

Dear Transport Focus,

I am writing on behalf of the Wokingham Borough Council who would like to express their strong opposition to the proposed ticket office closures at railway stations which impact key access routes to the borough in railway stations operated by both South Western Railway (SWR) and Great Western Railway (GWR). We would like to put forward our concerns for Crowthorne, Earley, Reading, Twyford, Wargrave, Winnersh, Winnersh Triangle and Wokingham stations impacting residents in the borough who use these regularly stations in particular though our objection to the plans extends beyond these geographical boundaries. We believe that these closures would have significant negative impacts on our residents and passengers using the rail services in the area.

For the listed stations, our primary concerns with the proposed changes are as follows:

Reduction in staffing hours: The proposed staffing hours from SWR and GWR are noticeably shorter than the current ticket office operating hours particularly for stations such as Earley, Winnersh, Winnersh Triangle and Reading. We find this particularly concerning as a key factor with the proposed changes is increased visibility of the staff in lieu of the ticket offices. However, we are concerned this will not be achieved with the proposed staffing hours, even leaving some days completely unstaffed.

Accessibility and Support: Many individuals, including those with disabilities, the elderly, the young and those from lower-income backgrounds, heavily rely on the assistance and advice provided by station staff. Ticket machines and mobile apps do not cater to all passengers' needs and may be inaccessible or confusing for some individuals, particularly for those with special educational needs or impaired eyesight. For those who predominantly use cash, part cash, part card payments including the older, disabled, young people and those without access to bank accounts, removing ticket offices would be a major barrier to their travel and a major cause of stress for their journeys. Overall, whilst this may be reducing the running costs for stations, we are concerned of the resulting reduced standard of service. This is a retrograde step, particularly as we try to encourage more people out of their cars and onto public transport.

Unavailability of key services from ticket machines: Services unavailable at ticket machines including refunds, season ticket changes, ranger and rover tickets, ferry/bus connections, park and ride, group save, disabled persons discount, season tickets over one month in length, advance fares, rail card purchases, off-peak tickets before 9.30am, changes to ticket classes, seat reservations, cycle reservations, photocards for season tickets, scholar tickets, sleeper bookings and car parking are key concerns for our travellers. While simpler journeys such as a return ticket from Twyford to Reading may be available through a ticket machine, more complex journeys are likely more difficult to arrange especially for the vulnerable, disabled and elderly. If ticket machines were to breakdown, it is also a concern for stations particularly at those stations with only one machine, such as Winnersh.

Reliance on Smart Media: While we recognise the importance of modernising the railway, we are concerned that the overreliance on smart media for ticketing may exclude individuals who do not have access to such technologies or prefer more traditional methods of purchasing tickets. This is a particular concern for areas of Wokingham where there is a large proportion of older people who might struggle with navigating smart media to purchase and amend their rail tickets.

Complication of proposals: The SWR Proposals have categorised Earley, Winnersh and Winnersh Triangle as category 3 stations with only Wokingham as a Category 2 station. From the case studies, it is noted that for ticket types that cannot be purchased at these stations, the customer would need to make their way to a category 1 station at a cost of extra time and diversion required for the

passenger. This is particularly concerning as those that would be affected by this will likely be those that struggle already with navigating digital devices and may also have accessibility issues. Having to divert them and make changes to their journey is a major concern. This information was also difficult to find and is a criticism of the consultation at present.

Passenger Safety and Security: Staffed ticket offices play a crucial role in ensuring passenger safety and security at stations. By removing the physical presence of staff from ticket offices, there may be a higher risk of incidents, anti-social behaviour, and a lack of immediate assistance during emergencies. Unstaffed train stations increases vulnerability for individuals, particularly for women and is a crucial step backwards against violence against women and girls (VAWG).

Impact on Staff: The closure of ticket offices may lead to job losses and pay cuts for station staff. We are concerned about the welfare of these employees and the consequences that their job security could have on their livelihoods and well-being.

Lack of Regulatory Oversight: If ticket offices are closed, there would no longer be any statutory regulation of staffing provision at stations. This could lead to further reductions in staffing levels, impacting passenger services and support.

Opposition from Disability Organisations: Numerous disability organisations have expressed their opposition to the ticket office closures. We value their input and are committed to ensuring that the railway service remains accessible and inclusive for all passengers.

Limited Consultation Period: The initial three-week consultation period was inadequate, and many stakeholders did not have sufficient time to prepare their responses. Extending the consultation period does not address the fundamental issue of inadequate time for meaningful input particularly given that the extension period is throughout August.

We urge the railway operators to reconsider their proposals and engage in more comprehensive consultations with all relevant stakeholders, including local authorities, disability groups, and passenger representatives. It is essential to find a balance between modernisation and maintaining the highest standards of accessibility and support for all passengers.

Wokingham Borough Council is committed to advocating for the best interests of our residents and ensuring that the railway service in our area remains reliable, inclusive, and safe for all. We request that our concerns are taken into account before any final decisions are made.

Thank you for considering our response, and we look forward to further discussions on this critical matter.

Wokingham Borough Council