



HOUSE OF COMMONS

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Sent by email: TicketOffice.SWR@transportfocus.org.uk

Our reference: BS28069

1 September 2023

Dear Sir/Madam,

I write in response to the consultation over plans to close all ticket offices on the South Western Rail (SWR) Network. Since these plans were first suggested I have been contacted by many constituents concerned about the impact they could have.

While it is right to review services to ensure resource is being used effectively - and there is clear evidence some ticket offices across the country are significantly under utilised - ticket offices in Runnymede and Weybridge still provide valuable service to a large number of passengers. The proposal of a blanket closure of all ticket offices raises a number of concerns over SWRs evaluation.

In addition, there are many issues that need to be fully addressed prior to any decision on changes to ticket office provision. These include accessibility, value for money, safety, the impact of pay as you go services, and the specific effect on local stations within Runnymede and Weybridge. To be clear, given the breadth of issues, questions and concerns, **as MP for Runnymede and Weybridge I am against the plans to blanket close all ticket offices in Runnymede and Weybridge.**

In preparation for this response I conducted a survey of local residents to understand further their rail use, interaction with local services, and their level of support for these proposals. Respondees were overwhelmingly opposed to plans to close all ticket offices. The response below outlines these concerns and presents a number of questions, which I will also send to SWR.

Consultation process

To begin with I have a number of concerns around the consultation itself. I was initially concerned at the proposed short timescale for the consultation, and I am pleased this was extended, however the initial aim did not convey a sense of wishing to actively engage with the public in relation to these plans.

The consultation material also uses a number of statistics which may inadvertently mislead the reader or not convey the full picture. For example, statistics from the SWR consultation document on ticket office usage state numbers have fallen from 82% of purchases in the mid-90s to 12% last year. However, this does not reflect that service levels have altered significantly since the pandemic, nor the large increase in customer numbers over the intervening years. While the percentage of passengers using ticket offices has fallen

dramatically, ticket offices still served over 200 million sales pre-pandemic, plus responded to countless customer inquiries which are not reflected in the accompanying documents.

In addition, the statement 'of the 12% of tickets bought at ticket offices nation-wide last year, an estimated 99% could have been bought using a ticket vending machine or online' is subjective. While 99% of ticket options purchased may have been available for purchase online or via machines, this does not factor in variables such as the ability of the customer to use these options, instances of technical problems, or the impact of queues at existing machines.

This gets to the heart of the issue in this consultation. If technology is already available, easier to use and accessible, why do 12% of sales continue to be made via ticket offices? What additional service is this providing to customers, and how do we ensure that is not lost as a result of the planned ticket office closures? **Before any decisions are made regarding ticket offices, I believe SWR should provide further information on what appraisal has been made as to the reason for 1 in 8 journeys involving the use of a ticket office.**

Accessibility

The greatest concern raised with me by residents is the impact these proposals will have on customers who may already be vulnerable or face disadvantage. All customers should be able to access rail services, however a large number have reported concerns and anxiety over being required to use ticket machines or online services.

Concerns include:

'Closure of ticket offices will effectively lock out a lot of elderly people who do not have access to technology (or the skills or confidence to use it). It will also lock out a lot of people with learning difficulties.'

'I'm elderly. I don't understand the ticket machines really. I have to ask for help, then the queue behind me get impatient and annoyed. The ticket office staff are helpful, and give advice. I will probably stop using the trains.'

'I am visually impaired and cannot use the ticket machines.'

'There are often very long queues at the machines which are very slow. I don't always know which is the most cost-effective ticket to buy. And what happens if you need assistance when all the staff are behind the barriers and you can't get to them because you can't get a ticket?'

Questions over how to obtain help from staff when they were on platforms were raised a number of times. Without a fixed location staff may be on different platforms. This presents difficulties for people with mobility needs. It also raises practical issues such as how will customers access disabled toilets (which are currently locked with the key located in the ticket office).

- **How will SWR ensure customers can readily access staff, information and advice under the new proposals (with specific regard to the examples outlined above)?**

I have unfortunately had to raise a number of issues regarding a lack of accessible travel with SWR in recent years, most notably with repeated issues at Weybridge Station. The consultation documents state there is an industry wide pledge: Those with accessibility needs will always be supported. In my experience this has not been met by SWR.

- **With issues already existing on the network, and a reduction in staffing hours at a large number of stations, how will SWR ensure this can be delivered?**

The requirement to access technology in order to purchase tickets also raises a number of other practical issues. Rail users have reported to me a number of occasions when ticket

machines have been out of order, the app has failed to work, and also highlighted some areas where lack of mobile phone signal prevents access to ticket purchases via the app.

Constituents also highlighted concerns that *'removal of local ticket offices effectively removes the option to pay in cash.'*

- **What additional measures or investment will be put in place to ensure technology required for ticket purchase is reliable and robust?**
- **What support will there be for customers in the event of issues with technology, as outlined above?**
- **Will there be options for customers to still pay in cash?**

The impact of the reliance on technology will likely disproportionately impact the elderly and disabled people. I note that SWR states that they will complete an Equality Impact Assessment for each individual station to ensure that any changes made are not at the detriment of customers who need additional support or belong to particular demographics.

- **Will copies of these Equality Impact Assessments be published, and can I obtain a copy of these reports?**
- **If implemented, how will the impact on customers be monitored and assessed?**

Value for money

Residents responding to my survey agreed that value for money in the service was essential. I understand the financial pressures due to a fall in passenger numbers that all train operators are facing, and the need to adapt service provision when circumstances change. However, value for money for customers must be retained.

The SWR Station Change Proposal states that 97% of ticket options are available via machines or online. However, no detail is provided on which options are not available, or what the timescale may be to ensure customers requiring these options are not left paying unnecessarily for more expensive fares. Residents have raised specific concerns with me such as how to apply their railcard discounts without access to a ticket office, how to renew railcards, and how to ensure they are accessing the best fare option, especially when travelling in mixed aged groups. Information regarding longer journeys and how to assess fares when travelling with more than one rail operator was also raised.

One rail user commented that fares have risen, yet they receive fewer rail services and now customer service is also being removed. It is essential that customers can see how these changes will deliver value for money for them as well.

- **Can the details of the 3% of fares not currently available online or via ticket offices be provided?**
- **Does this include options for fares purchased with discount railcards?**
- **How will customers who cannot use online services renew railcards?**
- **Will SWR set out its policy on future fare rises or similar proposals in light of the savings these proposals will deliver, to ensure value for money for**

customers?

The final issue raised regarding value for money is the potential impact on fraud or fare avoidance rates. Given a large number of category 3 and 4 stations, as set out in the proposals, have no ticket barriers, the reduction in staff hours at these stations may lead to an increase in fare avoidance.

- **What measures will SWR put in place to mitigate this risk?**

Changing payment trends

Pay as you go is also listed in the consultation documents as an alternative method for purchasing tickets. As you will be aware, pay as you go facilities are currently being rolled out across the network, with Virginia Water and Egham receiving these first in my constituency. While I welcome this, there is still no timescale for this to be rolled out to all stations across the network.

This will have a substantial impact on how people use the service. Given this, I believe this payment facility must be rolled out to all stations as soon as possible, and the impact fully assessed before any ticket office changes are enacted. This should be given additional priority to ensure customers retain a range of payment options.

- **Will SWR commit to setting out a timescale for the rollout of pay as you go to all stations in Runnymede and Weybridge and across the network?**
- **Will SWR pause plans to close ticket offices until the impact of pay as you go can be assessed?**

Safety

Residents also raised concerns regarding safety and anti-social behaviour as a result of reduced staffing at stations. Passengers report feeling safer when staff are present, and have expressed concern over school children and elderly relatives travelling by rail should staff hours be removed or reduced.

Concerns have also been raised that at peak times there are often queues at ticket offices and machines. If ticket offices are no longer available, these queues will be longer, and where machines are located on platforms, this could pose a hazard.

- **What measures are in place to ensure the safety and security of rail users at stations?**
- **What measures will be taken to mitigate possible impact of increased queues, and the risks of queues on platforms?**

Impact on staff

The proposals will also have a clear impact on staff themselves. Many ticket office staff are known and well-liked by customers, which is very evident from the responses I have received to my local survey. While I understand there will be consultation with staff and Unions, it is disappointing that compulsory redundancies have not been ruled out as a consequence of these plans.

Proposals to require staff to work on platforms, sometime in stations with no step free access, will also disproportionately affect disabled staff and those with mobility needs.

- **How will SWR ensure that all staff are treated fairly throughout this process, and that no particular group or demographic will be unduly affected?**

Runnymede and Weybridge station proposals

Runnymede and Weybridge constituency has 7 train stations, with residents also frequently using 3 further stations located nearby. The proposals for staffing resource places each station in a category, from 1-4, 1 having the greatest level of service. Proposals for our local stations are:

Station	Proposed category
Addlestone	3
Byfleet and New Haw	3
Chertsey	3
Egham	2
Longcross	4
Virginia Water	2
Weybridge	2
<i>Staines</i>	1
<i>Walton-on-Thames</i>	2
<i>West Byfleet</i>	3

Under these proposals there will be no staff located anywhere within the constituency with full retailing capability (Category 1 stations only). This means that, should proposals proceed, there would be no way to purchase the full range of tickets in Runnymede and Weybridge. The proposals will also see a reduction in hours where staff assistance is available at Addlestone, Byfleet and New Haw, Chertsey, West Byfleet stations.

Residents have contacted me with concerns regarding West Byfleet Station in particular. While located just outside of my constituency, many residents rely on this mainline station for commuting and leisure. While comparable in many ways to Virginia Water station, in terms of mainline location and number of platforms, this station has only been designated category three. The result of this is a severe cut in services, with staff hours proposed to be reduced by up to 83%, based on information from the SWR consultation documents.

This station has also not yet been included in the roll out of pay as you go, meaning passengers face a significant cut in customer service without access to alternative payment means.

SWR must:

- **Review the proposals with the aim to ensure the full range of ticket options is available in Runnymede and Weybridge, whatever the outcome of the consultation.**
- **Reconsider the allocation of West Byfleet under these plans given the disproportionate impact proposed on the level of service available.**

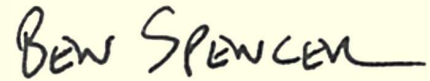
My final key concern is the impact of these plans on the branch line that runs through the constituency. Addlestone and Chertsey stations in particular have been hugely affected by timetable changes caused by maintenance work and strike action. When services are disrupted in such a way, the advice and support of station staff has been invaluable. This line supports local schools and St Peter's hospital, therefore a reliable service and clear communication is vital.

- **Will SWR commit to reduce the disruption and lack of service stations on this**

line have experienced?

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions in relation to the matters addressed in this response.

Yours faithfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Ben Spencer". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

**Dr Ben Spencer MP
Runnymede and Weybridge**