

The Rt Hon Mark Harper MP
Secretary of State for Transport
Great Minster House
33 Horseferry Road
London SW1P 4DR

10th July 2023

Dear Secretary of State for Transport,

We are writing to express significant concerns regarding the proposed closure of rail ticket offices. As a group of organisations representing blind and partially sighted people, it is our view that this would unavoidably have a severe negative impact on blind and partially sighted people's ability to purchase tickets, arrange assistance, and travel independently by rail.

Many of our organisations have been part of discussions with Rail Minister Huw Merriman and the Rail Delivery Group on these proposals. We are deeply disappointed that the consultation has been launched in a rushed, uncoordinated and overly complex manner. We ask for a meeting with both yourself and the Rail Minister, Huw Merriman, to more fully discuss our concerns and the failings in the current process.

Even if a minority of tickets are sold at ticket offices, many of those tickets will be sold to people who have no other way to purchase them. Without ticket offices, rail passengers would be forced to purchase tickets online or using Ticket Vending Machines at the station and, for many blind and partially sighted people, neither of these options are accessible. Only 3 per cent of blind and partially sighted people in RNIB research said they could use a ticket machine without difficulty. 58 per cent said it is impossible.

The benefit of ticket offices is not accurately captured in merely the number of tickets sold. 88 per cent of respondents to recent RNIB research said that a static point to meet rail staff was "important" or "very important."

Ticket offices are a fixed location that blind and partially sighted people can learn to navigate to and rely on as the first point of contact for many kinds of staff assistance, for example:

- ensuring the correct concession is applied to a ticket purchase
- making sure passengers have the correct ticket
- alerting passengers when facilities like lifts are out of use
- advising on any journey changes required due to delays or cancellations
- providing or arranging for blind and partially sighted people's sighted guidance through the station and safely on to the train.

Such multifaceted, flexible assistance cannot happen without sufficient staff in a known, consistent location.

The Government's stated aim is that it wants to "bring staff out from behind the glass" but in truth it risks leaving blind and partially sighted people behind a new barrier. It says it is "modernising the railway" but modernisation doesn't mean apps and touchscreens; modernisation means inclusivity and not leaving anyone behind.

We're asking for:

1. A meeting with yourself and the Rail Minister Huw Merriman as a matter of urgency, before the consultation closes.
2. A pause on the consultation. There should be no possibility of closing ticket offices when they are the preferred or only means of providing so many essential functions to rail passengers.
3. When any consultation on the modernisation of the railway happens, it should be truly accessible:
 - 21 days is far too short a consultation; given government involvement, we expect the principles of good consultation to apply which requires a 12-week consultation period.
 - Consultation information must be made accessible to blind and partially sighted people in a format they can read, whether online or offline. At affected stations, print signage – often in very small print – is being displayed simply signposting people to online information. Neither small print nor online options are

accessible to a large percentage of blind and partially sighted people.

- The consultation process must be less complex, confusing and repetitive in its demands on respondents. The current consultation requires rail users to identify the website of their train operating company, visit that website, download and analyse a list of proposals for the entire network of stations operated by the company, and then respond separately to Transport Focus or London TravelWatch as appropriate.

4. A detailed update on the Rail Accessibility Action Plan as promised in 2019. Without sight of this and clarity on the plans, the closure of ticket offices would be premature.
5. Given the involvement and sign-off of Government in this process, we would expect that the Department for Transport would carry out Equality Impact Assessments and that these should be published immediately. The train operating companies must ensure any decision they make does not discriminate against disabled people and they need to show the mitigations they plan to implement. This cannot wait until later in the process: disabled people need to be able to see the assessments now and be able to reflect on them during the consultation.
6. We need assurances that Government and the train operators will abide by the result of the consultation. To be meaningful, it must not treat the closure of train ticket offices as a forgone conclusion.

We look forward to hearing from you as soon as possible.

Your sincerely

Matt Stringer
CEO, RNIB

Charles Colquhoun
CEO, Thomas Pocklington Trust

Tom Wright
CEO, Guide Dogs

Cathy Yelf
CEO, Macular Society

Adrian Bell
CEO, Blind Veterans UK

Tina Garvey
CEO, Retina UK

Joanne Creighton
CEO, Glaucoma UK

Fiona Sandford
CEO, Visionary

Lisa Hopkins
CEO, SeeAbility

Keith Valentine
CEO, Fight for Sight

Judith Potts
Esme's Umbrella

Andrew Law
Chair, Metro Blind Sport

Nick Schofield
CEO, VICTA

Mike Silvey
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Chair, Usher Kids

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