



Department  
for Transport

# Research about disabled people and their experience of travelling by rail

Easy read version



April 2025

## Background information



This is the easy read version of the Department for Transport's research on disabled people's experience of rail.



This report uses the word 'disabled people'. The Department for Transport understands that not everyone uses these words to describe themselves, because everyone is different.

Passenger Assist is the name of the service where you can request help to travel by train, such as:

- help to navigate around the station
- help getting on or off the train
- arranging a ramp on or off your train
- carrying your bag(s).



A Disabled Persons Railcard is a card which makes travelling by train cheaper. If you have this card, you and an adult companion travelling with you both get one third off the cost of your rail fare.

## Introduction



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The Department for Transport wants to make the railways easier to use for disabled people.



In 2017 and 2020 the Department for Transport organised for some research to be done, to ask disabled people their experience of using the railways, or why they didn't use them.



This research was done before COVID- 19 and the cost-of-living increases. So, in 2024 the Department for Transport asked a research company called Verian to do some more research.

## Research aims

The research found out more about:

- What were the problems for disabled people when travelling by rail and what helped
- How confident disabled people felt about travelling by train
- What people thought about Passenger Assist and the Disabled Persons Railcard



The things the research found out will help improve rail travel in the future.

## How the research was done



Verian started by looking at 25 other research studies about disabled people using the railways. They did this between July and September 2024.

Then they did 60 online interviews, 30 with disabled people who travel by rail and 30 with disabled people who didn't travel by rail. The interviews were done in October and November 2024. This was to get a deep understanding of their experiences of rail travel, what was hard and what helped.



The researchers also joined 10 disabled people on their rail journeys so they could find out more about the difficulties they had.



They made sure they had a mix of people from all backgrounds. They had to be over 16, live near a railway station and have a disability or health condition which affected their lives.



## What the previous research studies said

Disabled people experienced practical difficulties using the railways. They also didn't have much confidence using the trains.



Not many disabled people knew about or used Passenger Assist or the Disabled Persons Railcard.





There were gaps in what the previous studies found out. These were:



- the experiences of young disabled people using the trains
- the experiences of different parts of the journey (from leaving the house to getting to the place where you are going)
- the experiences of people with different kinds of disabilities
- how COVID-19 and the cost-of-living increases have affected disabled people and rail travel.

## What the interviews found out



Train services were important to people because they helped them connect to other people. Many disabled people need to use public transport to get about.



All the people in the research had very different experiences and confidence in using railways.



The people who used the railways said they generally had good experiences using them. They had good support from the staff.



But the people who didn't use the railways said they were too difficult to use. For example, they said there was no help to get on or off the train.



Since COVID-19 some people said they were less confident to use trains as they thought there were less staff about to support them. Also, people said they thought it costs more to travel by train now.

## Barriers to rail travel



Some disabled people said they have **physical barriers** to travelling by train, for example steps, slopes and uneven surfaces at train stations.



Some people said they have **social barriers**, for example negative attitudes and uncaring behaviour from staff and other passengers. It is sometimes hard to find staff who can help.



Some people said there were barriers around **getting the right information**, for example about the layout of the station or getting up to date information about delays to trains.



Some people said they didn't like **how travelling by train makes them feel**, for example sensory overload, stress and anxiety.



Some people **didn't want to travel by train or didn't feel confident**, for example because they feel that trains are unreliable.



Some people said **cost** was a barrier, for example the price of train tickets, including tickets for their carer or support person if they needed one. Cost was the main barrier given by people who don't travel by train.

## What things help with rail travel



Planning journeys before travel helped, including finding out about the station layout.



Asking for help from staff and other passengers.



Passenger Assist helped many travellers. They also had help from other staff and passengers.



Accessible information is also important to helping people. For example, announcements in written text, audio and British Sign Language.

# What things help with rail travel

Passengers had some ideas for changes. These were:



- Better routes into and through stations to avoid busy and noisy spaces.
- Staff who were easy to identify and can help disabled passengers, and all staff being trained on how to assist disabled people.
- Better accessible live information in the stations and in the trains. Better signs and tactile pavements in stations to improve getting around.
- Guaranteed support and places in train carriages so passengers feel more confident.
- Join up buying tickets with reserving wheelchair and mobility scooter places, or arranging Passenger Assist.
- Make it easier to get a Disabled Persons Railcard, and free travel for a carer or support person.



Passenger Assist was well known by people who used railways but not the ones who didn't use them. The people who used it found it very helpful. But sometimes the assistance had let them down. Some people felt this service needed more funding and it was more for people with physical disabilities.





Disabled Persons Railcards were well known, but not everyone knew what they offered or how to get one. Some people said they were hard to apply for and needed too much proof of a disability. They wanted carers to travel for free, rather than discounted tickets. And the card needed to be recognised by other apps such as rail ticket apps.

## What have we learned from this new research



People who used rail services felt they were very important, and many had very good experiences.



But there are a number of barriers to rail travel for disabled people. Many of these barriers overlap, making it hard for people to travel or have confidence to travel.



The barriers depended on people's disabilities, impairments and experiences of rail travel.



Passenger Assist had very good feedback from the people who used it. But not everyone knew what it was. When it let people down, it had a big impact and people lost confidence to travel and use it again.