

PROPOSED CLOSURE OF CARLISLE TICKET OFFICE – CONSULTATION RESPONSE

Avanti West Coast proposes to close ticket offices at its stations introducing an on-platform Customer Ambassador. The proposals and those of other companies mean that there will be no staffed ticket offices to meet the needs of residents or tourists to the area between Barrow in Furness and Newcastle.

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.

Avanti West Coast have other staff working at the station, who provide a range of support services to passengers, meaning that the impact of ticket office closure may be perceived as less dramatic as the closure of a single-staffed station.

Carlisle is the gateway to two UNESCO World Heritage sites – Hadrian’s Wall and the Lake District. It has a university with students from throughout the United Kingdom and overseas. As a connecting station to regional routes and the West Coast Main Line, it is a focal point for local, regional, national, and international passengers.

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 It seems Customer Ambassadors will be outside the scope of the regulatory framework, consequently their role could be withdrawn by train companies without further consultation.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, use the ticket office to obtain advice and book tickets and railcards. The current ticket office provides a focal point of advice, something which will be lost when Customer Ambassadors will be working on the platform. But which platform? The layout of Carlisle Station is such that the Customer Ambassador will not always be visible.

Have Avanti West Coast considered that people with hearing impairments may not be able to communicate effectively with a Customer Ambassador whilst a platform given the background noise from announcements and other passengers? How will people with visual impairments find a Customer Ambassador on the platform?

With the plans to reconfigure facilities within the station area as part of the Borderlands investment in the city, passengers will also have to contend with the building works as physical changes are made to the main entrance and station environment. This combined with the proposed closure of the ticket office may well be a discouragement to those people not regular rail passengers.

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 Customer Ambassadors. Any new staff employed as Ambassadors will not have the experience, familiarity, and access to immediate support to meet the needs of the customer. Will Customer Ambassadors be able to sell the full range of tickets presently available from the ticket office? Or is it envisaged that some tickets, for example Railcards requiring different ticket stock, will only be available online?

Will cash be accepted if ticket offices close? It is estimated that one million people in the country do not have a bank account, credit or debit card¹.

Ticketing needs to be 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 Rail² 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.

¹ Source Martin Lewis, Money Saving Expert

² <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/great-british-railways-williams-shapps-plan-for-rail>

In Conclusion

In preparing this submission, we have considered feedback from passengers and the community, which supports our view that the proposal to close the ticket office at Carlisle 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.

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.

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

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