

GREAT BRITISH

# Rail Replacement

A cmac. group company

ACCESSIBLE RAIL DISRUPTION REPORT

## Passenger Insights: Closing the Accessibility Gap in UK Rail Replacement.





We asked 145 disabled UK rail users (as part of a wider national research piece) about their experiences with rail replacement services - from the real impact on passengers to the solutions that matter most, discover how to deliver confident, accessible rail travel during both planned and unexpected disruption.

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Director, Great British Rail Replacement.
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## Executive summary.

# For many, rail replacement is an inconvenience. For disabled passengers, it is a **major travel barrier**.

**Rail replacement prevents disabled rail users from travelling with confidence, clarity and independence.**

Research commissioned in 2025 with 145 disabled UK rail users - part of a wider national research piece - identified recurring pain-points during disruption: **Two-thirds report a deteriorating experience in the past year**, underlining the urgent need to address these issues now.

**Only 7% of disabled passengers report meaningful year-on-year improvement**, highlighting that at the very moment accessibility matters most (during disruption) progress is not being experienced.

Poor accessibility incurs significant implications for the UK rail industry - including passenger compensation claims, regulatory fines, operational inefficiencies, legal expenses and reputational damage – resulting in frustrated and upset customers who feel excluded or let down by the service, creating emotional strain and diminishing their overall travel experience. Collectively, these impacts undermine customer trust, reduce loyalty, and erode long-term brand value.

As Great British Railways (GBR) prepares to unify standards and rebuild public trust, an opportunity arises to embed accessibility as a foundational principle in every rail replacement journey. Ensuring disruption does not exclude or disadvantage customers and shapes a fairer, more inclusive railway, where no passenger is left behind.

This report presents the key insights from our national rail customer study, focusing on the experiences of disabled passengers – people with physical, sensory, cognitive, or hidden disabilities. It sets out how modern, standardised rail replacement services can remove barriers, improve confidence during disruption, and ensure consistent, inclusive support for all passengers, directly contributing to GBR's ambition for a simpler, more reliable and customer-focused railway.

66%

of disabled passengers report a deteriorating experience in the past year.

# Foreword.

**Rail replacement is critical to the passenger journey, and now is the time to make it truly accessible for everyone. The structural reform of the rail network means we can reset the standard for how replacement services are planned, delivered, and experienced – shaping an inclusive future for UK rail that empowers disabled people at every step, leaving no passenger behind.**

Historically, accessibility in rail replacement has often been treated as secondary rather than central to planning and delivery. Services are designed without understanding the barriers disabled passengers face each day. This approach must change. Disruption is unavoidable, but substandard experiences are not. Done right, passengers travel safely and confidently. Done wrong, it fails them and ultimately undermines trust in the railway.

With 45+ years of experience in the rail sector - including more than 20 years focused on rail replacement, I see the urgent need to make accessible disruption a key priority. Too often, disabled and older passengers face avoidable barriers: unsuitable vehicles, unclear wayfinding, crowding, inconsistent staff support, or insufficient information during critical moments of disruption. With rising investment in infrastructure and passenger expectations, the need for accessible rail replacement services has never been greater.

This White Paper sets out Great British Rail Replacement's blueprint for championing accessibility across every stage of the rail replacement journey.

By proactively coordinating fully accessible and audited buses, coaches, and taxis within a single, clearly managed framework, GBRR places accessibility at the centre of rail replacement planning. Vehicles should be selected to meet defined accessibility standards, including step-free access, wheelchair spaces and trained drivers who understand how to support disabled passengers. This approach reduces uncertainty, ensures equitable access for all users, and transforms rail disruption from a source of stress into a journey managed with clarity, confidence, and care.

Through collaboration, understanding and accountability, we can make a meaningful impact towards a truly inclusive railway. Great British Railways is committed to leading this change - even when services are disrupted.

**Ian Jeffrey.**

Director, Great British Rail Replacement.





# 01

**Why accessible  
rail replacement  
matters now.**



I would not travel if there are engineering works as I struggle with mobility and would worry.

Leisure customer, Kings Cross.

## **Renationalisation** offers the opportunity to embed accessibility as a core principle.

The UK government's plan to renationalise rail services through Great British Railways (GBR) marks a fundamental opportunity to integrate accessibility with consistent national standards, transforming the service and future of rail for disabled passengers.

Disruption will remain inevitable across a complex and ageing network - whether due to planned engineering work or unplanned incidents. However, for disabled passengers, the experience during disruption is inconsistent, unclear and insufficiently supported. Clarity, reassurance and assistance are the most critical, but unpredictable - undermining independence, confidence and dignity.

If disruption is not accessible, disabled passengers are effectively excluded from rail use - directly undermining modal shift and wider decarbonisation ambitions.

Accessible rail replacement is a core public service for disabled passengers. Getting it right is essential for establishing trust in the railway. For Great British Railways, this presents a high-visibility, high-impact opportunity to demonstrate meaningful progress and set a consistent national standard for inclusive disruption management.

## 4 key reasons why accessibility in rail replacement matters now.

This includes planned disruption - to cover engineering works - and 'short notice in-service' disruption:

01



Disruption shapes disabled passengers' perceptions more than routine journeys: 24% would cancel or postpone, compared with 15% of non-disabled passengers.

02



Inconsistency across the network contradicts GBR's vision of unified national standards.

03



Accessibility gaps create reputational and ethical risks.

04



To support the de-carbonisation agenda and enable meaningful modal shift.

# 02

**National insights on  
customer experiences  
during disruption.**



## What the data reveals about the impact on disabled respondents.



**Only 2.8%** of disabled customers that were surveyed **find replacement services fully accessible.**

- ▶ 30% were left without a viable alternative during disruption.
- ▶ 32% had to rely on a friend to collect them.



**Over half** of disabled passengers surveyed **would cancel/postpone their journey or seek alternative routes via other public transport** rather than using rail replacement.



**Two-thirds report a deteriorating experience in the past year.**

- ▶ **Only 7% report meaningful improvement year-on-year** - underlining the urgent need to address these issues now.



Gender disparity:

- ▶ **84% of women and non-binary disabled passengers look for an alternative public transport option** if their rail journey is replaced.
- ▶ In comparison, **only 22% of disabled men seek alternative transport** during disruption.



Urban and rural challenges:

- ▶ **74% of passengers who report a decline in service live in urban areas.** Busy stations and complex layouts contribute to crowding, unclear wayfinding, and heightened anxiety.
- ▶ In rural areas, wheelchair-accessible vehicles are often non-existent or extremely limited, creating significant barriers to independent travel and leaving disabled passengers with few or no alternative options during disruption. **31% of disabled rail users in rural locations rely on a family member, friend, or colleague** when services are disrupted.



**27% of respondents aged 55+ report challenges with digital or live updates,** leaving them excluded from vital information.



Uncertainty about renationalisation:

- ▶ **34% of disabled respondents are unsure that renationalisation will improve services,** compared with 42% of non-disabled passengers.



I had a poor experience due to overcrowding, lack of luggage space on a packed double-decker bus, and slow service. A lack of Wi-Fi further compounded my frustration.

Leisure customer, Haslemere.

## What disabled passengers want.

23%

Advance clarity about accessible travel options, including vehicle type and boarding arrangements.

21%

Seamless coordination between rail and bus/coach/taxi providers to ensure smooth transfers.

19%

Well-trained staff with strong local knowledge and confidence in accessibility procedures.

19%

Clear, prominent signage to locate replacement services easily.

19%

Fairer pricing when journeys are replaced with alternative transport.

18%

Increased service provision during disruption to meet demand.

17%

Accessible, multi-channel real-time information - digital and non-digital - tailored to a variety of demographics.

16%

Visible, proactive staff presence on platforms and at stations to offer guidance and reassurance.

16%

Higher-quality vehicles that are clean, comfortable and well maintained.

16%

Reduced waiting times through more frequent replacement services.



# 03

## Implications for GBR stakeholders.

## Fulfilling disabled passenger expectations.

Rail replacement services are a defining pain-point for disabled passengers. When disruption happens, people are left stranded, without suitable transport and safety is compromised.

Just 2.8% of disabled travellers say rail replacement services are fully accessible, while 30% report having no suitable alternative when their journey was disrupted. Physical access into replacement vehicles was the largest reported barrier (32%), underscoring the importance of providing accessible vehicle stock and ensuring services are coordinated to meet the needs of all passengers.

GBR can set a new standard by making accessibility a core requirement of every rail replacement plan - so disruption never results in exclusion, disadvantage, or unequal treatment, and the railway becomes more inclusive for all - leaving no passenger left behind.

# 2.8%

of disabled travellers say rail replacement services are fully accessible.

## Barriers reported by disabled passengers:

- ▶ Unsuitable vehicles create physical challenges when boarding or exiting replacement vehicles.
- ▶ Insufficient staff available to provide assistance during rail replacement.
- ▶ Inconsistent staff training, awareness, and attitudes within customer service.
- ▶ Limited seating and space on alternative transport options (buses, coaches, and taxis).
- ▶ Poor advance information about accessible travel options.
- ▶ Barriers in communication across websites, helplines, social media, audio announcements, and station signage.



I avoid these late at night.  
Train companies should offer  
girls taxis every time instead.

Leisure customer, Stratford.



I never travel alone – I have a  
deep-seated perception that  
public transport is an unsafe  
place for lone females.

Leisure customer, St Pancras.

## Addressing gender disparity.

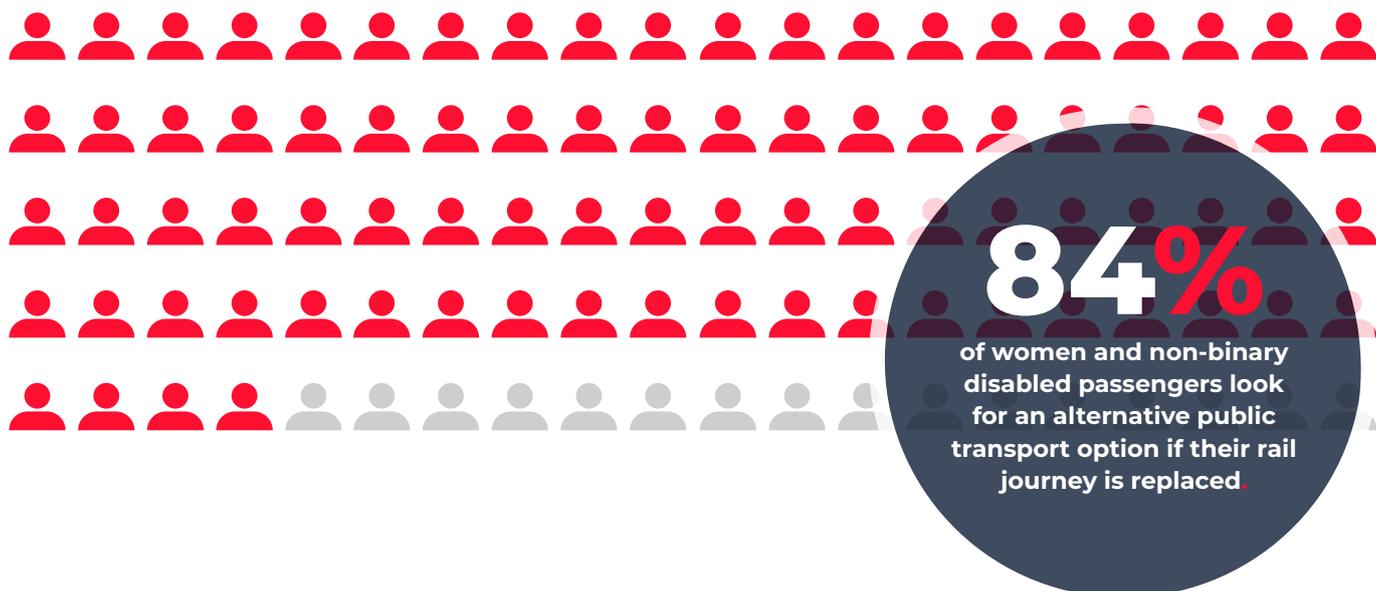
Gender disparity is a key barrier for disabled passengers during rail replacement. The data shows that concerns are especially pronounced for disabled women and non-binary passengers: **34% of disabled women and 50% of non-binary passengers** seek an alternative public transport option during rail replacement. By comparison, only 28% of non-disabled women would do the same, highlighting heightened concerns among disabled women.

In contrast, just 22% of disabled men and 28% of non-disabled men would seek alternative transport. This underscores that rail disruption disproportionately affects women and non-binary rail-users, particularly disabled passengers.

When stranded, **32% of disabled passengers had to ask a family member, friend, or colleague for a lift;** of these, **40% were women and 50% were non-binary, compared with only 20% of men** - highlighting a greater loss of independence for these groups.

Concerns include personal safety, security, staff visibility, and reassurance during disruption, with these risks amplified during evening travel.

Improving safety standards during rail replacement services supports government improvement objectives, building trust and confidence within UK rail replacement – particularly for disabled women and non-binary passengers.





# 27%

of respondents aged 55+ report challenges with digital or live updates.

## Enhancing accessibility for passengers aged 55+

Digital information was generally appreciated - **51% agree that rail operators provide adequate support and communication for disabled passengers**. However, there is significant scope for improved accessibility, particularly for older rail users.

Passengers aged **55+ are more likely than other age groups to experience challenges with digital or live updates, with 27% reporting difficulties**. This can leave them without vital information, increasing anxiety, uncertainty, and a loss of independence during disruption.

GBR can address this by adopting a more tailored approach to communication, ensuring that live updates, apps, websites, and other online channels are accessible, clear, and easy to navigate, while also providing clear, reliable non-digital alternatives for passengers who may be less confident or comfortable using digital platforms.



## Tackling rural and urban accessibility challenges.

Urban stations are a key area where disabled passengers experience a decline in service. 74% who report a dip in service live in urban locations - highlighting that busy, complex stations often exacerbate crowding, unclear wayfinding, and anxiety during rail replacement.

Wayfinding is a particular challenge. At stations with more than six platforms, 30% of passengers report that they would not know where to find replacement services. Of these, 37% live in urban areas, showing that improvements in large stations could have the greatest impact for passengers.

However, accessibility challenges are not limited to urban locations. In rural areas, where wheelchair-accessible vehicles are often non-existent or extremely limited, passengers face fewer alternative transport options - 31% of disabled rail users in rural locations had to rely on a family member, friend or colleague to collect them during rail disruption.

GBR can make a tangible difference by working closely with external suppliers to offer suitable vehicle stock and improved coordination for all individuals, particularly in rural areas. In addition, clearer signage, accessible guidance, visible staff presence, and effective crowd management would be beneficial in urban locations. These measures increase clarity, boost passenger confidence, and enable people to navigate stations with greater independence.

74%

who report a dip in service live in urban locations.

31%

of disabled passengers in rural locations rely on a family member, friend, or colleague when services are disrupted.

# 04

**Strategic  
recommendations.**

# Rail replacement transformation: 6 key actions.

## 1 Introduce a national rail replacement standard.

Establish a Rail Replacement Quality Mark with defined operational, accessibility, and service criteria, monitored via independent audits. This standard should set consistent expectations across the network.

## 2 Ensure every touchpoint is customer-ready.

Rail replacement staff and service providers must receive comprehensive training that prioritises accessible, inclusive, and customer-focused service. This should include real-time problem solving, clear communication and accessibility awareness. Training effectiveness should be regularly evaluated and include disabled people in planning and delivery.

## 3 Make accessibility an industry priority.

Involve disabled passengers in designing services and disruption plans. Ensure all vehicles meet accessibility standards, prioritise step-free routes at key stations, and make accessibility information clear at every stage - pre-trip, in-station, and on-board. Measure progress with defined benchmarks to hold the network accountable.

## 4 Improve information and communication for all passengers.

Ensure all passengers can access timely, clear, and actionable travel information, particularly during disruption. This includes providing real-time updates, journey planning, and accessibility information through multiple channels - digital and non-digital - so older passengers and those less confident with technology are not excluded. Technology should enhance accessibility and staff support, not replace human guidance. Adopt scalable service models that deliver consistent, reliable information across the network while keeping accountability for barriers firmly in focus.

## 5 Implement a mandatory communication framework for rail replacement.

Introduce a structured handover protocol for rail replacement services. Passengers could provide essential accessibility requirements in advance, then staff can relay this information to replacement vehicle providers. Suitable vehicles, equipment, and support could then be prepared for each passenger, reducing barriers and improving reliability and confidence in rail replacement journeys.

## 6 Establish a long-term rail accessibility action plan.

Bring together local authorities responsible for taxi licensing, vehicle and mobility device manufacturers, and representatives of the disabled community to create a coordinated, long-term plan for improving accessibility across rail replacement services.



It's difficult with a wheelchair during rail replacement. I don't know how to get on-board and worry staff are not going to be able help. I also worry about toilet availability, so I just don't travel now.

Leisure customer, Crayford.

## Conclusion.

Rail replacement is not merely a contingency measure - it is a vital component of customer experience and an immediate lever for improving national satisfaction. As GBR prepares for its formal launch, modernising rail replacement services offers a clear, practical opportunity to deliver visible improvements that align with its commitments to simplicity, reliability and customer focus.

By adopting national standards, improving real-time communication, and ensuring equitable access for all disrupted rail customers, GBR can take a decisive step toward rebuilding trust in the UK rail network and delivering a more connected, consistent, and compassionate railway for everyone.

# Great British Rail Replacement transforms the planning and delivery of bus, coach, and taxi services during both planned engineering works and unplanned disruption.

Great British Rail Replacement was launched in 2024 to transform the planning and delivery of replacement transport during both planned and unplanned rail disruptions.

Managed by CMAC Group, which facilitates over 5 million journeys annually across rail, aviation, and B2B/B2C sectors, the initiative focuses on maintaining journey continuity, supporting customers, and raising industry standards. Services are designed to be reliable, consistent, and accessible, ensuring that disruption is managed with confidence rather than frustration for all passengers.

Accessibility in rail disruption remains a significant challenge across the UK. Over 300,000 trains are cancelled annually (ORR, Nov 2024), and only 2.8% of disabled and older customers surveyed find replacement services fully accessible. 30% were left without a viable alternative during disruption.

Accessible vehicle shortages, unsuitable replacement transport, crowding, poor wayfinding, staff knowledge and attitudes, plus a lack of accessible customer information can all contribute to unsafe situations for disabled passengers – eroding confidence and trust in the network.

While the national vehicle supply remains heavily constrained, GBRR has led a number of targeted initiatives to strengthen how vehicles are identified, recorded and allocated across the organisation. This includes undertaking a comprehensive supplier audit to map available vehicle types, integrating vehicle type capture into onboarding and recruitment workflows, tagging vehicle types for clearer categorisation and faster matching, and providing enhanced training for operations teams to coordinate the correct vehicles for individuals. These improvements have significantly strengthened internal controls and allocation accuracy, helping us make the best possible use of a limited national fleet.

Great British Rail Replacement seeks to address issues further by co-ordinating integrated, customer-focused solutions that prioritise accessibility, efficiency and care. By coordinating accessible and audited buses, coaches, and taxis in a cohesive framework, passengers can experience seamless travel even during disruption, transforming what was once a frustrating experience into one managed with confidence.

**Contact our team today:**

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