Meg Hillier MP
Chair, Committee of Public Accounts
House of Commons
London SW1A 0AA

Dear Meg,

Progress on improving the accessibility of the railways for disabled people.

In the Department’s response to your Committee’s report on rail management and timetabling1 earlier this year, we committed to write to you, together with the rail regulator, the Office of Rail and Road (ORR), setting out the progress the Department has made to improve rail accessibility since the publication of the Inclusive Transport Strategy in July 2018. We also committed to provide an update on monitoring performance with regards to the accessibility of the rail network which the regulator has responsibility for.

As you may be aware, over the past two years the ORR has consulted extensively on the key areas for improvement of assisted travel. On 27 July, the ORR published Accessible Travel Policy guidance2 for train and station operators, which replaces the Disabled People’s Protection Policy. The guidance includes several strengthened requirements that will make the rail network more accessible for disabled and older passengers. The ORR will be writing to the Committee shortly to provide an update on the guidance and on how it will monitor and enforce train and station operators’ performance in relation to their licence obligation to have in place and implement an Accessible Travel Policy.

Turning to action by the Department, on 8 July, Nusrat Ghani MP, as Minister with responsibility for accessibility across all transport modes, made a written statement to the House of Commons to mark the one-year anniversary since

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1 https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmpubacc/1793/179302.htm
the publication of the Inclusive Transport Strategy\(^3\). As it sets out, whilst a relatively short period of time has passed since the publication of the Strategy, we have already reached some significant milestones and continue to make progress in delivering the Strategy’s commitments.

A key achievement has been the announcement in April 2019 of the 73 stations that will benefit from the additional £300 million we committed in the Strategy to extend the Access for All programme. The improvement works at these stations will be carried out between 2019 and 2024. On 8 July, the Department also announced the relaunch of the Mid-Tier Access for All programme, to fund smaller-scale works which boost accessibility at stations, using £20 million of the available funding. The Access for All programme was launched in 2006 and has installed accessible, step free routes at over 200 stations, with another 1,500 stations benefiting from smaller scale access improvements.

The Department is closely monitoring rail industry progress towards the 31 December 2019 accessibility standards\(^4\) deadline. Accessible rail vehicles are a key part of making the network accessible and good progress has been made over the last decade with high numbers of vehicles being refurbished or replaced. The mandatory accessibility standards cover the design and function of a range of features such as doors and door controls/ warnings, priority seating, wheelchair spaces, handholds and handrails, among others.

We know improvements to infrastructure are essential but they are only part of the picture. To coincide with the anniversary of the Strategy, we published research\(^5\) on the experiences of disabled rail passengers which was conducted in collaboration with Transport Focus. The research looked at the end-to-end journey experiences for disabled people who travel by rail, and we are using the findings from it to inform the changes we are working with the industry to make across the network.

The Department has been working closely with the Rail Delivery Group (RDG), the membership body for all rail operators, to support the delivery of several initiatives to provide a better service for disabled passengers. In April 2019, the RDG launched a new interactive ‘Access Map’\(^6\), which enables disabled passengers to find out in one place how accessible stations across the country are. This means they can more easily plan their journeys according to their needs, removing some of the uncertainty that passengers

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6 [http://accessmap.nationalrail.co.uk/](http://accessmap.nationalrail.co.uk/)
facing a new journey can feel and helping to boost their confidence to travel by train.

The RDG is also making significant improvements to the Passenger Assist scheme to ensure the provision of reliable, high-quality assistance for disabled passengers where they need it. The industry body is upgrading the systems used by booking centres and station staff to speed up bookings for assistance and to increase reliability. Supported by the Department, the RDG is also leading a project to deliver a Passenger Assist application for the wider travelling public, due to be available in Summer 2020. The app will enable customers to book, change and cancel assistance quickly and will mean they do not have to provide information about their individual requirements each time they book. The RDG recently held an accessibility drop-in session at the Houses of Parliament which was attended by a number of Peers and Members, to showcase how the rail industry is working together to address some of the challenges of accessibility, including the changes to Passenger Assist, and to raise awareness of the various initiatives and offers that are currently available.

One in four disabled people say negative attitudes from other passengers prevent them from using public transport. To address this, the Department is working closely with disabled stakeholder groups and key influencers to develop a marketing campaign aimed at increasing disabled people’s confidence to use public transport.

Due to launch in 2019, the campaign will target three key audiences: the travelling public, disabled people and transport operators as we seek to increase awareness of disabled people’s needs, particularly those with non-visible disabilities. We will reamplify existing messaging that seeks to promote disabled rights, concessionary cards and passenger assistance alongside increased understanding of hate crime.

The Department is working closely with the RDG and the Disabled Persons Transport Advisory Committee (DPTAC), independent statutory advisers to the Department on transport access for disabled people, to review the eligibility criteria for the Disabled Persons Railcard, which will include exploring how we can improve the provision for companions and carers. Research to support the review has been commissioned and is now underway. The review is expected to be completed by the end of 2019. The Public Accounts Committee will be interested to know that there has been an increase in the of holders of Disabled Passenger Railcard; with 239,000 Disabled Persons Railcards in circulation, up by 7.4% on a year ago.

In November 2018, the industry introduced the first ever impartial and independent Rail Ombudsman to investigate and rule on unresolved passenger complaints, thereby helping to make sure passengers are heard

and that they get a fair deal when train companies fall short. Disabled passengers who are dissatisfied with the service they have been provided with, including where assistance has failed, should in the first instance complain to the service provider but if dissatisfied with that response they can now take their case to the Ombudsman.

In September 2018, the Williams Rail Review was established to look at the structure of the whole rail industry and the way passenger rail services are delivered. Accessibility of the rail network is a focus for the Review, and the Review team is considering the needs and priorities of disabled passengers in its work and identifying how accessibility can be improved for everyone. In the Inclusive Transport Strategy, we committed to introducing a number of new accessibility requirements in future franchises where these are not already required by the ORR as a result of their revised Accessible Travel Policy guidance. While the Williams Review is ongoing, we are looking for opportunities to introduce the new requirements in Direct Awards and future franchise replacements.

We hope you find this update helpful. The ORR’s further update to you which will follow will provide a fuller picture of the importance being placed on accessibility right across the industry to ensure that disabled people have the same access to rail as everyone else. We acknowledge that there is still a lot more to do and our Department will continue to work with disabled people’s organisations, train operators, and industry partners to achieve progress in this area.

Yours sincerely,

Bernadette Kelly CB
Permanent Secretary