

# Agenda Item IMD20

## INDIVIDUAL EXECUTIVE MEMBER DECISION

REFERENCE IMD: 2023/20

<b>TITLE</b>	Rail Ticket Office Closures Consultation
<b>DECISION TO BE MADE BY</b>	Executive Member for Active Travel, Transport and Highways - Paul Fishwick
<b>DATE, MEETING ROOM and TIME</b>	31 August 2023 LGF9 at 12PM
<b>WARD</b>	None specific;
<b>DIRECTOR / KEY OFFICER</b>	Director, Place and Growth - Giorgio Framalitto

### **PURPOSE OF REPORT (Inc Strategic Outcomes)**

This report sets out our response to consultations regarding ticket office closures as presented by Transport Focus, South Western Railway (SWR) and Great Western Railway (GWR) impacting key stations: Crowthorne, Earley, Reading, Twyford, Wargrave, Winnersh, Winnersh Triangle and Wokingham.

The consultation has been considered by officers with input requested from all Ward Members and Town and Parish Councillors. It should be noted that due to the timing of the consultation many of those consulted will not have been available to add their views, however, there has been a general agreement across the borough regarding the response.

### **RECOMMENDATION**

That the Executive Member for Active Travel, Transport and Highways agree the appended response for submission to consultations regarding ticket office closures as presented by Transport Focus, South Western Railway (SWR) and Great Western Railway (GWR) by the deadline of 1 September.

### **SUMMARY OF REPORT**

This report summarises the comments received from various ward members in regard to upcoming ticket office closures as presented by Transport Focus, South Western Railway (SWR) and Great Western Railway (GWR) impacting key stations: Crowthorne, Earley, Reading, Twyford, Wargrave, Winnersh, Winnersh Triangle and Wokingham.

Key concerns include reductions in accessibility, assistance, safety, security, quality of service and availability of options provided only through a ticket office.

## Background

The Ticket Office Closures Consultation encompasses proposed changes by train operators to modernize the railway system in England. The plan involves closing the majority of rail station ticket offices over a three-year period. A three-week consultation was commenced and managed by Transport focus launched on the 5th of July to conclude on the 26th of July. These original timescales meant that WBC would not be able to compile a response to the consultation but instead was due to write to Transport Focus to register our objection to the process as a whole, however, due to many others also expressing this concern, the consultation was extended until the 1st of September 2023.

The two primary railway operators in the Wokingham area are South Western Railway (SWR) and Great Western Railway (GWR) managing key stations: Crowthorne, Earley, Reading, Twyford, Wargrave, Winnersh, Winnersh Triangle and Wokingham.

SWR categorizes stations based on footfall and outlines their approach for each category:

Category 1 stations (e.g., Basingstoke)

would have multiple colleagues to assist with ticket purchase, journey planning, accessibility needs, and more. Unstaffed hours would require customers to use ticket machines or online purchasing.

Category 2 stations (e.g., Wokingham)

would have several colleagues available during peak hours to support various customer needs. Unstaffed hours would require the use of ticket machines or online options.

Category 3 stations (e.g., Winnersh, Winnersh Triangle, Earley)

would have one colleague available at certain times and emphasize digital ticket purchases. Video-calling capabilities on ticket machines would be introduced.

Category 4 stations (e.g., Smallbrook Station)

are already unstaffed, and customers can purchase tickets online or at vending machines.

It is important to note that aside from Wokingham, the rest of the stations operated by SWR in the Wokingham borough will be experiencing a loss in weekly staffing hours with Winnersh Triangle a reduction of 30 to 20 hours, Winnersh 33 to 20 hours and Earley 50 to 20 hours. A total of 10, 13 and 30 respectively.

For stations operated by GWR, they state that they will closing ticket offices in substitute for more visible and trained staff members to assist passengers when needed. For key stations that impact Wokingham residents, Crowthorne and Twyford staffing hours are proposed to remain the same in contrary to Reading which will be reduced. Reading station weekly staffing hours are proposed to reduce from 109.25 hours per week to 90.5 hours, a total weekly reduction by 18.75 hours, despite acting as a key interchange for Wokingham, London and Gatwick Airport.

Wokingham Borough's impacts from GWR and SWR's changes include modifications in station staffing hours for various stations. Case studies which highlight how stations in each category will operate under the proposed changes are summarised in Appendix 4.

### **Accessibility and Assistance Concerns:**

The closure of ticket offices raises concerns for passengers who might not be able to navigate online booking systems. This particularly affects older individuals, those with disabilities, impaired eyesight and families who rely on ticket office expertise to plan day trips and leisure travel.

Parents of children in SEND education are worried about losing the assistance of ticket office staff, especially when the council is also withdrawing supported travel. They feel their children won't be able to navigate public transport safely and effectively without ticket office support.

### **Safety and Security Concerns:**

The closure of ticket offices could lead to a reduction in safety and security for passengers, especially for women and other vulnerable groups. Ticket offices provide a place of safety and support for both staff and passengers. Requiring staff to perform transactions on platforms could put both passengers and staff in vulnerable positions. Unstaffed stations pose security concerns, particularly for incidents, anti-social behaviour, and passenger safety. Losing the human presence of station staff may deter potential issues and help passengers feel safer.

### **Limited Options and Expertise:**

The proposed changes, like requiring passengers to travel to Category 1 stations to purchase certain tickets, may not be practical for all journeys. The complexity of such arrangements, lack of knowledge about station categories, and increased travel time pose challenges for passengers.

The knowledge and assistance of ticket office staff are crucial for understanding fare options, ticket types, and travel routes. Many passengers have concerns about navigating ticket machines, especially for complex journeys or when machines are not working properly. This is a particular concern for stations that only have one ticket machine, such as Winnersh.

### **Demographic Considerations:**

The closure of ticket offices disproportionately affects groups that rely on cash payments, including older people, lower-income individuals, and even young passengers.

Closing ticket offices impacts accessibility for disabled individuals, creating concerns about discrimination and difficulties in obtaining suitable tickets.

### **Quality of Service and User-Friendliness:**

It is likely that older people or vulnerable residents are more likely to find ticket machines confusing and difficult to use. It is also believed that ticket offices provide a better quality of service and human interaction. This shows a lack of equality in service that in future will exclude many of the borough's residents, particular given that some areas of the borough have a higher-than-average number of older and vulnerable residents.

The closure of ticket offices results in a loss of service quality for all passengers, leading to increased confusion, longer lines, and more difficulties in obtaining the best-value fares.

**Additional Concerns:**

The consultation process itself has been criticised for being complex, lengthy, and potentially discouraging participation. The fragmented nature of the consultation and lack of straightforward response methods are noted concerns.

Some specific stations, like Twyford, have highlighted the limitations of ticket machines for complex journeys and emphasized the busy nature of the ticket office throughout the day.

Overall, objections to the ticket office closures revolve around concerns about accessibility, safety, expertise, and the quality of service provided to a diverse range of passengers. Many believe that ticket offices play a vital role in ensuring a smooth, safe, and user-friendly travel experience for all. For further information and our proposed response to the consultation, please see the following Appendices:

- Appendix 1 – Response to Consultation
- Appendix 2 – SWR Ticket Office Proposed Changes
- Appendix 3 – GWR Ticket Office Proposed Changes
- Appendix 4 – Summary of consultation and issues

**FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE RECOMMENDATION**

***The Council faces unprecedented financial pressures as a result of; the longer term impact of the COVID-19 crisis, Brexit, the war in Ukraine and the general economic climate of rising prices and the increasing cost of debt. It is therefore imperative that Council resources are optimised and are focused on the vulnerable and on its highest priorities.***

	How much will it Cost/ (Save)	Is there sufficient funding – if not quantify the Shortfall	Revenue or Capital?
Current Financial Year (Year 1)	£0	Yes	R
Next Financial Year (Year 2)	£0	Yes	R
Following Financial Year (Year 3)	£0	Yes	R

<b>Other financial information relevant to the Recommendation/Decision</b>
N/A

<b>Cross-Council Implications</b>
The Council is trying to encourage sustainable travel including rail as part of its Climate Emergency Action Plan as well as ensuring that people are able to travel freely around the borough. The proposals appear to go against these objectives and so we are opposed to them.

<b>Public Sector Equality Duty</b>
This is a response to a consultation so our actions are not directly impacting on any groups, however, the proposals appear to be disadvantaging many groups within the borough and so Wokingham Borough Council is opposed to these.

<b>SUMMARY OF CONSULTATION RESPONSES</b>	
<b>Director – Resources and Assets</b>	No comment
<b>Monitoring Officer</b>	No comment
<b>Leader of the Council</b>	No comment

<b>For Highways use only</b>	
<b>Town and Parish Councils</b>	
Maria Bradshaw, Parish Clerk, St Nicholas Hurst Parish Council	Fundamentally disagree with the proposals. With a demographic in Hurst which includes a large proportion of older people, councillors do not find machines to be an easier or more user-friendly alternative and urge ticket offices not to be closed.
Annabel Wood – Parish Clerk, Arborfield and Newland Parish Council	Accessibility and support issues raised for those with special needs and impaired eyesight in addition to concerns raised by the WBC. Concern for reduced standard of service in exchange for reduced running costs for stations.
<b>Local Ward Members</b>	
Lindsay Ferris – Councillor Twyford	Simple journeys may be possible on ticket machines but more complicated journeys are far more difficult to organise without the support and assistance provided by ticket offices.  Many people in Twyford rely on Ticket offices and would not like to see this service shut.
Marie-Louise Weighill – Councillor, Norreys	Concern from the elderly on navigating online systems as well as for families who rely on the expertise of ticket offices to book day trips and leisure travel.  Parents of children and young people in SEND education who are facing the withdrawal of supported travel by the council are not able to organise and secure cost-effective safe travel for their children on public transport.

<p>Prue Bray – Councillor, Winnersh</p>	<p>For the low number of ticket sales for Winnersh and Winnersh Triangle, if the ticket office is not open for most of the day, most tickets will have to be bought online or at a machine.</p> <p>At stations with only one ticket machine such as Winnersh, a breakdown of the machine risks a passenger boarding without a ticket and facing a £100 fine through no fault of their own.</p> <p>Criticism of the consultation including complicated and difficult to find supporting documents, very short timeframe for consultation.</p>
<p>Rachel Burgess – Borough Councillor, Norreys Ward, and responding on behalf of Labour Group</p>	<p>Serious concerns over accessibility and discrimination concerns for disabled people or older/vulnerable people, unavailable products through ticket machines, reduction in safety and perception of safety while travelling, loss of quality service for all passengers and confusing and difficult to navigate ticket machines, particularly for older or vulnerable residents.</p>
<p>Sarah Kerr – Councillor, Evendons</p>	<p>Agree with the summary with additional concerns for:  Older, lower income and the youth who prefer to use cash and require additional assistance and advice to getting the correct tickets.  Security and perception of security specifically for women and girls in line with violence against women and girls (VAWG).</p>

<p><b>Reasons for considering the report in Part 2</b></p>
<p>N/A</p>

<p><b>List of Background Papers</b></p>
<p>Appendix 1 – Response to Consultation  Appendix 2 – SWR Ticket Office Proposed Changes  Appendix 3 – GWR Ticket Office Proposed Changes  Appendix 4 – Summary of consultation and issues</p>

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