

To Transport Focus and London TravelWatch

20 July 2023

Dear Sir or Madam,

### **Age UK's response to proposals to close ticket offices**

We are writing to raise concerns about the proposed approach to the future of ticket offices across the railway network. We are also concerned about the way that the consultation has been carried out. While the changes affect the train network nationally, each train company has its own plan and local consultation, and these are only open for 21 days. Organisations and individuals need more time to respond and also the opportunity to influence the policy at a national level.

Age UK is concerned that ticket office closures could make it harder for some older people to buy train tickets and to get the help they need at stations. We are not convinced that the proposed alternative arrangements will always offer suitable options, especially for those with disabilities and/or who do not use the latest technology.

Access to transport is a crucial issue for older people, and we hear regularly about the important role that public transport plays in allowing people to undertake important activities like attending hospital appointments, visiting family and friends, and going grocery shopping. When accessible good quality transport links are not available, it makes all of these things very difficult and can have a significant impact on someone's health and wellbeing.

### **Buying tickets**

One of the justifications for the change is that just 12% of tickets are now bought at ticket offices. However, this still represents a substantial number of journeys – out of the total 1.4 billion journeys made between April 2022 and March 2023, 168 million involved a ticket office purchase. Many of those who buy their ticket in person will be older or disabled people, or those with complex enquiries. The ability to talk to, and buy a ticket from, a member of staff is essential in many situations.

#### **Age UK**

7th Floor  
One America Square  
17 Crosswall  
London EC3N 2LB

**t** 0800 169 87 87  
**f** 020 3033 1000  
**e** [contact@ageuk.org.uk](mailto:contact@ageuk.org.uk)  
**www.ageuk.org.uk**

Digital exclusion is a key driver, as 2.7 million people aged 65+, around a fifth (22%), do not use the internet.<sup>i</sup> And over half (52%) of people aged 65+ who do go online are 'narrow users' meaning they only carry out limited activities online.<sup>ii</sup> They might, for example, email and make video calls but do not want to purchase tickets and other items online due to limited digital skills or concerns about fraud. Even for those with knowledge of digital services and basic skills, it can be difficult to navigate systems to get the correct ticket.

Digital exclusion is higher among disabled people, meaning older disabled people are more likely to be offline than people of the same age who are not disabled. This can mean using any kind of technology to purchase tickets may be challenging. It is imperative that the support is available, and that staff are adequately trained in how to help people with different characteristics – exactly what we believe can be best delivered through a ticket office. We are not confident that the proposed alternative arrangements are satisfactory.

Using a ticket machine may be difficult or impossible for people with physical or sensory impairments and machines may not provide the option to buy the required tickets. For example, they may not allow someone to buy a ticket starting from another station (if someone already has a ticket covering part of the journey) or for a future journey.

### **The benefits of ticket office staff**

Station staff are often very helpful in advising people of the best and cheapest routes or help them compare different journeys. Unlike machines they will be able to sell tickets from any station or for advance journeys. They may also be able to help explore different options when problems arise, for example, if a train has been cancelled.

Aside from selling tickets, staff based in ticket offices offer a specific place where those needing assistance can go. This could be to get information, ask for help in the case of an emergency, ask about disability assistance, or get advice on, or access to, station facilities such as toilets. Without a dedicated and specific place, it could be difficult or deeply inconvenient to get assistance. For example, most stations have at least two platforms, so if assistance is only available on one side this will mean someone has to cross over, which for some people is very difficult or even impossible.

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## Proposals for alternative assistance

The Rail Delivery Group website states that the proposals are designed to move staff out of ticket offices and onto station platforms and that this will mean staff will be able 'to help more customers across a whole range of needs, from buying tickets, to offering travel advice and helping those with accessibility needs.'

However, we are concerned that in practice the proposals will not provide the same level of support as the current system. The big advantage of a ticket office is that customers know exactly where staff are situated and what times the office is open. Older and disabled people are often not in the position to be able to walk up and down platforms looking for a member of staff.

While we agree that staff should be able to help customers in a range of ways, this would be more accessible if those offering this service continued to be based at designated ticket offices.

We are also concerned that replacing ticket offices with a range of alternative options, alongside pressure for people to buy their tickets online, will lead to an increasingly variable service at different stations and, at some stations, a reduction in the times staff are available. This could make it harder for some older and disabled people to buy tickets and to receive the support they need to travel with confidence.

We believe that ticket offices provide an important service that enables many older and disabled people to continue using rail services and we hope that these proposals will be reconsidered.

Yours faithfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Caroline Abrahams'.

Caroline Abrahams  
Charity Director Age UK

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<sup>i</sup> Age UK analysis of quarterly Labour Force Survey, January-March 2021 projected to 2022 figures.

<sup>ii</sup> [https://www.ofcom.org.uk/data/assets/pdf\\_file/0020/234362/adults-media-use-and-attitudes-report-2022.pdf](https://www.ofcom.org.uk/data/assets/pdf_file/0020/234362/adults-media-use-and-attitudes-report-2022.pdf) 'Narrow users' are those who have only carried out between one and four of 13 online activities asked about.

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