



Mystery shop of the Assisted Passengers
Reservation Service (APRS) offered to rail
passengers with disabilities

Summary of research conducted in London
and the South East

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1. Executive summary

The Assisted Passengers Reservation Service (APRS) is the system offered by all train companies to book assistance for rail passengers. This research was carried out in London and the South East to assess the quality of the APRS and provide the rail industry with information on the strengths and weaknesses of the service from the perspective of users. The research was set up to review the overall system rather than individual Train Operating Companies (TOCs) - hence findings should not be used to come to conclusions on individual TOCs. Key findings from the research are:

The following areas work well

- nine out of ten mystery shoppers reported that the APRS call handler won their confidence
- almost four out of ten calls were answered immediately, with only one in eight having to wait for more than two minutes
- nine out of ten mystery shoppers found station staff to be friendly.

The following areas need improvement in some cases

- Only one in three mystery shoppers were advised to get to the station early.
- Only one in three were given a reference number for their booking.
- Eight calls to APRS involved making journeys to/from stations that are inaccessible to wheelchair users. Five of these were not offered alternative transport arrangements by APRS staff, however on the day of travel all eight mystery shoppers were provided with alternative transport to the accessible station by station staff.
- Despite booking assistance at least 24 hours in advance, staff at stations were prepared for the mystery shoppers for only half of all journeys when they arrived at the departure station.
- Fewer than two in five were actually met at the agreed place at the station.
- Mobility impaired mystery shoppers who did not use wheelchairs encountered more difficulty boarding the train compared to wheelchair-users and visually impaired mystery shoppers with two out of five stating that boarding was “not very easy”. This was mainly due to lack of assistance by station staff.
- Mystery shoppers had to change trains in 38 cases. In seven out of the 38 instances assistance never arrived and in a further three cases it arrived late which led to the traveller missing their connection.
- Eight out of ten wheelchair users were satisfied with the assistance provided, compared with only a half of all mobility impaired mystery shoppers and less than four out of ten visually impaired mystery shoppers.

- Two areas of improvement required by mystery shoppers were staff being available to assist and better communication between the APRS and station staff.
- Mystery shoppers were offered the option to be called back by the APRS after the journey to gain their feedback on their experiences for only one in four journeys.

2. Foreword

Passenger Focus has recognised for some time that in spite of efforts made by the rail industry, disabled passengers can experience problems when using rail. Many passengers with disabilities do travel by rail unassisted, but others require the assistance offered by the APRS.

As an evidence based organisation Passenger Focus is keen to understand this issue and help to identify actions that might lead to improvements.

We have done the following:

- Reviewed each train operating company's Disabled Peoples Protection Policy (DPPP). The DPPP document outlines the additional service that train companies agree to provide to disabled passengers.
- Analysed the train operating companies current processes for booking and delivering assistance.
- Commissioned a mystery shop in London and the South East to look at the experience of disabled passengers when booking assistance using the APRS.

We have looked at the experiences of passengers cross referencing this against train operating companies' policies and guidelines. In too many cases there is a gap between the train operating company's aspirations, the services disabled passengers have a right to expect and the services that are delivered.

While some train companies are diligent in reviewing their services others only appear to do this on an ad-hoc and intermittent basis. It is not apparent that good practice in this area arises from surveys of the APRS users. In these circumstances failures are not identified or scoped and best practice is not identified and disseminated. It is hard to envisage how the industry will close the gap between aspiration and reality without adequate industry wide monitoring and active use of findings to improve services.

We will be consulting with train companies and other rail organisations to see how our research findings might help improve the APRS. We also want to hear the views of disability groups on the research and how it might be used to improve services. To this end we will consult with train companies, rail industry bodies and organisations representing disabled passengers and disabled passengers themselves.

3. Foreword

DPTAC greatly welcome this research done by Passenger Focus into this important aspect of the rail journey experience for passengers with disabilities.

Whilst we applaud the fact that Train Operating Companies provide assistance for disabled people, it needs to be consistent to give people confidence to increase the number of train journeys they make. Disabled people will increasingly form a large potential passenger market for companies as the population ages.

DPTAC have also had concerns for some time that the quality of booked assistance experienced by disabled passengers varies considerably between companies and locations, which although sometimes excellent, can often fall short of an acceptable standard.

The research carried out by Passenger Focus provides evidence that the standard of service experienced by disabled passengers who have booked using APRS can be very poor despite booking assistance more than 24 hours in advance and this may lead to lack of confidence in using the railway on future occasions.

DPTAC strongly urge the rail industry to review the robustness of processes for the consistent delivery of services for disabled passengers. Given the problems identified by the survey, further monitoring of the service experienced by disabled passengers is required. This includes consistency of service across the network to assess whether the existing APRS system meets an acceptable standard, in the future.

Ann Bates

Deputy Chair

DPTAC (Disabled Persons Transport Advisory Committee)

4. Background

Passenger Focus commissioned GfK NOP, an independent market research organisation, to carry out this mystery shopping research. The objectives of the research were as follows:

- to monitor the efficiency and adequacy of National Rail Enquiries (NRE) to direct callers to the appropriate train operating company (TOC) to book assistance
- to monitor the quality of the TOC APRS booking service
- to monitor the quality of service provided on the day of travel by station staff
- to identify areas for improvement.

The results summarise the service received by 18 disabled mystery shoppers (comprised of wheelchair users, mobility impaired and visually impaired people) using the APRS booking service and making rail journeys in London and the South East. They are not necessarily representative of any other types of disability or geographic areas.

Overall 12 individual train operating companies were mystery shopped and these findings should not be used to come to any conclusions on their individual processes. However as all train companies use similar APRS processes, the findings are likely to highlight common problems that exist.

5. How we carried out the mystery shops

A range of journeys were selected based on the availability of mystery shoppers on the market research organisation GfK NOP's panel of disabled mystery shoppers. Journeys were selected to include the following:

- direct journeys
- journeys involving changes of trains and making connections
- journeys involving travel to/from or between stations operated by different companies
- journeys using more than one train operating company
- travel to/from stations which are not wheelchair accessible - it should be noted that in these cases the onus is on the train company to provide alternative transport to the nearest accessible station.

A survey form developed jointly by Passenger Focus and GfK NOP was used to help ensure structured and objective assessments. Face to face training was provided to all the participating mystery shoppers. This covered issues such as how to use the survey form, objectivity and health and safety. Fieldwork was carried out in March and April of 2007. Mystery shoppers chose times of travel to suit them best, which tended to be in the off-peak and particularly at weekends.

In total 41 return journeys were completed. Mystery shoppers booked assistance for the outward and return journeys separately, resulting in 82 completed survey forms. The journeys were broken down as follows:

- mobility impaired – six journeys (12 survey forms)
- wheelchair users - 19 journeys (38 survey forms)
- visually impaired – 16 journeys (32 survey forms).

6. Key findings

The results cover passenger experiences of using National Rail Enquiries and the APRS booking service, staff assistance provided on the day of travel, journeys covering stations which wheelchair users cannot access, connection with other trains and facilities provided on the train.

6.1 National Rail Enquiries (NRE) and Assisted Passenger Reservation Service (APRS) booking service

Research findings

Mystery shoppers contacted National Rail Enquiries to request the telephone number they needed to make an APRS booking. On nine out of ten occasions mystery shoppers were given the correct train operating company number to book the assistance via APRS.

When making the APRS booking, mystery shoppers reported many positive aspects of the service they received with nine out of ten mystery shoppers indicating that the call handler won their confidence and was “helpful, professional and polite”. Almost four out of ten calls were answered immediately with only one in eight mystery shoppers having to wait for more than two minutes. However, only one in three mystery shoppers were advised to get to the station early to ensure they had time to catch their chosen train, fewer than one in three were given a meeting point at the station and only one in three was given a reference number for their booking.

Eight calls to APRS involved making journeys to/from stations which are inaccessible to wheelchair users. Five out of the eight were not offered alternative arrangements for their journey when they called APRS. This was due to APRS staff not being aware that a lift was out-of-order at one station and that another was not accessible to wheelchair users.

However on the day of travel all eight were provided with alternative transport. Of three of these journeys which were pre-arranged by APRS, only one was provided as scheduled. The other two were provided by staff at stations only when the passengers arrived there on the day. The remaining journeys were revised by the TOC staff who telephoned the traveller on the day of travel advising that they had rearranged transport for part of the journey as the station is inaccessible.

Mystery shoppers were offered the option to be called back by the APRS after the journey to gain their feedback on their experiences for only one in four journeys.

“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)

“The operator gave me clear and precise answers which made me feel confident about the journey.” (wheelchair user)

“The operator was friendly and informative.” (visually impaired)

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

6.2 Staff assistance on day of travel

Research findings

Despite all of our mystery shoppers booking assistance at least 24 hours in advance as specified within the train companies own guidelines, staff at stations were prepared for them in only half of all journeys where mystery shoppers wanted to get on the train, and in two thirds of journeys where mystery shoppers wanted to get off the train. Of those mystery shoppers who had been given an appointed place to meet, fewer than two in five were actually met there. However nine out of ten mystery shoppers found station staff to be friendly and eight out of ten experienced no major issues boarding the train.

When the data was broken down by the type of disability, nine out ten wheelchair mystery shoppers reported no significant problems with boarding the train, and in 38 out of 44 journeys the access ramp was ready to use when needed. Those who experienced problems boarding were inconvenienced mainly due to a lack of preparation by station staff.

“The staff were not prepared at all and did not know about my arrangements to travel that day.” (wheelchair user)

“I got the impression I was not expected.” (wheelchair user)

Mobility impaired mystery shoppers who do not use wheelchairs experienced considerably more problems boarding than wheelchair and visually impaired mystery shoppers. On five out of 12 journeys, mystery shoppers reported that boarding was “not very easy”, mainly due to lack of assistance by station staff who had been booked to assist them.

“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)

Eight out of ten visually impaired mystery shoppers boarded easily, but on six out of the 32 journeys significant problems were experienced. Problems included staff not expecting our mystery shoppers or not understanding why they required assistance.

“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 and walked me very quickly through the station ignoring hazards.” (visually impaired)

“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)

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

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

“The staff at the station were very friendly and helpful. They were prepared for my arrival, walked me to the platform and onto the train and reassured me that someone would meet me at my destination.” (mobility impaired)

Overall it emerged that visually impaired mystery shoppers were much less positive about staff assistance and facilities available for their journey, with only four out of ten rating their experience as “excellent” or “pretty good”. Eight out of ten wheelchair users were satisfied with staff assistance and facilities whilst only six out of ten mobility impaired mystery shoppers who do not use a wheelchair were satisfied.

A number of comments from mobility and visually impaired mystery shoppers who were unhappy suggest that station staff may not identify the traveller as disabled or understand the type of assistance that is required.

*“The journey was excellent. I did not have to ask for anything.”
(wheelchair user)*

“The members of staff were excellent. The ramps were out, awaiting my arrival and they helped me to alight and board without prompting.” (wheelchair user)

“The staff's attitude at the station was very poor and unhelpful. There was no assistance and no one seemed to care. There was no one at the ticket barriers. None of the attendants at the main ticket office seemed to have any knowledge of my trip. It was terrible. A member of staff said to me that whoever I arranged my journey with should have been there to meet me and it was not their job to check this out. I thought this was very rude. All the help desks were unmanned.” (mobility impaired)

It was striking how low some of our mystery shoppers' expectations were. A mobility impaired traveller rated staff assistance and facilities on train as “pretty good”, despite being put on the wrong train.

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

6.3 Connections

Research findings

35 of the 82 journeys involved changing trains; 32 of these required one change and three journeys required two changes, giving a total of 38 instances where the traveller had to change trains. In 23 out of the 38 cases the connecting train arrived on time and mystery shoppers made their connection into another train. Our mystery shoppers found that in seven cases the booked assistance did not arrive at all which meant that they missed their connection and in a further three cases the booked assistance arrived too late for them to make their connection. This affected the assistance booked for the remaining part of the journey, e.g. staff not being aware of the delay to the passenger - unless they had been advised, staff would wait for the incoming passengers in vain and connections were missed which caused more problems further down the line.

“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.”
(mobility impaired)*

6.4 Journeys involving stations inaccessible to wheelchair users

Research findings

There were eight journeys which involved travelling to/ from stations which are inaccessible to wheelchair users. On all eight journeys the TOC provided alternative transport to the traveller to get them from the inaccessible station to an accessible station. However station staff at the accessible station to which the mystery shoppers had been sent were usually not aware of their arrival. Despite being unprepared for the arrival of mystery shoppers, staff were found to be generally friendly.

*“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)*

6.5 Facilities on the train

Research findings

Our mystery shoppers found the following:

- dedicated wheelchair spaces were available in 15 out of 38 journeys. The remaining mystery shoppers were accommodated either by the doors or in the aisle in between seats
- the majority of verbal announcements were clear and audible
- staff were evident on four out of ten trains.

6.6 Overall journey experience

Research findings

Overall six out of ten mystery shoppers were satisfied with the assistance provided. This broke down to less than four out of ten visually impaired, half of mobility impaired mystery shoppers and eight out of ten wheelchair users.

Half of all mystery shoppers felt that the assistance provided on the journey they booked met their expectation based on their call to the APRS booking service. Two areas of required improvement mentioned the most were staff being available to assist and improved communication between the APRS and stations. Other aspects mentioned much less frequently were the need to provide more helpful staff at stations, the difficulty in accessing certain types of trains and for better information to be provided by APRS on station accessibility.

7. Conclusion

The research undertaken by Passenger Focus seeks to provide evidence that opens the gateway to debate and focussed work to improve service provision. We recognise the challenges are many and we do not believe there are easy answers to some of those challenges; however we remain optimistic that real change is possible. We are committed to working with passengers and the industry to ensure that we build on the positive aspects of the APRS booking service and help to highlight where improvements are needed.

Appendix A: Examples of journeys

Case study one

A visually impaired passenger undertook a journey on 28 March 2007 that involved changing trains once.

When the passenger called National Rail Enquiries they gave him the incorrect APRS telephone number. Eventually he was able to get hold of the correct number to book assistance.

“Once through to the right company they were very helpful and the process was easy.”

On the day of travel when he arrived at the departure station, the passenger was met by a friendly member of staff at the agreed location who assisted him to board the train:

“Even though the booked train was cancelled, the member of staff stayed with me until the next train arrived. I was shown to a seat by a member of staff.”

However problems arose when he needed to make the connecting journey at the intermediate station; the train arrived late, no assistance was provided to get off the first train nor getting to the platform for the connecting train and boarding it.

“I eventually had to phone my helper for assistance as there were no members of staff or help points.”

When he got to his destination station, there was no member of staff to assist him off the train. Because of the problems encountered in taking the connecting train, the passenger was dissatisfied with the overall experience of this journey.

“I waited for someone to assist me but no help was forthcoming. My experience would have been improved if the staff had been in the right place at the right time.”

Case study two

A mobility impaired passenger made a journey on 28 March 2007 which involved changing trains once to get to her destination.

The passenger telephoned National Rail Enquiries and was provided with the appropriate APRS number to book assistance. He got through immediately to the APRS number:

“The call handler was polite and helpful in telling me that a wheelchair could be arranged to get me from point to point.”

He was given a reference number for his call to APRS. However, on arrival at the departure station problems arose.

“No one 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 but no one did. There was no assistance and no one seemed to care. There was no one at the ticket barriers and none of the attendants at the main ticket office seemed to have any knowledge of my trip. It was terrible.”

Assistance was better when making the connection at the intermediate station.

“They went back and got me a wheelchair and took me to the correct platform where they told another member of staff to put me on the train.”

Overall the traveller was disappointed with the level of assistance provided and it did not meet the expectations that arose when speaking to APRS.

“If I had met someone at the beginning of the journey I would have felt reassured. The first part of the journey was a horrible experience. Staff were rude and unhelpful until I reached the intermediate station and met some caring staff.”

Case study three

A wheelchair user made a direct journey with no connections on 27 March 2007.

The passenger initially telephoned National Rail Enquiries and was provided with the appropriate number for the APRS service.

He telephoned APRS and got through immediately - the call handler asked numerous questions and provided the passenger with all the key information and advice he needed to make his journey.

“The member of staff was very friendly and gave me confidence to undertake my journey.”

The customer used the Dial a Ride taxi service to get to the station where he was met by a member of staff, fully prepared for his arrival.

“The member of staff was waiting for me with the ramp which was ready to use. The journey was excellent, I did not have to ask for anything. The member of staff gave me all the instructions about what I needed to know.”

The passenger was also assisted by the on board train staff in alighting from the train at the destination station and overall he was very satisfied with the level of service provided.

“I don’t think there was anything more that could have improved my journey.”

Case study four

A mobility impaired passenger made a direct journey with no connections on 10 April 2007.

The passenger was given the correct number for APRS from National Rail Enquiries. He then telephoned the APRS number to book assistance for the journey.

“No reference number was given for my booking.”

However on arrival at the departure station, the passenger was met by the station staff at the appointed place. Assistance was provided to board the train.

“The staff at the departure station were very friendly and helpful. They were prepared for my arrival, walked me to the platform and helped me on to the train.”

“I was helped to my seat on the train, near the toilets, and reassured that someone would meet me at my destination. I felt confident and reassured all the way and the service was excellent.”

Overall the passenger was very satisfied with the level of service provided for this journey.

“All the staff from beginning to end were polite and helpful.”

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