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Brandon Peat
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By email

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Dear Brandon

Approval of Avanti West Coast's proposal to trial an alternative to the handover protocol (electronic handover) for communicating between stations on assistance provision

Thank you for your letter dated 28 October 2024, outlining a proposal for Avanti West Coast to use an alternative to the handover protocol at select stations on a trial basis. You made this application in view of risks you had identified with delivery of the handover protocol and so assistance failures, and in the context of Avanti having made positive progress in roll-out of the Passenger Assist (PA) staff mobile app, which has recently been equipped with new features that enable an electronic handover. We have considered your application in the context of the requirements set out in our [ATP Guidance](#), and outline our decision-making process below.

I am pleased to confirm that ORR accepts Avanti's proposal to trial use of the electronic handover for booked and turn-up-and-go (TUAG) assists on journeys between Lancaster, Preston and Wigan North Western, on all operators' services, for a three-month period. For assists involving other stations, Avanti will continue to use the telephone handover protocol to confirm the details of the journey, with electronic handover functionality not enabled for these stations.

ORR requirements

Reliable delivery of assistance depends on clear and timely communication between departure and destination stations. This ensures that staff are expecting the passenger at the destination and are aware of relevant information such as assistance needs or location on the train. To mitigate the risk of failed communication, ORR developed a 'handover protocol' that operators must follow



when assistance at the destination station will be provided by staff who are not onboard the train itself. This is required under section A1.2e of the ATP Guidance, where full details are set out. The handover protocol as described in the ATP Guidance is referred to as the 'telephone handover' in this letter.

The ATP Guidance also allows an operator and ORR to agree an alternative process provided it has the same functionality and effectiveness as the telephone handover. You made a request for ORR to consider and approve an alternative process for Avanti to use for assistance between three stations.

The PA system, staff mobile app and electronic handover functionality

The PA system facilitates both booked and TUAG assistance on Britain's rail network. It both records individual passengers' assistance requirements across all operators and provides staff with the real-time information they need to deliver assistance to passengers. One way in which staff can access the PA system is through the staff mobile app, giving staff the information they need via their phones.

The electronic handover functionality has recently been added to the staff mobile app following development by Rail Delivery Group on behalf of industry, and is available to all operators.

Staff using this function at the departure station will enter the required information into the system, and all staff at the arrival station will be notified via the staff mobile app (or staff web interface). Arrival station staff can then choose whether to accept the handover, or can call the departure station to share relevant information about the arrival station if needed. The arrival station will need to accept – if they fail to do so, the departure station will be required to revert to the telephone handover. Functionality can be enabled on a station-by-station basis, enabling trials between select groups of stations.

Avanti proposal

Your proposal, and the reasoning behind it, is set out in your [letter of 28 October 2024](#).

You have identified that assistance failures can take place due to incompleteness of the telephone handover. This can be because of a breakdown in communication between stations, incorrect information being shared between stations or issues with communication internally within a station team.

You have proposed to trial the electronic handover as an alternative that you expect to improve the robustness and reliability of the handover process. This would be on a

trial basis, applying to all booked and TUAG assists on journeys between Lancaster, Preston and Wigan North Western, on services operated by all operators.

You have explained that over the last two years Avanti has rolled out the staff mobile app for station teams, who are responsible for carrying out the handover protocol (or agreed alternative process), alongside training through roadshows, videos and regular communications. You provided data showing that the roll-out has progressed well at the stations proposed for the trial, with the majority of assistance requests actioned through the staff app. During period 7 of 2024 to 2025, 99.5% of requests were actioned through the staff app at Wigan North Western, 95% at Lancaster and 82% at Preston. You advised that the lower figure at Preston is because a small number of staff members are not currently using the staff mobile app (its use is not mandatory).

You propose to replace the telephone handover with the electronic handover protocol for journeys between the three trial stations. You expect to see the following improvements:

- Greater efficiency, with staff at the arrival station receiving a push notification about an incoming customer, quickly giving all relevant details of the assistance required and the opportunity to accept or call with further information.
- All staff at the arrival station logged-in to the staff mobile app or staff web interface will be notified, removing the potential for a single point of failure where a team member responsible for answering the phone may be busy with other responsibilities.
- Both the staff mobile app and staff web interface will continue to show details of the handover once this has taken place, allowing all staff to see details of the assistance required. With the telephone handover this would rely on details being shared between team members.
- Staff members at the departure station can still help customers while waiting for the handover to be accepted instead of waiting on the phone.
- If failures occur, the audit trail will aid investigations by clearly showing the potential reasons behind them.

For assistance that is not for travel between the three trial stations the telephone handover will continue to be used. This therefore includes journeys starting at one of these stations but destined for a station not included in the trial. As functionality will only be enabled for the three trial stations it will not be possible for staff to accidentally enact the electronic handover instead of the telephone handover.

As noted above, there are some staff at Preston who do not currently use the staff mobile app. You have assured us that you have considered and mitigated against the risks associated with this. In such cases, the telephone handover would be used, consistent with the process being followed at other stations.

You have also given early indication of a potential second phase for the trial, to include three potential options:

- Option 1: A phased extension of electronic handover functionality to the other 13 Avanti-managed stations.
- Option 2: An extension of phase one to gather more information.
- Option 3: Reversion of the telephone handover.

ORR decision

We approve Avanti's proposal to trial use of the electronic handover for booked and TUAG assists on journeys between Lancaster, Preston and Wigan North Western, on all operators' services, for a trial period (phase one). For journeys involving any other station Avanti should continue to use a telephone call, as required by the handover protocol.

We have reached this decision by assessing the evidence you have provided in your proposal letter and through additional engagement. You have stated that you believe the electronic handover will exceed the functionality and effectiveness of the existing telephone handover, as is required by our ATP Guidance.

The data you have provided indicates a high level of staff mobile app usage, which is important to the effective usage of the electronic handover. We note the lower take-up at Preston, but you have assured us that this does not present a risk to assistance reliability, with the telephone handover to be used in line with the process being followed at other stations if required. We note that you have otherwise received positive engagement and feedback from staff.

You have engaged or plan to engage with a range of relevant stakeholders. This includes with London North Eastern Railway to learn about its use of the staff mobile app for handover and your accessibility panels who you have indicated are supportive of the trial. You have committed to sharing a briefing with non-Avanti operators of services between the three trial stations ahead of the trial commencing.

You have considered potential risks with the trial, including in the event of disruption or an outage of the staff mobile app. You have suitable mitigations in place and have confirmed that you are able to return to using the telephone handover if the trial is leading to adverse outcomes for passengers.

We have taken into account Avanti's performance in our [annual survey of booked assistance](#) where Avanti is one of the better-performing operators, with this continuing in the first quarter of this year.

You have a clear evaluation framework for the trial, setting the following success criteria:

- Decreased assistance failures between trial stations; and
- Positive staff feedback on the efficiency and robustness of the new processes.

This approval is for a trial period from 3 February to 31 May 2025. As discussed, you will provide us with interim monthly updates before submitting a full update by 30 April 2025 to confirm how implementation has progressed and to understand if the change has been effective. This update should include data referring to your success criteria. Please also provide any additional relevant evidence of performance including, for example, a summary of qualitative feedback from passenger complaints and information on any disruption to functionality of the staff mobile app. You also offered us the opportunity to visit your stations during the trial, and this is something we would welcome. In your report, please confirm your proposal for phase two of the trial. We will consider the evidence provided and then reach a decision with respect to this.

Rail Delivery Group is continuing to work with operators to plan and deliver further improvements to the PA system. Avanti should continue to play a full role in this work, sharing its experience from use of the electronic handover during the trial period, and incorporating changes to staff mobile app and staff web interface functionality and industry processes within its own working practices as appropriate.

Next steps

As outlined above, please provide us with monthly updates, and a full update on implementation by 30 April 2025. In the meantime, we will publish this decision letter, along with your proposal letter, on our website.

Yours sincerely,

Jacqui Russell

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