

Ticket Office closures: a UTG position paper

Background

On 5 July 2023, most train operators in England launched consultations on changes to railway station ticket offices and staffing at railway stations, a process coordinated by the Rail Delivery Group. The consultations run until the end of July, allowing 21 days to respond.

Under the proposals, most ticket offices will close, with staff moved to platforms and concourses to support passengers, albeit not necessarily on a like-for-like basis. Many operators are proposing reductions in staffing hours alongside the ticket office closures.

The rationale provided for the proposals is that, given 12% of tickets are now bought through ticket offices, a more flexible staffing arrangement at stations will benefit more people and provide opportunities to upskill staff.

Our position

We are not opposed to improving the way that passenger needs are met by staffing provision at stations, however, we have significant concerns about the current proposals. These are in three areas – the consultation process; the impact on passenger experience; and the interaction with wider goals that city regions have for our people and places.

The consultation process

We ask, as a matter of urgency, that city regions transport authorities have a seat at the table before any decisions are made as to the future of ticket offices and staffing levels.

City region transport authorities are responsible for setting the overall strategies for integrated local public transport networks. They are complex, multi-operator environments. They need to have sight of plans for all train operators in their areas, not just for those which they have formal responsibility for. Indeed, some of our members have already implemented staffing reforms on the public transport networks that they are responsible for and would be a willing partner in supporting future changes.

The consultation process, as it has been run so far, goes against the Government's commitment to devolution and levelling up.

Our members have had little or no notice of the proposed changes and no opportunity to influence them, despite the importance of railways to the areas they cover. This is counter to many devolution deals which refer to our members' role in local rail planning and provision, and in particular the trailblazer deals recently agreed between Government and Greater Manchester and the West Midlands, which included a stronger role for the Mayor and Combined Authority in overseeing and specifying local rail services and integrating them into the local transport network.

It also contradicts the commitment to giving local authorities more influence over their local rail services contained in the Williams-Shapps White Paper on the railways and subsequent documents.

The consultations as published by train operating companies (TOCs) give very limited information on the rationale behind the changes and there is no apparent industry-wide approach.

For example:

- Looking at the largest city stations in our member areas, Manchester Piccadilly and Birmingham New Street ticket offices are earmarked for closure, whilst Leeds, Sheffield, Newcastle and Liverpool Lime Street ticket offices will remain open.
- Both Manchester Piccadilly and Birmingham New Street are run by Avanti which is proposing to close all of its ticket offices. Meanwhile, LNER, which also manages some of the country's busiest stations, is proposing to keep staff in ticket offices in London, Newcastle and Edinburgh.
- Durham ticket office is proposed for complete closure, despite its high footfall, international tourism and long-distance services, whereas Hartlepool, with a much less frequent train service and lower footfall, is proposed to keep its ticket office.

Individual train operators are taking different approaches, with different timescales, making it difficult to engage with the process, absorb all of the information and get the full picture of the proposed changes.

We believe that a 21-day consultation period is not sufficient for such a large-scale, complex and high impact set of proposals.

The impact on passenger experience

There will be a significant impact on journeys and the user experience across the rail network.

In the city regions, there are 210 ticket offices, of which 90% (188 ticket offices) will close under the proposed changes. There are currently over 231 million entries and exits through those stations. Over 153 million of those (66%) will no longer have a ticket office service. The percentage of journeys impacted rises to 82% if we look specifically at those outside of the main city stations.

Whilst 12% of tickets bought at ticket offices may seem a small portion of overall sales, it translates as 168 million tickets. In some places, the proportion may be higher. For example, Northern report that around 17% of their tickets are purchased from ticket offices.

The proportion of tickets purchased at ticket offices may also vary according to the type of journey or ticket type, with shorter, local journeys more likely to be purchased on the day, rather than in advance online.

We are particularly concerned that Equality Impact Assessments of the proposals do not seem to have been conducted in all cases.

Staff at ticket offices are the first point of contact for disabled people arriving at stations who require assistance. They provide information, unlock station facilities (such as disabled toilets) and have a profound impact on the overall rail experience of many passengers, and particularly on feelings of safety and security and comfort. Closing ticket offices is likely to make stations feel more unsafe, especially for women and young people, and potentially increase crime and antisocial behaviour.

These changes could further reduce public trust in the railways, at a time when the climate emergency demands that we encourage as many people as possible to use public transport and active travel. Evidence gathered by our members¹ suggests that people who currently do not use the railways, use them rarely, or who rely on the support of ticket offices to give them confidence in ticket buying options, will be put off further from travelling by rail.

¹ For example work for Transport for Greater Manchester on consumer decision-making found that confusion over or hassle purchasing tickets was cited by 9% of non users as a reason for disliking rail. Research by Transport Focus of non-users for the Williams Rail Review found more staff on board trains and at stations had a “net likelihood to encourage more travel by train” of 16% <https://d3cez36w5wymxj.cloudfront.net/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/29145935/Williams-Rail-Review-Barriers-to-travel-How-to-make-rail-more-attractive-to-infrequent-and-non-users.pdf>

Rail is just part of a wider, multi-modal transport network, especially in the city regions. There is a real risk that the proposed changes could lead to a less integrated network, with restricted access to multimodal ticketing.

Staff at railway stations can sell and advise on multi-modal tickets and smartcards in our areas, which integrate rail services with other public transport. However, the range of fares and products available may be reduced – for example, season tickets, railcards, refunds, rover tickets and excess fares, and it is unclear how many of these will be available online or at ticket machines.

Furthermore, where railway stations are part of multimodal transport interchanges, removal of railway ticket office staff will put more pressure on staff covering light rail and bus services, including some that our members employ.

These proposals come in advance of any serious reform or simplification of the complex rail fares system.

We have supported the reform of the complex fares regime on the railways and the modernisation and streamlining of rail ticketing to make online sales and contactless payments an easier option for more passengers and journeys. Our members have been working to introduce simplified and multi-modal fares in their areas, including rail. To proceed with ticket office closures in advance of such reform is premature and could reduce customer choice and value without an alternative being in place.

Many of the train operators are proposing reductions in staffing hours at stations alongside ticket office closures, meaning ticket office staff who are being lost, are not being replaced like-for-like.

In one of our member areas, for example, proposals will see the number of full-time equivalent staff more than halved across the network.

In South Yorkshire, the station at Meadowhall – a major shopping and leisure destination as well as a park and ride location – currently has a ticket office open from 6.15 – 20.15 Monday-Saturday and 9.00 – 19.30 on Sundays. Under the proposals, the ticket office will close and ‘journey makers’ will instead only cover 9.00-16.00 Monday – Saturday (missing the morning peak) and there will be no journey makers on a Sunday².

Furthermore, unions estimate that the plans could lead to the loss of nearly 2,000 jobs. The TOC consultation documents do not clearly set out the rationale for reducing staff cover. Additional staffing reductions could follow as TOCs are not required to consult on future changes once staff are redeployed outside of ticket offices.

² Transport for All analysis

https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1ld7SuXdS1dbvg7I8pWlf_gnJobvRcgo575e7In2f_Yo/edit#gid=116116905

Interaction with wider goals for people and place

The changes will undermine the wider goals our members have for their communities, stations and places.

Many of our members are in the process of, have recently completed or have plans for investment projects in stations and areas around them, as part of levelling up strategies, based on there being staff on stations to support this investment - these changes risk losing that investment.

Investment examples

In the **North East**, £26 million has been invested so far in transforming Sunderland train station, including a brand new ticket office and reception area. This ticket office is amongst those earmarked for closure and the redeployed staff will be cut from seven to four. In Sunderland, an above average proportion of tickets are bought at the ticket office (15%).

In **South Yorkshire**, work is ongoing on accessibility improvements to Barnsley and Mexborough stations, with over £500,000 invested, whilst work has recently been completed on £115,000 worth of accessibility improvements to Meadowhall. An outline business case is being developed for a £6 million City Region Sustainable Transport Settlement (CRSTS) scheme to develop Meadowhall as a Mobility Hub, whilst a further £8m of CRSTS funding is planned to improve accessibility at Thorne North.

The ticket offices in all of these South Yorkshire stations are set to close, potentially undermining efforts to make them more accessible and, in the case of Meadowhall, reducing the value of a major hub and access point for a wider integrated transport offer.

Our report, [*Action stations: How devolution is transforming rail stations for the better*](#), examined over 35 completed station investment projects from across the UK and showed how these schemes have helped meet local housing need, sparked regeneration, turned run-down stations into gateways and places to be proud of, improved environmental performance and welcomed more people onto the network by boosting accessibility.

The closure of ticket offices and the de-staffing of stations it entails could seriously undermine these kinds of investment, leaving them more vulnerable to vandalism and neglect, and reducing their potential to act as the beating heart of the communities they welcome.

What next?

City regions transport authorities need to be fully involved in decision making as to the future of ticket offices and staffing levels.

Our role in overseeing, and setting the overall strategy for, integrated transport networks in our areas means we need a seat at the table.

We need to fully understand the rationale for these proposals and the response of Ministers, officials, operators and the Rail Delivery Group to the concerns we have outlined. UTG and its members need sight of the results of the consultations and the opportunity to discuss these results with operators, ministers and officials, before any changes are agreed.

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