

£5.3 million investment in innovative projects to make railways more accessible

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AI technology could soon see live staff announcements across train tickers to ensure passengers hard of hearing don't miss vital updates, thanks to a Government funding competition announced this week.

This is just one of the 17 projects – six of which are focused on accessibility – being announced as part of the '2023 First of a Kind' competition.

Run in conjunction with Innovate UK, other accessibility projects set to share the £5.3m of funding offered by the Government include:

- Strategically placed QR codes around stations which allow train managers to directly input important information on platform changes and service alterations as well as acting as a database for accessible information, ensuring passengers have all the information they need;
- An online journey planner providing up-to-date information on key facilities such as where accessible toilets are in stations and trains throughout their journey and whether they're open and in use, giving passengers more confidence when planning journeys;

- Installing kiosk systems on platforms – similar to pressing a button on a bus to let the driver know to stop – in rural areas where passengers currently have to physically flag down trains which can cause difficulties for those with mobility needs.

This is the seventh round of First of a Kind funding, which aims to develop new and innovative technology to drive efficiency, modernise our current infrastructure, and make using our railways a better experience for passengers. The funding will support the projects through their development phases involving real trials on the railways in the coming months and giving them a better chance of being used across the network long term.

Rail Minister Huw Merriman said: “We’re spending more than £5 million on modernising train journeys, improving the experience for some of the most vulnerable passengers and using cutting edge technology to do so.

“The projects announced today have the potential to make a huge difference to passengers, whether that’s being able to read important announcements or locate accessible facilities. I’m proud of the support we’ve been able to show through this competition to drive towards a more innovative, inclusive and better value for money rail network.”

Other winning projects this year include a sensor to detect when there’s leaves on the line – a problem which causes delays across the network, DreamSuite, a new design for UK Sleeper Services, and new technology that will allow train timetables to rapidly update during extreme weather events so people are kept up to date.

Over the past six years more than £50 million of funding has been awarded to 150 projects as part of the competition, helping a number of innovative technology reach the market including, ‘[Seat Frog](#)’, which allows passengers to swap train tickets without having to purchase a new one, a [train-mounted camera](#) able to identify and address lineside maintenance issues, and [Transreport](#)’s technology enabling passengers with disabilities to request assistance more easily.

Anthony Smith, chief executive of independent watchdog Transport Focus, said: “This new investment in accessibility improvements is a welcome move to help rail passengers with disabilities travel freely and with greater confidence.

“It is important that people with disabilities have full access to trains and station facilities. Improving information and new innovative solutions will help staff give all passengers the support they need.”

Mike Biddle, Executive Director for Net Zero at Innovate UK, stated: “The innovations receiving support through this competition are set to foster a more accessible, inclusive railway system within the UK and to develop demonstrators that offer innovations in customer experience, reliable and maintainable assets and optimised train operations.

“The objective is to endorse a wider array of innovations that focus on enhancing railway accessibility for all passengers, ensuring a more equitable travel experience while creating easy to maintain assets and

optimising train operations.”

As part of the Network North plan, we have set aside a further £350 million to improve accessibility at up to 100 stations, meaning stations will be able to benefit from refitted lifts, tactile surfaces, ramps and footbridges, new ticket gates and accessible waiting rooms and toilets.