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Data gathering and analysis of railway inclusion and accessibility for individuals with intellectual disability

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Executive Summary

This deliverable presents the findings from the first three phases of an exploratory, qualitative study investigating railway inclusion and accessibility for individuals with intellectual disabilities, conducted within the framework of the PhDs EU-Rail project. Using a comprehensive interpretive approach, the research combines semi-structured interviews, accompanied train journeys, field observations of pilgrimage train departures, and in situ walking (commented) interviews. Data collection took place across four railway stations in France and one in Belgium, involving railway staff, adult passengers with intellectual disabilities, and volunteer accompanists.

Phase 1 (13 railway staff interviews) reveals a hierarchical representation of disability where physical and sensory impairments are prioritised over cognitive disabilities. Staff training is largely awareness-based and focused on statistically frequent situations, leaving intellectual disabilities marginalised. Accessibility measures vary significantly between stations, with maintenance and functionality issues undermining usability. Furthermore, assistance systems are conditional, relying on advance booking and self-identification, which conflicts with the desire of many individuals not to be labelled.

Phase 2 (ten accompanied journeys with users) documents real-time cognitive and procedural barriers. Key difficulties include inaccessible online ticketing (due to lack of bank cards), reliance on memorisation strategies that fail under informational complexity (e.g., two trains at the same time), misunderstanding of symbolic codes (e.g., class numbers on train cars), and acute stress during unexpected disruptions (e.g., strikes requiring unplanned transfers). Phase 2 bis (observation of pilgrimage trains and volunteer interviews) highlights that even well-intentioned inclusive initiatives rely on untrained volunteers and improvised solutions, revealing a structural ableism within standard train designs.

Phase 3 (walking interviews) maps the emotional and temporal dimensions of station navigation. Participants experienced stress, disorientation, and backtracking in crowded areas, confusion between arrivals and departures boards, and difficulty locating platforms due to poor signage visibility. The combined results demonstrate that accessibility is not merely a technical issue but a relational and organisational one.

Current railway systems are designed for literate, autonomous users, imposing a high anticipatory and psychological burden on travellers with intellectual disabilities. The report concludes that human mediation is essential and that future solutions must co-develop recommendations with users themselves, moving towards a model of accessibility that supports genuine autonomy and participation.

1 Objective/Aim

The primary objective of this research is to document and analyse the experiences, social representations, professional practices, and systemic barriers related to cognitive inclusion in railway environments for users with intellectual disabilities. The study aims to produce contextualised, in situ knowledge that reflects the complexity of accessibility issues as lived by these passengers, while remaining interpretable and implementable within the daily operational context of the railway sector. A secondary aim is to assess the training needs of railway staff to improve their capacity to welcome and support all passengers effectively. Ultimately, the research seeks to move beyond a purely technical, assistance-based model of accessibility towards a more empowering approach that ensures information and environments are understandable, predictable, and usable for all.

2 Background

Disability manifests itself in a variety of ways, making any attempt at categorisation complex. Despite this difficulty, we have to define the context of our study, drawing on the literature, which nevertheless distinguishes several broad categories of disability according to their nature. Among these are sensory impairments, generally congenital or acquired at an early age, which include, in particular, visual impairments, such as low vision or blindness, as well as hearing impairments, such as hearing loss or deafness. Physical impairments, also referred to as motor impairments, are characterised by the absence, malformation or functional impairment of a part of the body, which may affect mobility or posture. Finally, intellectual disabilities encompass people with a significant impairment in cognitive functioning, which may lead to difficulties with learning, independence and adapting to their environment (Blanc, 2015).

This study focuses more specifically on the latter category, namely intellectual disability (ID), the definition of which warrants clarification given the wide range of diverse and heterogeneous situations it covers. According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5), intellectual disability is characterised by the co-occurrence of limitations in intellectual functioning and adaptive behaviour, emerging during the developmental period (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). The diagnosis is based on three main criteria. The first concerns the presence of deficits in intellectual functioning, particularly in the areas of reasoning, problem-solving, planning, abstract thinking, judgement and learning. The second criterion relates to deficits in adaptive functioning, which manifest as difficulties in meeting the expected socio-cultural demands regarding personal autonomy and social responsibility. These difficulties may affect various areas of daily life, such as communication, social participation, independence in activities of daily living, and integration into school, work and the community. Finally, the third criterion stipulates that these limitations must be present during the developmental period. The prevalence of intellectual disability is estimated at around 1 per cent of the general population (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). In France, estimates suggest a prevalence of between 10 and 20 per 1,000 people for mild forms, whilst severe forms affect around 3 to 4 people per 1,000 (INSERM, 2016). There are many causes of intellectual disability. They may be genetic in origin, as in the case of trisomy 21, Williams syndrome or fragile X syndrome; result from environmental factors acting during development or remain unknown (Struyf, 2025).

Beyond this clinical definition, intellectual disability cannot be understood solely in terms of its diagnostic dimensions. The manifestations associated with intellectual disability vary considerably from one person to another, both in terms of their intensity and their impact on daily life. This diversity highlights the importance of taking into account the unique nature of individuals' life experiences, as well as the diversity of their needs and resources (Ville, Fillion and Ravaud, 2014, 2020; American Psychiatric Association, 2023).

In this perspective, and in order to avoid reducing individuals to their diagnosis alone, this research adopts an interactional approach to intellectual disability. This is viewed not only as an intrinsic, stable and definitive characteristic of the person, but as the result of interactions between the individual and their environment. Material, social and organisational contexts can indeed act as facilitators or, conversely, as barriers to social participation, the exercise of autonomy and access to the various spheres of everyday life (Genet, 2012; Bruyère, 2026). This approach shifts the focus away from individual deficits and towards the environmental conditions that can promote the inclusion and full participation of people with an intellectual disability.

Our study states that intellectual disability remains largely invisible within mainstream railway accessibility policies and professional practices. While significant infrastructural and organisational efforts have been made to

accommodate passengers with motor, visual, and hearing impairments, individuals with intellectual, cognitive, or psychological disabilities continue to face systemic barriers that constrain their mobility and autonomy. In France, invisible disabilities account for approximately 80% of all disabilities, yet railway training programmes and assistance systems are primarily structured around statistically frequent and visibly identifiable situations. Staff interviews conducted in this study reveal that training on intellectual disability is often reduced to basic awareness-raising, with recommendations limited to simplifying language rather than providing in-depth psychological or communicative approaches. Furthermore, assistance is frequently conditional upon advance booking and prior identification, a requirement that conflicts with the desire of many individuals to avoid being labelled as disabled. Existing accessibility adaptations, such as tactile paving or information displays, are not always maintained or coherently designed, and smaller stations suffer from structural under-investment. The lived experiences of passengers with intellectual disabilities, including difficulties with ticket purchasing, interpreting symbolic information (e.g., train class numbers), managing unexpected disruptions, and navigating crowded or poorly signed stations, remain poorly documented. This PhD research addresses this gap by providing situated, multi-perspective knowledge co-constructed with users and railway staff.

3 Legislative framework of the study

The international and national legal framework provides a structural basis for rail accessibility, in particular through the adoption of standards and regulations designed to ensure equal access to transport. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), adopted by the United Nations in 2006 and which became effective in 2008, plays a central role in this regard.

It aims to promote, protect and ensure equal rights, whilst promoting the full and effective participation of persons with disabilities in political, economic, social and cultural life. In this regard, the Convention, whose terms are legally binding, marks a major turning point in the understanding of disability. Indeed, its preamble emphasises that disability is not a fixed condition and that it is destined to evolve over time. States must therefore take into account all the needs of these individuals. Article 1 provides a definition of disability: “Persons with disabilities include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which, in interaction with various barriers, may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others.” The Convention invites States to ensure “universal accessibility” of general systems by systematically incorporating the disability perspective into public policies and by ensuring that “products, equipment, programmes and services can be used by all without the need for specific adaptations”. Article 9 emphasises the need for barrier-free access to “the physical environment, transport, information and communications, including information and communication technologies and systems”. Article 19, for its part, recognises the right to live within the community whilst benefiting from the same freedom of choice as other citizens, and requires States to implement concrete measures to promote this inclusion (United Nations, 2006).

At European level, several legal texts reinforce this legal framework. Article 13 of the Treaty of Amsterdam (1997) introduces an explicit measure prohibiting any discrimination based on disability. The Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (2000) reaffirms these principles: Article 1 emphasises the inviolability of human dignity, Article 21 prohibits any discrimination on the grounds of disability and Article 26 “recognises and respects the rights of persons with disabilities” to benefit from measures designed to ensure their independence, their social and professional integration, and their participation in community life.

With specific regard to the rail sector, Commission Regulation (EU) No 1300/2014 of 18 November 2014, known as the “PRM TSI” (Technical Specification for Interoperability relating to the accessibility of the Union’s rail system for persons with disabilities and persons with reduced mobility), constitutes the reference framework at European level. This Regulation, as last amended by Commission Regulation (EU) No 2023/1694 of 10 August 2023, extends its application to the entire Union rail network, rather than just the trans-European network; aligns the definition of persons with reduced mobility with that used by the United Nations and prioritises high-level functional requirements rather than imposing specific technical solutions (European Commission, 2014). It covers, in particular, the accessibility of station infrastructure, rolling stock and passenger information systems, as well as ticketing and ticket validation procedures. This Regulation is supplemented by Regulation (EU) No 454/2011, known as the ‘TAP TSI’ (Telematics Applications for Freight and Passenger Services – Technical Specifications for Interoperability), which sets out the technical requirements for the display and dissemination of passenger information, including via digital interfaces.

Additionally, Regulation (EU) 2021/782 of 29 April 2021 on the rights and obligations of rail passengers (the Rail Passengers’ Rights Regulation) replaces the Regulation of 23 October 2007 by establishing a more comprehensive and up-to-date framework governing passengers’ rights and obligations. It strengthens passengers’ rights, in

particular the right to information, and clarifies the civil liability regime applicable to railway undertakings. With the goal of ensuring better protection for vulnerable travelers, this regulation emphasizes the importance of equal treatment for people with disabilities compared to other passengers. In particular, it requires rail companies and station operators to establish or implement non-discriminatory access rules applicable to the transportation of people with disabilities, including their companions, who must be able to travel for free or at a reduced fare. More generally, a disability must not result in additional costs for the traveler concerned.

In France, Law No. 2005-102 of February 11, 2005, on equal rights and opportunities, participation, and citizenship for people with disabilities, constitutes the national legal basis for accessibility requirements related to the “mobility chain”. Twenty years after this law took effect, the results remain below expectations as the mechanisms put in place to achieve “universal accessibility” have been only partially implemented and remain insufficient. Discrimination against travelers with disabilities remains significant and persistent, as many train stations are still inaccessible to people with disabilities. In this regard, the European Committee of Social Rights ruled, in its decision of April 17, 2023, that this situation constituted a violation of Article 15, paragraph 3, of the European Social Charter.

4 Data gathering and analysis of railway inclusion and accessibility for individuals with intellectual disability

4.1 Introduction

This study is based on an exploratory, qualitative, and non-random methodology using a comprehensive interpretive approach.

We chose an exploratory, qualitative and non-random methodology based on a number of considerations relating to the nature of the subject under study, the current state of scientific knowledge, and the ethical and practical constraints associated with the population concerned. The epistemological position of this research is founded on the comprehensive paradigm, which seeks to understand the meaning of human actions, it is a subjective and constructivist approach, in which the nature of the findings is contextual and situated, the researcher adopts an engaged and reflexive posture (Charmillot & Dayer, 2007), (Grassi, 2005).

Although many studies focus on transport accessibility for people with disabilities, the literature is still more extensive in relation to motor or sensory disabilities than to intellectual disabilities. The available evidence therefore does not yet allow us to identify a stable set of explanatory variables or to formulate sufficiently substantiated hypotheses that could be subject to quantitative validation. In this context, an exploratory approach appears appropriate in order to understand a phenomenon that has not yet been sufficiently studied, to identify the significant dimensions of the lived experience, and to develop categories of analysis derived directly from fieldwork.

Its main objective is to document the experiences, social representations, professional practices, and systemic barriers related to cognitive inclusion in railway environments for users presenting an intellectual disability. This research aims to produce contextualised knowledge *in situ* to reflect the complexity of accessibility issues as experienced by users living with intellectual disabilities (Gardien, 2017), while also being interpretable and implementable within the daily professional and operational context of the railway sector. Methodological adjustments were made gradually throughout this process, based on feedback from participants and the results of successive phases of data collection and analysis. This adaptive approach has been adopted to ensure that the realities encountered in the field are both analysed and taken into account. Changes and adaptations will be documented in the corresponding phase reports. In this report, we will present the initial results from Phases 1 to 3.

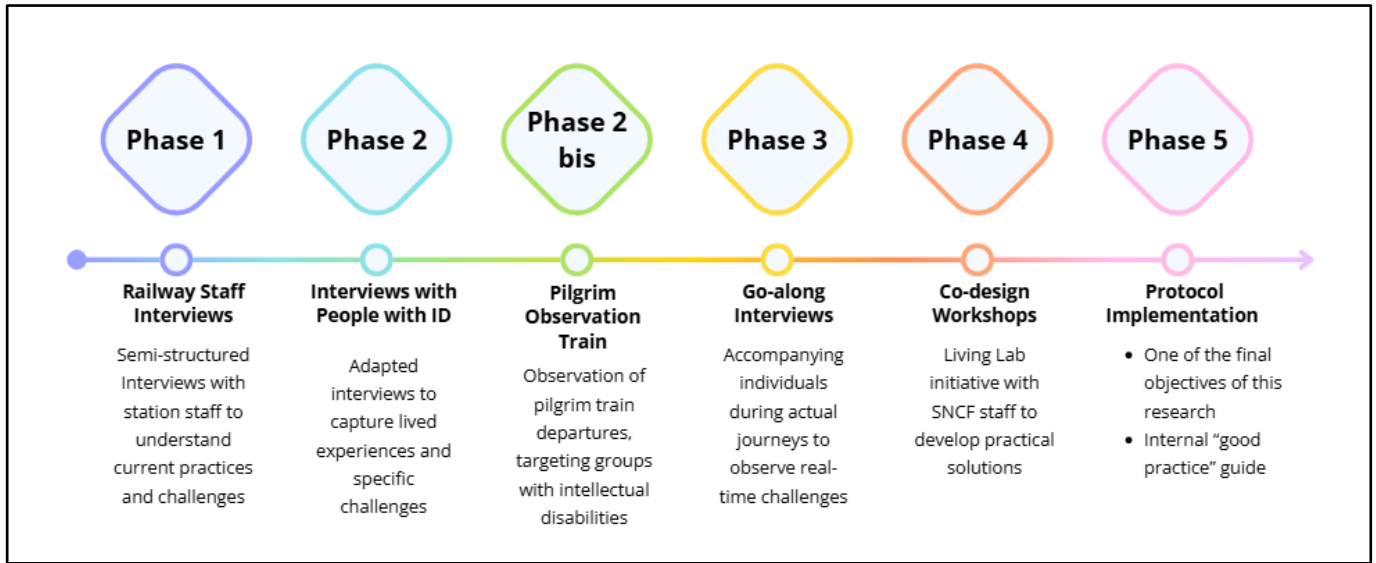


Figure 1. Schematic representation of the data collection phase

4.2 Phase 1: Railway staff interviews

4.2.1 Participants

The participants in this phase of the study were exclusively railway employees working on regional and suburban rail services located in France. These networks were identified for analysing localised forms of assistance, given the frequency of face-to-face interactions with passengers and the assistance needs encountered in the context of daily operations. The sample was designed to be representative and included a variety of positions to reflect the diversity of responsibilities within railway stations and operational management structures. Participants included front-line staff, such as customer service agents, standby agents, mixed-role standby agents, ticket agents, and reception agents, as well as operational and managerial roles, including platform supervisors, station managers, commercial route managers, facility directors, and senior executives responsible for transformation, passenger services, and accessibility management. A total of thirteen interviews were conducted as part of this phase of the research. However, the sample exhibits certain imbalances, particularly in terms of gender distribution (ten were men and three were women), which may reflect, at least in part, the gender distribution observed in certain operational roles within the railway sector. Given the non-random and exploratory nature of the study, representativeness was not sought in the statistical sense of the term; rather, the objective was to ensure a diversity of roles and experiences.

All held positions involving either direct interaction with passengers or strategic responsibilities related to passenger services and accessibility policies. Participants were recruited through internal partner contacts within train stations and organizational structures. Participation was strictly voluntary and followed an initial presentation of the research objectives and procedures. Prior to the interviews, participants were informed of the study's objective, the conditions of participation, and the intended use of the collected data. Participants agreed to take part in the study under conditions that ensured confidentiality and anonymity. To preserve anonymity, personally identifiable information such as names, specific job titles, organizational units, or assignments was removed or generalised in the transcripts and in the presentation of results. All data were treated confidentially and were used exclusively for research and analysis purposes. The data extracted from the interviews were analysed using a thematic approach based on manual coding of the transcripts (Paillé & Mucchielli, 2021). The analysis was based on deductive and inductive methods.

4.2.2 Procedure

Data collection for the first phase of the study was based on semi-structured interviews conducted with frontline railway staff working at various stations (Sauvayre, 2021). An interview guide was developed and focused on several themes, including disability-related training, experiences in assisting passengers, identifying passenger needs, managing unexpected situations, perceptions of cognitive accessibility, and possible ideas for improving existing practices (see Appendix 1). The interviews were conducted in accordance with the comprehensive interview approach (Kaufmann, 2016). This methodological framework conceptualises the interview as a flexible conversational exchange that allows interviewees to express their experiences in their own terms while minimising constraints imposed by the interviewer. Particular attention was paid not only to explicit statements, but also to hesitations, pauses, and implicit aspects of speech, which were considered significant elements in the construction of narratives. All interviews were conducted face-to-face in private spaces (soundproof cabins) provided within the station facilities. The interviews lasted an average of about forty-five minutes, although their duration varied considerably depending on the level of detail provided by the participants and their availability. The shortest interview lasted twenty-five minutes, while the longest lasted up to three hours and ten minutes. With the participants' consent, all interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed in full to allow for a detailed analysis of the collected data. For ethical and confidentiality reasons, no identifying information regarding cities, railway stations, or specific locations is disclosed throughout this document. This decision aims to minimise the risk of identifying the participants and organisations involved, particularly given the relatively small sample size and the specificity of certain roles and contexts. As such, all locations referred to across the different phases have been anonymised or generalised.

4.2.3 Field

Station type	Identification code	Estimated annual footfall (Total travelers 2024)	Key characteristics	Accessibility challenges	Organisation of assistance for passengers with disabilities
Major central city station (multimodal hub)	Station No. 1	25 331 979	Hub - Dense urban environment; high passenger flows; strong intermodality	Informational complexity; time pressure; heterogeneous users	External service provider
Large international station	Station No. 2	6 642 464	Hub - Long-distance and high-speed traffic; international connections	Safety procedures; cross-border coordination	Internal railway staff
Medium-sized city station	Station No. 3	806 899	City - Regional and suburban services; smaller-scale infrastructure	Lower density; local accessibility needs	Internal railway staff
Major European hub	Station No. 4	257 024 152	Hub - Very high density; complex logistics; large-scale coordination	Extreme crowding; intermodality; organisational complexity	External service provider

Figure 2. Structural, organisational and operationa characteristics of the study field of work

The fieldwork was conducted in four French railway stations selected for their structural, organisational, and operational characteristics to reflect the diversity of situations encountered both by passengers with intellectual disabilities and by railway staff in everyday practice. The first site is a major central city station functioning as both a railway hub and a strategic intermodal transport node. With an estimated annual footfall of 25,331,979 passengers in 2024, illustrates the intensity of passenger flows and the heterogeneity of user profiles typical of dense urban mobility environments. Its scale and multimodal connectivity make it particularly relevant for examining cognitive accessibility in high-traffic contexts characterised by informational complexity and time pressure. The second station recorded an estimated 6,642,464 passengers in 2024. This site presents distinct operational challenges, notably in relation to long-distance and high-speed traffic management, including frequent international connections. The implementation of safety procedures and the coordination of cross-border mobility flows constitute key dimensions of the accessibility environment in this setting. The third station is located in a medium-sized city and represents a more modest-scale infrastructure. With an estimated annual attendance of 806,899 passengers in 2024, it primarily serves regional and suburban routes. The fourth site is one of the largest railway stations in Europe and constitutes a highly complex logistical and human environment. With passenger numbers among the highest within the French railway network, it provides a critical setting for analysing accessibility issues in contexts characterised by extreme density, intermodality, and large-scale organisational coordination. An additional selection criterion concerned the organisation of assistance services for passengers with disabilities. In the two largest stations, assistance is provided by an external service provider, whereas in the two other stations, assistance and support are delivered directly by internal railway staff.

4.3 Results

4.3.1 Perception of support and representations of disability

The interviews reveal an overall positive perception of the support service dedicated to people with disabilities, which is considered "satisfactory" or "functional" by the majority of participants. However, staff members point to significant variations in service quality depending on the station and the situation. Most respondents reported having received general training on welcoming and assisting passengers with disabilities, but only a small number said they had received training specifically focused on intellectual disabilities. The training courses are described more as "awareness-raising" than in-depth learning.

"We have redundant training courses, meaning that all permanent employees undergo training [...] in sales, boarding, safety, anti-fraud, and we also have two modules lasting a day or two for all vulnerable individuals. For example, if we ever have to transfer someone in a wheelchair, we have been taught how to do so. We have been taught to be more attentive, more vigilant, and to give priority to these individuals. We have also been informed about the entire system that has been put in place by the station, including lifts, tactile paving, etc. But it is not a very in-depth training course either. It is more of an awareness-raising exercise." (Reception agent, Station No. 1, interview on 25/02/2025, the interview was conducted in French but has been translated for the report).

The recurring reference to the general nature of training content reflects a homogenised approach to disability, closer to a normative register than to a professionalisation approach. Staff justify this approach on statistical grounds, with the most visible impairments (motor or sensory) being reported as the most frequently encountered in their daily activities, while intellectual impairments appear to be "rare" or "occasional":

"I would say that we were trained on what we would statistically encounter most often. So, wheelchairs, blindness, deafness. On the other hand, it's true that when it comes to people who are, let's say, psychotic, we're just told to keep our distance, remain professional, courteous and polite. But we don't get any more training than that. It's really based on statistics about what we're most likely to encounter. And statistically, the things we're least likely to encounter are left to other assistants at the station who, I think, have better training. Our managers, who I suppose

are a little more comfortable with these situations." (Reception agent, Station No. 2, interview on 25/02/2025, the interview was conducted in French but has been translated for the report).

This probabilistic logic can make some certain forms of disability invisible (Gardou, 2012), particularly those that are less detectable at first sight. It also refers to what the literature calls invisible disabilities, which account for 80% of cases in France (Government (info.gouv.fr), 2025). As a result, difficulties related to adapted communication, managing "atypical" behaviour or specific cognitive needs remain largely unexplored in formal training courses:

"When it comes to intellectual disabilities, we were just told to keep it simple: short sentences, clear words, get straight to the point. But there was no real training. We need a real psychological approach, that's the basis" (Reception agent, Station No. 2, interview on 25/02/2025, the interview was conducted in French but has been translated for the report).

Some support situations are described as delicate, particularly when they involve behaviour that is considered unpredictable or difficult to interpret.

"There are some people who are more complicated... When a child with Down's syndrome has a breakdown, we don't always know how to react. If the person is alone, honestly, I wouldn't know how to handle it. I would call my manager." (Sales and boarding agent, Station No. 1, interview on 25/02/2025, the interview was conducted in French but has been translated for the report).

The relevance and effectiveness of training programmes are also called into question in contexts where assistance services within stations are outsourced to external providers, typically private companies responsible for supporting passengers with disabilities. In such configurations, railway staff may have limited direct involvement in assistance practices, which can reduce opportunities to develop skills or gain experience in assisting people with intellectual disabilities.

Conversely, in stations where assistance is carried out directly by railway staff, support practices tend to be primarily oriented towards passengers with physical disabilities. In particular, assistance is often associated with mobility-related needs, such as wheelchair access, and with the adaptation of infrastructure or train design. This may contribute to a narrower understanding of disability, with less attention given to other forms of impairment, including cognitive or invisible disabilities. As illustrated by one interviewee:

"You really need to be facing the problem at that exact moment to be able to talk about it, and so on. But otherwise, no. I'm the manager of two stations, X and Y. At X, my staff are monospecialised. They only deal with welcoming people with disabilities. And there's a separate service that handles the support. Here, actually, it's different because I have staff here at Y who handle the assistance. But I'd say their job stops at assisting with manual or electric wheelchairs, with or without a ramp. Bear in mind that our TGVs are now equipped with automatic ramps, so it stops at assistance alone. But no, we don't go any further than that." (Station manager, Station No. 3, interview on 26/06/2025, the interview was conducted in French but has been translated for the report).

However, engagement with training opportunities also depends on individual sensitivity, motivation, and personal curiosity among staff members. While training provision is not limited to face-to-face sessions, it also includes access to digital learning resources, such as e-learning modules available via mobile devices. These resources offer flexible and potentially continuous learning opportunities, allowing staff to explore specific topics related to disability at their own pace. Nevertheless, as participation in these training modules is not mandatory, their uptake varies considerably between individuals. This results in uneven levels of knowledge and awareness across staff, depending largely on personal initiative rather than institutional requirements. As one participant explained:

"Because we offer e-learning courses on disability. It's up to them to be curious and explore the topics that interest them."

(Production and Services agent, Station No. 4, interview conducted on 18/11/2025; originally in French, translated for the report).

This situation highlights a shift towards a more individualised approach to professional development, where responsibility for acquiring knowledge about disability and accessibility is partially transferred to employees themselves. While such flexibility may encourage autonomous learning, it also risks reinforcing disparities in training engagement and, consequently, in the quality of assistance provided to passengers.

4.3.2 Existing measure and limitations encountered in improving accessibility

During the interview phases, it was also possible to conduct visits to the various railway stations, either led directly by station managers or by other responsible staff members. These visits focused primarily on the implementation of accessibility measures and on identifying potential material or infrastructural challenges encountered in providing access for passengers with disabilities. It is important to note that these presentations were not limited to provisions for individuals with intellectual disabilities, but encompassed accessibility measures for disability in general. From the perspective of the railway system, disabilities are categorised into four main groups: motor, visual, auditory, and intellectual, cognitive, or psychological disabilities. Based on these categories, the rail system is gradually developing and implementing a series of measures aimed at facilitating travel and reducing environmental barriers that may limit accessibility (Accessibility & Network Department, 2025). The table below summarises the main adaptations identified/ or mentioned during these station visits:

Type of disability	Main railway adaptations (in progress/in place)
Motor disability	Easy access routes: ramps, slopes, lifts. Easy boarding: access ramps, mobile ramps. Physical facilities: easy-to-open doors, reserved spaces, adapted seating. Usage facilities: standard height controls, accessible ticket machines, reserved parking.
Visual impairment	Tactile markers (tactile paving, floor guidance). Enhanced contrast (stairs, signage). Removal of obstacles from walkways. Systematic duplication of visual information through audio announcements. Audio location markers. Improved audio quality of announcements.
Hearing impairment	Duplication of audio announcements with visual/written displays. Light signals. Information screens visible from cars. Adapted interfaces: written transcription, Sign Language. Optimised lighting for lip reading.

Intellectual, cognitive or psychological disability	Simple, continuous, legible signage (clear pictograms). Simplified verbal/written information (FALC if possible). Human assistance identifiable in normal or disrupted situations. Consistent digital interfaces: simple navigation, accessible vocabulary, adjustable contrast and fonts. Accessible terminals: audible location indicators, audio description, standardised controls, tactile/visible devices. Option to pay in cash.
Transversal measures	Harmonisation of equipment: pictograms, colours, navigation. Voice synthesis, headsets and physical buttons for accessing audio assistance. Testing of models with user associations. High-visibility equipment (contrasts, anti-glare). Information screens from platform to train, advance announcements, indication of the opening side. Harmonisation of equipment: pictograms, colours, navigation. Voice synthesis, headphones and physical buttons for accessing audio assistance. Testing of models with user associations. High-visibility equipment (contrasts, non-reflective) Information screens from platform to train, advance announcements, indication of opening side. Safety: light signals, accessible SOS buttons, redundant announcements. Professional conduct: presence of ship's officers, support and reassurance.

Figure 3. Table of Railway adaptations for accessibility

However, the extent and effectiveness of accessibility adaptations vary significantly across the stations visited. In Stations No. 1, 2, and 4, numerous infrastructural measures have been implemented to improve accessibility. Nevertheless, some of these adaptations are either no longer functional or have not been maintained over time, thereby limiting their practical usefulness in everyday situations. This issue is illustrated by the removal of certain assistance devices initially designed to support passenger orientation and autonomy. As one participant explained:

“When it’s busy, people actually can’t find their way around. What was good before was that X¹ had a station to call them from. Because, actually, their office is on platform 9, if you’re familiar with the station. The call point was on the platform, right opposite platforms 4 and 5, so right in the middle. It was great because they’d call them, saying, “Wait for us there, we’re on our way.” And I think, actually, everyone had a bit of fun pressing the button. So, yes. They ended up taking it away. » (Sales and Check-in Agent, Station No. 2, interview on 25/02/2025, the interview was conducted in French but has been translated for the report).

¹ Reference to the external support system for people with disabilities

In contrast, Station No. 3 highlights a different set of challenges, where several necessary accessibility modifications have not been implemented at all. This situation reflects structural disparities between stations, particularly in relation to their size, level of activity, and available resources. While larger stations tend to benefit from more extensive investment, smaller or less frequented stations often face limitations in the deployment of accessibility infrastructure. As highlighted by a station manager:

« So, some things are going very well. But inevitably, especially in large stations, that's where there's a huge number of customers, and so on. Then, the further out you go into the provinces, the more you see this in stations with low activity. Naturally, there's less opportunity to develop certain facilities. Yes, but there are still standards that need to be put in place. Take the tactile paving, for example. A visually impaired passenger who follows the tactile paving in the hall finds themselves at a door that's closed. And we're asked to keep that door closed. To stop pigeons getting into the hall and causing damage, and then having to pay staff to clean up afterwards. And moving the strip is really not an option. I asked, and I was told no. What do you want me to say? I'm not going to turn up one morning to remove the tactile paving. And besides, I might even be blamed for it. » (Station manager, Station No. 3, interview on 26/06/2025, the interview was conducted in French but has been translated for the report).

4.3.3 Accessibility based on prior identification: conditional assistance

All staff emphasise the need to identify and determine users' needs prior to travel, which is mainly done through the assistance booking process. From an organisational point of view, this system is a prerequisite for effective assistance.

"In fact, if we don't provide the information or assistance ourselves, it's provided by service X at the station, which is completely free of charge. And they, on the other hand, are trained to deal with vulnerable people. They are dedicated to this. And it's a really important service. I call on them for lots of things every time. They are so friendly and kind. It's great that they're there. It's more than a service, it's a necessity." (Reception agent, Station No. 2, interview on 25/02/2025, the interview was conducted in French but has been translated for the report).

"Yes, that's why identification and X are important. It's very important because with X, they are monitored. And that way, the train managers know how many PRMs or vulnerable people or things like that they have. And it's easier for them because they know where they are, they know where they're getting off, and they're actually in control." (Sales and boarding agent, Station No. 2, interview on 25/02/2025, the interview was conducted in French but has been translated for the report).

However, agents point out structural limitations: many passengers do not make a prior request, making it more difficult to locate them at the station, particularly during busy periods. This situation results in a form of conditional assistance, which relies on advance notification. The lack of requests automatically leads to a lack of assistance. Assistance becomes dependent on the ability or willingness of individuals to make their disability visible. Erving Goffman's work shows that individuals who carry a stigma sometimes employ "normalisation" strategies, i.e., efforts to present themselves as "ordinary" people without completely concealing their disability (Goffman, 1975). Explicitly identifying themselves can therefore conflict with this process of identity adjustment. This point was also highlighted during one of the interviews:

"I'll take the example of a visually impaired person in station X. We were recently called out during a mystery survey; we have mystery surveys in X. The investigator was in the queue and reproached us for not letting a visually impaired

person jump the queue. But we know this visually impaired person very well, and they definitely don't want to be differentiated. So, we also have this sort of customer who absolutely does not want to be labeled as someone who needs assistance, etc." (Station manager, Station No. 3, interview on 26/06/2025, the interview was conducted in French but has been translated for the report).

In this context, mobility and support remain dependent on the identification system. The agents themselves insist on the need for advance requests, via a reservation 24 hours before the journey. This requirement makes unplanned or spontaneous travel particularly complex for users. The absence of a reservation complicates the identification of needs and limits the ability of agents to respond appropriately. This creates tension between the inclusive principles aimed at promoting free movement and the organisational logic that makes mobility conditional on a prior step that not all users are able or willing to take. The vision of accessibility is therefore linked to the prism of assistance. The railway organisation encourages the autonomy of passengers with disabilities, but this autonomy appears to be constrained.

"No, because in fact, there are risks. Well, in this case, it was short journeys, so it's fine. But what if it's on the highspeed train? There's a real risk because if we have to deal with an incident involving a broken overhead line or acts of sabotage, or delays for any other reason, how will she manage on her own? When we arrange hotel or taxi transfers, is she able to go to a hotel on her own? Won't she be cut off from the world? That's where we start to wonder." (Sales agent, Station No. 1, interview on 25/02/2025, the interview was conducted in French but has been translated for the report).

"That's why it's this particular aspect, which isn't necessarily obvious, that can... We might find out at the last minute and then it's too late to do anything. In fact, it's strange that they can travel alone, given the different situations we might encounter. Even if we're trained to spot them and assist them, we can't give special attention to a single customer because we have several to manage. That's right. And so, that's why, normally, there should be someone accompanying her so that they can take care of her." (Sales agent, Station No. 1, interview on 25/02/2025, the interview was conducted in French but has been translated for the report).

In this context, the autonomy promoted in accessibility policies comes into conflict with the notion of risk culture (Peretti-Watel, 2005), in which individuals with intellectual disabilities are perceived as particularly vulnerable. Thus, the support offered is intended to promote autonomy, but this autonomy remains supervised, monitored and largely conditioned by a set of organisational measures (advance booking, personalised care, mobilisation of available staff). Without these conditions, professionals' express doubts about the ability of users with intellectual disabilities to cope with the contingencies of travel.

4.4 Phase 2: Accompagnying train journeys with users living with intellectual disabilities

4.4.1 Participants

Participants were adults over the age of 18 presenting an intellectual disability who received medical and social support (e.g., through ESATs² or residential facilities) and who were accustomed to using public transport, either

² A medical-social structure that enables people with disabilities to work in a suitable environment when their abilities do not allow them to work in a traditional workplace or in a work-adapted environment.

independently or with assistance, particularly rail services. Participants were recruited through established professional contacts working with individuals presenting intellectual disabilities, as well as through specialised organisations in response to a call for participants. All departures were conducted at the railway stations previously investigated during Phase 1 of the study.

The aim was to include people with practical experience of rail environments in order to gather concrete testimonials based on their perceptions. The study excluded individuals who were unable to communicate, even in a simplified form, despite the adaptation of research tools and the use of accessible communication aids or alternative communication systems such as Makaton³. Individuals experiencing an intense psychological crisis were also excluded from the study. In addition, individuals under legal guardianship that limited their ability to give informed consent were not included (enhanced guardianship), in cases of simple guardianship or curatorship, they could be included if the consent procedure involved the presence and/or signature of a legal representative. No randomisation was planned or carried out. Participants were selected on the basis of their availability, consent and methodological relevance in order to ensure diversity of profiles.

³ Makaton is an Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) programme that integrates spoken language, manual signs, and pictorial symbols to support the communication needs of children and adults with learning and communication difficulties.

ID	Gender	Need for assistance	Housing situation	Area of independence	Age	Education level	Travel experience	Usual transport mode	Employment status	Notes
Participant n°1	W	Occasional assistance	Living with parents	Inter-city	26	Specialised institutes	Occasional independent experience	Private transport (adapted taxi) Public Transport with assistance	Sheltered employment (ESAT / assisted workshop)	Non-reader Self-stimulatory behaviour
Participant n°2	W	Independent (no assistance)	Adapted housing (supported living)	No known limit	48	Specialised institutes	Regular independent experience	Public transport independently	Sheltered employment (ESAT / assisted workshop)	Non-reader
Participant n°3	M	Independent (no assistance)	Independent housing	No known limit	49	Specialised institutes	Regular independent experience	Public transport independently	Sheltered employment (ESAT / assisted workshop)	Reader
Participant n°4	W	Occasional assistance	Adapted housing (supported living)	Immediate neighborhood	22	Specialised institutes	Experience only with assistance	Private transport (family vehicle, adapted taxi) and public transport with assistance	Sheltered employment (ESAT / assisted workshop)	Reading difficulties / Motor stereotypy
Participant n°5	W	Independent (no assistance)	Adapted housing (supported living)	Inter-city	30	Specialised institutes	Occasional independent experience	Private transport (family vehicle, adapted taxi) and public transport with assistance	Sheltered employment (ESAT / assisted workshop)	
Participant n°6	M	Independent (no assistance)	Living with family	No known limit	65	Specialised institutes	Regular independent experience	Public transport independently	Retired	Reader
Participant n°7	M	Occasional assistance	Living with parents	Immediate neighborhood	23	Specialised institutes	Occasional independent experience	Public transport independently	Sheltered employment (ESAT / assisted workshop)	Reading difficulties / Motor stereotypy

Figure 4. Table of participant profiles

4.4.2 Procedure

Two adapted interviews were conducted with adults presenting intellectual disabilities, using a simplified interview guide. The guide was further adjusted according to participants' profiles and, where necessary, complemented by visual supports such as images or pictograms. The topics explored included participants' perceptions of train travel, their lived experiences, comprehension of information, emotional responses in stations or on board, and expectations regarding support during the journey. During the initial pilot phase, it became apparent that the semi-structured interview format was not suitable for the participants. Questions that were too specific or abstract proved difficult for participants to answer when the journey was not actively taking place (Mactavish et al., 2000). Individuals presenting intellectual disabilities frequently encounter challenges in orienting themselves in time and space, making the retrospective evocation of a travel experience largely unfeasible. Consequently, the interview

format was adapted to focus on real-time, contextualised experiences, as captured during accompanied journeys. The approach adopted in this phase of the study was to accompany trips already planned by participants with intellectual disabilities, rather than organising experimental travel situations.

The researcher joined these preexisting trips and accompanied the participants during their journey, asking questions in real time when appropriate in order to capture perceptions, reactions and interpretations as they emerged during the travel experience. In addition, a “floating observation” method was adopted, enabling the researcher to maintain an open, non-focused attentional posture capable of detecting subtle signals, emerging patterns, or atypical uses of space (Pettonnet, 1982). At no point did the researcher participate in organizing the trip. We did not assist with purchasing tickets, planning the itinerary, or making decisions regarding schedules. All trips were organized independently by the participants prior to the accompaniment. For each observation, the researcher was contacted in advance (usually through an intermediary who facilitated contact with the participant) and received the relevant details of the trip (route, schedule, etc.). This allowed to independently purchase a ticket for the same trip and accompany the participant without influencing the planning or execution of the journey.

Discussions that took place in the station environment were not systematically recorded. When the recording system was not in use, observations and significant discussions were noted in real time in the field journal. This approach preserved the spontaneity of interactions while ensuring that contextual observations and participant comments were systematically documented. When conversations were recorded, this was always explicitly indicated to the participant. Although consent to participate and be recorded was obtained in advance through a signed informed consent form, participants were systematically asked to give their consent again before recording began. This additional confirmation ensured that consent remained active and informed throughout the data collection process. Informed consent was obtained via an Easy-to-Read and Easy-to-Understand (FALC) information sheet, signed by the participant and/or their legal representative. This document also underwent substantial adaptation following the shortcomings observed in the pilot interviews. The materials intended for participants with intellectual disabilities were first validated by experienced medico-social professionals and then tested with a “pilot group” of three participants. Feedback regarding difficulties in reading or understanding the information was incorporated to ensure clarity and comprehensibility before requesting formal consent. Collected data included participants’ age, gender, lifestyle, level of autonomy, travel frequency, and level of understanding as assessed by a referent from the supporting institution. In accordance with ethical guidelines and the study’s design, no specific medical data were collected beyond official recognition of disability status (MDPH documentation), which was not requested or accessed by the researchers under any circumstances.

4.4.3 Field

The fieldwork included ten “accompanied journeys” involving different participants with intellectual disabilities, including both individual and group travel. Data collection was conducted between 19 June and 29 January 2026. Each journey corresponded to a real trip undertaken by the participant and was accompanied exclusively by the researcher acting as an observer; no third-party companion or professional support person was present during the journeys. The objective was therefore to observe mobility practices and accessibility challenges in conditions that closely reflected the participants’ usual travel situations. All participants presented an intellectual disability without any associated motor impairment. The journeys observed consisted primarily of short regional trips lasting less than one hour and involving no transfers. These trips took place within an interregional context and reflect short-distance rail mobility. In addition, one longer journey lasting more than one hour was documented, this journey included a transfer and involved travel across an international border into a neighbouring country. All journeys were carried out on regional train services, and none involved high-speed trains. The fieldwork covered a diversity of station environments, including both urban stations and smaller rural stations. This variety allowed for the

observation of different types of infrastructure and service organisation. With regard to travel conditions, the majority of journeys were conducted outside peak hours; only one journey took place during a period of high passenger density

4.5 Results

4.5.1 Case study 1: Group travel 19/05/2025

Participants' profile

The first case study, involved a group of four participants, including two men and two women, aged between 22 and 65. All members of the group resided independently and worked in ESATs. They reported travelling by train between six and twelve times per year. Each participant was able to purchase a train ticket independently at the ticket office, though none had access to a bank card for online purchases. Three out of four participants were capable of seeking assistance when necessary, and the majority (three out of four) typically travelled independently. Two participants were able to use digital applications to support their travel, while the remaining two did not possess this capacity.

Journey context

The journey, which took about 35 minutes, was familiar to the group as they had already made it several times previously. A number of observations emerged during this trip regarding the practical and cognitive challenges faced by travellers presenting intellectual disabilities when navigating railway systems. First, the process of purchasing tickets online often proved inaccessible. Many travellers do not possess a bank card due to legal guardianship arrangements, which prevents them from completing online transactions. As a result, they are required to purchase tickets directly at the station, frequently several days in advance, limiting the possibility of spontaneous or urgent travel.

Arrival, orientation, and train identification processes

Time management also appeared to constitute a significant concern. For instance, the group involved in this journey arrived one hour and thirty minutes before the train's departure, primarily due to the fear of missing the train. This anticipatory behaviour illustrates the high level of vigilance required to ensure successful travel for the group. The ticket validation process also presented notable difficulties. Participants possessed special cards linked to their disability status that needed to be validated or scanned prior to boarding. However, this process proved complex for the group, and in practice it was often misunderstood or forgotten. As a result, passengers were sometimes penalised even though they held a valid ticket. Since these tickets cannot easily be modified or exchanged, this situation highlights the need to reconsider certain validation procedures in order to make them more accessible.

On-board experience

The observations further showed that travellers often rely on compensatory strategies based on habit and memorisation. Some participants attempt to remember the train number or the departure time, yet this strategy becomes ineffective when several trains depart at the same time and requires reading skills that not all users possess. Others rely on counting the number of stops during the journey, although this method remains unreliable as it requires sustained attention and basic calculation skills, which may be difficult for some individuals. Another strategy observed involved recognising stations visually after repeated journeys with an accompanying person, however, this method becomes ineffective in conditions of low visibility, such as at night.

4.5.2 Case study 2: Individual travel 03/10/2025

Participants' profile

The case study 2, focused on a single female participant in her forties, living in autonomous housing and employed in an ESAT. She reported travelling by train approximately five to ten times per year. She was able to buy her tickets on her own at the ticket office, but did not possess a bank card. She usually travelled independently, had basic reading skills, but was unable to use digital travel applications. She demonstrated a preference for oral or humanbased information.

Journey context

The journey undertaken was short, approximately 28 minutes, and it was a route she was already familiar with.

Arrival, orientation, and train identification processes

Most of the observations and difficulties identified during this journey occurred within the station environment rather than during the train journey itself (Figure 5. Simplified view of station 1 - Walking interview no. 1 on 03/10/2025).

On-board experience

As the train journey was familiar and regularly undertaken by the participant, no particular difficulties were observed once on board. Furthermore, the train's destination corresponded to the terminal station, which appeared to reinforce the participant's sense of security. The participant expressed confidence that a member of train staff would notify her when the train reached its final stop if necessary. One moment of hesitation was nevertheless observed when the participant had to choose a seat. The journey was undertaken on a regional train service where seats are not assigned. The participant described this situation as somewhat complex, as the absence of a designated seat required her to make a decision among several available options. She consequently walked through several train cars before eventually selecting a place to sit. This sequence illustrates how apparently minor aspects of travel organisation, such as open seating arrangements, may introduce additional cognitive demands for some travellers.

4.5.3 Case study 3: Group Travel 29/01/2026

Participants' profile

The case study 3, involved two participants, one man and one woman, both living independently and employed in ESATs. They reported travelling by train between five to ten times per year and were able to purchase tickets independently at the ticket office. However, as in the other cases observed in this study, they did not have access to a bank card, which prevented them from purchasing tickets online. Both participants were generally able to seek assistance, when necessary, although, as observed in Journey 2, such interactions could become challenging when the person providing assistance was not familiar with intellectual disability. Both participants usually travelled independently and had basic reading abilities, while one participant was also able to use digital applications to support travel planning.

Journey context

The participants were unfamiliar with the route, as they had no previous experience with it. The itinerary involved crossing an international border to reach a neighbouring country. It is also important to note that a national strike affecting railway services in the destination country occurred during the journey, constituting an exceptional external factor that considerably affected the travel experience. The journey was initially planned to last 1 hour and

54 minutes and included one transfer. However, due to disruptions linked to the strike, the actual travel time extended to approximately 4 hours and 15 minutes and required two transfers. This significant modification of the itinerary generated multiple situations of uncertainty and stress for the participants.

Arrival, orientation, and train identification processes

The first difficulty encountered concerned locating the correct train within the station. Not all platforms were visible from the main hall, and trains serving cross-border destinations departed from platforms located further away from the central hall. After several minutes of hesitation and discussion within the group, the participants decided to seek assistance. However, no station staff members were immediately visible. As a result, they approached another traveller in order to request directions. Although the traveller indicated the general direction of the relevant platform, the signage identifying the platform itself was not clearly visible from a distance and could only be seen once approaching the area. After several minutes of uncertainty and wandering within the station, one of the participants who was able to read eventually located the correct platform.

On-board experience

Once the train had been found, no particular difficulty was observed in selecting seats. The journey was initially planned as a direct route, with the destination corresponding to the terminal station. During the journey several disruptions occurred that generated additional stress and confusion among the participants.

An announcement was made over the train's public announcement system indicating that the train would not continue to the planned destination and that passengers would have to disembark at an intermediate station and take a connecting train in order to reach their final destination (this change was due to the ongoing strike affecting railway services). The announcement was not understood by the participants. When the train arrived at what had become its final stop, although not the intended destination, the staff member approached the group and asked them to leave the train because it had reached its "terminus". The term "terminus" was not immediately understood by the participants, who remained seated. The railway employee subsequently reformulated the explanation using simpler language, clarifying that the group would need to change trains and informing them that they had approximately five minutes to make the connection.

After leaving the train and entering the station, the group experienced considerable difficulty orientating themselves. The instructions regarding the platform for the connecting train had been delivered orally, requiring the participants to memorise the information while navigating an unfamiliar environment. When they eventually reached the correct platform, the connecting train was already departing. This situation was not immediately understood by the participants, as they assumed that the train would wait for passengers arriving from the previous service.

Researcher intervention

The group remained on the platform for approximately twenty minutes waiting for the train that had already departed. During this period, stress levels increased significantly within the group, and one participant began to show signs of acute distress. Given the escalation of emotional tension and the unfavourable weather conditions (as the participants were waiting outside), we decided to suspend the observational posture and intervene in order to prioritise the participants' safety and well-being. The group was therefore accompanied back into the station building. A further intervention was then necessary in order to assist the participants in identifying an alternative train that would allow them to reach their intended destination.

Journey resumption and continuation

The participants themselves addressed station staff in order to request information, and the group was eventually able to board another train and continue the journey. However, they remained in a state of heightened stress, expressing concern that the train might once again terminate unexpectedly before reaching the intended destination. On the return journey, the strike no longer affected the railway services and the journey itself took place without major disruption. However, a different type of difficulty was observed. The tickets issued to the participants clearly indicated that they were required to travel in second class. When asked about this by the researcher, the participants explained that they did not have a clear understanding of the distinction between first and second class on a train. More specifically, they reported that the numbers displayed on the train car's doors, such as "1" and "2", were not interpreted as indicators of travel class. Instead, these numbers were perceived simply as numerical markings without any specific meaning related to ticket validity or seating category. As a result, the participants did not associate the number "2" displayed on the train car with the instruction written on the ticket indicating that they should travel in second class. This observation illustrates a broader issue concerning the interpretation of symbolic or coded information within transport environments. Consequently, the link between the written information on the ticket and the numerical signage on the train cars was not spontaneously established, highlighting how certain conventions commonly assumed to be intuitive within railway systems may not be immediately understandable for travellers presenting intellectual disabilities.

Another observation concerned the use of digital communication. One participant possessed a mobile phone and received a text message when the train crossed the national border. The message informed the user about the change of country and provided information regarding potential roaming charges for mobile communications. Although the participant was able to read simple written information, he did not fully understand the content of the message. The presence of monetary values in the message generated confusion and significant anxiety, as the participant interpreted the information as a potential financial cost without fully understanding its meaning.

It should also be noted that the preparation of the journey had already presented logistical difficulties. A few days prior to the trip, the participants had attempted to purchase their tickets at the station closest to their residence, as online purchase was not possible for them. However, this rural station was closed at the time of their visit, as its opening hours depend on variable staff schedules. Consequently, the participants had to travel by bus to another town in order to purchase their tickets in person, requiring an additional journey of approximately 38 minutes each way. This preliminary stage illustrates how structural constraints in ticket purchasing systems can already complicate travel planning for people with intellectual disabilities before the journey itself even begins. Overall, this sequence highlights how unexpected disruptions, itinerary changes, reliance on oral announcements, and the need to memorise information in unfamiliar environments can significantly increase cognitive load and emotional stress for travellers with intellectual disabilities.

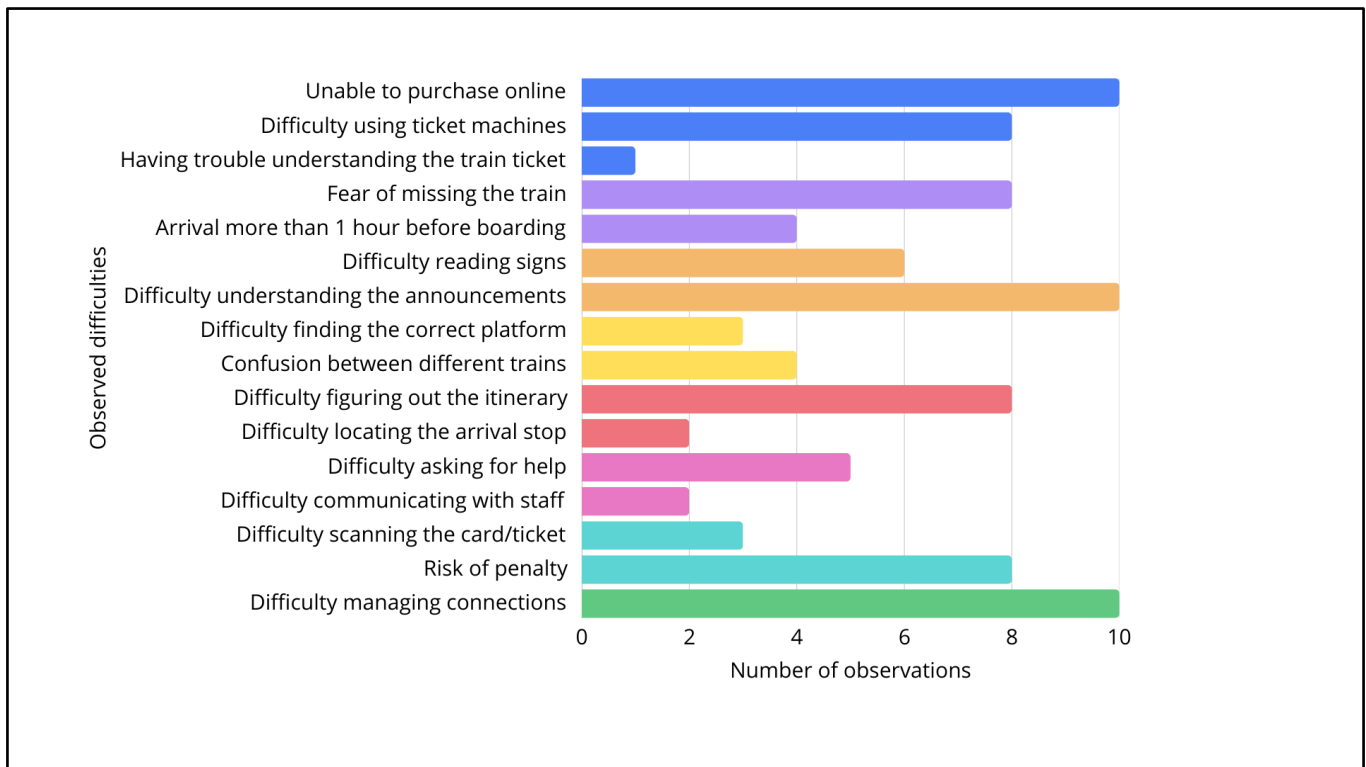


Figure 5. Field observation results

Taken together, these observations⁴ suggest that current railway systems are primarily designed for autonomous, literate users who are able to interpret complex information systems. Such configurations can unintentionally exclude travellers with cognitive disabilities. As a result, mobility often entails a considerable psychological burden, as individuals must anticipate potential difficulties in advance. This may include arriving significantly earlier than necessary, repeatedly checking information boards that they may struggle to interpret, or rehearsing the sequence of actions required to complete the journey. Interactions with station staff may also represent an additional challenge, particularly for travellers who experience speech or communication difficulties. Finally, more complex journeys, such as those requiring transfers between major stations in large urban areas, may become extremely difficult to manage independently. This situation contributes to inequalities in access to long-distance travel and highlights the structural barriers that continue to affect the mobility of people with intellectual disabilities.

4.6 Phase 2 bis: Observation of Pilgrimage Train Departures and Interviews with Volunteer Accompanists

This additional phase was incorporated into the study as a complementary and exploratory section. The journeys observed represent a unique organisational context and focus on observing two departures of pilgrimage trains organised by private organisations, as well as on interviews with volunteers taking part in these journeys.

The aim of this collecte was to examine how group journeys involving vulnerable passengers are organised in practices, particularly for people with intellectual disabilities, thereby identifying transferable “good practices”. The aim of Phase 2 bis was not to analyse the travel behaviour or coping strategies of people with disabilities in the same way as in ordinary rail transport situations, nor to produce findings that could be directly generalised to everyday transport contexts. The aim of this phase was rather to document how accessibility and assistance are

⁴ The graph displays ten entries corresponding to individual participants. The cases refer to participants rather than to the number of journeys undertaken.

organised within the context of large-scale group travel, and to identify organisational practices, coordination mechanisms and support systems that could provide useful insights for improving inclusive mobility. The findings presented in this section should therefore be interpreted as exploratory and contextual, reflecting a specific transport environment rather than standard rail operations.

Rather than constituting a data source itself, Phase 2 bis helped to triangulate the findings obtained through observations and interviews conducted during the other phases of the study, particularly at an organisational level. The pilgrimage is organised through several geographically distributed volunteer groups, commonly referred to as “trains”, each corresponding to a specific territorial sector within the diocese. These groups are independent associations that coordinate the accompaniment of pilgrims travelling from their respective areas. Within this organisational framework, a specific subgroup of pilgrims includes individuals presenting intellectual disabilities who are able to travel with partial autonomy but who have been offered supervision and assistance during the journey. These travellers are accompanied by volunteers responsible for providing logistical support and care throughout the travel process.

4.6.1 Procedure

For the purposes of the study, the research focused on volunteers involved in the organisation and accompaniment of these journeys. Eight volunteers participated in the interviews conducted during this phase, including five young volunteers actively involved in travel assistance and three individuals occupying coordination or organisational roles. Among these participants, seven were men and one was a woman. Participants were recruited through direct contact with the pilgrimage associations and volunteered to participate after receiving an explanation of the research objectives. As in Phase 1 of the data collection process, the interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview guide based on the comprehensive interview (see Appendix 2). During this phase of the study, the consent procedures were adapted to take account of the fact that some participants were below the age of majority. In such cases, written informed consent was required from both the participant and their legal guardian. The consent form therefore had to be co-signed by the minor participant and their legal representative prior to the interview. In the absence of this dual signature, the interview was cancelled and no data was collected. Legal guardians were permitted to be physically present during the interview when requested. However, their presence was strictly limited to verifying consent and supervising; they did not participate in the discussion or intervene to answer the interview questions. This procedure was put in place to comply with ethical requirements regarding the participation of minors while preserving the autonomy of the respondents' answers. The interview guide explored several thematic areas including the volunteers' personal trajectories and motivations, their previous experiences of accompaniment, the training or preparation they had received, their perceptions of the travellers they accompany, the practical organisation of the journeys, difficulties encountered during travel, and their views on the accessibility of rail transport for people with intellectual disabilities. Additional questions addressed coordination with railway staff, organisational arrangements before and after the journeys, and the personal impact of volunteering experiences.

4.6.2 Field

In parallel with the interviews, field observations were conducted during two departures on the same day (12/06/2026) of trains transporting pilgrims to the pilgrimage town. Observations were conducted from the platform, with prior agreement from the station manager, who was informed of the researcher's presence. The researcher was also granted permission to board the train in order to study the boarding process and passenger installation. At all times, the researcher maintained a purely observational role, without intervening in operations or assisting passengers, ensuring that the observations did not influence the events.

These observations took place at a railway station located in a medium-sized city within a large metropolitan area, which primarily provides regional and suburban rail connections. Approximately 1,500 passengers participated in the two observed departures. These journeys involved a complex organisational structure bringing together multiple actors including railway staff, municipal police officers, private security services, civil protection teams, healthcare volunteers, and numerous members of religious and community organisations.

4.6.3 Findings from Phase 2 Bis

The aim of these observations was to better understand the organisation of these large-scale assisted journeys and to identify differences between this type of specialised travel arrangement and conventional railway travel conditions. Particular attention was paid to boarding procedures, coordination between volunteers and railway staff, spatial arrangements within the trains, and the management of passengers requiring specific forms of assistance.

Intentional inclusion, but functional dependency

The two trains chartered by the diocese (the 11:43 am service, known as the “yellow train”, and the 1:11 pm service, the “red train”) were intended to enable around 1,500 passengers, many of whom had disabilities or were in vulnerable situations, to travel to the place of pilgrimage. This initiative reflects an inclusive approach, in which the religious institution plays a central role in coordination, funding safety measures and mobilising volunteers. However, this inclusion remains largely symbolic, as it relies on untrained staff and inadequate infrastructure. For example, the participation of people with reduced mobility was only made possible through the mobilisation of volunteers who physically carried them to their seats on the train. Although motivated by goodwill, such practices contradict the fundamental principles of inclusion, which presuppose a certain degree of autonomy and respect for dignity. This situation can be understood as a form of delegated inclusion, in which participation depends on the presence of a third-party carer.

Accessibility as a reflection of a normatively able-bodied system

The station infrastructure and the conventional high-speed trains (TGVs) used on the route revealed a clear mismatch with the needs of the people concerned. The lack of independent access for wheelchair users, the lack of space for stretchers (sometimes stored above the seats or in the buffet car) and the presence of a single accessible toilet on the platform all point to a standardised concept of mobility centred on the able-bodied user.

This standardisation can be described as “structural ableism”, whereby social environments are designed by and for able-bodied people, relegating others to a peripheral position. In this case, the invisibility of specific needs is not the result of an isolated omission, but rather of a systemic configuration that fails to take into account the universality of use.

Compensatory arrangements outside professional frameworks

In response to infrastructural inaccessibility, the organisers mobilised a wide range of volunteers and private sector stakeholders to address these shortcomings. Scouts, hospital volunteers, healthcare staff, private security firms and civil protection teams all contributed to the smooth running of operations. However, this widespread reliance on non-professionals for care-related tasks (such as handling bodies or assisting vulnerable people) raises concerns regarding training and associated risks. Neither the Scouts nor the members of the diocese had received formal training in the safe handling of wheelchairs or the physical transfer of people. This shortcoming highlights a tension between moral commitment and technical competence, where assistance can become potentially dangerous for both those receiving it and those providing it.

Improvised management of public space

Traffic around the station required the intervention of the municipal police, who were called in by the rail operator to manage a very busy drop-off zone. In the absence of a coordinated bus system, such as the one that had been put in place in previous years, the widespread use of private vehicles (cars and minibuses) made managing the urban space considerably more difficult. This situation illustrates the challenges involved in reconciling exceptional uses (such as travel associated with the pilgrimage) with everyday traffic norms and raises questions regarding coordination between public and private actors in the organisation of public space.

Operational strengths and emerging inclusive practices in pilgrimage transport organisation

The organisation of two special train departures provided an opportunity to identify a range of effective practices supporting passengers in situations of vulnerability. Beyond infrastructural considerations, the event highlighted the role of organisational strategies and human coordination in facilitating access to rail travel. These observations also point to a set of recommended practices that could be transferred to more routine travel contexts. In particular, anticipatory organisation (e.g. preparation of luggage and journey stages), clear group structuring or guided pathways, continuity of support across different phases of the journey, and accessible communication adapted to users' needs appear as key levers for improving inclusivity and accessibility.

Anticipatory luggage management and continuity of support

A structured system for luggage management was implemented, based on prior labelling and early collection of passengers' belongings at the station entrance. Responsibility for luggage was then assigned to designated volunteers, ensuring its handling and transfer throughout the journey. This approach reduced both the physical and cognitive demands placed on passengers and contributed to a more fluid boarding process.

Group-based organisation as a spatial and social support

Passengers were organised into clearly identified groups prior to boarding. This configuration provided stable reference points, limiting situations of disorientation and reducing the need for individual navigation within a complex and crowded environment. Group organisation also facilitated supervision and support, ensuring continuity of assistance throughout the different stages of the journey.

Relational engagement and adaptive support practices

Volunteers demonstrated a strong capacity for interpersonal engagement, despite the absence of formal training in disability support. Through direct interaction, they sought to establish communication, interpret individual needs, and adapt their assistance accordingly. This relational dynamic contributed to creating a supportive atmosphere and enabled more responsive, situation-specific forms of assistance.

Effective coordination in boarding and passenger installation

The boarding phase was characterised by a high level of coordination among the different actors involved. Communication between volunteers, railway staff, and support teams allowed for the efficient organisation of passenger flows and facilitated the installation of travellers within the train. This collective management contributed to maintaining continuity during a critical phase of the journey.

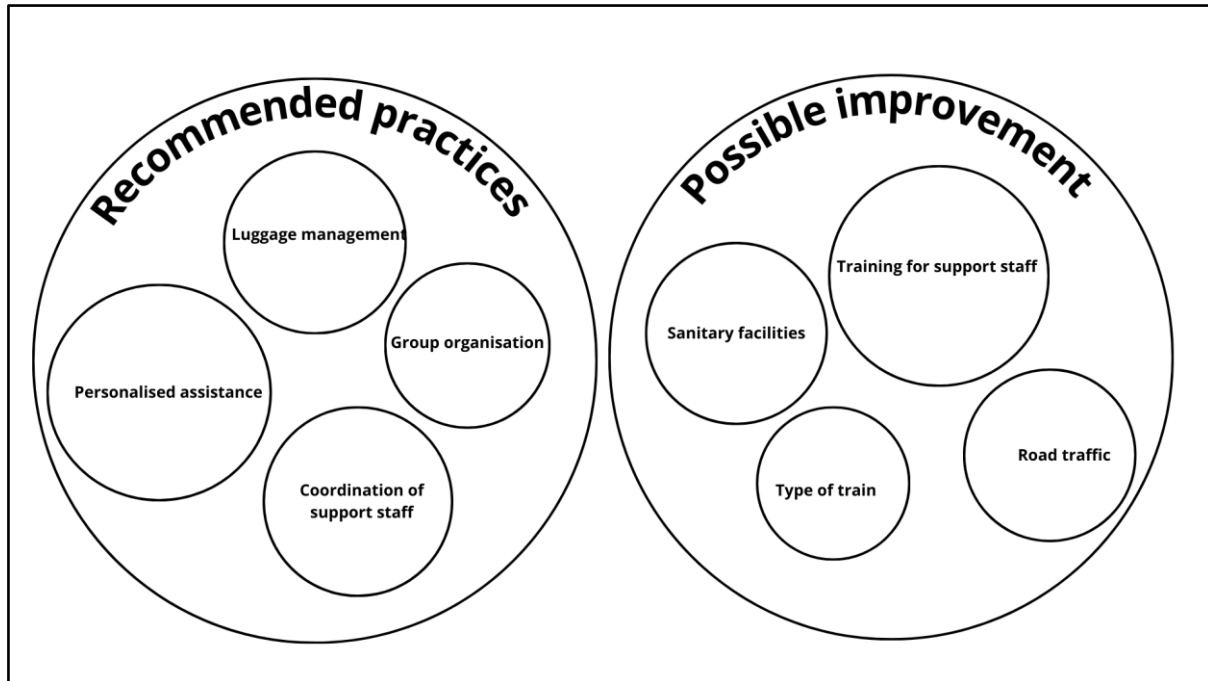


Figure 6. Schematic representation of transferable practices and difficulties observed

4.6.4 Interviews: Volunteer Experiences and Representations

The semi-structured interviews conducted with volunteers provide additional insight into the organisation of these journeys and the experiences of those responsible for assisting passengers. Overall, participants described their engagement primarily in terms of personal commitment, solidarity, and a desire to contribute to the well-being of the individuals they accompany. At the same time, the interviews reveal a complex interaction between this personal motivation and the practical challenges associated with supporting travellers within a transport environment that remains only partially inclusive. The analysis highlights three main themes: the largely informal nature of volunteer training, the logistical constraints associated with railway equipment, and the way in which volunteers perceive and interpret disability in the context of providing support. A first finding concerns the absence of a clearly formalised training framework prior to departure. Several participants indicated that volunteers generally receive only minimal briefing before the journey, with practical instructions often delivered in an improvised manner on the station platform immediately before boarding. Volunteers frequently reported that they had not received specific technical guidance regarding safety procedures or the handling of equipment such as wheelchairs. In practice, this gap is partly compensated for by an informal hierarchy of experience within the volunteer group. The presence of more experienced members, including medical professionals, provides a form of supervision that allows less experienced volunteers to acquire skills through direct participation and imitation. Another aspect highlighted in the interviews concerns the spontaneous nature of the relationships formed between volunteers and passengers. In many cases, the pairing between a volunteer and a pilgrim occurs shortly before departure, often upon arrival at the station. This dynamic requires volunteers to adapt quickly to the needs, preferences, and potential vulnerabilities of individuals whom they have not previously met. The interviews also reveal important socio-technical constraints related to the railway environment itself. Participants frequently emphasised a paradox between the symbolic image of modernity associated with highspeed rail and the practical difficulties encountered when transporting passengers with significant support needs. Station infrastructures were generally perceived as relatively accessible, particularly in locations where platforms are level with the train entrance and where staff assistance is available. However, the interior configuration of the trains was often described as a major source of difficulty. Narrow corridors and limited manoeuvring space were repeatedly

identified as obstacles to the movement of wheelchairs and other mobility aids. In order to navigate these constraints, volunteers described the frequent need to rely on improvised solutions, such as transferring passengers from their own wheelchairs into narrow transfer chairs to facilitate movement through the train.

“First of all, I thought it was very poorly organised. I hated it. They would arrive by taxi, and you had to act quickly; there was a real sense of pressure to hurry. We didn't know when they were going to arrive, what car they were in, how they were going to get out. Every now and then, we had to go and say hello, I'm coming, I'll accompany you. Some people had to be accompanied by hand, they were walking. Others were in wheelchairs. So, at one point, I was with someone in a wheelchair. And when walking, there's a small gap between the platform and the train. It wasn't that easy because the doors aren't very big. So, to get the wheelchair and the person in, no... And I also thought there wasn't enough space. Also, there were some people who I thought were a bit crowded together.” Excerpt from an interview with a volunteer on the pilgrim trains on 08/12/2025. The interview was conducted in French but has been translated for this report.

Another theme emerging from the interviews concerns the expectations that volunteers express regarding the evolution of railway equipment. Several participants referred to the potential of future trains to provide more modular interior layouts and improved accessibility features. The request for more spacious areas for movement, a greater number of wheelchair-accessible spaces and more adaptable access facilities suggests that current train models are perceived as being inadequately suited to the public transport of passengers with significant mobility needs.

“Well, they were normal high-speed trains, they were duplex trains, I think it was a Tallon and on the other side it was an Océane. So, the Océane is a little more suitable. An Océane or newer in recent years. So, I think it was a little better. Because there may be disabled seats. I know that there are some trains where there are a few wheelchair spaces. It's one or two, so it's not going to make much difference. But it's still a small effort. The other one was the same. But the difficulty is that there are double-decker trains. The advantage is that, compared to single-decker trains, there are a few steps to climb. With single-decker trains, there are only one or two steps to go down and you're straight onto the lower level.”⁵ Excerpt from an interview with a volunteer on the pilgrim trains on 19/02/2025. The interview was conducted in French but has been translated for this report.

Beyond these practical and organisational issues, the interviews also provide a better understanding of how volunteers perceive disability. One volunteer, in particular, questioned the systematic use of institutional terminology such as “the sick” by the pilgrimage organisers:

“They're always calling everyone “sick”, even though some of them aren't necessarily ill. They're just pilgrims. I don't really like the term... I find it really reductive. To me, an intellectual disability is simply having a slightly different way of thinking. A way of thinking that may be different, but that doesn't mean you're sick” Excerpt from an interview with a volunteer on the pilgrim trains on 19/02/2025. The interview was conducted in French but has been translated for this report.

According to several interviewees, this label tends to oversimplify a much more diverse range of situations. Some volunteers therefore expressed their discomfort with terminology they perceived as reductive or overly

⁵ The term “Tallon” or “Océane” refers to a type of train.

medicalised. When discussing passengers with intellectual disabilities, particularly those travelling within the group known as the “Petit Train de l’Amitié” (PTA), volunteers tended to adopt a perspective closer to a social or relational understanding of disability. Rather than describing disability primarily as a deficit, they often emphasised differences in autonomy or communication styles, while also recognising the emotional and relational qualities of the individuals they accompanied. Another volunteer interviewed described her participation partly as a form of pre-professional experience linked to her aspiration to become a nurse, her engagement was framed primarily in terms of care, interpersonal connection, and the desire to support others. Taken together, the interviews point to a broader structural dynamic. While station infrastructures are often perceived as relatively accessible, the transition from the station environment to the train interior constitutes a critical point of rupture within the mobility chain. The successful completion of the journey relies heavily on the physical effort, improvisational skills, and emotional engagement of volunteers. This situation suggests that, although the intention of inclusion is present, the practical implementation of inclusive mobility still depends on informal solidarity and individual commitment rather than on fully integrated technical and organisational solutions.

4.7 Phase 3: Walking Interviews

The walking interview method is an *in situ* research approach designed to combine the analysis of social practices with a situated understanding of space. (Dorier-Apprill & Gervais-Lambony, 2007). Based on participants' cognitive experience of space, these approaches provide access to situated knowledge that is both descriptive and interpretative. In this perspective, the go-along interviews function as a tool for collecting perceptions in motion. It reveals the atmospheres perceived by participants, the spatial cues they mobilise to orient themselves, the adaptive strategies they deploy, and the points of tension or uncertainty encountered along the route. The journey is therefore reconstructed not as a neutral sequence of movements but as a lived process shaped by emotions, uncertainties, and forms of spatial appropriation or avoidance (Thibaud, 2001). From this perspective, mobility cannot be reduced to a simple physical displacement (Desprès et al., 2019). The distinction between movement and mobility is crucial: while movement refers to a measurable displacement in space, mobility encompasses a broader experiential dimension embedded within social, cultural, and sensory contexts. Mobile methodologies such as the go-along method therefore allow the researcher to capture mobility “in the making”, rather than relying solely on retrospective accounts of travel experiences.

4.7.1 Participants

Participants in this phase of the study were recruited according to the same inclusion criteria and ethical requirements as applied in phase 2. All results presented in this report are therefore based on the same group of participants as those involved in Phase 2.

4.7.2 Procedure

During the exercise, participants were invited to undertake a short journey within the station environment, typically from the station entrance to the platform. The researcher accompanied the participant throughout the route while encouraging them to describe what they perceived, understood, or felt during the journey. Participants were free to indicate elements they found clear, confusing, reassuring, or stressful, and to interact naturally with the surrounding environment. Each session lasted approximately thirty to forty-five minutes and included a brief preparatory discussion as well as a concluding session during which participants were invited to share their thoughts on their experience of the journey. The duration of the journeys was not strictly standardised, as it depended on the pace, needs and individual characteristics of each participant. The journeys were initially audio-recorded using a handheld digital recorder in order to capture participants' verbalised impressions in real time. However, during the first stages of data collection it became apparent that this device constituted a source of

disturbance for several participants. Unlike the interview situations or the accompanied journeys observed in previous phases of the study, participants were asked to hold the recording device themselves during the pathway. For some individuals, this request was perceived as an additional responsibility and generated a noticeable level of stress, which in turn affected their engagement with the environment. In another case, the participant began to establish a form of anthropomorphism with the recording device, addressing it directly and maintaining visual attention on the object while speaking. In light of these observations, the recording procedure was adapted in order to minimise the intrusiveness of the equipment. The handheld recorder was replaced with a lavalier microphone attached to the participant's clothing. This solution allowed participants to avoid having to physically hold the device and significantly reduced the visibility of the recording equipment during the journey. Participants who encountered communication difficulties due to language disorders were provided with alternative communication tools to help them express themselves. Visual aids, such as pictograms, were made available to them to help them convey their perceptions and emotions throughout the programme.

4.7.3 Field

The commented journeys analysed in this report took place within two major railway stations: one located in a large French city and the other in a large Belgian city. These journeys were conducted between 19 May 2025 and 29 January 2026.

Participants were familiar with the French station, having used it regularly, whereas the Belgian station was entirely new to them. A total of seven participants took part in these journeys. Two of the commented journeys occurred during off-peak hours in the middle of the day, while one journey was conducted during late afternoon peak hours, allowing for observation under different passenger density conditions.

4.7.4 Findings from Phase 3

Simplified plans of the station were used to illustrate the commented journeys of the participants. A legend was produced to report on several aspects of the participants' travel experience in different areas of the station environment. The study focused on emotional expressions (Hochschild, 2003), as well as on the perception of time and modes of circulation during the journey.

Time spent (average time spent in spaces)

- : Long time (waiting, break, waiting for a train or appointment)
- : Average time (quick purchases, connections, orientation)
- : Short time (passing through, quick crossing)

It should be noted that the concept of time in this analysis is not calculated in minutes. The initial attempt to measure duration using conventional temporal indicators such as hours and minutes was found to be inappropriate for the population targeted by the study. These forms of temporal measurement did not correspond to the ways in which participants described or experienced their journeys. Consequently, the measurement approach was adapted in order to better reflect participants' own perceptions and modes of expression. As a result, the temporal dimension presented here should be understood as an experiential indicator grounded in the participant's personal perception of the journey, rather than as a strictly measurable duration.

Ways of circulating

-  : Wandering (exploring, strolling, waiting)
-  : Passing through (direct crossing, rapid circulation)
-  : Passing through... (necessary transition space between two points)
-  : Retracing one's steps (hesitation, getting lost, searching for a route)

Spatial organisation: Symbols are positioned directly along the trajectories on the maps to indicate the precise locations where specific events or emotional responses were identified.

Movement patterns (arrows and lines): Lines represent the type of movement observed (e.g. a solid line indicates smooth and continuous movement, while a dashed line represents backtracking). Arrows indicate the direction of the participant's movement.

Temporal indicators (dots): (●) are clustered to reflect the perceived duration spent within a specific space. The number of dots (ranging from one to three) indicates the intensity of perceived time, rather than an objective, measured duration.

Emotional pictograms: These are placed near decision points or congested areas to illustrate the participant's immediate emotional response to the environment (e.g. stress in crowded areas, satisfaction upon reaching the platform).

Expressed emotions

- | | |
|--|--|
|  : Annoyance |  : Stress |
|  : Not understanding |  : Fear |
|  : Need for help |  : Lost |
|  : Fatigue |  : Well |
|  : Stopping the journey |  : Not well |
|  : Doubt |  : Pleased |

The pictograms used in the legend and displayed on the station maps are not the same as those presented to participants during the guided walk-along interviews. The original pictograms, drawn from an existing database⁶, were provided in the form of a booklet to support participants who experienced difficulties in verbalising or expressing their emotions. As these pictograms were not suitable for direct integration into station maps due to readability constraints, they were subsequently adapted into simplified geometric shapes.

⁶ ARASAAC - <https://beta.arasaac.org>



It should be specified that the commented journey may be interrupted at any stage of the itinerary if the participant wishes to stop. Participants are informed that they remain free to discontinue the exercise at any moment without justification. Furthermore, when the category "need for help" is indicated in the analysis, it does not refer to assistance provided by the researcher conducting the commented journey. This methodological positioning is clearly explained to participants beforehand, both in the research information sheet and again prior to the beginning of the journey. Participants are informed that the researcher adopts a non-interventionist position

throughout the exercise in order to preserve the authenticity of the experience being observed. The researcher intervenes only in situations where the participant's safety may be at risk during the journey. Outside of such circumstances, the participant is encouraged to navigate the environment independently and, if necessary, to seek assistance from station staff or other appropriate sources within the station environment.

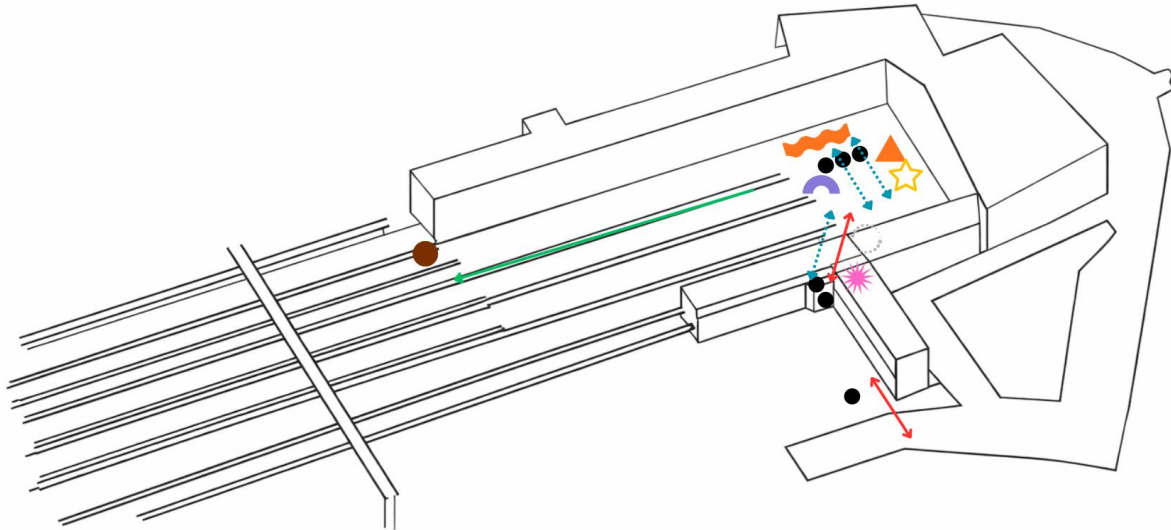


Figure 7. Simplified view of station 1 - Walking interview no. 1 on 03/10/2025

The commented journey was conducted with an adult presenting an intellectual disability, who is able to read and regularly travels by train independently. At the beginning of the pathway, the transition between the surrounding urban environment and the station entrance did not appear to generate any particular stress or difficulties. The participant moved directly from the exterior public space towards the interior of the station without hesitation. Her trajectory followed a clear and linear path from point A to point B , suggesting an initial sense of orientation and confidence in the environment. The temporal perception of this initial stage was also described by the participant as relatively short.

Upon entering the station, the participant first approached the main information display board. During this stage, she expressed positive emotions associated with the upcoming journey, notably a feeling of excitement related to travelling . She initially stated that she understood the information presented on the board and began moving through the station hall without visible hesitation.

However, once inside the station hall, the situation changed due to environmental conditions. The journey took place during a peak travel period, which meant that the participant had to move through a dense crowd of passengers. The station configuration also required travellers to pass through a controlled access area where security barriers had been installed for high-speed train services. These control points created a concentration of passengers waiting to access the platforms, resulting in a congested area that the participant had to cross. During this stage of the journey, several emotional reactions were expressed. The participant reported feeling lost, stressed, and irritated while navigating through the crowd. This situation appeared to disrupt her spatial orientation and led to a temporary loss of reference points within the station environment. As a consequence, she eventually

retraced her steps  in order to return to the information board and reassess the available travel information. One of the main difficulties encountered during the journey concerned the interpretation of the station information displays. The participant confused the arrivals board, which indicates trains arriving at the station, with the departures board, which provides the information necessary to locate the correct platform for an outgoing train. She explained that she had initially consulted the “arrivals” board because, in her words, “we want to arrive in this city”. This misunderstanding led to a prolonged period of wandering  within the station hall while attempting to identify the appropriate information.

The situation was eventually resolved after the participant approached a station staff member for assistance. Following this interaction, she was able to obtain the necessary information and proceed directly  to the correct platform. Despite the difficulties encountered during the journey, the participant ultimately expressed a sense of satisfaction upon successfully reaching the platform.

From the perspective of the commented journey methodology, this pathway highlights how cognitive accessibility challenges can emerge at specific moments of the travel experience, particularly in complex environments characterised by high levels of sensory stimulation and dense passenger flows. While the participant initially demonstrated confidence and autonomy in navigating the station environment, the combination of crowd density, spatial organisation, and information display formats temporarily disrupted her orientation and increased emotional stress. The pathway therefore illustrates how seemingly minor elements of information design and environmental complexity may significantly affect the mobility experience of travellers with intellectual disabilities.

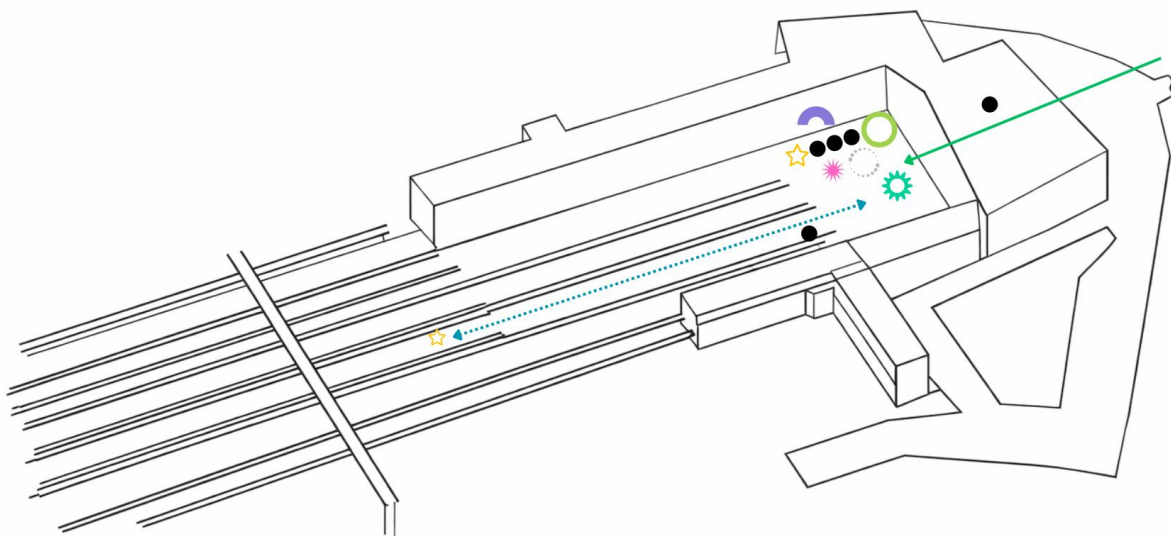


Figure 8. Simplified view of station 1 - Walking interview no. 2 on 19/05/2025

This walking interview was conducted with a group of four participants presenting intellectual disabilities. Three participants were able to read, while one participant was non-literate. The group was accustomed to travelling by train: three of the participants usually travelled independently, whereas one generally travelled with the assistance of a companion.

Upon arrival at the station, the group moved through the environment quickly and without initial hesitation . They arrived approximately one hour and thirty minutes before the scheduled departure of their train. After entering the station hall, they chose to sit facing the main information display board, which they used as their principal reference point for monitoring departure information.

The waiting period before the display of the relevant departure information proved relatively long from the participants' perspective. Despite the substantial time available before the train's departure, the group expressed concern about missing the information when it would appear on the board. As a result, they remained positioned directly in front of the display and appeared reluctant to engage in other activities while waiting. This difficulty in diverting their attention suggests the importance they attributed to continuously monitoring the information board in order to avoid missing the announcement of their train.

However, a situation subsequently emerged that was perceived by the participants as disruptive and generated a range of negative emotional responses. At one point, two trains (including the train they had to take) were scheduled to depart at exactly the same time on the information board. The group's strategy for identifying their train had been based primarily on memorising the departure time. The presence of two trains with identical departure times therefore created confusion and uncertainty. During this phase, participants verbalised several negative emotions, including feelings of being lost, doubting their understanding of the information, discomfort, and a pronounced sense of stress. A prolonged period of hesitation followed as the group attempted to resolve the confusion independently. Eventually, they decided to request assistance from a station staff member. At that moment, they also realised that the train was due to depart in approximately fifteen minutes. This realisation triggered a strong sense of urgency and heightened stress within the group. The participants quickly moved towards the platform, at times running in order to reach the train before departure. When they finally boarded the train, they appeared somewhat disoriented and visibly stressed. From the perspective of the commented journey methodology, this situation highlights how reliance on a single orientation strategy such as memorising the departure time can become problematic when unexpected informational complexity arises. It also illustrates how uncertainty regarding travel information can rapidly generate emotional responses that influence mobility behaviour, particularly among travellers with intellectual disabilities, leading to hurried movements and increased stress even when the available time remains relatively sufficient.

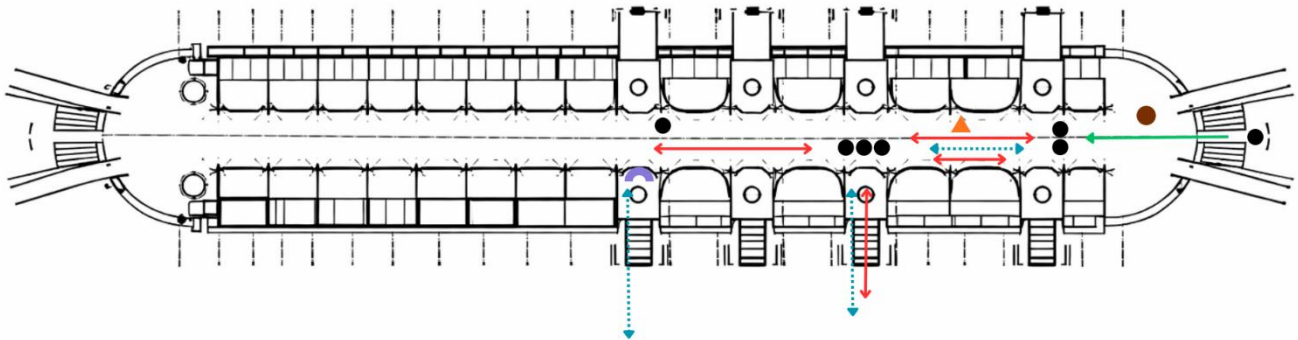


Figure 9. Simplified view of station 2 - Walking interview no. 3 on 29/01/2026

In this commented journey, the participant was an adult man with an intellectual disability who was able to read and was accustomed to travelling independently by train. However, it is important to note that he was visiting this particular station for the first time. The journey began relatively quickly , yet the participant soon expressed difficulties related to orientation within the station environment. In particular, he noted that access to the platforms was provided through several staircases that appeared highly similar and offered little advance visibility before descending. He also indicated that the platform numbers were not clearly displayed from his perspective.

As he progressed through the station, the participant initially chose to return to a staircase he had previously passed . This decision generated hesitation and led to several back-and-forth movements within the hall . After these repeated attempts, he eventually decided not to use the staircase to access the platform and retraced his steps once again . He ultimately returned to the staircase where he had initially been located, yet remained uncertain about his choice. The participant explained that he believed he might be mistaken because buses were visible on the platform area below, which reinforced his confusion about whether he had reached the correct location.

This uncertainty prompted him to retrace his steps again and return to the main hall of the station. From this vantage point, he was finally able to identify the platform numbering system more clearly. Having located the relevant information, he quickly decided to take the appropriate staircase leading to the platform . Nevertheless, throughout this sequence he repeatedly verbalised doubts regarding his orientation. His uncertainty persisted until he boarded the train, and he only expressed reassurance after confirming the train's destination with a member of the train staff.

From the perspective of the commented journey methodology, this sequence illustrates how the spatial configuration of a station and the visibility of wayfinding information can significantly influence orientation strategies for travellers with intellectual disabilities. The participant's movements within the station were characterised by repeated verification strategies, hesitations and backtracking, highlighting the importance of clear signage and anticipatory visibility of platform information in supporting autonomous mobility.

5 Discussion and conclusions

The aim of this survey is to analyse and document experiences, social representations, professional practices, and systemic barriers related to cognitive inclusion in railway environments, from both the perspective of railway staff and users with intellectual disabilities. By combining interviews, observations, and commented journeys, the findings provide a situated and multi-perspective understanding of accessibility as it is experienced in everyday mobility contexts. More specifically, the research seeks to identify and better understand the difficulties encountered by individuals with intellectual disabilities when travelling by train, across different stages of the journey, including stations, platforms, and onboard environments. By analysing these challenges, this seeks to contribute to improving the accessibility and inclusiveness of the rail system. In parallel, particular attention is given to the training needs of railway staff, in order to enhance their capacity to effectively welcome, support, and interact with all type of passengers. Beyond physical accessibility, the study emphasises the importance of ensuring that information and environments are also cognitively accessible, that is, understandable, predictable, and usable for all passengers.

The findings from Phase 1, point to a hierarchical representation of disability, in which physical and sensory impairments are prioritised over cognitive or intellectual disabilities. This ranking is reinforced by training programmes that are primarily oriented towards the most visible and statistically frequent situations. As a result, intellectual disabilities tend to remain marginal within institutional training frameworks, leading to a partial professional knowledge base and a reliance on simplified communication strategies rather than structured approaches.

Opportunities for institutional training exist, but they remain unsystematic and are utilised unevenly, depending heavily on individual motivation and curiosity, as well as on the worker's position in the hierarchy; more advanced training is reserved for managers, who explained during interviews that they did not have the time to provide formal feedback to their staff who are in daily contact with passengers. This reflects a broader trend towards the individualisation of responsibility for professional skills, where accessibility depends more on personal commitment than on organisational standards.

The study also reveals a shift towards an individualised model of competence, in which staff members' ability to respond to accessibility issues depends largely on their personal sensitivity, experience, and willingness to engage with available training resources. While e-learning tools offer flexible opportunities for skill development, their non-mandatory nature contributes to uneven levels of knowledge and practice across staff members. This variability has direct implications for the quality of assistance provided, as support practices become contingent upon individual initiative rather than standardised professional guidelines. In turn, this may lead to inconsistencies in how passengers with intellectual disabilities are welcomed and supported across different stations and situations.

Although a wide range of accessibility measures has been implemented across railway stations, the findings demonstrate that accessibility cannot be reduced to the mere presence of infrastructure. Issues related to maintenance, functionality, and coherence significantly affect the usability of these measures in practice. The observed disparities between stations further highlight structural inequalities linked to territorial, organisational, and economic factors, with smaller or less frequented stations often facing greater limitations in implementing or maintaining accessibility adaptations. In addition, tensions between accessibility requirements and other operational constraints (e.g. maintenance, cost management) may result in contradictory situations that undermine user experience. These results suggest that accessibility should be understood as an ongoing process, requiring continuous adaptation, coordination, and evaluation, rather than as a one-time implementation of technical solutions.

One of the central findings concerns the conditional nature of assistance systems, which rely heavily on prior identification through advance booking procedures. While this system allows for organisational efficiency and anticipation of needs, it simultaneously creates barriers for users who do not, or cannot, request assistance in advance. As a result, accessibility becomes conditional upon users' ability to make their needs visible and to comply with procedural requirements. The reticence of some individuals to self-identify as needing assistance highlights the social and symbolic dimensions of accessibility, where requesting support may conflict with the desire to maintain an "ordinary" social identity. Furthermore, the emphasis placed by staff on risk and vulnerability contributes to a form of supervised autonomy, in which independence is both encouraged and constrained. This aligns with the concept of risk culture (Peretti-Watel, 2005), whereby uncertainty and potential incidents lead professionals to favour controlled and monitored forms of mobility, particularly for individuals perceived as vulnerable.

Overall, the findings underline the need to move beyond a predominantly technical and assistance-based model of accessibility towards a more empowering approach. Accessibility should not only enable physical access to transport systems but also support users' ability to understand, anticipate, and navigate complex environments. Accessibility can be seen as a condition for participation, shaping individuals' capacity to position themselves within social space. The experiences reported by users and staff alike highlight the importance of legibility, predictability, and familiarity in fostering a sense of ease and autonomy during travel.

The field observations of accompanied train journeys provide critical insights into the real-time challenges faced by travellers presenting intellectual disabilities, complementing the findings from Phase 1 regarding institutional practices and professional training. While railway systems are designed to facilitate autonomous travel for literate and no cognitive impairments users, the experiences documented in this study reveal persistent cognitive, procedural, and emotional barriers that constrain mobility for individuals with intellectual disabilities. One of the main findings concerns the structural and procedural obstacles encountered by participants, particularly in relation to ticket purchasing, journey planning, and station navigation. Across all case studies, participants faced difficulties in accessing online services due to the lack of bank cards or/and digital literacy, resulting in a dependency on in-person transactions. This limitation not only reduces flexibility and spontaneity but also increases the cognitive and logistical load required to complete travel. For instance, participants often arrived at stations well in advance of departure times to compensate for uncertainties in navigating complex procedures, reflecting a high anticipatory burden linked to cognitive accessibility challenges.

Similarly, station environments and informational systems often proved difficult to interpret. Participants struggled with symbolic or coded information, such as numerical indicators for train cars corresponding to ticket classes, and oral announcements regarding itinerary changes. These observations indicate that implicit conventions embedded in transport systems assumed to be intuitive but may be inaccessible for travellers with cognitive disabilities, thereby generating stress and reliance on compensatory strategies (Bobillier-Chaumont, 2009).

The journeys highlighted the psychological dimension of travel, including heightened stress and anxiety when facing unfamiliar or disrupted travel conditions. In Case Study 3, external disruptions such as a national strike introduced significant uncertainty, requiring participants to memorise oral instructions and navigate complex station layouts without sufficient visual or written guidance. These conditions amplified cognitive load and led to moments of acute distress, demonstrating that accessibility extends beyond physical infrastructure and requires consideration of cognitive and emotional support needs. Journeys along familiar routes were experienced with greater confidence and minimal difficulty, whereas unfamiliar routes or international travel compounded disorientation and stress. Interactions with railway staff emerged as a crucial factor in facilitating travel, particularly when participants encountered unexpected disruptions. Furthermore, staff interventions often required translation of complex instructions into simplified language, highlighting the need for adaptive communication strategies tailored to the passengers. These interactions reinforce the notion that accessibility is both a technical and relational process,

dependent on both infrastructural adequacy and social mediation. Accessibility challenges are not limited to physical design but are embedded in organisational procedures, information systems, and social interactions. For travellers with intellectual disabilities, the combination of structural, informational, and cognitive obstacles generates inequalities in mobility, constraining both independence and agency.

Human mediation emerges as a central element in these findings, highlighting the importance of recognising and valuing the knowledge and expertise possessed by users with intellectual disabilities themselves. It is essential that users living with intellectual disabilities are not considered mere subjects of study, but rather as active knowledge holders and producers. Future research and experimental initiatives should actively involve them in the co-development of recommendations and solutions tailored to their specific needs. This includes enabling users to contribute directly to the training of frontline railway staff, reflecting the diversity of disabilities and the uniqueness of each individual's experience.

6 Limits of the study

The results presented in this deliverable should be interpreted in the light of several methodological limitations, which stem both from the deliberate choice of a qualitative and exploratory approach and from constraints encountered during the conduct of the research.

Firstly, the sample size remains relatively restricted. The study is based on the accounts of thirteen railway staff interviewed during Phase 1, seven passengers with an intellectual disability who were accompanied during Phases 2 and 3, and eight volunteers interviewed as part of Phase 2bis.

In accordance with the qualitative, exploratory and non-probabilistic approach adopted, the aim was not to establish a statistically representative sample, but to document a variety of profiles, roles and situations. The results obtained cannot therefore be generalised to all railway staff, people with intellectual disabilities or those involved in voluntary support initiatives. They should be understood as context-specific insights, illustrating certain experiences and practices without claiming to represent a statistical generalisation.

Furthermore, the composition of the sample reveals a marked imbalance in the gender distribution of participants. Phase 1 thus includes ten men to three women, whilst Phase 2 bis involves seven men to one woman. Although this distribution partly reflects the gender composition of the professions and voluntary activities observed, it limits the scope for exploring any gender-related differences in experiences, perceptions or practices. This aspect deserves greater consideration in future research.

Another limitation relates to the absence of interviews with healthcare professionals or specialists in intellectual disability, such as doctors, psychologists or special needs educators. Involving these stakeholders would have helped to supplement the data collected from service users and rail sector professionals, whilst providing an expert perspective that could have enriched and consolidated the typology of profiles proposed in this research. However, the time constraints associated with producing this deliverable did not allow for the implementation of this additional element, which would have required the development of specific survey tools as well as the involvement of volunteer professionals. This approach therefore represents a relevant area for further development in future work.

The results from Phase 2 bis also call for caution in their interpretation. The observations were carried out during the departure of pilgrimage trains, a particularly unique organisational context characterised by high passenger density, significant logistical constraints and a higher level of uncertainty than that encountered during ordinary rail journeys. These exceptional conditions are likely to give rise to situations of stress or disorientation, even for passengers without disabilities. Consequently, the findings from this phase cannot be generalised to everyday rail travel situations. They primarily provide insights into the coordination arrangements between the various stakeholders involved in the management of large-scale events.

Furthermore, the research is based on isolated observations and interviews, without any longitudinal follow-up of participants. This approach does not allow for an understanding of how users' skills, coping strategies or level of independence evolve over time. Longitudinal follow-up would provide a valuable methodological contribution towards a better understanding of individual trajectories, learning processes and the effects of repeated experience of rail travel on the development of independence.

Finally, for ethical and confidentiality reasons, all the locations mentioned in this study have been anonymised or described in general terms. This decision is due to the limited sample size and the specific nature of certain contexts observed, which could have made the participants or organisations concerned identifiable. Whilst this precaution appears essential for the protection of those involved in the research, it nevertheless limits the scope for a detailed contextualisation of the results, particularly with regard to the architectural, organisational or territorial characteristics specific to the various sites studied.

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8 Appendix

8.1 Appendix 1. Interview guide for railway sector staff

Interview Guide Railway Staff

This guide follows the comprehensive interview method: questions are formulated as flexible conversational prompts rather than a fixed script. The interviewer adapts phrasing, order, and depth to the interviewee's responses, paying particular attention to hesitations, pauses, and implicit aspects of speech. Before starting, the interviewer reminds the participant of the study's objective, the conditions of participation, and the confidential and anonymous treatment of the data collected.

1. Perception of assistance to passengers with disabilities

- What is your overall perception of the assistance provided to passengers with disabilities in stations and on-board trains?
- In your own words, how would you describe a person with an intellectual disability?
- Are you aware of any specific scheme or arrangement currently in place for these passengers?
- On average, how often are you called upon to assist passengers with disabilities?
- Does this assistance mostly concern passengers with a visual, hearing, cognitive, or physical disability?
- Have you received specific training to assist these passengers? If so, do you consider this training sufficient? If not, what aspects are missing?

2. Limitations and difficulties encountered

- What are the main difficulties you encounter when assisting passengers with disabilities (material, organisational, communication-related)?
- Could you share a difficult or particularly memorable situation related to this?
- Do you have the tools you need to properly assist these passengers (equipment, signage, technical assistance, etc.)?
- What tools or resources are you missing that would make your work easier?
- Do you encounter any problems in the transmission of information concerning these passengers?

3. Living Lab

- Do you think you are able to put yourself in the shoes of passengers with an intellectual disability, in terms of their experience of transport?
- Would you be willing to take part in a collaborative workshop aimed at better understanding their needs by placing yourself in their situation?

4. Personal and relational experience

- How would you describe your relationship with the passengers with disabilities you assist?
- Do you sometimes feel that you are unable to meet their expectations or needs?
- Do you feel a sense of personal satisfaction when you help these passengers?
- Are there aspects of this assistance that can generate stress or frustration for you?

5. Suggestions and areas for improvement

- What improvements would you suggest to make it easier to assist passengers with disabilities?
- Do you think technological innovations or changes in organisation could be useful?
- What would you like to learn or explore further in order to better assist these passengers?
- Is there anything else you would like to raise, or any additional suggestion you would like to share?

Legend

	Core question	Main guiding question, central to the theme, always asked.
	Follow-up	Used to expand on or clarify an answer that has already been given, or to obtain more specific details.
	Sensitive / open-ended question	Addresses a potentially sensitive topic

8.2 Appendix 2. Interview guide for volunteers on the pilgrimage train

Interview Guide

Volunteer Companions on Pilgrimage Trains

Preliminary note. This guide follows the comprehensive interview method: questions are formulated as flexible conversational prompts rather than a fixed script. The interviewer adapts phrasing, order, and depth to the interviewee's responses. Before starting, the interviewer reminds the participant of the study's objective, the conditions of participation, and the confidential and anonymous treatment of the data collected. Where the participant is a minor, the consent procedures described in the methodology section apply (co-signature by the participant and their legal guardian).

1. Personal background and experience

- Could you tell me how you became a volunteer companion on the pilgrimage trains?
- What motivates you to accompany people during these journeys?
- How many journeys have you already completed in this capacity?
- Had you already had any experience accompanying people with disabilities or in vulnerable situations before this?

2. Training and preparation

- Did you receive any training or specific instructions before undertaking the journey?
- Were you given any information about the type of people you would be accompanying?
- In your view, what skills are needed to be a good companion?

3. The travellers accompanied

- How would you describe the travellers you accompany on these journeys (profile, age, health status, specific needs)?
- Have you identified particular difficulties encountered by travellers? (e.g., mobility, communication, understanding, time management, anxiety)
- In your view, are these journeys suited to people with an intellectual disability? Why, or why not?

4. Course of the journey

- Could you describe, step by step, how a typical journey unfolds? (from passengers' arrival at the station, to boarding, the journey itself, and arrival at the destination)
- How are roles divided among volunteers?
- What are the main practical difficulties you encounter during the journey?

5. Situations experienced

- Have you ever been faced with a complex or unexpected situation during a journey? How did you handle it?
- Were there moments when you felt unable to respond to a traveller's needs?
- What kinds of support (human, material, organisational) would be needed to better assist these travellers?

6. Accessibility and adaptation

- In your view, is the train (design, comfort, layout of spaces, journey duration) suited to the travellers being accompanied?
- What improvements would you suggest to make the journey more accessible and comfortable?

7. Coordination and organisation

- What relationship do you have with railway staff during these journeys?
- Is there a collective preparation session before departure?
- Is there a debriefing after the journeys regarding care arrangements and safety measures?

8. Representations and personal impact

- In your own words, how would you define intellectual disability?
- Has this experience changed the way you view people with disabilities or in vulnerable situations?
- What do you consider the most memorable aspect of your experience as a volunteer companion?
- Would you like to continue this type of volunteering in the future? Why, or why not?