

Ticket Offices Consultation Summer 2023

A submission to Transport Focus & London TravelWatch – All stations, all Train Operators

Railfuture has very significant concerns with the proposals from every Train Operating Company (TOC) applicable to every station in-scope and does not believe that any should be allowed to proceed in their current state. In making this statement, it is not that we believe that Ticket Offices need to continue in their current form for ever, simply that (1) the proposed alternatives are not fit for purpose, and this will still be the case once already identified improvements are delivered; and (2) in-person ticket selling remains an essential option for some intending travellers.

We have decided to still submit to the original deadline, so our view became available everyone well in advance of the revised deadline of 1 September 2023. We subsequently submitted supplements on Ticket Vending Machines and on Equality Impact Assessment quality.

An approach built around 6 key principles could well receive our support:

1. The principle that intending passengers are encouraged (but not forced) towards self-service via online, contactless and Ticket Vending Machines (TVMs) is supported ❶.
2. That all of these are made fit for purpose first – and the fares & tickets system is simplified so that self-service customers can develop confidence that they are choosing the right fare / ticket ❶ ❷.
3. That all types of tickets continue to be sold by skilled rail staff (such as those currently in ticket offices), with a clear recognition that the preferred alternatives of online, contactless and TVMs will never be suitable for some customers for a variety of reasons ❶ ❷.
4. Some move of ticket office staff to the multi-skilled role, but the retention of dedicated ticket selling staff at the busiest stations for longer hours – and at medium sized stations at the busiest times. These ticket selling staff do not need to be behind the ticket office glass but should be easily findable and always at the same place on the station ❶ ❷.
5. That stations retain a clear meeting point / welcome desk for passengers to be able to find staff ❷ ❸ ❹.
6. That hours of staffing are not reduced at stations – and facilities such as toilets and waiting rooms ❷ ❸ ❹ ❺.

Transport Focus's tests

- ❶ Easily buy the right ticket.
- ❷ Assistance to travel provided in a timely and reliable manner.
- ❸ Get the information they require including during disruption.
- ❹ Feel safe.
- ❺ Not penalised if they cannot buy a ticket.
- ❻ Can continue to use facilities at a station.

We believe that a sensible immediate way forward could be as follows:

1. At the stations with the quietest ticket offices – and at quieter times at many medium based stations, staff should become 'multi-skilled' and take on a wider role. But the station ticket office should remain open – and accessible to the staff – for ticket sales that cannot be completed by other means (or the immediate demand for tickets can be most efficiently met at the ticket office window).
2. The TVM Concierge role should be trialled at larger stations – both helping intending passengers with their purchase and directly entering the journey requirement when sensible.
3. Other than the initiative described immediately above, ticket offices at virtually all stations should remain open for now, with very minimal changes to hours.
4. A proper analysis is undertaken to determine why ticket office users visit and use it – and the barriers to switching to the alternatives, such as online.

5. Equality Impact Assessments are extended to properly cover non protected conditions such as Dementia and Aspergers and also to properly consider the impact on ticket buying, not just preparing to board trains.
6. Work is initiated to improve the usability and accessibility of TVM software and hardware. As our supplement explains, this is potentially a major project for many types of TVM.
7. Natural language AI (eg ChatGPT) and/or voice recognition is trialled as an additional assistance mechanism to sell tickets both online and via TVMs – to convert human speech into ticket choices.

We also consider it essential that the Government acknowledges that the railway is a public transport service for those unable to drive (eg sight challenges, other physical and mental disabilities) and that the ticket purchase process must not prevent them travelling. As we outline below, for some of these people, in-person ticket purchase is by far the most realistic way for them to obtain tickets and the railway should continue to be meet this need where there is sufficient demand for a station to be staffed.

Finally, we accept the headline rationale for the scale of these changes, that 10% (sometimes 12%) Tickets are now sold at Ticket Offices. But we think that this masks very different scenarios – stations inside London’s zonal system with very low percentages (eg Peckham Rye: 1.1%) vs stations outside (eg Luton (Town): 30.0%), where there is no simple, well established PAYG ticketing option (see our main submission). We believe that there are many medium sized stations with higher percentages of ticket offices sales where dedicated in-person ticket selling needs to continue to be offered, either with, or without, a ticket office window between customer and staff member.

More generally, as we have considered the proposals, we have concluded that a key point for all the alternatives is:

1. In some cases, the alternatives can be made fit for purpose (or at least much better) quite quickly. For instance websites could be enabled to sell Rangers and Rovers, booking cycle spaces online could be improved (see box).
2. In other cases, the alternatives can be made fit for purpose, but this will take time. For instance, we suggest below that TVMs might become operable in staff mode to take over functions currently only possible at a ticket office and we believe that more large screen TVMs are needed.
3. There are some situations where the alternatives will never be fit for purpose – as described above, usually applicable to the personal circumstances of the ticket buyer.

Comment from a member

On some websites (e.g. Avanti) the cycle booking facility is available if the whole journey is on Avanti. If I try to book e.g. Carnforth to Wolverhampton, using Avanti from Lancaster, cycle booking is not available at all.

We think there is too much focus on decommissioning an office, when the focus needs to be on how the people in, and the services provided from, that office are provided, with an emphasis on using slack time between sales more usefully. There seems to be a view that a ticket office can only be used for selling tickets. We think this is wrong – there are many stations where it could have a multiple role – improve revenue control, supervise gate lines, provide information and passenger security.

Subject to layout, an ideal is a window overlooking the concourse either side of a barrier, so giving advice public and ticketed sides, supervising the barrier and platforms. Staff should be visible, but some do not sell tickets, and cash sales are managed separately, so obviating a secure area. The staff should therefore be able to come out and assist where passenger including disabled access, need help.

- TfL have done this at many locations, mostly at locations far busier than National rail stations. The DfT should refer to TfL with a view to actually improving the environment for passengers.