

PROPOSED CLOSURE OF HEXHAM TICKET OFFICE – CONSULTATION RESPONSE

1. Background
2. Proposals
3. What will be lost?
4. Some case studies
5. What needs to be done before any change?
6. In conclusion

Background Information

Northern proposes to close ticket offices at most stations where these facilities are available¹. There is one staffed ticket office on the Tyne Valley Railway at Hexham. Under these proposals this key station will see its ticket office closed. This stance is in stark contrast to previous thoughts given to the expansion of ticket offices facilities along the Tyne Valley route e.g., new provision at MetroCentre.

This response is from the accredited Community Rail Partnership (CRP) for the Tyne Valley Railway, comprising feedback from members of the CRP and our communities impacted by these proposals.

It is worthy of note this response is based on the limited information currently available. The lack of a robust business case, evidence of savings, clarity and certainty of future staffing commitments, available station facilities, all underpinned by the short timescale clearly undermines the principle of a proper and reasoned consultation period.

What We Currently Have

Hexham is a busy market town serving numerous functions – it is home to c.12,000 residents, many of whom commute(d) by rail into Tyne & Wear; it acts as a focal point for local rural communities throughout the Tyne Valley; it also serves as a tourist destination and gateway to UNESCO Hadrian's Wall, which attracts many international visitors².

The latter point is especially pertinent within the context of this consultation – given the post-pandemic growth of leisure travel by rail and encouragement of the use of public transport, the availability of reliable travel information to encourage residents and visitors to get out of their cars is essential to support the economy and, of course, the revenue of the rail industry.

The ticket office at Hexham is open during the working day Monday to Friday and on Saturday morning³. As a single-staffed station, Hexham's ticket office staff undertake a multiple of tasks, supporting ticket sales whilst ensuring the safety of the station and the well-being of the customer: -

- Selling tickets and providing advice on the most appropriate for passengers' intended journeys.

¹<https://www.northernrailway.co.uk/sites/default/files/202307/Public%20Consultation%20Document%20-%20V3.pdf>.

² 40% of visitors to Hadrian's Wall attractions are international travellers.

³ Current regulated opening hours: Monday-Friday 0715-1730 hours Saturday 0815-1415 hours

- Provide reassurance to those people unfamiliar with rail travel, help people book Passenger Assist and encourage and support the use of sustainable transport rather than the car.
- Accepting cash and warrants in payment for tickets.
- Opening and closing the waiting rooms.
- Opening the toilets (at present closed by the staff of the Platform Bar at the end of their trading day).
- Enabling passengers unable to use the footbridge to cross between the platforms by means of the barrow crossing.
- Fault reporting
- Ensuring the safety of everyone at the station
- At times of disruption, when trains are cancelled or depart from a different platform, provide reassurance and advice, ensuring passengers can board the right train or a rail replacement bus. This is especially important when the long line public address and customer information screens broadcast incorrect information.
- A facility to act as an ad hoc tourism ambassador for the town, Northumberland National Park and the UNESCO World Heritage Site Hadrian's Wall. Ticket office personnel are often the first contact that many visitors have with the area.

The barrow crossing is particularly important because the alternative route between the platforms is lengthy (circa 650 m). Alongside one of the main roads in and out of Hexham, the step-free route crosses three main roads, only one of which has a pedestrian crossing, is particularly isolated in one stretch.

As you will see from this photo, the footpath is of limited width, hazardous for the very people with no alternative means of step-free access between platforms, users of wheelchairs and wheeled walkers, and people with buggies ⁴.

There is no map nor signposting to show support people using the route. Those passengers forced to use this route to get from one platform to the other will risk missing their train and possibly onward connections.

For safety reasons, understandably, passengers are not permitted to use the barrow crossing on their own, so the staff presence here is crucial.



What is Proposed

The ticket office at Hexham will close. In its place, a new role of 'Journey Maker' will be deployed, but only for 3.5 hours on a Monday to Saturday. This represents a **60% reduction** from the current ticket office opening hours.

We understand the Journey Maker will have the following functions:

- Give customers information.
- Help customers to buy tickets online and via machines.
- Provide extra assistance to those who need it.
- Keep stations clean and tidy.

⁴ <https://julianvaughan.blog/2020/02/06/rail-access-map-takes-the-wrong-route/>

- Make announcements at stations.
- Assist during service disruption.
- Help resolve customer issues.

There is lack of clarity on the role, skills and availability of Journey Makers and feedback on issues such as:

- a) Is the 3.5 hours quoted the actual time on the platform? Will signing on/off and administrative work be outside these hours?
- b) Will Journey Makers receive the same level of training in ticketing and other procedures as has been provided to ticket office staff?
- c) Will reserve staff be available to cover sickness, annual leave, training etc?
- d) What is the likelihood of current ticket office staff wanting to work as Journey Makers? Will Northern be able to find people to work such a short shift?
- e) Northern has indicated facilities such as waiting areas and toilets will remain available. Will this be for the duration of the Journey Maker's shift only?
- f) There has been no reassurance about the availability of barrow crossings for those unable to negotiate the footbridge or independently use the c.650m alternative route between the platforms. Will Journey Makers be given the necessary training to allow people to use the barrow crossing?
- g) It has been suggested the Journey Maker may be redeployed to another station for special events which generate an exceptional number of passenger movements or in cases of disruption.
 - a. In such circumstances, would it be a worthwhile exercise given the additional travelling time to a different station?
 - b. What arrangements will be in place for people arriving at Hexham wanting ticket advice during times of redeployment?

Northern's plans to introduce ticket retailing at local convenience shops may benefit those wanting to pay by cash and for tickets for local journeys. Given the complexities of the national ticketing system, it is highly doubtful staff in local shops will have the time, capacity, skill, or patience to deal with complicated journey enquiries, leading to frustrations on behalf of the passenger. Whether this will be a viable option is yet to be determined. Will shops with PayPoint facilities want to take on this work? Will the commission paid to them be considered worthwhile? Is it possible that selling rail tickets will have a negative impact on their core business?

What Will Be Lost

A loss of over 53 hours per week in staff availability with the associated loss of customer assistance, staff skills, station security and, potentially, depleted revenue through lost sales. In most businesses, these are key areas for business survival - something surely which the rail industry must recognise.

The loss of a regulated part of the rail industry, i.e. ticket offices with specified opening hours, is a clear degradation of the industry standards. It seems Journey Makers will be outside the scope of the regulatory framework, consequently their role could be withdrawn by train companies without further consultation.

Many passengers, and particularly those who are infrequent travellers or nervous about booking online, are aware the best time to visit the station to purchase tickets for longer or more complex journeys is at the booking office's quieter times. This will not be possible if the ticket office is closed,

and many people will naturally be dissuaded from having to make a lengthy journey, at additional expense, to the nearest staffed facility at Newcastle Central.

Again, there is the potential for lost revenue - will rail users migrate to other forms of transport if they cannot get timely and appropriate advice as to rail travel? This seems counter-intuitive to the Government's and rail industry's agenda to encourage sustainable transport use.

Staff working in ticket offices possess a high level of skill and knowledge of the myriad of ticket types, accepted routes and lesser-known products such as rovers, rangers, and PlusBus. Skills which will be lost to the industry if they decide to take any offer of redundancy rather than reduce their hours to become Journey Makers. Any new staff employed as Journey Makers will not have the experience, familiarity and access to immediate support to meet the needs of the customer.

Feedback from our community engagement reveals concerns about the negative impact on the local economy, particularly the tourism sector, who encourage travel to the area by train and connecting public transport services. Tourists unfamiliar with public transport rely on information provided at Hexham's ticket office.

It appears inevitable some tickets will become unavailable. Northern has produced a chart showing ticket types⁵. In response to a query made following sight of this chart, it's been stated the number of ticket types affected amounts to 81, representing 1.7% of the range. A simple calculation indicates a total range of 4765 ticket types. Even if the remaining 4684 ticket types remain available from the channels available, in the absence of expert advice, this level of complexity will defeat many passengers.

Using Northern's data at Appendix A as an example, 786 railcards were sold at Hexham in three months. There will be no alternative but to buy them online if the ticket office closes, with the potential of discouraging people from using rail travel. This has the potential to particularly impact on the sale and use of Senior Railcards, given not all people in this age group have a smartphone or a computer, or find them accessible.

There are four ticket vending machines at Hexham, only one of which is adapted to accept cash. This facility has not been operational for some time and the local station manager has indicated it isn't going to return. Northern's data for Hexham indicates 20% of issues from the ticket office was paid for with cash (see data at Appendix A). While this is a reduction from 23% during the year April 2022 to March 2023, it is still a significant fraction of total sales.

It is estimated that one million people in the country do not have a bank account, credit or debit card⁶. The lack of the opportunity to use cash to pay for tickets has the potential for the rail industry to lose customers and revenue. Northern's published data highlights Hexham is used for a higher percentage of cash sales than their average for all stations.

Access to facilities and platforms will be an issue for passengers when Journey Makers are not present. Many passengers are unfamiliar with Passenger Assist, do not know how to pre-book and subsequently rely on ticket office staff making arrangements for them on the day. Assuming waiting rooms and toilets will be available for longer than the Journey Maker is present, there remain the

⁵ <https://www.northernrailway.co.uk/sites/default/files/2023-07/Ticket%20purchase%20options.pdf>

⁶ Source Martin Lewis, Money Saving Expert

problems of getting between platforms for passengers unable to use the footbridge and information at times of disruption.

Many rail users, especially vulnerable people or those with disabilities or special needs, will lose the vital assistance and valued reassurance of a staff presence. Only 3% of people with visually impairments can use a ticket vending machine⁷ - what do they do out of the Journey Maker hours? How will people with Crohn's access toilet facilities?

As well as providing reassurance, the presence of a uniformed member of staff at the station deters unsafe or inappropriate behaviour and encourages the security of passengers and the buildings.

The station is a valuable asset to both the town and the Northumberland National Park, as it is often the stepping-off point for visitors (from all over the world) to the wider area. Without the station staff, Hexham station (outside of the restricted hours of the Journey Makers) will be like any other unstaffed station. It will have no means of linking visitors with all the area can offer, not least the UNESCO World Heritage site that is Hadrian's Wall.

Case Studies

Short notice closures of the ticket office at Hexham are a regular experience. On occasions, members of our team have witnessed the impact this has on the journey experience of the customer. Some are reflected below.

1. A mother with a baby in a buggy and a toddler were trying to travel from Newcastle to Riding Mill. As the "stopping" train has been cancelled, staff at Newcastle advised the passenger to travel to Hexham, cross to the other platform and then get on the next service to Riding Mill. But at Hexham, the ticket office was closed so the mother had no choice but to try to use the footbridge. Trying to negotiate a footbridge safely with a baby, toddler and a buggy is impossible. Fortunately, the CRP Officer was on the platform and went to the aid of the family and held the toddler whilst the mother struggled to get the buggy over the footbridge.
2. Also witnessed by the CRP officer was a woman with a very large suitcase accompanied by a dog struggling to negotiate the footbridge when access to the barrow crossing was not available.
3. Another incident recently witnessed was a young female who tried to use the ticket vending machine without success, gave up and went into the Platform Bar.
4. During a short visit on a recent afternoon, our Chair witnessed several people visiting the ticket office, closed due to staff shortages, who were unable to obtain travel advice and purchase tickets, left without using the vending machine. One of these people having an unsuccessful 13-mile round trip by car.

Throughout the short period of consultation, we have sought the views of the community and have had a high level of engagement, demonstrating the value our travellers place on this facility and the significant concern over its potential loss.

⁷ RNIB research

Feedback directly by email has included:

- **IB:** Last year we had to purchase a rail card and tickets to Manchester to catch a suitable flight out to Australia to visit our son. My husband and I found purchasing these at Hexham booking office so very handy, and we got such good support from the staff there, on the best value way to travel. We are both in the 80s range and would be lost without the Hexham office being available to us for information. At our age we are not into computerised equipment, so would have been lost without the local Hexham office for advice. Please don't close any booking offices on this line.
- **GT:** Having read your article I am really concerned. My daughter who is autistic will be using the Hexham to Carlisle train 4 times per week to attend college. It is a worry that she will not have anyone to consult with and potentially end up at totally the wrong station/platform. It gave me comfort that she would have someone with knowledge to help thus encouraging her independence.
- **JK:** I am strongly against the closure of Hexham ticket office for the following reasons: As a traveller with mobility issues, I need assistance in getting to Platform 1 where the trains leave for Newcastle. This is obviously a real safety issue, and the ticket office staff are crucial in ensuring my safety. I often experience glitches with using the ticket machines on the station platform. This causes anxiety about obtaining, or collecting, my train tickets. I often have to go to the ticket office for advice and they obtain my train tickets (for collection) for me. Also, I usually purchase a ticket that includes travel on the metro (Newcastle) as well as train travel to Newcastle. This option is not available to buy on the platform ticket machines. I often accompany my friend's learning-disabled daughter who also purchases a ticket that covers metro travel. The ticket station staff are invaluable in their support for this and in their care and attention to my friends daughter. Safety is of the most paramount importance. The ticket office staff are crucial in this and in their advice for travel. Although I book my tickets from Newcastle to London online there are many, many others (including my sister) who do not purchase tickets online and rely on station staff to assist her in purchasing tickets. To this end, closure of the ticket office and the role the staff play in helping is discriminatory against those who do not use the internet.
- **JP:** I live in an elderly supported living complex in Hexham where a lot of tenants have had to give up their cars due to age and ill health. Hexham is so fortunate to have great connectivity via rail to nearby towns that train has become their default mode of transport for hospital appointments in Newcastle and days out to Carlisle and the borders etc. The majority are very elderly and completely bamboozled by tech, have failing eyesight, poor coordination and dexterity and limited ability to learn how to use tech at this late stage of life, so buying tickets online or via machine is totally prohibitive. I am disabled and a wheelchair user needing assistance if I am to use trains, especially as travelling in one direction at Hexham means I have to cross the tracks. Has this large and growing demographic been considered? What sort of help will be provided at stations to help those who have relied on ticket offices? Will there be help for those with sight, dexterity, mobility, learning or reading difficulties?
- **NJ:** My daughter (20 year old) has used the Hexham/Haltwhistle trains (daily during term time) for about 7 years now. She commented that she can understand that from a sales perspective she could understand the move to close the ticket offices, BUT she felt that they serve a bigger function as information/advice centres. She readily recalled people asking about

season ticket, concessionary tickets, tourist information (both travel and general), elderly folk asking about travel and some younger travellers who were not regular train users.

- **GS:** As a partially sighted person, the proposed closure of Hexham train station booking office will prove very difficult for me, as use of a ticket machine is not practicable, and I do not have sufficient sight to use a smart phone.
- **SC:** Will the station retain its public toilets as part of this proposal or not? This is essential. I also fear that the staff redeployed will be phased out altogether very shortly.

Responses on social media posts highlight the issues of accessibility, ticket vending machines issues, ticket types purchased and include:

- I'm 56 and can't use the machines so these offices are a god send.
- I feel it is very important to be able to converse with a human. I am disabled and struggle with machines and the Internet. Please keep Hexham Ticket Office open.
- I saw the proposed times when there would be staff at the station - basically avoiding the rush hour! 9-12.30 during the week, when the place is pretty quiet anyway. So I'd request more sensible timings for the staffing and also ensure that the staff who are there are able to issue tickets.
- I use the station frequently and see a lot of people using the office not just to buy train and parking tickets but getting travel advice and timetable/fares help, ie. needing a real person to speak to.
- A lovely lady not that long ago help me book tickets for disabled traveller and was absolutely brilliant, couldn't fault her and because of great help I received I again went back to Hexham booking office and this time a male ticket advisor help and what can I say without both I would still be struggling to book trains, seats and assistants at the stops etc so Please don't close Hexham train station ticket office. As well who would then take vulnerable passengers across the lines safely that can't do the steps on the bridge???
- Definitely keep the ticket office!! Them shitty machines only work half the time!! On a train now with no ticket is £50 spot fine and the fare!!
- I frequently use the ticket office, to book in advance journeys with several stages. I find this difficult online. Single journeys are ok. The office staff are very helpful, managing connections etc. What do people do now if they are unable to use the internet. Surely not travel to Newcastle to make a booking.
- I think the proposals contravene the requirements of the equalities act for this reason at many stations.
- I prefer a person to a machine and also someone who could make sure I'm getting on the right platform. Don't replace with a machine.

- I have a disability too. I need help to get on the far side of the platform ie someone there to help me so I do not have to climb the stairs.
- How does this now work with no one there?!
- If the 1st time you bought a Senior Railcard was at a Ticket Office, you cannot renew it online. Has to be a ticket office. So the nearest is going to be Newcastle. Idiots. Plus, how do wheelchair users get over to the other platform at Hexham station? The Ticket Office staff get permission to cross these days and help people over. Madness if they close them all.
- As wheelchair users have to cross over the line how will they manage without ticket office staff to escort them?
- The machine does not give all ticket options even staff cannot find duo tickets on it. So we always go to the ticket office.
- And the minute the railways go cashless is the minute I choose to never use a train again.
- The staff are essential to help people with disabilities.
- I'm disabled, so I need help to get to the other side of the platform. Without staff, I wouldn't be able to do that, also I need help with the ticket machine, that's why I always go to the ticket office for help. What's going to happen to disabled people like me, who need the ticket office and platform staff are no more.
- I also feel that will be less deterrent for bikes thieves.
- My wife would have to go all the way round down the road full of holes and cross over main road and it's dangerous and over bridge in the wheelchair

What Should Happen Before the Ticket Office is Closed

As a priority, immediate consideration should be given to how those passengers who are unable to use the footbridge will gain access to platforms, including users of wheelchairs and other mobility aids, those with other disabilities, people with young children and buggies. An option is to provide lifts to enable access from one platform to the other; something which has been suggested by the CRP in the past but not yet considered for inclusion in infrastructure improvements.

It is universally acknowledged the present fares system is vastly overcomplicated and hard for passengers to understand. There is widespread concern that in the absence of expert advice, passengers will end up buying a ticket that is not valid for the journey they intend to make, or they will end up paying far more than they need. We contend the fares system must be radically simplified before the expert retail provision, upon which many passengers depend, is withdrawn. LNER is introducing single leg pricing across its network. The intention is to end up with a fares system having only three ticket types for each of standard and first-class journeys (open, flexible, advanced). This is the objective the railway must reach and have established before it starts closing ticket offices.

The Williams-Shapps Plan for Rail⁸ acknowledges the complexity of the present fares system is confusing to many would-be passengers. The plan commits Great British Railways to introducing easy, frictionless payment options for every journey across the network. Specifically, the following measures are promised:

- Pay as you go journeys will be expanded outside London to make millions more trips straightforward.
- A new Great British Railways website and app will create a personalised travel experience.
- Customer service at stations will be modernised, with one-team working expanded across the network. Improving customer service at stations large and small across the network is vital to modernising the passenger experience and integrating rail travel better with wider transport services. This will also make it easier for tourists to navigate the network and boost economic growth.

These initiatives need to be in place before ticket offices are closed.

Many people struggle to purchase the most appropriate ticket from the ticket vending machines, which at times are unreliable due to equipment or systems failure. Enhancements to these machines are considered essential.

Consideration should be given to the Penalty Fares system, the inability to purchase a ticket from the ticket office or from a Journey Maker exacerbated by the TVM being impossible or impractical to use has the potential for customers to unfairly face a penalty fine. The introduction of realistic and customer-friendly procedures to help people, rather than fine them, when they have problems buying tickets, obtaining a Promise to Pay ticket and losing their opportunity to benefit from railcard discounts must be understood and addressed.

As a priority, if the proposed closure is to be implemented, then Northern need to reconsider the working hours of the Journey Maker, increasing them to align with the current hours of opening, reflecting the needs of the passenger requiring access to platforms, trains, information, and offering reassurance. Whilst these are not revenue-generating tasks, they are critical to customer service and future income-generation.

In Conclusion

People value people, Hexham's ticket office is much more than a means of selling tickets.

Throughout this submission, we have considered feedback from passengers and the community, which supports our view that the proposal to close the ticket office at Hexham does not provide safeguards to enable people to:

- a) plan their journey effectively, book and receive reliable assistance to enable a journey.
- b) buy the most appropriate ticket for the journey they want to take.
- c) receive an acceptable level of information and reassurance at times of disruption to services.
- d) receive assistance to enable them to board trains.
- e) have access to waiting rooms, toilets and feel safe at the station when it is unstaffed.
- f) have the reassurance they will not face a Penalty Fare or car parking fine through inability to purchase a ticket.

⁸ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/great-british-railways-williams-shapps-plan-for-rail>

We cannot support the scheme as currently proposed. Acknowledging there is notable growth in digital ticketing and the changing nature of our railways, this does not mean everyone is 'on board', able to use such advances in technology or wishes to do so.

Simplification of ticketing, improvements to ticket vending machines, and a solution to the accessibility issues faced by those unable to use the footbridge need to be implemented before Hexham's ticket office should even be considered for closure.

Even then, for the reasons set out throughout this response, we feel this would be the wrong action to take.

24 July 2023