooters were not used.

Overall 180 survey forms were completed for the 90 return journeys. However, one shopper decided not to undertake her last journey due to a bad experience on the previous journey. The journeys undertaken in phase one and phase two can be found in Appendix A.

### 5.1.4 How the journeys and routes were determined

The selection covered a wide range of journeys, including:

- direct journeys
- journeys with change of trains
- journeys made using trains operated by more than one TOC
- using stations operated by different TOCs and Network Rail
- journeys where stations and trains were operated by different TOCs
- using stations inaccessible to the shoppers - where the TOC must make alternative arrangements
- journeys using staffed, unstaffed and partially staffed stations
- a range of train types from 'commuter metro' to 'intercity', and
- smaller stations where assistance bookings are likely to be infrequent.

The survey covered 24 train operating companies, some of which no longer exist due to franchise changes. Details of the operators are shown in Appendix B.

## 5.2 Telephone mystery shops

In addition to the journey shops, during the second phase trained interviewers undertook 100 telephone mystery shops. Eight scenarios were devised covering a range of disabilities and journey types. The telephone mystery shoppers initially contacted NRE then APRS. However, no assistance was booked as part of the telephone mystery shops.

Fieldwork was carried out between March and April 2008.

## 6. Research findings

The following sections cover shoppers' experiences of: NRE; APRS; staff assistance on the journey; on-train experience; connections; inaccessible stations; and overall satisfaction.

As these data include results from those journeys involving a change of train, the base size exceeds the total number of journeys (180).

### 6.1 National Rail Enquiries (NRE)

Almost all shoppers contacted NRE for the telephone number to make an APRS booking. On four occasions they did not contact NRE because they sought information and booked assistance in person at the station or online.

#### 6.1.1 Information provided by NRE

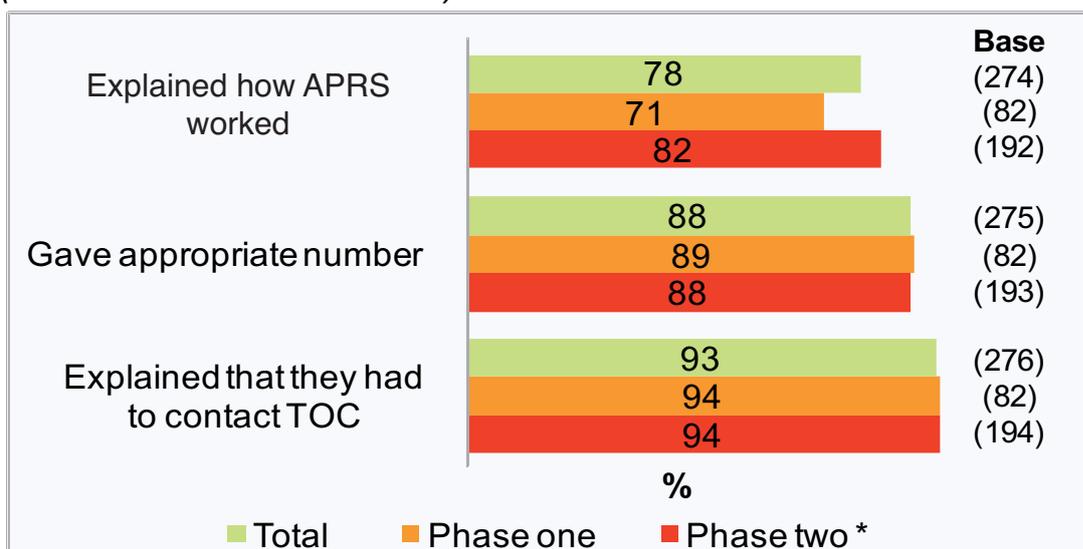
On almost nine out of 10 occasions mystery shoppers were given an appropriate<sup>5</sup> TOC number through which to book APRS assistance.

*“The operator was helpful. However, it took two attempts to get through and they gave the wrong train company.”*

*“It took three attempts to get through. I was told it was the wrong number.”*

#### Chart 1: Did NRE staff explain the APRS process?

(Base is shown in brackets)



\* The base includes the results from the telephone and journey mystery shops

<sup>5</sup> We define 'appropriate' in this case as the number of a company operating the station of departure or the train on any part of the journey.

### 6.1.2 Train Times

- on nine out of 10 occasions in phase two, NRE staff provided information about train times for the journeys<sup>6</sup>
- on some occasions NRE staff directed shoppers to TOCs as soon as they heard that they required assistance, suggesting they obtain further information when making the booking

*“As soon as I said I was in a wheelchair he said it would be better to ring the assisted line.” (Wheelchair user)*

- on one occasion NRE directed a mobility-impaired shopper to an inaccessible station.

## 6.2 Assisted Passenger Reservation Service (APRS)

Passenger Focus instructed some shoppers to book online; one shopper was instructed to book at the station in person. All other shoppers were required to book by telephone.

### 6.2.1 Booking online

Three journey shoppers were instructed to book assistance online using the relevant train company’s ‘Assisted Travel’ web page. Not all TOCs offer this facility.

- two found the assisted travel page ‘not very easy’ and one found it ‘impossible’
- two shoppers completed the online form; of these, only one heard back from the TOC within 48 hours
- the other online booker received no response from the TOC and resorted to booking by telephone.

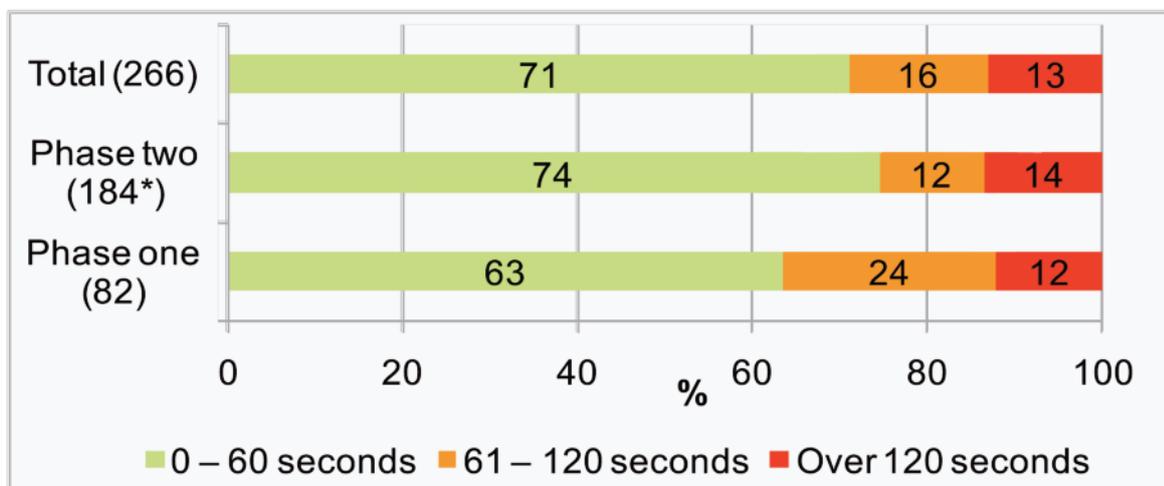
### 6.2.2 Booking by telephone

All other shoppers booked assistance by telephone. Separate bookings were made for the outward and return part of each journey. Most calls to APRS were answered within a minute. Only one shopper in 10 waited longer than two minutes.

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<sup>6</sup> No data was collected on train times in phase one.

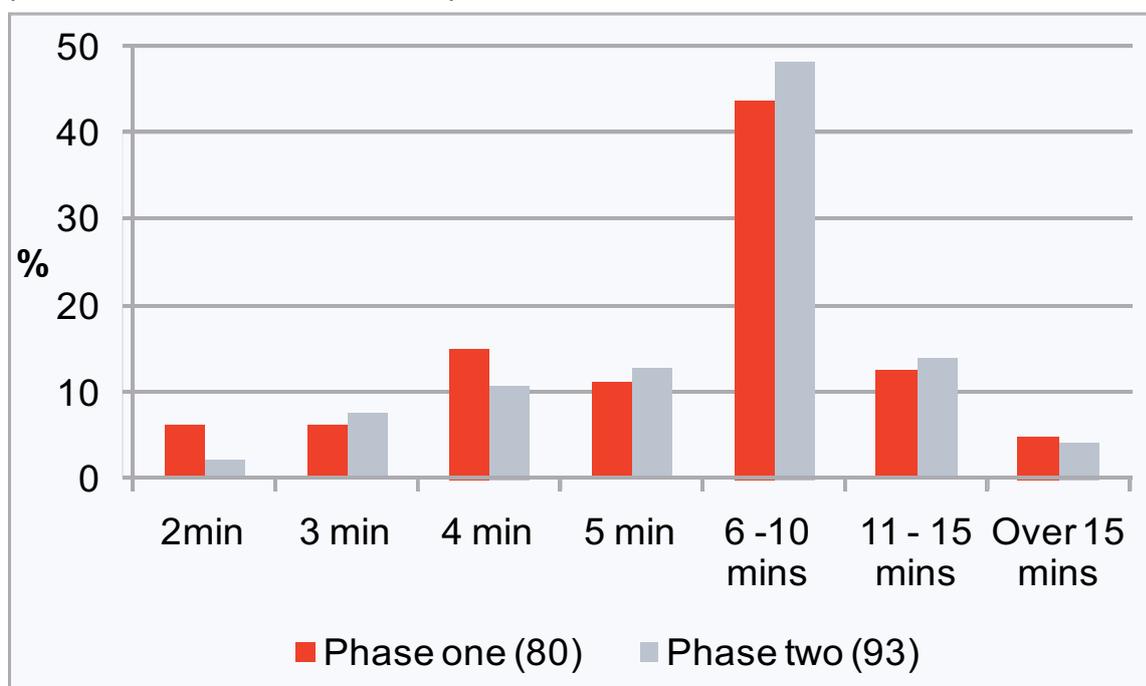
**Chart 2: Time taken by APRS to answer calls**  
 (Base is shown in brackets)



Note: percentages shown in the table do not add up to 100 due to rounding  
 \* Includes the results from telephone and journey mystery shops

Once through to APRS, on average shoppers spent around six to 10 minutes booking assistance for each single journey.

**Chart 3: Duration of call to APRS**  
 (Base is shown in brackets)



### 6.2.3 Information provided by APRS

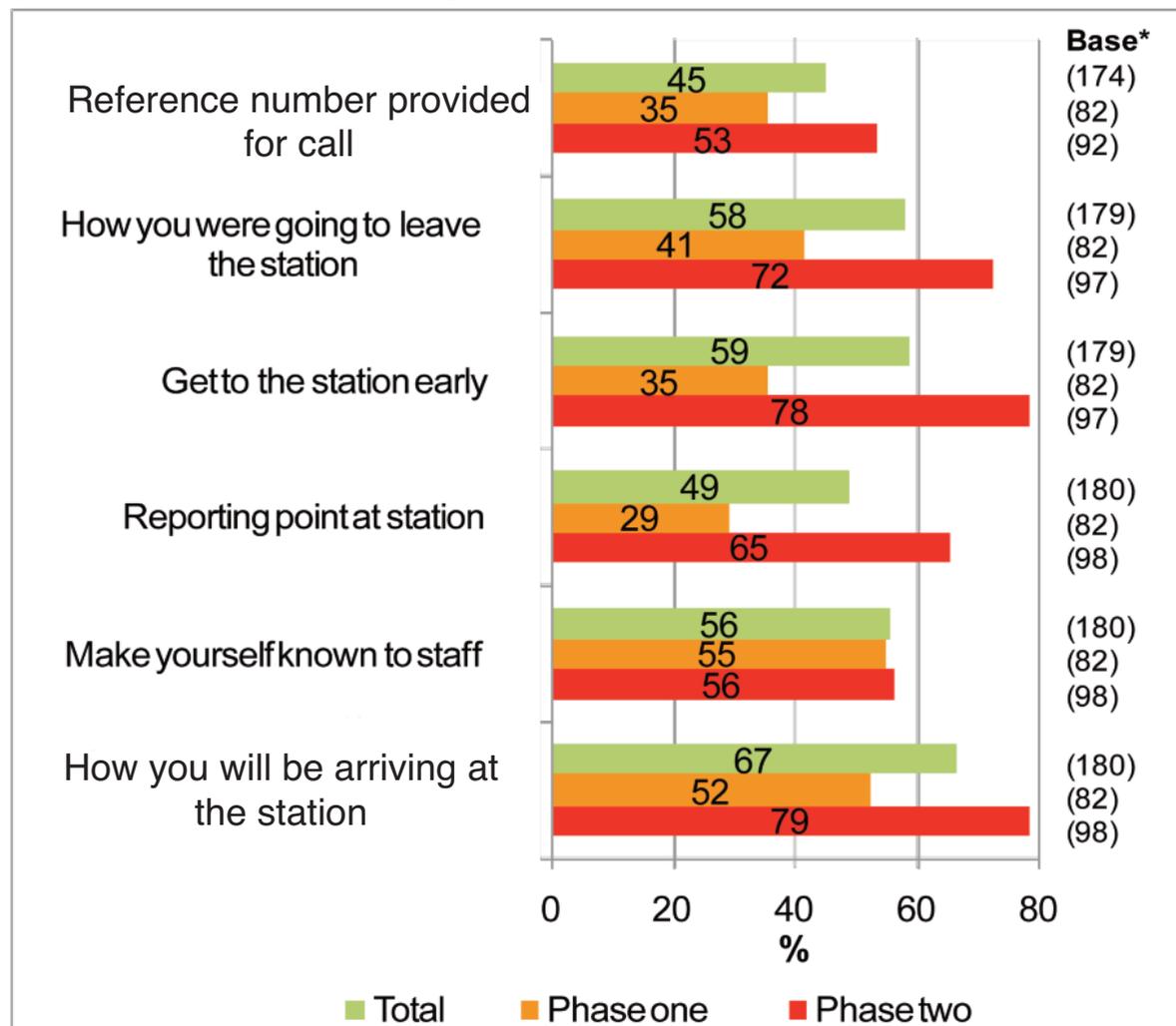
- three in five shoppers were advised to get to the station early<sup>7</sup>
- fewer than half were told of a reporting point at stations
- 56% of shoppers were told to make themselves known to a member of staff on arrival at the station
- 45% of shoppers were given a reference number for their booking.

*“No reference number was given. I wasn’t confident and couldn’t prove that assistance had been booked.” (Wheelchair user)*

Visually-impaired shoppers were asked more often how they would arrive at or leave the station than mobility-impaired or wheelchair-using shoppers.

**Chart 4: Did APRS staff mention these when you booked?**

*(Base is shown in brackets)*



\*Base fluctuates as not all shoppers responded to these questions.

<sup>7</sup> The need to arrive early should reflect the personal circumstances of the passenger needing assistance, the nature of the station and its staffing, if any.

### 6.2.4 Information on station facilities

In phase two, additional questions were asked about the facilities at the starting station, destination station and on trains.

Generally, APRS staff were more forthcoming with information about starting-station facilities than about the destination station. Some shoppers were directed to another TOC for details. Others reported no opportunity as APRS staff terminated the call before they could ask. One shopper found the manner of the staff too off-putting to feel comfortable to even ask.

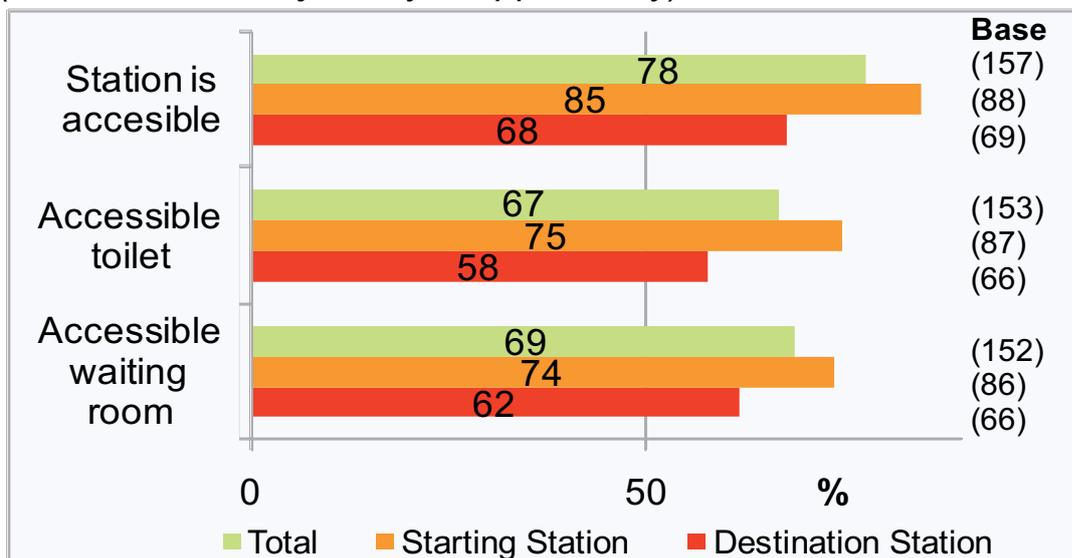
On a significant number of occasions APRS staff gave no information, even when asked, on certain aspects.

- on one in three occasions, APRS did not inform shoppers whether the station has an accessible toilet
- on one in five occasions, APRS did not advise the shoppers if the stations were accessible.

*“Information given by APRS was no way detailed enough and when I asked specific questions about facilities they didn’t seem to know.”  
(Wheelchair user)*

#### Chart 5: Did APRS advise about station facilities?

(Base: Phase two journey shoppers only)



Note: base fluctuates as not all shoppers responded to these questions.

### 6.2.5 Information about on-train facilities

When asked about on-train facilities, staff were even less forthcoming than they were about station facilities.

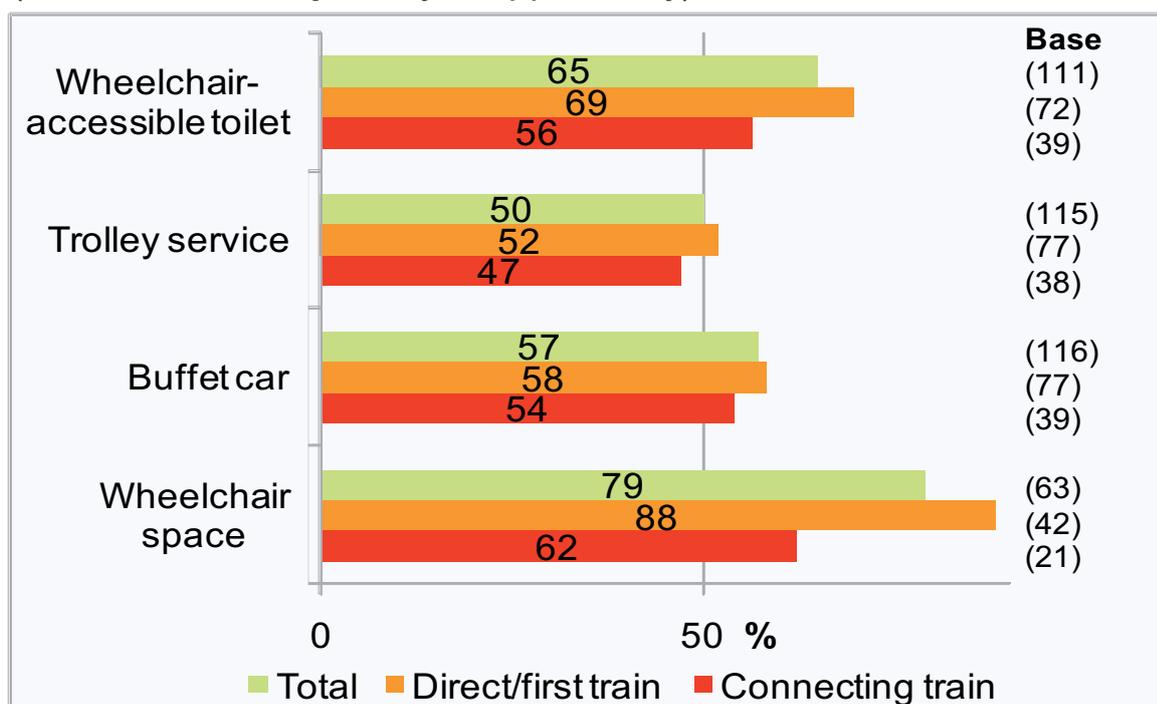
- on 21% of occasions staff did not say whether a dedicated wheelchair space was provided
- on 35% of occasions staff did not say whether there was a wheelchair-accessible toilet aboard the train.

Comments from shoppers who did not receive the information asked for: *“They could give me no information about my train..; disabled toilet facilities, buffet car, or trolley service.”* (Wheelchair user)

*“APRS said this was not one of their trains and they didn’t know which services would be available.”* (Wheelchair user)

#### Chart 6: Did APRS advise about on-train facilities?

(Base: Phase two journey shoppers only)



Note: base fluctuates as not all shoppers responded to these questions.

### 6.2.6 Need for information to make informed decision

Full information on station and train facilities is vital for passengers to decide for themselves if the journey is possible.

Our research found that one in four shoppers were not confident that their needs would be met having phoned APRS. This was mainly due to the lack of information and in a few cases, staff hurried the booking process and denied passengers the opportunity to ask further questions.

*“The operator was polite and friendly but uncertain of the details needed to arrange for help and how the service worked, which did not generate confidence that the service would be forthcoming.” (Visually impaired)*

*“Not at all helpful, just felt like she couldn’t get rid of me quick enough.” (Wheelchair user)*

*“The operator seemed very unfriendly and put the telephone down before I finished asking questions about my journey.” (Wheelchair user)*

### **6.2.7 Satisfaction with APRS staff**

Overall satisfaction with the APRS staff varied between phase one and two. Nine out of 10 shoppers in phase one said that the staff were friendly and had won their confidence.

*“The operator sounded confident and was quick when inserting information and responding to my questions.” (Visually impaired)*

*“The operator was very helpful, took my mobile number and promised to call me back after they had made all the arrangements. They duly did call me back which was brilliant.” (Wheelchair user)*

However, in phase two only three out of four shoppers rated APRS staff as ‘excellent/pretty good’ in terms of their helpfulness. Shoppers whose questions were not answered were more dissatisfied with APRS staff.

Comments from shoppers who were dissatisfied:

*“He failed to provide information about the station, failed to ask about a companion, failed to give the correct fare information, and failed to ask for a contact number or give an opportunity to ask about facilities at the train station.” (Wheelchair user)*

*“The lady was hesitant with her responses and did say she was having problems with her computer. She ended the call by saying, ‘Okay, that is it, sir’, and was gone.” (Visually impaired)*

### **6.2.8 Call backs**

Some TOCs telephone passengers who have used APRS after their journey. This enables TOCs to assess passengers’ satisfaction with the assistance and to address any failures. Call backs are an important direct means of obtaining passengers’ feedback.

On 36 occasions (one in five), APRS offered to call shoppers for feedback. Only 15 calls were received.

## 6.3 Staff assistance on day of travel

This section looks at staff assistance at various stages of the journey:

- arriving at the station
- ticket purchase
- boarding the train
- alighting from the train
- ramps
- on-train experience
- connections
- inaccessible stations and
- overall satisfaction with the journey.

### 6.3.1 Arriving at the station

Shoppers booked assistance at least 24 hours in advance as specified within most train companies' own Disabled People's Protection Policy. However, station staff were prepared for them on two out of three journeys. In phase one, staff were prepared on only half of all journeys.

Of those shoppers given an appointed meeting place, only 58% were actually greeted by staff there. In phase one, staff met shoppers on 38% of occasions, though this doubled to 80% in phase two.

Despite this, nine out of ten shoppers found station staff friendly and helpful, even though staff were not expecting them.

**Table 2: Were station staff prepared?**

<i>(Base is shown in brackets)</i>	Phase one Number of occasion	Phase two Number of occasion
Staff prepared for the arrival of shoppers at station	43 (82)	72 (89)
Staff greeted shoppers at appointed meeting place	29 (76)	52 (64)

### 6.3.2 Ticket purchase

Shoppers bought their tickets at the departure station, either from the ticket office or ticket machine.

Those shoppers who held a Disabled Persons Railcard (DPRC) used them for a reduction for themselves and their travelling companion.

Reduced fares also apply to certain categories of disabled people (wheelchair users, alone or accompanied, and accompanied visually-impaired passengers) who are non-DPRC holders. Some wheelchair users were asked to seek these non-railcard reductions. Of those, not all obtained the correct discount; one was actually undercharged.

It is unclear whether NRE or APRS advised any shoppers of cheaper advance purchase fares, as many passengers could have bought them for their journeys, but none did so.

One shopper was over-charged and had to make a much longer journey because APRS sent him via a longer and more expensive route.

Shoppers holding local authority travel passes, e.g. a Freedom Pass, used those tickets within the applicable areas.

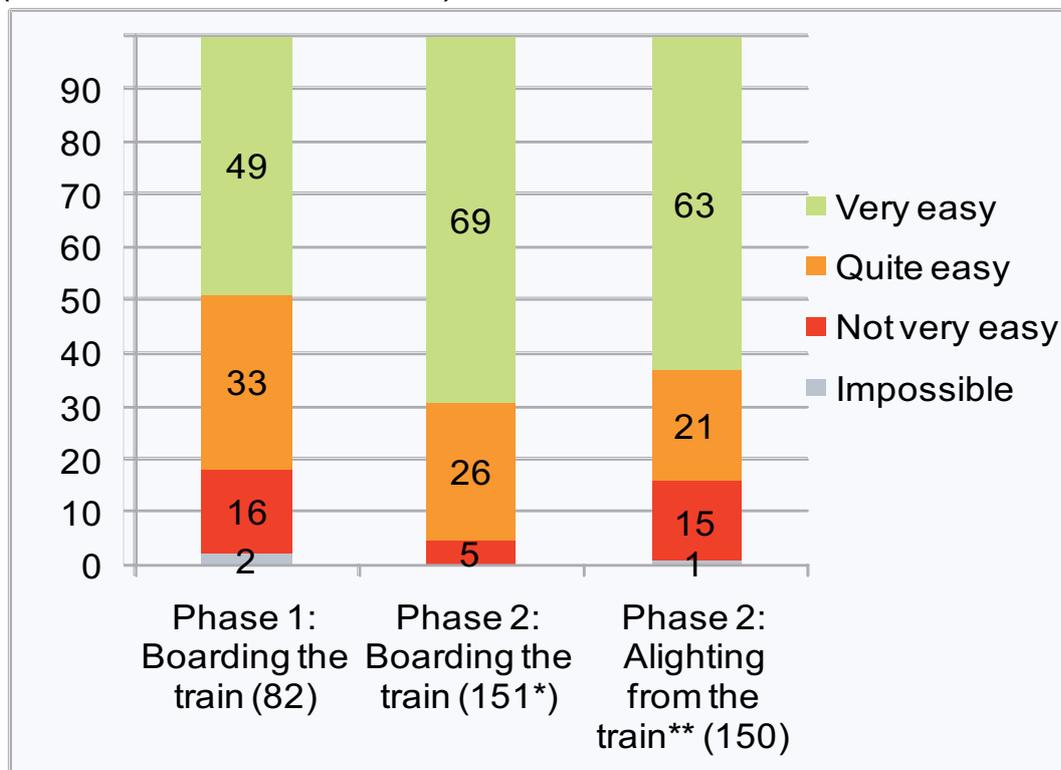
### 6.3.3 Boarding the train

Generally, shoppers found it easy to board trains; eight out of 10 experienced no major issues. In phase one, wheelchair shoppers found it easier to board the train than visually or mobility-impaired shoppers.

However, in phase two, visually-impaired shoppers reported a more positive experience with boarding the train than wheelchair users and mobility-impaired shoppers. Also, more shoppers experienced difficulty alighting from the train than boarding (see Chart 7).

**Chart 7: How easy was it to get on/off the train?**

(Base is shown in brackets)



\* Phase two is based on 151 train journeys but excludes six journeys where the shopper travelled by taxi/bus.

\*\* No data was collected on ease of alighting in phase one.

Comments regarding staff who were aware of the booked assistance:

*“The station and assistance was very busy, but the service provided was courteous and efficient. I was kept informed of what was happening at all times.” (Wheelchair user)*

*“The assistance was very good. As soon as he arrived at my side he offered his arm to guide me. He mentioned where steps were and even hesitated, explaining that he was guiding me around pigeon poo.” (Visually impaired)*

*“They were waiting for me as the train pulled in, looked after me well, and took me to the customer lounge. They asked me if I needed to go to the toilet, got tea for me, and offered to carry my bag.” (Visually impaired)*

Comments regarding staff who were unaware of the booked assistance:

*“The station staff didn’t have the correct ramp for this train. He had to contact the train company to make sure it was available. The train staff were not prepared, as the message had not gone through. However, the ramp was produced and the delay was minimal.” (Wheelchair user)*

*“Nobody knew about my arrangements. The member of staff was quite rude and said it was not their job to assist people. They said if I had previously arranged this, someone would come to meet me. No-one did and the other ticket office was abandoned as were the information points.” (Mobility impaired)*

*“I had to board the train by myself as the member of staff left me in the waiting room and informed me when my train would arrive. The member of staff said they had not received a reservation for my assistance.” (Mobility impaired)*

*“When I arrived at the station my pre-booked request for assistance had not been passed on and it took some time for a member of staff to be found. On arrival they were clearly irritated at being pulled away from their work and walked me very quickly through the station.” (Visually impaired)*

*“There was no-one waiting for me. My companion had to look for someone to assist me. I managed to get assistance before the train left the station which was very stressful.” (Wheelchair user)*

### 6.3.4 Alighting from the train

In 15% of all cases, no assistance was provided to shoppers. This was particularly the case in phase one, with one in three shoppers receiving no assistance to alight. This caused shoppers great difficulties, anxiety and stress.

On one occasion a blind shopper found it impossible to get off a replacement bus service because the member of staff who helped her onto the bus did not tell the driver of her needs. In the end, another passenger had to locate a member of staff to assist.

On another occasion, a wheelchair user could not alight at her destination because booked assistance did not materialise. Her travelling companion, who was on the platform to attract station staff's attention, was left behind when the train moved off, with the shopper still aboard.

Comments by shoppers whose assistance failed:

*"I was left on the train, my companion had already alighted, the doors closed and I was carried on to the next station." (Wheelchair user)*

*"The staff at [Station A] should be ashamed of themselves. There should be staff available and they should be disability aware. I was very disappointed and felt quite vulnerable when the train I arrived on departed. The train staff hadn't come to my aid, then there was silence except for the wind blowing." (Visually impaired)*

*"The telephone request was booked but failed to be passed on which presented problems during my journey, especially at [Station B]. I could not find a member of staff who could assist me. After 15 minutes I was approached by a recently arrived passenger who escorted me to the ticket hall so that I could leave the station. I found the attitude of the platform attendant completely unsatisfactory as they could see that I required help but made no move to assist me." (Visually impaired)*

Although most shoppers were assisted off the train by station or train staff, on 18 occasions shoppers had to be assisted off by their companion or another passenger. On three occasions, shoppers were assisted not only by a member of staff but also a passenger.

Mobility and visually-impaired shoppers experienced the greatest difficulty getting off the train: staff were not expecting them or failed to understand why they required assistance as the disability was invisible.

**Table 3: Assistance provided getting off the train**  
(Base is shown in brackets)

	Phase one (82)	Phase two* (151)	Total (233)
Station staff	37	106	143
On-board train staff	10	42	52
Another passenger	4	11	15
Other	4	2	7
No assistance provided	27	8	35

\*The total does not equate to the base figure as some shoppers were helped by more than one person (i.e. both station and train staff)

*“When they called for a team leader they arrived and asked why I needed assistance to board the train. When the train pulled in to the platform the team leader said ‘that’s the train’ then left me to board by myself. Because I am partially sighted they could not understand why I needed assistance.” (Visually impaired)*

### 6.3.5 Ramps

Despite requesting a ramp when booking assistance through APRS, on one in 10 occasions it was not deployed. This mainly affected ambulant mobility-impaired shoppers. In some cases, the shoppers were helped by passengers. Others, however, had to get on/off by themselves with great difficulty and potential danger.

In a few cases wheelchair users got off the train without ramps and without any staff assistance. On one occasion staff assisted a wheelchair user off the train without a ramp. On another occasion, a wheelchair user was not helped to alight at all and had to get off at the next station and return by another train (on which no assistance was booked) to her destination.

**Table 4: Ramps provided for getting on/off the train**  
(Base is shown in brackets)

	Phase one (44)	Phase two (146)	Total (190)
Ramp provided	38	130	168
Ramp not provided	6	16	22

Comments from shoppers who requested ramps:

*“There was no one to meet me again and staff asked if I had booked assistance. The ramp used was broken and dangerous. I did point it out but they weren’t interested.” (Wheelchair user)*

*“The train manager pushed me off the train without a ramp. I was not very happy about this as the last time my wheelchair was damaged when the person had to get me off when assistance didn’t arrive.” (Wheelchair user)*

*“No one was expecting us. We hung around for a few minutes, but no one took any interest. The carer took the wheelchair off himself as it was not too far from the train to the platform.” (Wheelchair user)*

*“I couldn’t see anyone there to help. I managed with great difficulty to get off alone. I think someone may have come to find me, but as I was concentrating on getting down safely I didn’t look up and they went past me.” (Mobility impaired)*

### **6.3.6 On-train experience**

In 27% of cases, shoppers were not assisted to their seat<sup>8</sup>. This was mostly the case with mobility-impaired shoppers.

- in 72% of cases, wheelchair shoppers were assisted to a dedicated wheelchair space
- more than half of the wheelchair shoppers in phase one were accommodated in the door-way vestibule<sup>9</sup>
- a small minority moved the wheelchair to the aisle between the seats because of draughts in the vestibule.

However, in phase two, on most occasions wheelchair shoppers were accommodated in a dedicated wheelchair space.

- on several occasions when the wheelchair space was cluttered with luggage, staff did not remove it and left the shoppers in the aisle
- on one occasion the wheelchair user called the member of staff back to remove the luggage to allow her wheelchair to occupy the space.

Comments by shoppers who could not access the wheelchair space:

*“I was not shown to the wheelchair space. I had to call the guard back to have the luggage removed from my space” (Wheelchair user)*

<sup>8</sup> This excludes wheelchair users and is based on phase two results only (base 139).

<sup>9</sup> It is unclear whether station staff accommodated wheelchair users in the nearest available vestibule to minimise dwell time at the station even though a dedicated wheelchair space is provided on the train.

*“The wheelchair space was free, but there were cases in the wheelchair space” (Wheelchair user)*

*“Space was available, but the door was half partitioned off so the wheelchair could not get to the space. I had to get out and the staff folded the chair to go through the gap<sup>10</sup>. It would not have been possible for some” (Wheelchair user)*

Most could reach the accessible toilet on board. However, as expected, wheelchair users could not use the non-accessible toilets or move through the train.

Comments by wheelchair shoppers about accessibility of facilities:

*“The trolley did not come to the wheelchair space.”*

*“APRS advised that there was a buffet service, but none was available.”*

- eight out of 10 announcements on the train were clear and audible
- on just over half of all trains shoppers reported their ability to see the electronic information display<sup>11</sup>.

### **6.3.7 Connections**

Shoppers changed trains on 38 occasions in phase one and 62 in phase two.

- shoppers in phase two were able to make their connection on more occasions (96%) compared to phase one (66%)
- shoppers missed their connection in phase one due to non-arrival of assistance (seven occasions), assistance arriving too late (three occasions) or train arriving late (three occasions).

Missing a connection affects booked assistance for the rest of that journey: if unaware of the passengers' delay, staff will await the wrong incoming train. Severed connections are a problem not only for passengers but also for staff as booked arrangements will not apply.

*“I eventually had to phone my helper for assistance as there were no members of staff or help points visible to me.” (Visually impaired)*

*“No assistance arrived when my train came into the station. I waited 5-10 minutes then made my way to the lift which took me to the platform for the connection.” (Mobility impaired)*

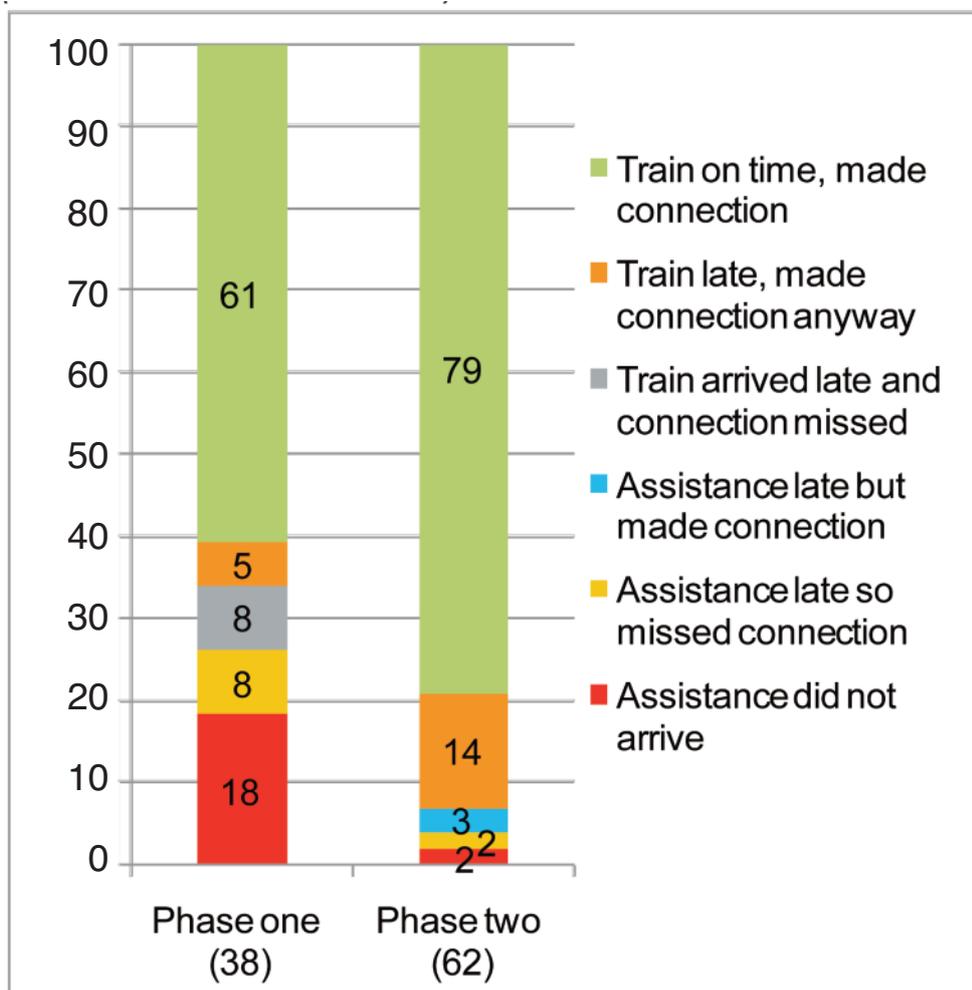
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<sup>10</sup> The wheelchair in question was of 'reference size' and should have been able to manoeuvre aboard the train without problems.

<sup>11</sup> This excludes visually-impaired shoppers.

## Chart 8: What happened when changing trains?

(Base is shown in brackets)



### 6.3.8 Inaccessible stations

A significant number of stations are either wholly or partially inaccessible to mobility-impaired or wheelchair-using passengers. Passenger Focus specifically selected 15 journeys because they involved a selection of such stations:

- where all platforms could be reached only by stairs
- where at least one platform could only be reached by stairs
- where staff presence is needed (e.g. to use a barrow crossing) or
- where the lift was known to be out-of-order.

On six occasions, shoppers were provided with a taxi to/from the inaccessible station. On one occasion the shopper was advised to change trains en route and travel between accessible stations by tram; it is unclear whether APRS checked if the shopper had a valid ticket to travel by this mode.

APRS failed to advise shoppers on eight of these 15 occasions that one of the stations was inaccessible and did not book alternative transport for

them. Nonetheless, station staff on the day provided alternative transport to all shoppers who needed it.

One shopper who was offered alternative transport on the return leg of her journey was advised, for some reason, to get to the inaccessible station 20-30 minutes before the taxi's departure time. The taxi arrived 40 minutes after the shopper had been told to get to the station. It was a cold day in March; the waiting room was locked as the station was unstaffed at that time of day.

Once shoppers arrived at the accessible stations, staff were usually unaware of the assistance booked. Despite being unprepared for the arrival of the mystery shoppers, staff were found to be generally helpful.

*"I spoke to a member of station staff about the assistance. They had no record and sent someone from security who didn't really know how to help or where to put me." (Mobility impaired)*

*"The taxi transfer was late, as they could not locate a taxi that could take a wheelchair so I missed the train and had to take the next train." (Wheelchair user)*

### **6.3.9 Overall satisfaction with journey experience**

There were a higher proportion of successful journeys where assistance was provided in phase two than phase one. In phase one, six out of 10 shoppers were satisfied with the assistance provided. This broke down to less than four out of 10 visually-impaired, half of mobility-impaired and eight out of 10 wheelchair-using shoppers.

Satisfaction was slightly higher in phase two with three out of four shoppers rating themselves as very/fairly satisfied with the assistance. Visually-impaired shoppers were most satisfied (78%) followed by wheelchair users (76%) and mobility-impaired shoppers (66%).

- half of all phase one shoppers felt that the assistance provided on the journey met their expectation based on their call to APRS
- in phase two, only four out of 10 shoppers said that the assistance provided met their expectations based on their call to APRS.

In phase two we asked shoppers who had used APRS before to compare their journey experience with previous experience. Around half stated that it was the same, but more than a quarter (29%) found it to be worse.

However, it was clear that staff on many occasions provided an excellent service and did their best to provide good-quality assistance.

*“The journey gave me confidence to go to a shopping centre I didn’t know, on my own.” (Visually impaired)*

*It was a good journey, and made better by good and timely assistance.” (Visually impaired)*

*“All the staff that helped me today were very attentive and helpful.” (Mobility impaired)*

*“The preparation of the member of staff and the assistance they offered putting me on the train was perfect.” (Wheelchair user)*

Comments from those who were dissatisfied:

*“Due to delays and overcrowding I could only travel part way...Staff advised me of updates. The waiting room and platforms were very crowded. The assistance advised me to go back.” (Visually impaired)*

*“None of the arrangements or promises made were fulfilled.” (Wheelchair user)*

*“It was horrible. Almost enough to put me off mystery shopping. Definitely enough to never use the system for myself.” (Mobility impaired)*

The results show that some shoppers have low expectations, and thus rated satisfaction relatively highly despite the difficulties they encountered with their assistance.

Comments from shoppers with low expectations who rated satisfaction as **“very or fairly satisfied”**:

*“I waited until everyone else had gotten off. I couldn’t see anyone there to help. I managed with great difficulty to get off alone.” (Mobility impaired)*

*“The expectation that I could cope alone was wrong. They assessed my needs by my appearance without asking.” (Mobility impaired)*

*“My only issue was that they put me on the wrong train and I had to change. The ticket inspector told me I was on the wrong train, but got assistance for the changeover.” (Mobility impaired)*

*“The assistance at [Station D] did not return to help me when my train was about to depart.” (Visually impaired)*

## 7. Conclusion

We undertook this research to determine if the service worked effectively and, if not, where failures occurred. The evidence from both phases of research showed frequent and repeated failures in three main areas:

### 1. Information to passengers

APRS, and to a lesser extent NRE, often failed to answer passengers' questions about train and station facilities. APRS frequently failed to make clear to shoppers those services 'booked' for their journeys, e.g. reserved seats, taxi provision or station assistance. On other occasions passengers were given incorrect information.

APRS staff cannot effectively book assistance or advise on accessibility without information on each station's status. This information therefore *must* be available to them. Their frequent refusal to pass this to passengers is of immense concern; either they have this information and chose not to pass it on or they have no access to it and are effectively sending passengers into the unknown.

Some shoppers were also misinformed on relevant fares and routes, including by station staff.

This calls into question the accuracy and integrity of the systems which the industry relies upon when booking assistance for disabled passengers. The recently revised Department for Transport's Code of Practice stresses the prime importance of accurate information so that passengers are fully aware before they set off on their journey

*"The information train companies have on facilities for disabled travellers should be shared with other train companies. This journey today was one of the worst I have travelled because of a lack of information given."*  
(Wheelchair user)

*"The telephone booking could be more professional."* (Mobility impaired)

### 2. Communication

On frequent occasions, train and station staff were not aware of the assistance bookings made through APRS. Failure to pass this information to relevant staff undermines the point of booking in the first place and results in passengers not receiving the expected service.

*"There needs to be more communication between the stations."*  
(Wheelchair user)

*“Communication of this service between APRS and the station staff should be done properly and more efficiently.” (Mobility impaired)*

*“The main problem is communication between APRS staff and ground staff. Perhaps further training to make sure assistance theory works well in practice.” (Wheelchair user)*

*“I would like to make a suggestion to have some form of communication device to alert train staff to visually-impaired persons needing assistance.” (Visually impaired)*

### **3. Training**

Many members of staff failed to show the levels of training and knowledge to carry out the task efficiently and courteously.

*“The manager at [station E] would benefit from some awareness training and customer relations skills updating.” (Visually impaired)*

*“The station staff need customer care training.” (Wheelchair user)*

*“I think the Customer Service Operators on the telephone should have some form of practical 'face-to-face' training with the public, and the members of staff who are doing the 'face-to-face' at the moment should look after the phones.” (Visually impaired)*

*“The assistant passed me over to a colleague on the station by pushing my chair in his direction and letting go. This is unnerving for a wheelchair user.” (Wheelchair user)*

.....

The research shows that the current systems and procedures are so often prone to failure that passengers cannot rely upon them. As the system cannot adequately deal with the demands placed upon it, we fail to see how it will address the major additional burden of the Olympic and Paralympic Games. Urgent action is needed to ensure a system is in place to cope with 2012. The urgency of addressing these failures was summed up by one despairing shopper as:

*“I do not believe, unless the railway companies do something drastic, it will ever change.” (Visually impaired)*

## 8. Recommendations

As a result of this research, Passenger Focus recommends that the industry address issues in a number of areas:

- **National Rail Enquiries**

- ✓ provide the appropriate TOC's number every time.

- **APRS Booking staff**

*Our recommendations:*

- ✓ provide a freephone number for passengers to book assistance
- ✓ have in place suitable systems and methods for providing accurate information and advising passengers on facilities at stations and trains\*
- ✓ provide facilities to book assistance and receive confirmation online
- ✓ create a database for passenger details to accelerate future bookings
- ✓ provide relevant information at the level which each passenger needs: on reporting times at stations, 'reporting point' etc.
- ✓ provide a booking reference for booking retrieval and passenger confidence
- ✓ provide written confirmation of the booking via email, fax or post.
- ✓ reduce the time it takes to book assistance, e.g. take down passengers' contact details and then call them back to confirm.
- ✓ ensure booking details have been communicated to relevant staff\*
- ✓ call back at least a percentage of passengers for feedback after the journey to address shortcomings.

- **Information provision**

*Our recommendations:*

- ✓ clear processes to monitor, update and share station/train facility information between train companies and Network Rail\*
- ✓ improve communication between APRS and train/station staff
- ✓ explore the viability of a single APRS number for booking assistance
- ✓ ensure that passengers understand in which circumstances accommodation has been *reserved*
- ✓ ensure that passengers understand where assistance has been booked and who will provide it (station or on-train staff)

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\* Although these processes should be part of the standard APRS delivery procedure, their frequent failure suggests that particular attention needs to be addressed to these elements.

- ✓ send written confirmation of the assistance booking via email, fax or post
- ✓ create a handbook of “do’s and dont’s of assisted travel” booklet, the text of which could form part of the *Rail travel made easy* booklet, for reference during a journey, in the event of assistance failure or other emergency
- ✓ create a national helpline number for passengers to contact in case of emergency and in the absence of assistance
- ✓ refund the passenger’s (and any companion’s) fare in full in the case of assistance failure which disrupts their journey (in addition to any delay compensation under the Passenger’s Charter).

- **Staff assistance**

*Our recommendations:*

- ✓ ensure that all staffed stations have a clearly marked ‘reporting point’ with a recognisable logo, to be included in publicity
- ✓ ensure booking details have been communicated to relevant staff\*
- ✓ telephone ahead to the alighting station with confirmation that the (named) passenger is travelling and his/her location aboard the relevant train
- ✓ staff must assist passengers to a point where they can board their onward train or continue their journey by other means\*
- ✓ use ‘good practice’ to help in locating ‘missing’ passengers.

- **Training**

*Our recommendations:*

- ✓ train staff in how to provide appropriate assistance, how to spot ‘invisible disabilities’ and how to use relevant equipment.

- **Monitoring and Evaluation**

*Our recommendations:*

- ✓ Have in place an auditing system to monitor the quality of assistance provided and highlight shortcomings.

Passenger Focus has drawn up ‘best practice guidelines’ which are available separately summarising the above. Details of this can be found on our website at [www.passengerfocus.org.uk](http://www.passengerfocus.org.uk).

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\* Although these processes should be part of the standard APRS delivery procedure, their frequent failure suggests that particular attention needs to be addressed to these elements.

## 9. Contact us

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## Appendix A

### Phase one journeys

Ref	Start station	Destination station	Changing at	Single or return
001a	London Charing Cross	Ashford International		S
001b	Ashford International	London Victoria		S
002	Ilford	Colchester	Shenfield	R
003	London Fenchurch Street	Southend Central		R
004	Enfield	Shenfield	Liverpool Street	R
005	London Victoria	Gatwick Airport		R
006	London Victoria	Gatwick Airport		R
007	Harrow & Wealdstone	Milton Keynes	Watford Junction	R
008	London Paddington	Heathrow Airport		R
009	Surbiton	Sutton	Wimbledon	R
010	London St Pancras	Bedford		R
011	London St Pancras	Bedford		R
012	London Kings Cross	Peterborough		R
013	London Kings Cross	Biggleswade		R
014	London Waterloo	Windsor & Eton Riverside		R
015	London Waterloo	Windsor & Eton Riverside		R
016	London Waterloo	Windsor & Eton Riverside		R
017	London Kings Cross Thameslink	St. Albans City		R
018	London Kings Cross Thameslink	St. Albans City		R
019	Brockley	Watford Junction	East Croydon	R
020	New Eltham	Harpenden	London Bridge	R
021	London Euston	Watford Junction		R
022	London Euston	Watford Junction		R
023	London Marylebone	Aylesbury		R
024	London Marylebone	Beaconsfield		R
025	Eltham	Gillingham Kent	Dartford	R
026	Eltham	Gillingham Kent	Dartford	R
027	Forest Hill	Guildford	Clapham Junction	R
028	Putney	Stansted Airport	Vauxhall and Tottenham Hale	R
029	London Cannon Street	Sutton	London Bridge	R
030	Lewisham	Chelmsford	Stratford	R
031	Lewisham	Chelmsford	Stratford	R
032	Mill Hill Broadway	Wellingborough	Luton Airport Parkway	R
033	Stratford	Braintree Freeport		R
034	West Ham	Southend Central		R
035	Barking	Westcliff		R
036	Surbiton	Woking		R

037	Putney	Staines		R
038	Willesden Junction	Norbury	Clapham Junction	R
039	London Waterloo	Basingstoke		R
040	Stratford	Colchester Town	Colchester	R
041	Greenford	Slough	Ealing Broadway	R

## Phase two journeys

Ref	Start station	Destination station	Changing at	Single or Return
001	Shrewsbury	Llandrindod		R
002	Shrewsbury	Aberystwyth		R
003	Shrewsbury	Melton Mowbray	Birmingham New Street	R
004	Shrewsbury	Walsall	Birmingham New Street	R
005	Shrewsbury	Worcester Shrub Hill	Hereford	R
006	Shrewsbury	Runcorn	Crewe	R
007	Chippenham	Weston-super-Mare	Bristol Temple Meads	R
008	Chippenham	Taunton	Bristol Temple Meads	R
009	Chippenham	Gloucester	Swindon	R
010	Chippenham	Bradford-on-Avon	Bath	R
011	Newcastle Central	Inverness	Edinburgh Waverley	R
012	Newcastle Central	Carlisle		R
013	Newcastle Central	Darlington		R
014	Edinburgh Waverley	Perth		R
015	Edinburgh Waverley	Falkirk		R
016	Edinburgh Waverley	Helensburgh Central	Glasgow Queen Street	R
017	Altrincham	Port Sunlight	Chester	R
018	Manchester Piccadilly	Stoke-on-Trent		R
019	Manchester Piccadilly	Derby	Stoke-on-Trent	R
020	Cardiff Bay	Gloucester	Cardiff Central and Cardiff Queen Street	R
021	Cardiff Central	Abergavenny		R
022	Brunstane	Carlisle	Edinburgh Waverley	R
023	Brunstane	Berwick on Tweed	Edinburgh Waverley	R
024	Brunstane	Pitlochry	Edinburgh Waverley	R
025	Brunstane	Glasgow Queen Street	Edinburgh Waverley	R
026	Newcastle Central	Middlesbrough		R

027a	Sunderland	Northallerton		S
027b	Northallerton	Newcastle Central		S
028	Newcastle Central	Leeds		R
029	Newcastle Central	Doncaster		R
030	Chesterfield	Manchester Piccadilly	Sheffield	R
031	Chesterfield	Leicester		R
032	Chesterfield	Loughborough	Derby	R
033	Edinburgh Waverley	Aberdeen		R
034	Edinburgh Waverley	Durham		R
035	Sheffield	Burton on Trent	Derby	R
036	Sheffield	Ilkley	Leeds	R
037a	Sheffield	Hull		S
037b	Hull	Grantham		S
037c	Grantham	Sheffield	Doncaster	S
			Manchester Piccadilly	R
038	Bolton	Stoke-on-Trent		R
039	Bolton	Oxenholme	Preston	R
040	Bolton	Blackpool North		R
041	Paignton	Plymouth	Newton Abbot	R
042	Paignton	Taunton	Newton Abbot	R
043	Paignton	Barnstaple	Exeter St David's	R
044	Ayr	Carlisle		R
045	Ayr	Stranraer		R
			Manchester Victoria and Piccadilly	R
046	Rochdale	Manchester Airport		R
047	Rochdale	York	Leeds	R
048	Crosshill	Penrith	Glasgow Central	R
049	Crosshill	Motherwell	Glasgow Central	R

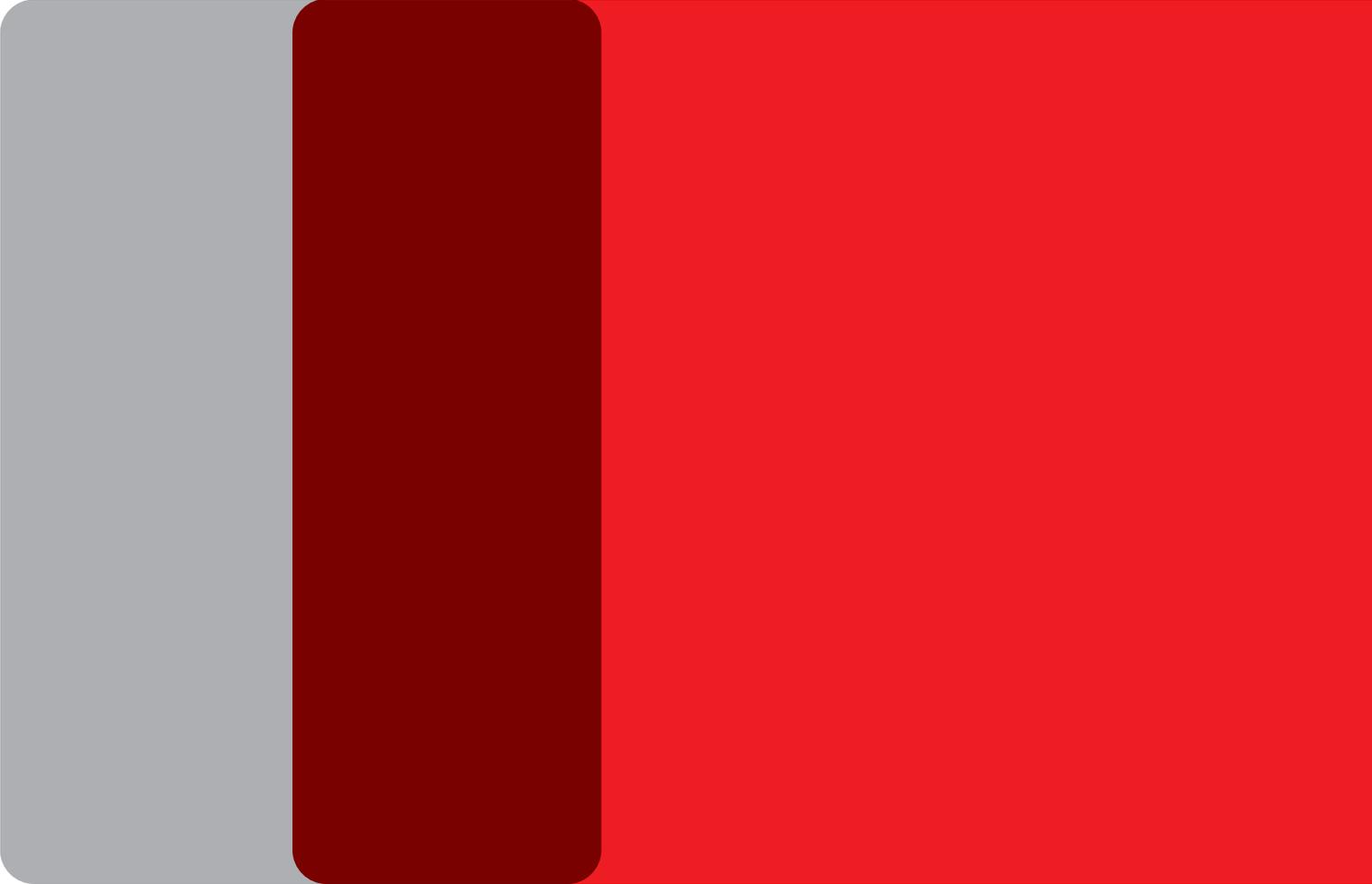
## Appendix B

Train companies on which shoppers' journeys were made:

Arriva Trains Wales  
c2c  
Chiltern Railway  
CrossCountry Trains  
East Midlands Trains  
First Capital Connect  
First Great Western  
First ScotRail  
First TransPennine Express  
Gatwick Express  
Grand Central Railway  
Heathrow Express  
Hull Trains  
London Midland  
Merseyrail  
Midland Mainline  
National Express East Coast  
Northern Rail  
one  
Silverlink  
South West Trains  
Southeastern Railway  
Southern Railway  
Virgin Trains

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