

Transport Focus – Ticket Office Consultation – response from Community Rail Network

Introduction

1. Community Rail Network is a not-for-profit organisation working across Britain to support, champion and represent community rail: a growing, thriving grassroots movement that works to engage communities with their railways, and ensure local people benefit from railways and stations.
2. Community rail now includes 76 community rail partnerships (CRPs) and c. 1,200 station friends' groups and other local groups, spread across Britain. These are community-based and led groups and organisations, working closely with the rail industry, to:
 - Enhance the railways' contribution to local sustainable development and community wellbeing, including by maximising access to and use of the railways;
 - Ensure the community has a voice and plays a part in the development and improvement of our railways, so this meets community needs and aspirations and delivers maximum benefit;
 - Communicate the development and importance of our railways to communities, enhancing understanding and pride, and promoting rail as a key part of sustainable, healthy travel;
 - Encourage and enable more people to use rail (see our [report](#) on modal shift), including by supporting groups and individuals with mobility and additional travel needs.
3. Community Rail Network works to empower, support and champion community rail as a membership organisation. We share good practice, connect those working in community rail, and help our members to enhance their impact and overcome challenges. We also raise wider awareness about community rail and share its unique insights with policy and decision-makers. We are the lead delivery partner for the Department for Transport's Community Rail Development Strategy and work closely with government at different levels to advise on community rail's insights and experiences.
4. This consultation response does not provide specifics on the views of our members, which are numerous and attuned to local contexts and nuances. Instead we provide an overview of views and responses we have heard from the community rail movement. We have simultaneously encouraged community rail partnerships and station groups to input into the consultations with their locally focused views, and urge that their local knowledge and advice is utilised effectively within each of the train operator level consultations.

Our response to the pledges and proposals

5. Community Rail Network sees value, in principle, in certain pledges made by Rail Delivery Group (RDG) with regards to the changes in ticket office operations and staffing. Namely:
 - Across the network as a whole, there will be more staff available to give face-to-face help to customers out in stations than there are today;
 - Customers will never have to travel out of their way to buy tickets;
 - Those with accessibility needs will always be supported;
 - Station staff who are multi-skilled, mobile, and flexible could have the ability to offer greater all-round support for passengers who need it, including continuing to offer advice and guidance on fares and ticketing.

6. The broad commitment to accessibility and inclusion is also welcome. This is an area of work fundamental to community rail partnerships and groups, which aim to increase rail patronage, break down barriers to travel, and promote rail as an inclusive travel option for all. We know from community rail experience that groups with additional mobility needs, and the many people across our communities who are less familiar and confident using rail, welcome a people presence on stations, to reassure them they are able to ask for help. At many stations, ticket offices provide a visible go-to point for this support, but if there are more staff available to offer face-to-face support – as the pledge suggests – and they are visible to all rail users, this again could be a positive, *so long as there is not a reduction in the times when they are available* (see further below).
7. Customers not having to travel out their way to buy tickets is also helpful, especially as fare complexity remains an issue for all passengers, and particularly for certain demographics, e.g. disabled and vulnerable people, those on low incomes, elderly people, young people, and families. We are aware of proposals for the Great British Railways Transition Team to create an easier, fairer fares structure in the future, but we and our members are also conscious of the uncertainties surrounding Great British Railways and the timescales for setting it up, so ensuring customers continue to have a human presence to reassure them they are buying the right ticket, at the best available fare, remains very important.
8. Despite potential value in the principles behind these pledges, as the umbrella body for community rail partnerships and station groups across Britain, we also need to report the strong concerns of so many of our members that the details contained within the proposals made by the 13 train operators will ultimately mean such commitments cannot be met. These concerns are outlined below, set out against the six main criteria that Transport Focus is using to assess the proposals to change the Ticketing and Settlement Agreement (TSA). They have been collated from numerous and detailed feedback from our membership, gathered via numerous emails we have received, a dedicated webinar on this issue, attending steering group and train operator meetings, and numerous direct conversations.
 - *Passengers can easily buy the right ticket for the journey they want to make*
9. While we acknowledge that the majority of tickets are now purchased either online or via ticket vending machines (TVMs), our members have concerns that the removal of ticket offices will leave many passengers, especially disabled people (visible and non-visible disabilities), people with vulnerabilities, elderly people, young people, and anyone less familiar with rail travel, at a disadvantage. This affects fair and equal access to rail travel and therefore to services and work, education, and leisure opportunities. Some may be unable to purchase online tickets in advance due to lack of access to or confidence with the internet or smartphone apps, and/or poor connectivity at stations, particularly in rural areas.
10. We have received comments regarding the usability, reliability, and positioning of TVMs. There can be occasions where they are not working, there may not enough to cope with demand at busy times when people are rushing for trains, and some people do not feel confident to use them at all, especially to negotiate complex ticketing and be sure of getting the right/cheapest ticket. Some of our members have found, via surveys and local

engagement activities, that apprehension around TVMs and digital technology is already a barrier to travel for some, and they feel that these proposals will increase those fears and lead to fewer people feeling able or willing to use rail. There are also passengers who need to pay with cash, which can be an issue with some TVMs.

11. There is also the issue of certain ticket types or transactions that cannot be bought or made via TVMs, e.g. purchase of season tickets/railcards, the availability of certain concessions etc. This is allied to the fact that many people are unsure of the most appropriate ticket to buy for some journeys and can be fearful of being fined. Many people (even in some cases those using apps) rely on advice from ticket office staff to ensure they get the correct, cheapest, and most convenient option. Even simple journeys can be subject to a variety of different fares and ticket types, and without the support of ticket office staff, people can be left confused and at risk of paying over the odds or being fined for an innocent mistake.
12. Many of our members recommend that any significant changes to the role of ticket offices must be *preceded* by a comprehensive fares review and the creation of a fairer, simpler fares structure that can be more easily understood, making people less reliant on advice from specialist ticket office staff. Until then, this support is vital and cannot be replaced by technology.
 - *Passengers requiring assistance to travel receive that assistance in a timely and reliable manner*
13. The pledges by RDG state that staff – and in ‘many cases’ extra staff – will be at stations and more visible and readily available on platforms and station concourses to help people to plan journeys and use digital and self-service ticketing. Were this the case, this would alleviate many of the concerns raised against the previous criterion, and should help to ensure timely and reliable assistance. Again, in principle, many of our members agree with this and are in favour of staff being a mobile, visible presence around the station and available to help passengers with ticketing and other needs (although how this should be deployed exactly would depend on the layout and nature of each station).
14. However, community rail partnerships and station groups have expressed strong concerns that the new multi-skilled roles being proposed are not an adequate replacement for ticket office positions. This is primarily due to the reduction of hours when staff will be at stations to provide in-person support, as set out in train operators’ proposals. Some members have stated that stations on their parts of the network will suffer cuts in staffing hours of around 70%, with ticket office opening hours, where at least one member of staff will be present, replaced by vastly reduced hours covered by mobile staff teams, responsible for a number of stations at once. There are also concerns in some cases that the proposed new hours are not appropriate to cater for the busiest times at stations when support is needed most. Some community rail partnerships and station groups have reported that mobile teams would serve their stations for two-hour periods during the morning, for example, when demand would be relatively low.
15. This criterion also specifically mentions Passenger Assist, which is growing in terms of usage and is something community rail proactively signposts to as part of its work building rail

confidence among disabled and vulnerable people. This is an important aspect of community rail's work in building travel confidence among those who face barriers to rail travel, as highlighted in our new [report](#), 'Community rail and inclusive, accessible travel,' which shows the huge amount of experience and expertise within community rail in developing inclusive, accessible travel. Building on the experience, our members are concerned that the reduction in staffing hours means that this support will not always be readily available, particularly on a turn-up-and-go basis. Community rail experience suggests that people with additional mobility needs greatly appreciate a human presence at stations and being able to ask friendly staff for in-person help. Members have concerns that mobile staff teams will not be able to offer the same level of support, meaning reliable assistance at all times will be impossible. This will make it more challenging for community rail to deliver its crucial work (set to be ramped up in many locations) increasing travel confidence among disabled people.

- *Passengers can get the information they require to plan and make a journey, including during periods of disruption*
16. The variety of information channels available at many stations are extremely useful, and our experience within community rail suggests that groups who lack rail confidence/familiarity or have additional travel needs can be supported, e.g. through travel confidence and/or rail familiarisation programmes and training, to become confident in using help points, touchscreen information points, and TVMs, as well as traditional notice boards with timetables. However, we also know that a lack of a human presence at stations, including to support the use of such facilities as needed, can be a barrier to travel for some and, as highlighted above, the current proposals constitute major reductions in staffing hours at many stations. This is likely to be a particular issue at times of disruption, the times of which are of course unpredictable, and during which people especially need and value face-to-face information and reassurance.
 17. Some of our members have commented that ticket offices are not only important for the knowledge and help of the staff, but in their nature as a focal point where people know they can go to ask for assistance, and someone will be there. If that staff member, or a team of mobile staff, are elsewhere on the station, some argue that they could actually be less visible, and at times of disruption, particularly on stations with multiple platforms, passengers may not be able to locate them. This may be a particular factor at certain stations, depending on their size and layout. For more vulnerable passengers with additional travel needs, losing this central and recognisable contact point may be an extra concern and something that could deter them from travel.
- *Passengers feel safe at a station*
18. Experience from community rail tells us that people find stations far safer and more welcoming when there is a staff presence. Again, while the proposals state that no currently staffed stations will become unstaffed via the planned changes, staffing hours in many cases will be cut back severely, which is of obvious concern to our members. The feeling is that if people feel unsafe, they will simply not travel, impinging on their mobility and access to

services and opportunities, or encouraging the far more carbon intensive, polluting option of driving, if this is available to them (for many it is not).

19. Also of concern is an increase in anti-social behaviour (ASB) at stations where staffing hours will be cut. While CCTV is a welcome addition at many stations, it is a reactive measure, and not wholly effective. There is a feeling among some of our members that a reduction in staff presence opens the door to problems that could undermine much of the good work done by station adoption groups across the network to make stations more welcoming, pleasant, and enjoyable (often in turn reducing ASB) and cause such groups to scale back or even cease activity. Given the many benefits station adoption brings in making stations welcoming and attractive places that communities take pride in, while creating social value and boosting health and wellbeing from the volunteering activity, this is understandably a major concern. The community rail movement across Britain involves more than 10,000 volunteers, who give around 470,000 hours per year, worth £39.9m. However, we and our members are very clear that this volunteering is additional to appropriate rail industry staffing and responsibilities, not a substitute; these volunteers perform a very different role, which is community- and not rail industry-led.
20. Some of our members have also raised the issue of staff safety if they are to be moved out of a ticket office to a more roving role. On smaller stations where lone working is needed, some members have questioned whether expecting staff to be more accessible in a lone situation is the right way forward, and asked for details of the mitigations train operators would propose to ensure the safety of lone working staff. We have also had comments that solo staff working at cafes/shops on stations feel reassured by the presence of station staff, and that the loss of permanent staff would be negative to these businesses.
 - *Passengers are not penalised if they cannot buy the ticket they require from the station*
21. Our members tell us that concerns over not being able to buy a ticket, or being penalised for not having the correct one, is a barrier that puts many passengers off rail travel, and negatively affects the experience of existing passengers. This can be heightened by the threatening language and messages around penalty fares. To assuage their worries, many rely on, and are thankful for, the specialist support that ticket office staff provide. Again, if mobile staff could replicate this support then this may not be a major problem, but our members are concerned that reductions in staffing hours mean this will not be the case.
22. Various proposals have been suggested to mitigate this issue, such as some larger stations retaining staffed travel centres, passengers being able to use 'promise to pay' vouchers, and tickets being available at other retail outlets in and around stations. However, such changes may create additional needs and complications compared to present arrangements, such as ensuring that external suppliers have the knowledge to ensure passengers get the correct and best available fare. Again, this issue is connected with the complexity and opacity of the fares and ticketing system itself.
23. The threat of penalty fares and prosecution for fare evasion is already a worry to many people traveling by rail, particularly those who lack travel confidence and/or have additional

mobility needs. The feeling among our members is that without the reassurance of support from an actual member of staff – which could be the case at times when stations are unstaffed – then this is another factor that could potentially see rail patronage continuing to stall post-pandemic, and make it harder to attract new passengers.

- *Passengers can continue to use facilities at a station*
24. This criterion lists access to a number of facilities at stations, e.g. toilets, waiting rooms etc, that may fall under the remit of ticket office staff, particularly at smaller stations where there is perhaps only a single staff member. It has been raised by our members as an issue as these facilities are obviously of great importance to passengers and offer a more comfortable and pleasant station environment, which again also helps community rail to encourage wider use of rail. The worry among our members is that access to such facilities would be denied at times when mobile staff teams are not present. Therefore, reduced staffing hours indicates reduced access. This again makes rail travel less appealing and less accessible, particularly for those (likely to disproportionately affect more vulnerable and elderly passengers) who need to ensure they will have somewhere comfortable and warm to wait, and toilet facilities on which they can rely.
 25. Some members have also expressed concerns that without permanent station staff – be they dedicated ticket office staff or more multi-skilled workers – station environments will become unkept, with less effort made in terms of maintenance and appearance. If mobile teams are tasked with covering various stations across a certain area and have less time to spend at each, it seems likely they will have less time to give to the station environment, with a detrimental effect on passengers and communities.

Cross-cutting issues

26. Compounding concerns with all six criteria as outlined above, our members have voiced worries over the long-term implications of the proposals, specifically regarding future staffing levels and whether these proposals could be the start of a slippery slope. There are unanswered questions as to whether the TSA will provide security and mitigate against any further changes. Some of our members are keen to know whether the new multi-skilled roles being proposed are temporary, or whether they could be changed/removed following the current commitment to no redundancies to the end of 2024.
27. Some of our members are also concerned that given the differing nature of the proposals being put forward by individual train companies, there could be significantly reduced consistency of service across the network. Consistency in how to buy tickets via TVMs across different train operator areas is already a barrier to travel for some, most notably disabled people, and these proposals could increase such problems. It has been highlighted that given stations in Scotland and Wales are not affected by these proposals, along with some train operators in England, e.g. Merseyrail, passengers will receive different standards and tiers of service depending on the station or operator they use, which is not a strong position from which to promote rail travel as a convenient, coherent, and accessible option.

28. Finally, we wish to pass on comments on the length of the consultation process, which many of our members felt was very short and did not leave sufficient time to consult and engage the communities they serve. Some argued the three-week window was not appropriate for an issue of this importance, with such a large volume of information in the proposals varying across different localities.

Summary

29. Community rail partnerships and groups recognise the challenges within the rail industry post-pandemic, and are not against reforms per se to help the railway to be more efficient and effective. However, while there is some positivity about the principles that were set out nationally, the overriding view across community rail partnership and station groups we have heard from is that they cannot support these proposals in their current form. A large number of examples we have seen fed through from our members show train operator proposals not upholding the RDG's stated pledges, and appearing to undermine our ability to promote an inclusive, accessible, and welcoming railway, and enable wider use of rail. This cuts across a range of government policy commitments, including: creating a passenger-centric, community-responsive, accessible railway; 'levelling up' by creating wider access to opportunity and enhancing public transport; using transport to tackle loneliness; and decarbonising transport by accelerating modal shift. It also looks likely to undermine work in community rail which the industry and government support.
30. Many stations with good ticket office opening hours are set to have these hours cut, significantly in many cases, with mobile teams providing far less coverage, and a lack of specialist, dedicated knowledge. This is widely seen as something that will discourage rail use and throw up an additional barrier, at a time when community rail partnerships and groups are striving harder than ever to increase rail patronage, to support modal shift and a move towards greener, healthier, more inclusive travel with rail at its heart. They feel that these proposals undermine this fundamental aim, particularly for people who have additional mobility or support needs, such as those with hidden and physical disabilities, older and younger passengers, families with children, vulnerable people, low-income groups, but also in supporting and encouraging the large majority of people for whom rail travel has simply become unfamiliar to give the train a try.
31. Our members have expressed worries that these proposals could lead to further reductions in station staff over time, and erode the railway's ability to serve existing and potential passengers well. Community rail partnerships and station groups, from their local engagement, know how much people value a human presence and the specialist support that regular, experienced ticket office staff can provide, and do not feel this can be replaced by these proposed changes, certainly while we continue to await comprehensive and meaningful fares reform.
32. While individual community rail partnerships and station groups will rightly feed in to this consultation with specific details on their local areas and stations, Community Rail Network is committed to advising on the wider views of its members on this issue, and would be happy to discuss this response further with Transport Focus and other relevant partners.

For further information, contact Rob Lowson at rob@communityrail.org.uk