

Northern Ticket Office Consultation

Railfuture North West England Branch response

Railfuture is Britain's leading, longest-established, national independent voluntary organisation campaigning for a bigger and better railway network for passenger and freight users. This response draws together the views of the North West England Branch and affiliated Rail User Groups, as authorised by Railfuture's national Board of Directors. The Railfuture North West Branch has 134 individual members and supporters plus 18 group members (Rail User Groups/Rail Action Groups who between them have around 3000 members in the north west). We are writing to object to the proposals by Northern to close 131 of its 149 ticket offices, 101 of which are in the North West.

This response relates specifically to issues arising from the consultation document issued by Northern and stations in North West England and is aligned with Railfuture's National Response on this issue covering all stations for all TOCs currently consulting on Ticket Office changes. In the case of accidental conflict, the Railfuture National Response is the primary submission.

Railfuture believes in a bigger and better railway. A better railway is one that provides a better service to passengers (and freight customers). A better railway seeks to increase passenger numbers, not put up barriers to travel. **A better railway has an efficient and easy interface between actual and intending/potential passengers, and railway staff; ticket offices are a vital part of this.**

We consider that the original three-week consultation over the closing of all Northern's ticket offices was deeply flawed and possibly illegal. We think the last-minute extension to a nearly 8 weeks period over the holidays will not be adequate either.

The combined population of the affected stations areas in the North West is around 7.5 million, and with the proposal to close such a high proportion of the ticket offices managed by Northern and **reduce the coverage hours for the replacement "ticketing support"** (our calculations show the average reduction is 58% with some as high as 91%), we think this will disadvantage **ALL** passengers, whether they buy their tickets at the station, (ticket office or ticket machine), online or through Northern's App (particularly because some of the latter two types of transactions require collection of tickets at the station).

We are not against change, but it must be change that grows the railway, not change to suit the short-sighted and short-term needs of HM Treasury. We accept that there are a few ticket offices that probably should not survive in their present form, **but any and all ticket office closure proposals should be done on an individual station by station basis and involving an option appraisal.** There are stations that sell low volumes of tickets where the

solution might be to have a combined ticket office/retail outlet or, where this is not possible, to have simple, specific (and additional) ticket machines (TVMs) which take cash and only issue the range of tickets for the most frequent journeys. Most of Northern's managed stations have services by other operators calling there, so these may not necessarily be tickets for journeys on Northern only services.

The Rail Minister, the RDG and Northern keep referring to "only" 12% of tickets being purchased from ticket offices but fail to mention how many millions of tickets that represents. Our calculations from the latest passenger figures show that 168 million ticket purchases across the country would be affected by this (12% of the 1.4 billion number noted for 2022-3 here <https://dataportal.orr.gov.uk/media/2207/passenger-rail-usage-jan-mar-2023.pdf>) That's an awful lot of tickets still. If we use the figures from Northern's website, these show Northern had 27.5 million overall sales for the year in the North West stations (ticket office, TVM, Digital or "Other"), so if we assume 12% is the correct figure in particular for Northern, that equates to 3,304,131 passengers facing change in how they buy their tickets. However, our analysis of Northern's figures show an average **18%** figure for sales in ticket offices in the North West stations and that would result in a figure of nearly 5 million passenger journeys (4,956,196).

In our view, there are many reasons why most ticket offices should be retained.

- 1. Northern's ticket offices provide 14.6 million customer purchase transactions a year. In the North West, 913.4k transactions took place in Q1 2023 at the 101 stations proposed to lose their ticket offices, equivalent to approx. 3.65 million a year.** That is a lot of purchases. Volumes for the year were more than 20k transactions at 41 of these stations, with 75k transactions at Chorley, 73k at Wilmslow and 70k at Newton-Le Willows at the top of the list all of which are proposed for closure. Of the other stations, a further 20 had ticket office sales between 30k and 66k per year. (Note that figures are excluded from those stations at which ticket offices will remain open)

When **the ticket office percentages of ticket sales volume** from each of these stations is considered, only 23 of the 101 had ticket office sales at or below the nationally quoted figure of 12%, the remainder ranged up to 60% with the average across Northern stations as whole (as we have said) at 18% and that at North West station is 24%.

At only six staffed Northern stations in the North West, were there more sales from TVMs than from ticket offices (Chassen Road, Dinting, Disley, Flixton, Hale and Woodsmoor), all stations with restricted ticket office opening hours already.

- 2. Ticket office closures will most affect the already financially disadvantaged members of society, as most cash transaction can only be done at ticket offices or on train.** Of the entire estate of Northern's stations in the North West, the only

ones able to accept cash were at Blackburn (1 of 5 TVM's) Blackpool North (1 of 3 TVM's) and Manchester Victoria (2 of 4 TVM's), all of which the ticket offices will remain open. So we think these proposals go against the concept of "Levelling up" in that potentially they effectively bar people without bank or credit cards from using trains, this is currently estimated to be 1.4 million people in the UK. (<https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmtreasy/1642/164205.htm>) of which there are a higher proportion in the north. We also note that in the overall sales figures, cash sales for the year via ticket offices are 20% so we think its not adequate to meet these passenger needs with only 9 of the entire estate of 611 TVM's able to accept cash. We would also draw your attention to the large range of cash sales figures across your estate of stations, 44% of tickets at Burnley Central, 39% at Accrington, 40% Farnworth and 65% at Glazebrook for instance are cash sales and the average is 24% **and only 3 of the 101 stations are below 10% ticket office cash sales.**

3. Ticket office closures will impact adversely on everyone and anyone who through physical, mental, neurological or sensory disability, is unable to use TVMs and/or the internet. This is clearly discriminatory and may be illegal. Whilst we accept that Northern's proposals for Journey Makers will provide ticketing support, because the hours they cover are less than the previous ticket office hours at every station (and average of 58% less with some as much as a 91% reduction of hours), by definition, they are disadvantaged.
4. **Ticket office closures will adversely impact anyone and everyone who needs advice that only ticket offices can give, whether in terms of the best routing, interchange information, or the cheapest suitable tickets.** Few, if any, ticket machines sell the complete range of tickets (and railcards) that are available from ticket offices. We think consideration of closures should not go ahead until TVM's can sell the full range of tickets available from a ticket office. **We see ticket office closures contributing to a backdoor rise in train fares paid by some passengers** – often those who can least afford them. This is through the inability of most current TVM's to offer the full range of fares on routes. Its also not clear how Railcards could be purchased or renewed if passengers have no internet access and that will contribute to exclusion and effective fare rises for those groups.
5. **Ticket office can sell tickets for complex journeys**, whether on the day or in advance and including tickets starting at stations other than that station. They also sell Rover Tickets, very useful and cost-saving tickets that, sadly, are not well promoted by the railway. Whilst we know that some TVM's are now able to sell Rovers, and that on some you can change the starting point this is not universal and until it is we think again that consideration of closures should not go ahead.
6. **Ticket offices can issue refunds and amend /replace tickets.** Skilled ticket clerks are unlikely to make mistakes that can occur when buying from a TVM and its not

clear from the consultation how you propose ensuring that ticketing support staff are adequately trained for the task nor how TVM's can do this process.

7. **Ticket offices provide a local place where property accidentally left on the station can be handed in and retained for easy collection.**
8. **Digital ticketing on smartphones is not suitable for everyone.** Some people do not have smartphones, so they are immediately excluded; if also they cannot for whatever reason use a ticket machine, they will be excluded from the railway. This raises equality issues. Others have a smartphone, but do not want their train ticket on it. There are several reasons for this. Fear of loss of battery power. Fear of losing their phone (more likely with every removal from a safe storage place in a bag or zipped pocket). Dislike or refusal to purchase on line for security reasons. Fear of phone or software malfunction causing the ticket to be lost within the phone. Others cannot have a ticket on a smartphone as their physical condition (e.g arthritis) means they cannot manipulate the keypad easily. And people without debit or credit cards cannot use smartphones. **Digital purchasing directly discriminates against older, poorer, intellectually and sensory impaired people, and others who are not computer literate.**
9. **On line purchasing on a computer is not for everyone.** Several reasons. Some people do not have a P.C. or are not computer-literate. Some have a PC but no functioning printer. Some do not do on-line purchasing for security reasons. Some cannot do on-line purchasing as they do not have debit or credit cards.
10. **Passenger safety.** Despite what is often said by proponents of ticket office closures, some (/most) ticket office staff do come out "from behind the glass" and help passengers on the platforms, including helping on/off trains, informing about last minute platform changes, coping with train breakdowns etc. There may be stations at which the ticket office staff could be relocated "onto the platform" (all platforms?), but we think these are a very small minority. Ticket offices are generally well located. "Journey Makers" would, presumably carry out some of these functions, but they are planned to work fewer hours, and their future is not guaranteed.
11. **The presence of staff acts as a deterrent against anti-social, criminal, and dangerous behaviour,** and staff come out of their offices to deal with this . This can help vulnerable passengers, including older people and many women, feel safer; if they did not feel safe, they may decide not to travel by train. Furthermore, serious vandalism may occur outside staffed hours, and this can be especially serious at stations that are Listed Buildings, and those with toilets. Given that the "Journey Makers" will be present for much reduced hours, they cannot completely take over this vital function.
12. **"Journey Makers" (JM's).** As stated above, Journey Maker hours will be fewer than ticket office staff. Our calculation from your proposals is that on Northern

stations, the average is a 58% reduction in hours, with some as high as 91% . The JM's role, as proposed by Northern, is restricted. Whilst they can give advice and information to passenger, they will not be selling tickets directly. They can show people how to use a ticket machine; this is fine for easy transactions, but we doubt whether it will be helpful for more complex ones. And what if for reasons given above, passengers cannot use a TVM? If these closure proposals are accepted, then they must be amended so that JM's can sell the full range of tickets. There is also no indication of how future -proofed the JM presence will be, and whether the JM's will be of the same calibre as the generally excellent and experienced Ticket Office staff. We suspect not, as this is clearly a cost-cutting exercise. In short, **JMs are not an acceptable substitute for ticket office staff. The statement in the RDG press release that "proposals mean more face-to-face support across the network to choose the cheapest tickets and advise on journey planning" is clearly arrant nonsense, a lie, when Northern's proposals are examined.**

13. Waiting rooms, toilets and lifts. On those stations with lockable indoor, warm, waiting rooms, and toilets, the ticket office staff unlock and lock them at the beginning and end of their day and although you mention in your covering letter that facilities such as waiting areas and lifts will not be affected, it's not clear how and there is no mention of toilets. Note that the facilities in some/many waiting rooms have been enhanced due to the activities of station friends/Adopters groups. In the case of toilets, bear in mind that Northern's 195 and 331 CAF train sets were specified with inadequate toilet provision (one toilet on 3 car units, some of which perform 3 hour journeys). So station toilets are of great importance. Are there still passenger lifts that can only operate when a station is staffed? If so, any reduction in hours will surely violate the Equalities Act in terms of access to services by disabled people.

14. TVMs are often not fit for purpose, even when not out of use. We have paraphrased the experience of one of our members below for relevant points.

Issues with TVM use.

- a) *Poor intuitiveness: screens often laid out in a haphazard manner and it's not clear how to get to/from each stage.*
- b) *Easy to make mistakes; I bought two tickets, but only added the senior railcard for one of them.*
- c) *They also sometimes just won't work. You get part way through a transaction and the machine will go no further. I have found that sometimes the touch screen needs a much firmer press with two fingers rather than one at the ticket selection stage. I shouldn't have to find this out because the machine shouldn't behave in this way. I was at a staffed station and used the ticket office instead, an option that would be no longer available.*

- d) *If the machines are simply not working what are passengers expected to do if they don't even offer a 'promise to pay' ticket. Surely that should be a default option even if the machine has lost its data connection (a frequent issue) So if passengers get on the train, they risk being fined £100 in penalty fares areas. Asking the conductor/train manager before boarding is a distraction for him/her at a time when they are performing a safety critical task.*
- e) *Vandalism of TVM's; What provisions are in place presently for those unstaffed stations in penalty fares areas for the failure of TVM's, i.e., do conductors get notified of failure and can act accordingly in not issuing un-necessary penalty fares.*
- f) *If TVMs are out of service having run out of tickets, what are passengers supposed to do under the Penalty Fares scheme? We suggested passengers take a picture of the TVM to show to on train staff. As previously suggested, are on train staff informed when a TVM is inoperative?*

We think in particular with regard to TVM's being used to make some of the transactions currently undertaken at ticket offices, it's not a one size fits all situation, and the railways cannot be compared with other so called mainstream businesses in terms of staff management because it is by its very nature unique, with many fragmented components.

We consider we have supplied very many reasons why the current proposals to close ticket offices should be abandoned. We accept that there are some ticket offices whose continuation in their present form may not be justified due to very low patronage. **Our answer is that if a TOC wants to close a ticket office (whether effectively told to do so by the Department for Transport and HM Treasury, or not), there should be specific station consultations involving an option appraisal.** Options to consider would include:

- Ticket office continues in its current form
- Ticket office functions expanded to include other types of retail
- Ticket office closure, but with extra TVMs that take cash, and separate TVMs for (a) simple journeys (which take cash) and (b) more complex transactions.

Such option appraisals would take in account future developments in terms of tap-in/tap-out travel including the possibility of selling and topping-up "Oyster like" cards at retail shops in the nearby towns and villages, with the ability to purchase them with cash.(as happens in London with Oyster card top-ups)

Additionally, all stations, even those with ticket offices, should have very simple machines that only issue **Permission to Travel Tickets**. Given that getting on a train without a ticket

can now lead to a £100 Penalty fare, even if the traveller has no intention of defrauding the railway, this safeguard is important, and will be more so if there are longer queues at TVMs.

Northern's consultation document is entitled "Changing how we support customers at our stations". A more honest title would have been "How we plan to reduce support to customers at our stations". We are being asked to accept an inferior service, dressed up as "modernisation". **We oppose these proposals and call for their withdrawal.**

Railfuture North West England branch

31/08/23

Contact: Trevor Bishop, Chair trevor.bishop@railfuture.org.uk