# Transcript: RIDC Network Rail Podcast. March 2025

**[Upbeat music]**

**Phil Friend (Interviewer)**

Hello, everyone, my name is Phil Friend, and welcome to this podcast which today focuses on something that affects millions, millions and millions of disabled and older passengers: accessibility on our railways. Now, for almost two years, Network Rail and the Research Institute for Disabled Consumers, who we'll refer to as RIDC, have been working together on an ambitious project, 700 real world journeys, assessing accessibility at 20 of the UK's busiest stations. The result? Some big improvements, but also some clear lessons on what still needs to change. Now, joining me in this discussion are Natasha Marsay from Network Rail, who's been leading on this work, and Cath Cashman from RIDC, who helped to design and carry out the research. Welcome to you both.

**Natasha Marsay (Network Rail)**

Thank you for having me.

**Cath Cashman (RIDC)**

Thanks for having us, Phil.

**Phil Friend (Interviewer)**

Okay, so, Natasha, perhaps I could start with you by asking, you know, why did Network Rail take this kind of dive into accessibility? What was the driving port force behind the project?

**Natasha Marsay (Network Rail)**

I think accessibility has become more and more developed in the rail industry, probably over the last five or six years. The industry is starting to really understand how important ensuring that services are right for older and disabled people is. And actually, you know, we talk about the purple pound and things like that, the value of ensuring that accessibility is at the forefront of rail travel, ensuring that it is equal for everybody and everyone has the potential to travel and to socialise and work and everything. We do a lot of research generally on the general journey. So the ORR, the Office of Rail and Road, do a lot of research on passenger journeys and their experiences through that, but we were hyper aware that actually is the journey of disabled people different? Are the stresses, different? Are the challenges different? And actually are the assets within stations that people rely on very different to that of the general traveling public? And is there things that we can do to really enhance that and improve that? So that was the sort of starting blocks I think for us thinking we need to do more research, we need to understand things more. And I think for me, so I'm an Accessibility and Inclusion Strategy and Policy Lead and I'm registered blind. I have sight loss. I have done since I was a baby and I'm really comfortable talking about the visual impairment experience, but I would never want to speak on behalf of anybody else's experience of different disabilities or even sight loss. So I think it's really important that whatever we develop and produce is co-produced with the community that we're developing it for. So it was really vital for us to have that voice.

**Phil Friend (Interviewer)**

And why, why RIDC? What made them the sort of right partner for you to undertake the work?

**Natasha Marsay (Network Rail)**

Well, I don't know if it's slanderous to say that I think there are research partners out there that maybe don't prioritise the fact that their researchers are disabled and have true lived experience of disability. And I think we've all seen headlines in the papers of different companies who've maybe used research agencies that haven't prioritised that. And as such, their research has been flawed by sort of including anybody and just sort of saying, oh, so you've got a disability. And for us, it was really important that the research was ethical and that the people doing the research were treated respectfully and paid for their work and supported and sort of given the right tools to be able to do that independently. And RIDC really gave us that platform and that confidence. So that's why they were chosen.

**Phil Friend (Interviewer)**

That's brilliant. Thank you. Cath, coming to you now. I mean, obviously you and your team played a crucial role in all of this because obviously you, you designed the research and so on. How did you go about doing that? What were the key issues that you think you and your group had to explore?

**Cath Cashman (RIDC)**

So what was important to us in terms of what to research. We wanted to cover the whole customer journey, so everything through to, you know, reviewing information online, information about the station and the facilities, through to buying a ticket, booking assistance and being at the station. So that was something that we took into account when we were designing our methodology. And so we looked at the contextual side of things too. So the time of travel, the assistive aids that were being used to visit the stations. We looked at confidence before traveling to a station and then post journey, which gave us really useful measures to compare the before and after. We took a very, we were very considerate with our sampling, so we made sure that we had a broad range of impairments in our sampling. So our participants represented broad impairment groups being mobility, vision, cognition, hearing, metabolic. And, yeah, dexterity. So we covered a lot of our participants have more than one impairment. We have a very good spread of different panel members taking part, which adds value to the Mystery Shopping project. We're very careful with how we brief our participants. We tell them what to look, look out for during their visit so that they cover all the key aspects of the journey and that they can effectively report back on them.

**Phil Friend (Interviewer)**

Yeah, I mean, it's incredibly thorough, isn't it? And I think Natasha mentioned the fact that one of the attractions of RIDC was the fact that you use disabled people to do the research. And Mystery Shopping is a very key part of that, provides a lived experience. How did you manage say that, I mean, obviously turning up at stations at different times of day, particularly for example, for someone with a sight impairment at night time, an unstaffed station, the sort of health and safety aspects, were they part of your thinking or was that not a problem?

**Cath Cashman (RIDC)**

So safety and well being is always so paramount in our research and we support our panel members throughout the whole research process. So every mystery shopper is assigned a researcher in the RIDC team who supports them throughout the whole process, so they liaise with them. And we always ask our mystery shoppers to let us know when the day and time that they'll be traveling so that we can remain alert. And we make sure that they travel, we tell them to travel before 9pm in the evening. Obviously we want to give our shoppers autonomy and let them travel through the station when it's most convenient for them. But we always make sure that they have contact details readily available and more often than not, it goes relatively smoothly. If they feel uncomfortable or reluctant to undertake a journey on their own, allow them to have a carer or family member, accompany them.

**Phil Friend (Interviewer)**

Right, right. So, Cath, just before we come back to Natasha, how long did this take? How long were you and the team involved? How long was the project?

**Cath Cashman (RIDC)**

Basically, the program is divided into waves. So each wave covers six months, and within that six months we have to recruit 200 shoppers to assess 20 stations. So 20 of Network Rail stations across the UK and Scotland. And for each station we recruit 10 participants.

**Phil Friend (Interviewer)**

Right, okay. So it's incredibly, yeah, incredibly detailed and very, very well organized. Natasha, so when this, when Cath and her team had done all the field work and got all the stuff together and produced the report, when you saw the results, what stood out most for you? What were the, were there any findings that really surprised you? I mean…

**Natasha Marsay (Network Rail)**

I think it's different for how I felt about it to how other people felt about it. For me, because it's an area I work in, it was quite comforting to know that I'm on the right track. Excuse the train pun.

**Phil Friend (Interviewer)**

Oh, I love it.

**Natasha Marsay (Network Rail)**

I know it weaves into my life and there's no escape. But, you know, as I was saying before, I don't like to speak on behalf of people. And so I can sit here and formulate ideas of what I think people want and what I think people would find valuable. So actually it's really nice to see the reports and be like, okay, yeah, I was right. This is what people are wanting, you know, I'm not going completely 180 on what I thought was the right direction and actually it's really nice to get a bit of backup from the community of actually, you know what, I know what I'm talking about and I can prove to station managers or to other people that this is what the community wants. I think that maybe station managers, so we have three different reporting types from the research. So we have individual station reports which are really valuable for that individual station team. So the station management and the customer service assistants and everyone who's supporting customers directly. Then we have regional reports which are a few stations aggregated together and they're really helpful for people like route directors and people maybe looking at funding bids and what we're going to spend money on in the next year, in the next five years. And then we have a national report which is really helpful for people like me who can actually see a real overview of these are trends, these are things that are happening, these are people's thoughts and feelings. So it's really nice to have it at different levels to appeal to different people and different demographics within the business who have really different ways of manipulating that data and using it for good. So I think station managers maybe found it the most surprising actually how reliant people were on changing places, I think was one of the big ones for them.

**Phil Friend (Interviewer)**

That's the, that's the, the large toilets, isn't it? With all sorts of things.

**Natasha Marsay (Network Rail)**

Yeah. So we're having a hoist and having a, a height adjustable bed and sink and things like that to help people who need more support.

**Phil Friend (Interviewer)**

I, I know that one of the, one of the major issues that came up, I think in the report was the kind of inconsistency of accessibility. Some stations had really good facilities but passengers found them unreliable or difficult to navigate. Was that, was that a big challenge for you? I love the idea that you have three different kind of report levels. Local, sort of, and then national. But was, was that inconsistency issue a real challenge?

**Natasha Marsay (Network Rail)**

Yes. Yeah, absolutely, I think, and, and it's a challenge that we're hyper aware of and it's really hard to try and get consistency because we're working with buildings and very different geographical spaces. It's really hard to get consistency between our own managed stations, let alone the whole rail industry. And we work really hard to try and make things uniform. And so we have a sort of pledge to have a changing place at each of our managed stations in the next few years. We're doing autism friendly training and things at the minute. And all of these things have come out of the feedback of this training because, this research, sorry, because they're highlighting what's important to our customers and what's important to them is, can I go to the toilet? Can I buy something to eat? Can I be treated with respect? And that's really what it boils down to. We want to be treated respectfully and we want our basic human rights met. And actually, you know, in our original thought processes, we thought, is the disabled journey really different to that of the non disabled journey? And it's not, you know, people, there's additional requirements, you know, passenger assist, for example, is something people are really reliant on and brings them confidence and support. But yes, the basic needs of a customer are the same.

**Phil Friend (Interviewer)**

Yeah I mean, all human beings need to go to the loo, don't they? For example. And I guess if there's a toilet that doesn't work for a non disabled person, they may have alternatives. But if it's a disabled person, a wheelchair user, for example, they may not. So that's a big issue. Cath, thinking about from your point of view, the mystery shoppers and the journeys they all went on and the research they undertook on your behalf, were there any moments that really highlighted the challenges people face? I mean, do you have any particular stories that you remember that stand out from the teams that were going out and looking at all the stations?

**Cath Cashman (RIDC)**

It's a difficult question because we've organized over, well, 700 shops have been undertaken, even more in the last few months. Most of the time it goes relatively smoothly. But a big issue is, I would say, the navigation aspect. So being able to navigate stations is always a big issue for our participants and getting around and finding a facility too, a toilet. You know, I think a big issue too is getting, you know, getting to your train, not always having enough time and the overwhelming nature of the stations as well. So we can't control when our mystery shoppers will go to the stations. We sort of leave them, decide, we advise them to, you know, take precautions when they go to the station. But there have been instances where, you know, there's been overcrowding and they haven't been able to get through the ticket barrier so easily. Another issue is, you know, being mistreated by other passengers on the train, you know, suffering abuse. There can be a lot…

**Phil Friend (Interviewer)**

Oh really? So there was really. Oh, that, that does surprise me. I don't know why it surprises me. People get abused, don't they? But. Oh, that. So other passengers feeling verbal abuse? Yes, sure. But because, because they will. Why were they getting verbal abuse?

**Cath Cashman (RIDC)**

So a lot of drinking on trains, sometimes, you know, big groups and I think being on a train, it's a very, it can be quite an intimidating environment if there's no staff on the train. But more often than not, I think what, what really is reassuring to us is how highly rated the staff are. So I think in our most recent report we had over 80% of our panel members felt that staff understood their assistance needs very or fairly well. So, yeah, the staff interaction element is so important.

**Phil Friend (Interviewer)**

That's absolutely key, isn't it? It seems. Yeah. If you need assistance, which many of us do, the way the staff provide it is clearly incredibly important And the findings must be very encouraging from that point of view to Network Rail. Natasha, I suppose, moving on, then, the report landed on your desk, it was disseminated, it went around the organization and so on. And plans are being, will be made, I'm guessing, to begin to change things, to improve things. So what, given the nature of our railways, which is very old and lots of very old stations and so on, what was flagged up in the report that you can actually do something about? I mean, what, what is the plan?

**Natasha Marsay (Network Rail)**

Yeah, I think it's really important that you recognize that, like, there are things we can change and there are things we can't unless we win some massive amounts of cash. So, you know, people will talk about step free access and having, you know, no ramps to get on trains, for example, and they're just things that we can't fix quickly. They would need a lot of intervention. So it's really, like, important that we pick the things that we can fix. And I think it's nice that Cath pulled out the sort of staff feedback. So that was one thing that we really wanted to improve from our first report up until now. And we engaged with different disabled customers and created a staff training video which was all about language and all about how we speak to customers, how we make people feel and actually the value of our words. You know, anyone who's got passenger assist will probably recognise VIP, for example, a visually impaired person or a wheelchair instead of a wheelchair user or a person in a wheelchair. And it's just them changes in language that give people a bit more confidence and, you know, feel like they're valued and that they're a person and not an object that, you know, we're shipping, essentially. So that was a big piece of work for us and something we were really proud of developing because I think it has really, and the proof's in the pudding, isn't it? The proofs and the research, it has really improved our scores on staff behavior and the way that we treat people for passenger assist. Other things, so Cath talked about wayfinding and we know it's difficult. We run 20 of the largest stations in the UK. Places like Euston, which I'm sure everyone's seen sort of lambasted in the press for being incredibly busy and hard to navigate or places like Edinburgh again are really challenging to navigate if you're non disabled and if you're, you know, looking for step three routes or if you're visually impaired, then it adds an extra layer of complexity onto that. So we launched a product called Good Maps in all of our stations, which is a turn by turn navigation app that people can use and it was designed by printing house for the blind in America. So it's created for disabled people. It provides step rerouting and helps you find assets within the station, whether that's retail or whether it's your train or facilities or things like that. So introducing things like that are a direct response to what are people finding difficult. And we can improve signage. We're doing a big project on signage and station signage at the minute, but that's not useful for everybody. If you're hearing impaired, for example, and can't, you know, you use BSL and therefore the signage within stations adds no value. Or if you're neurodiverse and you're starting to sort of struggle or panic or feel discombobulated by the environment that's around you, what else can we do to support you? So we've been working with the National Autistic Society to become autism friendly and we piloted that at Waterloo and that's become really popular and got really good customer feedback and we can see the scores at Waterloo rising in that specific category of research. So now we're going to roll out all of our managed stations over the next few months.

**Phil Friend (Interviewer)**

Cath mentioned the anxiety of obviously being on your own in environments which would, I like your word, discombobulating. But, but there was that kind of verbal aggression and those kinds of things. Passenger well being and safety issues obviously came out from, from the research. What, what, if anything can be done in that area?

**Natasha Marsay (Network Rail)**

Maybe it's controversial to say I'm glad it happened for the research, but that's a really representative of everybody's journey, do you know what I mean? So it's not like the research has protected people from the realities of what happens and we need to understand the reality of what happens to actually be able to impact it. So what I really like about what RIDC do is they support customers, they don't protect them in that way. You know, they're not shielded or, you know, taken on the journey by somebody else and that doesn't happen. I think it's really important for us to actually get that feedback and, and be told, you know, I was verbally abused on the train. This is what people were saying, this is how I felt vulnerable in that situation for us to actually make the changes. So I think that's the sort of first thing that actually I'm really glad that people do speak up and say that that's happening to them because without people speaking up we can't make a change. And so it's difficult. A lot of our stations are in London and there's a lot of driver only operated trains. There isn't a guard, there isn't that person on board who can, you can go to and ask for support or you can get some extra sort of backup in them situations for what I would say to customers is I think people feel really afraid of pressing the emergency button on the train. There's a lot of signage around that button like only press this in an emergency. And I think it puts a lot of pressure on what is an emergency. You know, an emergency doesn't mean somebody's died or something horrendous has happened. Something can just be emergent to you and there's no negatives in pressing that button and asking for support. So I would always say to customers, you know, if you feel unsafe, if you don't feel that something is right on that train, you've got British Transport Police, you can absolutely text them or I'm sure we've all heard their 61016 number a thousand times on the train. Please text them, please tell them and alert them to any abuse. Please feel free to press the button on the train if you need some support. They're generally sort of by wheelchair suitcases and things like that.

**Phil Friend (Interviewer)**

Cath, I mean you mentioned at the beginning of our conversation how, you know, obviously the, the mystery shoppers and so on are supported and to some degree trained and given guidance and so on. Has what you found from the research changed any of those kinds of initiatives from your end. I.e. the fact that some passengers reported verbal abuse, etc. and their safety is clearly of paramount concern. You've already said that. But does it change anything for you from RIDC's point of view?

**Cath Cashman (RIDC)**

I think we need to show a great deal of empathy in all of our research, which we do, and there is a bit of pastoral care there. If there is a negative experience, what's great about the panel is that they feel they trust us enough to come to us if they're upset and there have been upset panel members. It's quite rare. Most of the time, these journeys go smoothly. There might be one or two instances that might not be ideal or, or make our mystery shoppers feel less comfortable or a bit less confident traveling by train. But, yeah, we, we have a very dedicated team who are always available to help. Obviously not at nighttime, but during work hours. Our team are always readily available. They have their, you know, they answer calls from our mystery shoppers, they support them. Our mystery shoppers also know that if anything happens, they have the right to withdraw from the mystery shopping. They can return home to safety. We always cover their expenses to and from the station. So if they need to get a taxi home if they don't want to, if they don't feel comfortable going ahead, they know that they're not obliged to continue. And we also always tell them to let a family member or friend know that they're undertaking the mystery shop so that there's help available.

**Phil Friend (Interviewer)**

I suppose we've ended up focusing a bit, haven't we, on the negative. And as you said in, in your response, Cath, it's pretty rare that passengers have, in this particular area of research, that passengers have any difficulties. Thinking more positively then, so the findings of the report come out, you begin a process of changing things, Natasha, and obviously RIDC and you are still working together. What's going on currently then that might be a bit different from what you've done so far? Natasha, let me ask you that question. What's the program at the moment engaged in?

**Natasha Marsay (Network Rail)**

So we've done sort of splinter surveys, I guess. So we, we've used the panel for different things, sort of tacked onto the standard survey that we run. So we've done a deep dive into London Liverpool Street to support their development works and sort of expanded the survey and had more mystery shoppers and did a deep dive there. And that was massively valuable in helping them redesign that station. And a lot of the feedback from that group has now gone into the designs and that's going forward for redevelopment of Liverpool Street Station. We're looking at doing a similar sort of thing at Euston at the minute, and bolstering the research that we do there. Euston's under a sort of a massive period of change right now to make sure it's fit for purpose. You know, it was a station built a lot of years ago. It was built to service sort of 30 million passengers. It's now servicing 55 million passengers. It's a massive jump on what the expectation was of that building. And as such, you know, it's bursting at the seams and it's struggling and that has a negative impact. So we're really trying to change how that works and getting disabled people's feedback on that is really valuable. So we're sort of doing booster surveys there to ensure that the changes that we're making have a really positive impact and are the right changes for everyone. And then we're looking at doing some more research into passenger assistance as well. So passenger assistance is a real core part of what we offer. Network rail, at our 20 managed stations deliver 40% of the passenger assistance that's delivered in the railway in the UK, because they're big inner city stations, and so making sure that passenger assistance goes well and really boosting that feedback for us is invaluable. The ORR do a survey on passenger assistance, but because we have such big volumes, the sample size that they have is quite small. So we're really keen on sort of boosting that and giving ourselves much more visibility on passenger assist to ensure that we can develop that and make sure it's a fit for purpose service, and it's a service that our customers can have confidence in.

**Phil Friend (Interviewer)**

And from your point of view, Cath, what's ongoing in this project, from RIDC's point of view? Are you just doing more of the same, or have you got different programs or projects that you're developing to help Network Rail become the best they can be?

**Cath Cashman (RIDC)**

So, as Natasha mentioned, we're talking about increasing the number of mystery shops at Euston Station. So I think we need to make some modifications to our survey that we use, collect feedback from our participants. We do include additional measures as well, but we have to keep everything consistent so that we can compare different waves of mystery shopping. So basically, two waves corresponds to a year of mystery shopping, and that's 400 shops across a whole year. So what we want to do is compare every year and see if things are improving or getting worse. I think things are improving and it's brilliant. But Network Rail have taken on initiatives to, especially with regard to navigating the station, to implementation of more changing places, toilets, because that's so crucial for people's comfort and you know, it gives people more independence and confidence to travel. And what's really heartwarming is we regularly hear from our panel members that taking part in this mystery shopping has given them the confidence to travel by train.

**Phil Friend (Interviewer)**

Right. Well that, that's tremendous. I mean that, that really is very positive. You mentioned a number of times, Cath, it's probably worth for our listeners just to remind them, you've mentioned the panel. Now I happen to know that when I worked with RIDC it was over 4,000 disabled people on that panel. What's the kind of current figure? Ish.

**Cath Cashman (RIDC)**

It's about 4,500 a bit over that. Just to note that we do have a second panel now. We have the NCAT panel so that's all transport related research. So there's a bit of crossover but, but we are, what's brilliant too is there are, there are details at Network Rail stations to join our panel. So there are some adverts that are put up in the stations.

**Phil Friend (Interviewer)**

That was. Yeah, that's why I asked the question really it's a good opportunity for our listeners to think, oh, I might be able to help with this and sign up to become join the panel either of NCAT or RIDC itself. So okay, that, that's, that's absolutely tremendous. So before we finish, I, I suppose I want to ask each one of you really separately one key message that you would leave for passengers or transport planners or policy makers. I guess transport planners and policy makers is a bit more your bag, Natasha, but yeah, Natasha, let me start with you. What would be your key message to anyone listening to this?

**Natasha Marsay (Network Rail)**

I think probably two key messages. I think planners and transport is a different message to customers. I think a message to customers is please be assured that we take your feedback really seriously and we're always striving to improve and to provide a service that you can have confidence in. And we want you to travel and we want you to love traveling by train. So you know, do the mystery shops join the panel have a voice? You know, lots of train operators have panels as well that help them. So any way that you can give your feedback makes it round the loop and we do listen to it and we do make changes. I think my message to transport providers and policymakers would be that there's over 16 million disabled people in the UK and lots of disabilities are acquired later in life and any of us can become disabled. Disabled people are the largest minority group in the UK and you know, just because you don't think it impacts you now, it may do in later life. And don't think that accessibility is a nice to have. It's a must have.

**Phil Friend (Interviewer)**

Yep, excellent. Thank you very much. Cath, what about you? What's your message to…

**Cath Cashman (RIDC)**

So I would say to transport providers, as Natasha said, by making some journeys inclusive and accessible, you are making them accessible to everyone. So all those, you know, elements like especially passengers, this is so important, making sure that, you know, the information is passed through to the right staff. When assistance fails, that's when things just go so wrong for a passenger and makes them extremely anxious and puts them off traveling again. So that, to me is incredibly important, you know, making sure that assistance run smoothly and effectively and people receive the right help.

**Phil Friend (Interviewer)**

Well, well, look, we, we've come to the end of our conversation, but it strikes me that there's obviously there's the buildings and the infrastructure and all of that stuff, the engineering stuff, stuff which matters hugely. You know, if you've got a toilet that works, that's brilliant. But at the other end of it, as you were saying, Cath, there is also the people, the people that provide the service and what comes out of the research suggests that most of the time the people are getting it right and they're doing their very best and that's appreciated. But when it goes wrong, it can be very difficult and that clearly is where we need to concentrate efforts. Thank you both so much for this fantastic discussion. I think it's been really illuminating and, and it's clear that real passenger experiences through the panel and the mystery shopping and that sort of thing are making a real difference in helping Natasha and her colleagues to change the transport system, or at least the train system, the railway system, for the good. So thank you both so much for your time. And to our listeners, if you've had an experience with accessibility and train stations, we'd love to hear from you. And we'll put the phone number and the contact details for RIDC and for Natasha in the show notes. So until the next time, take care and thank you very much for listening.