



Equality Impact Assessment for the Exemption of Coaches Providing Unplanned Rail Replacement Services from the Public Service Vehicles (Accessible Information) Regulations 2023 (“AIR”).

Summary

1. The Public Service Vehicles (Accessible Information) Regulations 2023 (“AIR”) require audible and visible information to be provided on local bus and coach services, including some rail replacement services where these fall within the statutory definition of a local service, as prescribed under Section 2 of the Transport Act 1985. In 2024, the Department was advised by the Rail Delivery Group (RDG) and industry bodies that the rail replacement coach sector was unlikely to achieve full compliance within the required timescales. Concerns focused on the limited availability of compliant vehicles, low commercial incentive to invest in equipment for a small part of operators’ business, and the risk that operators might withdraw from the market rather than incur additional costs. Ministers therefore introduced a temporary exemption to maintain the continuity of rail replacement services while the sector moved towards compliance.
2. The exemption was intended as a transitional measure. During this period, government funding supported operators to install equipment and supported the development of portable solutions. Although some progress has been made, deployment has been slower and less consistent than expected. Market readiness remains uneven, and there is continuing uncertainty about the availability, cost and scalability of suitable equipment.
3. Until recently, policy and industry understanding was that unplanned rail replacement services were generally outside the scope of the Regulations. On that basis, efforts focused mainly on planned services ahead of the expiry of the current exemption in July 2026. However, a subsequent review of advice in spring 2026 has concluded that unplanned rail replacement services are also likely to fall within scope unless exempted. This represents a material change in position and introduces additional delivery, safety and legal risk, particularly given the short notice and operational constraints inherent in unplanned rail replacement.
4. This raises a specific equality issue. Accessible information is particularly important for disabled passengers and can support independent and confident travel. However, if operators are unable to provide rail replacement services at all during disruption, this could have a greater negative effect on passengers, including disabled passengers, who rely on those services to complete their journeys. Unplanned rail replacement presents a particular challenge because services must often be arranged at very short notice, making it difficult to guarantee compliant vehicles or equipment.

5. The proposed exemption is therefore intended to manage the transition to full compliance while maintaining service continuity. Without a further temporary exemption, there is a risk either of non-compliance or of reduced rail replacement provision during disruption. The Department considers that a targeted exemption for unplanned rail replacement would help reduce the risk of passengers being unable to travel, while allowing time for the sector to develop the capacity to meet the Regulations on a sustainable basis.

Section 1: Summary and relevance to the Public Sector Equality Duty

Summary

6. The Public Service Vehicles (Accessible Information) Regulations 2023 ("AIR") require audible and visible information on local bus and coach services in Great Britain, including rail replacement services where these fall within the statutory definition of a local service. The Department's previous understanding was that unplanned rail replacement services were generally outside scope. However, following a review of the relevant legislation the Department now considers that such services are also likely to be in scope unless exempted. The Department has therefore considered a targeted, time limited exemption for coaches used on unplanned rail replacement services. The purpose of the proposed exemption is to support service continuity during disruption while the sector moves towards compliance, recognising that accessible information is particularly important for disabled passengers.
7. In developing this proposal, the Department has considered its likely impacts on people with the nine protected characteristics, in line with the Public Sector Equality Duty ("PSED"). This Equality Impact Assessment ("EqIA") summarises that assessment and the regard given to the need to eliminate discrimination, advance equality of opportunity and foster good relations.

Introduction

8. The AIR came into force in October 2023 and require audible and visible route and location information on local bus and coach services in Great Britain. The Regulations apply to vehicles adapted to carry more than sixteen passengers when they are used to provide local services. Their purpose is to support disabled passengers and other passengers to travel with greater confidence and independence. Different implementation dates applied depending on when a vehicle was first used on local services and whether it was already providing accessible information when the AIR took effect.
9. The issue now under consideration is narrower than the one originally assessed. The Department's previous understanding was that unplanned rail replacement services were generally outside the scope of AIR, however, following reconsideration of the relevant legislation as noted above, the Department now considers that unplanned rail replacement services are also likely to fall within scope unless exempted. This creates a risk that, from 1 August 2026, some unplanned rail replacement services may be unable to meet the

requirements of AIR in practice, because they often need to be arranged at very short notice and compliant vehicles or equipment may not be available. This gives rise to an important equality consideration: although accessible information is particularly important for disabled passengers, a failure to provide rail replacement services at all during disruption could also have a significant adverse impact, including on disabled passengers who rely on those services to complete their journeys.

10. This EqIA therefore focuses on the likely effects of a further temporary and targeted exemption for unplanned rail replacement services, and the consequences for passengers, particularly disabled passengers, if no such exemption were provided.

The issue

11. Rail replacement services are provided when rail services cannot operate, including during planned engineering work and in response to disruption. A substantial proportion of these services are provided by coach operators on behalf of train operators, usually through rail replacement procurement arrangements.
12. Until recently, policy and industry understanding was that unplanned rail replacement services were likely to fall outside the scope of the regulations. This was based on how the Transport Act 1985 provides an allowance for variations to how a local service is defined based on parameters relating to distance travelled in an “emergency”. Both the Department and sector interpreted this as meaning that the emergency provision effectively provided an exemption from the accessibility regulations. However, ahead of exemptions ending, the Department has reviewed this position to ensure certainty on the matter, following which we now conclude that unplanned services are in fact likely to be still in scope of the regulations, as the emergency provisions applies to the local service and its operation, rather than the situation which required the use of the replacement vehicle in the first instance.
13. This represents a change in the Department’s understanding of the position. The issue is therefore no longer whether a broad temporary exemption is needed for rail replacement generally, but whether a targeted further exemption is needed for unplanned services that must be arranged at short notice.
14. Unplanned rail replacement presents a distinct practical challenge. Services may need to be mobilised quickly in response to disruption, leaving limited time to secure vehicles fitted with compliant equipment or to configure equipment so that required information can be provided consistently.
15. During the existing exemption period to date, government funding and industry activity have supported progress towards compliance, including the provision of £4.82m in grant funding for small size local service operators to retrofit and upgrade their vehicles, and separate funding via an Innovate UK competition to develop more flexible portable solutions. However, while the grant funding has seen approximately 139 operators (as of 28 May 2026) benefit with an estimated 380 vehicles now compliant, and the development of four

new portable technology solutions from the Innovate UK competition, overall deployment has been slower and less consistent than expected. The evidence available to the Department remains limited, but indicates continuing uncertainty about the availability, cost and scalability of suitable equipment across the unplanned rail replacement market.

16. Without a further temporary exemption, there is a risk that some unplanned rail replacement services may not be capable of complying with AIR in practice from 1 August 2026. This could create a risk either of non-compliance or of reduced rail replacement provision during disruption, including circumstances in which passengers may be advised not to travel.
17. The Department has considered evidence from the RDG, trade bodies and other available sources. As with the earlier 2024 assessment, the evidence base is limited and does not provide a complete picture of market readiness. The Department has therefore taken a precautionary approach in assessing the likely consequences for passengers if no further exemption were provided.
18. Accessible information is particularly important for disabled passengers, including passengers with visual impairments, hearing impairments, cognitive impairments and some neurodivergent passengers, because it can support safe, confident and independent travel. A delay in full AIR compliance therefore carries a risk of continued disadvantage for those passengers.
19. However, if unplanned rail replacement services cannot be provided at all during disruption, this could also have a significant adverse effect on passengers, including disabled passengers who may be less likely to have access to alternative transport and who may therefore be disproportionately affected by cancelled or curtailed journeys.
20. The issue for this EqIA is therefore whether a further temporary and targeted exemption for unplanned rail replacement services would strike a proportionate balance between two objectives: improving accessible information for disabled passengers and maintaining continuity of rail replacement services during disruption while the sector develops the capacity to comply fully with AIR.

Response options

21. The Department has considered three options for responding to the issue identified in this EqIA.
22. **Do nothing.**
 - a. **Summary:** The Department would take no further action when the existing exemptions expire on 31 July 2026. From 1 August 2026, unplanned rail replacement services that fall within scope would be required to comply with AIR. This option would place the greatest weight on immediate compliance, but it carries a risk that some unplanned rail replacement services may not be capable

of complying in practice at short notice, which could lead to reduced service provision during disruption.

- b. **Equality impacts:** This option is the baseline for comparison. It could support faster application of AIR to unplanned services, which would benefit passengers who rely on accessible information, particularly some disabled passengers. However, if unplanned rail replacement services cannot be provided consistently during disruption, the resulting loss or reduction of service could also have a significant adverse effect on disabled passengers and older passengers, especially those who are less likely to have access to alternative transport. The Department does not consider that people with the other protected characteristics would be disproportionately affected by this option.

23. Roll over the existing exemptions.

- c. **Summary:** The Department could extend the current exemption regime on broadly the same basis as the existing exemptions. This would provide continuity and legal certainty for operators and would reduce the risk of disruption to rail replacement services. However, it would apply more broadly than the issue now under consideration, because the present concern relates specifically to unplanned rail replacement services rather than rail replacement services generally.
- b. **Equality impacts:** This option would help maintain continuity of rail replacement services and would reduce the risk of passengers being unable to travel during disruption. That would benefit passengers generally, including disabled passengers and older passengers who may be disproportionately affected by service loss. However, because it would continue exemptions for planned as well as unplanned services, it would delay full AIR compliance more widely than may now be necessary. The Department therefore considers that this option would provide service continuity benefits but may do less than a narrower option to advance equality of opportunity through timely provision of accessible information.

24. The Department has also considered a more targeted exemption option.

25. Introduce new exemptions limited to unplanned rail replacement services.

- d. **Summary:** The Department could introduce a new time limited exemption applying only to unplanned rail replacement services. This would respond directly to the matter of unplanned services now being considered as likely to be in scope of the Regulations and would allow planned services to move to full compliance without continuing the broader existing exemption. It would also reduce the risk that unplanned services cannot be provided during disruption where compliant vehicles or equipment are not available at short notice. The Department considers this to be the most proportionate option.

- e. **Equality impacts:** This option seeks to balance two equality considerations. It would delay full AIR compliance for unplanned rail replacement services, which could prolong some disadvantage for passengers who benefit from accessible information, particularly some disabled passengers. However, it would also reduce the risk of disrupted journeys and loss of rail replacement services during disruption, which could have a significant adverse effect on disabled passengers and older passengers. Because it is limited to unplanned services, the Department considers that this option strikes the most proportionate balance between supporting accessible information and maintaining service continuity.

Section 2: Evidence Summary

Overview

- 26. The Department has considered a range of evidence in assessing the current issue, the available policy responses and the likely equality impacts. This has included evidence and views from the RDG; the main bus and coach trade bodies, including the Confederation of Passenger Transport (CPT), the UK Coach Operators' Association (UKCOA), the Road Haulage Association (RHA) and the Association of Local Bus Company Managers (ALBUM); information from the Department's accessible information grant and innovation activity, including work to support portable solutions; data from the Office of Rail and Road (ORR) on the accessibility of rail replacement provision; advice from the Disabled Persons' Transport Advisory Committee (DPTAC); and departmental and wider government statistics on disability, transport use and access to private transport.
- 27. Nevertheless, the evidence base remains limited. The current issue emerged following the Department reconsidering whether unplanned rail replacement services are likely to fall within scope of AIR unless exempted. As a result, there is limited direct evidence on the extent to which the sector can comply with AIR for unplanned services from 1 August 2026, particularly where services must be arranged at very short notice. The Department has considered the available evidence on market readiness, progress made during the existing exemption period, and the likely consequences for passengers if no further exemption were provided. While that evidence is mixed and, in some respects, incomplete, it is sufficient to indicate a credible risk to the continuity of unplanned rail replacement services. The Department has therefore taken a precautionary approach in assessing the likely impacts of the available options.
- 28. The summary below provides details of additional evidence considered in analysing the impacts of the baseline and preferred option.

Use of public transport by disabled people

29. In 2024/25 there were 16.7 million disabled people in the UK ¹([100%](#)). This represents 25% of the population.
30. The ability to access transport is vital for disabled people to assist with their full participation in society. According to the government's 'Disability, accessibility and blue badge statistics for England, 2023 to 2024'², in 2023, disabled adults in England made 25% fewer trips than non-disabled adults, broadly in line with previous years.

Rail Replacement Accessibility

31. Rail replacement services operate within the wider accessibility framework of the Public Service Vehicles Accessibility Regulations 2000 (PSVAR), which set requirements for the physical accessibility of buses and coaches, including wheelchair access. Based on information reported by operators to the Office of Rail and Road (ORR), the majority of vehicles used for rail replacement either meet PSVAR accessibility standards or operate under a formal exemption. On this basis, the ORR estimate that around 95% of rail replacement vehicles in use in 2023 were compliant with accessibility requirements, an increase from 94% in 2022–23 and from around 90% in 2021–22. However, these figures reflect reported vehicle compliance rather than a direct measure of passengers lived experience of accessibility during rail replacement journeys³.

Impact of AIR

32. Accessible information benefits a wide range of passengers, but it is particularly important for disabled passengers. For some disabled people, especially those with visual impairments, hearing impairments, cognitive impairments and some neurodivergent passengers, audible and visible information can be an important support for safe, confident and independent travel.
33. This is consistent with longstanding evidence from disabled passengers and representative organisations. For example, Guide Dogs' earlier campaigning highlighted the impact that the absence of audible and visible information can have on blind and partially sighted passengers' ability to travel independently and avoid missing their stop. This remains relevant to the Department's assessment of the importance of accessible information.
34. Departmental bus statistics provide some wider market context, indicating that a proportion of vehicles used on local bus services are equipped to provide audible and visible information. However, this does not demonstrate compliance with AIR and does not provide

¹ Family Resources Survey: financial year 2024 to 2025 - GOV.UK

² Disability, accessibility and blue badge statistics, England, 2023 to 2024 - GOV.UK

³ <https://www.orr.gov.uk/annual-rail-consumer-report-2023-2024/accessible-travel#block-orr-axisbookpagetitle>

a direct measure of readiness within the unplanned rail replacement coach sector, where the evidence base remains limited.

Section 3: Assessment

Introduction

35. In developing the policy options described in this document, the Department has considered the likely impacts on people with protected characteristics, in line with section 149 of the Equality Act 2010. This section summarises that assessment and the regard given to the need to eliminate discrimination, advance equality of opportunity and foster good relations.
36. This section considers the likely equality impacts of the baseline and preferred options set out above: doing nothing or introducing a new exemption limited to unplanned rail replacement services.

Equality Assessment Overview

37. In assessing these options, the Department has considered how two key factors relate to the protected characteristics: the continuity of rail replacement services during disruption, and the provision of accessible audible and visible information on board those services.
38. Rail replacement services are used by a broad cross section of rail passengers during disruption. However, passengers who do not have access to alternative transport may be more dependent on those services. Departmental transport and disability data shows that disabled adults are more likely than non-disabled adults to live in households without access to a car or van. The Department therefore considers that any reduction in rail replacement provision may have a disproportionate effect on disabled passengers.
39. AIR was introduced to improve access to local bus and coach services, particularly for disabled passengers, by requiring audible and visible information. The Department also recognises that older passengers may experience some similar barriers, for example where they have reduced hearing or vision, and may therefore also benefit from accessible information and from continuity of service during disruption.
40. For these reasons, the Department has focused this assessment principally on the protected characteristics of disability and age. The other protected characteristics have also been considered, but the Department does not consider that the options under assessment are likely to have particular impacts on those groups by reason of those characteristics alone.

Baseline

41. The Department has considered the impacts of the baseline do nothing option in order to assess the likely effects of the preferred option on older and disabled passengers. Under the baseline scenario, no further exemption would be introduced when the current exemptions

expire on 31 July 2026. From 1 August 2026, unplanned rail replacement services that fall within scope of AIR would therefore be required to comply with the Regulations.

42. The evidence base remains limited, but the Department considers that the main likely impacts of this option can be identified with sufficient confidence for the purposes of this assessment.
43. This option would place the greatest weight on immediate application of AIR to unplanned rail replacement services. That could benefit passengers who rely on accessible audible and visible information, particularly some disabled passengers. However, the available evidence also indicates a credible risk that some unplanned services could not comply in practice where vehicles or equipment cannot be secured or configured at very short notice. In those circumstances, train operators may face disruption to rail replacement provision, with a risk of reduced services or passengers being advised not to travel.
44. Any reduction in unplanned rail replacement provision could have a disproportionate effect on disabled passengers and older passengers. Disabled passengers are less likely than non-disabled passengers to have access to a car or van and may therefore have fewer practical alternatives if rail replacement is not available. Some passengers may be unable to complete their journey at all, while others may face longer, more complex or less certain journeys.
45. The Department does not consider that the baseline option would necessarily result in rapid or complete compliance for unplanned rail replacement services from 1 August 2026. Rather, it may create a risk that the practical difficulties of compliance are felt first through disruption to service continuity. The baseline option could therefore improve access to accessible information for some passengers, but it also carries a material risk of adverse impacts on disabled and older passengers if rail replacement services are reduced or unavailable during disruption.

Equality Assessment: Age and Disability

46. The Department has considered the protected characteristics of age and disability together in this assessment because the current issue may affect both groups in similar ways. In particular, both may be more likely to benefit from accessible audible and visible information and may be more adversely affected if rail replacement services are reduced during disruption.
47. The issues described in this document may affect disabled passengers with a range of impairments. Accessible information is particularly important for passengers with visual impairments, hearing impairments, cognitive impairments and some neurodivergent passengers. The continuity of rail replacement services may also be particularly important for disabled passengers who have limited access to alternative transport.

48. The paragraphs below summarise the Department's assessment of the preferred option, namely a further temporary and targeted exemption for unplanned rail replacement services, by reference to the three limbs of the Public Sector Equality Duty.

Consideration: Duty to eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation and other conduct prohibited by the Act

49. The preferred option would delay full AIR compliance for unplanned rail replacement services for a further temporary period. This means that some disabled and older passengers may continue, for longer, to experience the disadvantages associated with the absence of fully compliant audible and visible information on those services. However, the Department does not consider that the baseline option would necessarily lead to materially faster or fuller compliance in practice from 1 August 2026, given the continuing uncertainty about the availability and deployability of suitable equipment for services that must be arranged at very short notice.
50. The risk of the preferred option delaying progress towards compliance is reduced by the fact that it is limited to unplanned rail replacement services only. Planned services would still be expected to move towards compliance without the continuation of the broader existing exemption. The Department also expects the sector to continue making progress towards full compliance during the exemption period.
51. Where services operate under the proposed exemption, rail and coach operators would still be expected to provide journey and destination information by alternative means where possible, for example through spoken announcements, signage or staff assistance. Rail operators would also remain subject to their Accessible Travel Policy commitments and to wider duties under equality legislation. These measures would not remove the disadvantage caused by the absence of full AIR compliant information, but they would help reduce it.
52. The preferred option would reduce the risk that unplanned rail replacement services could not be provided during disruption because compliant vehicles or equipment are not available at short notice. By helping to maintain continuity of service, it would reduce the risk that passengers, including disabled and older passengers, are unable to complete their journeys or are left with fewer practical alternatives.
53. Taking these factors together, the Department considers that the preferred option would provide a more proportionate outcome for disabled and older passengers than the baseline option. Although it temporarily delays full compliance for a narrower category of services, it reduces the risk of more severe adverse effects arising from the loss or reduction of unplanned rail replacement services. The Department does not consider that the preferred option would result in unlawful discrimination, harassment or victimisation, and considers that it is compatible with the Department's obligations under the Equality Act 2010.

Consideration: Duty to advance equality of opportunity between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not

54. In considering the duty to advance equality of opportunity, the Department has focused on whether the preferred option would help minimise disadvantage for disabled and older passengers, meet their different needs, and support their ability to travel with confidence during disruption.
55. The preferred option would not remove all disadvantage. By delaying full AIR compliance for unplanned rail replacement services, it would mean that some disabled and older passengers continue for longer to experience the absence of fully compliant audible and visible information on those services. However, the Department considers that this disadvantage must be weighed against the risk that, without a targeted exemption, some unplanned rail replacement services may not be provided at all during disruption. In those circumstances, the loss of service continuity could create a greater disadvantage for disabled and older passengers who rely on those services to complete their journeys.
56. The Department also considers that the preferred option helps to meet different needs in a proportionate way. Disabled and older passengers may have a greater need both for accessible information and for continuity of service where they have fewer practical alternatives. Under the preferred option, rail and coach operators would still be expected to provide journey and destination information by alternative means where possible, such as spoken announcements, signage or staff assistance. Although this is not equivalent to full AIR compliance, it would help reduce disadvantage while the sector continues to move towards compliance.
57. Transport is an important enabler of participation in public life. By reducing the risk that unplanned rail replacement services are unavailable during disruption, the preferred option is likely to better support the ability of disabled and older passengers to continue making journeys for work, education, healthcare, family life and other activities. The Department therefore considers that the preferred option is capable of advancing equality of opportunity more effectively than the baseline option in the present circumstances.

Consideration: Duty to foster good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not

58. The Department considers that the preferred option has only limited direct relevance to the duty to foster good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not.
59. The main relevance of this limb is indirect. By helping to maintain access to rail replacement services for disabled and older passengers during disruption, the preferred option may support continued participation in everyday travel and recognition of the needs of those passengers. However, the Department considers that any effect on fostering good relations is likely to be limited.

Equality Assessment: Other Protected Characteristics

60. The Department has considered the other protected characteristics of gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation. The Department does not consider that the options assessed in this EqIA are likely to have particular impacts on those groups by reason of those characteristics alone.
61. The Department has also considered the possibility of overlapping or intersecting disadvantages. For example, some older or disabled women may feel particularly affected by uncertainty during disrupted journeys or by the absence of clear on-board information. The Department considers that these concerns are best addressed in this assessment through its focus on the impacts on disabled and older passengers, and through the expectation that information should still be provided by alternative means where possible under the preferred option.

Section 4: Decision and Conclusions

62. In summary, the Department has considered the risk arising from unplanned rail replacement services likely falling within scope of AIR from 1 August 2026 unless exempted. Although the evidence base remains limited, the Department considers that it is sufficient to indicate a credible risk that some unplanned rail replacement services may be unable to comply in practice at short notice. The Department has considered a range of options in response and has concluded that the most proportionate approach is a further temporary and targeted exemption limited to unplanned rail replacement services. This would reduce the risk of disruption and help maintain continuity of service, while allowing further progress towards compliance. Operators would still be expected to provide journey and destination information by alternative means where possible, and rail operators would remain subject to their Accessible Travel Policy commitments.
63. Having considered the likely impacts of the issue and the available options on passengers, including in relation to the nine protected characteristics, the Department considers that the preferred option is an improvement on the baseline. Although it would temporarily delay full AIR compliance for unplanned rail replacement services, it is likely to reduce the risk of more significant adverse effects on disabled and older passengers that could arise if those services were reduced or unavailable during disruption.
64. The Department therefore considers that this decision can be taken in a way that is consistent with its obligations under the Public Sector Equality Duty and that the preferred policy approach represents the most proportionate option for those most likely to be affected, particularly disabled and older passengers.

Section 5: Monitoring and Review Summary, and options for increasing its compliance with AIR.

65. The Department will monitor the uptake and operation of any new exemptions for unplanned rail replacement services, and the impact of those exemptions on progress towards AIR compliance. Monitoring will draw on information gathered through the exemption process and other available data sources. The Department will continue to work with the rail and coach sector to improve the evidence base, support evaluation of the intervention, and develop a clearer understanding of readiness for compliance in the unplanned rail replacement market.
66. The temporary exemption period is intended to provide time for the Department to work with the rail and coach sector, and with representatives of disabled passengers, on a longer-term approach to compliance for unplanned rail replacement services. The Department remains of the view that accessible information should be provided on these services, and that the long-term aim should be full compliance with AIR on a sustainable basis.

Section 6: Sign off

I am satisfied that the above assessment demonstrates that full and appropriate regard has been paid to the PSED.

Officer completing the EIA

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Date: 2 June 2026

SCS sign off

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