**Response from Damian Hinds MP to South Western Rail (SWR) consultation on ticket offices closures.**

**July 2023**

Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to comment on the above proposals. Let me begin by saying that I do understand why these changes are necessary given the changes to our buying habits over the last thirty years. I also understand the need for SWR to seek further efficiencies in the operating model, which includes upskilling their workforce.

As an MP, my primary concern is ensuring that all those in my constituency who wish to use the rail network can continue to do so easily and confidently. Having a reliable and accessible rail network is of incredible importance to rural communities as often rail is the only means of regular transport between local towns; bus services being often infrequent or of long duration. I think it would be a real shame if one of the unintended consequences of this consultation was to dissuade the public from travelling by rail.

I understand that this consultation is only the first part of the process, and that you will look to refine your proposals once you have digested all of the responses.

I will limit my comments to a summary of the feedback I have received from constituents, which are grouped into areas below for ease. It’s also worth pointing out that every email I have received on this issue has been opposed to your proposals in their current form.

1. **Issues with current ticket vending machines on station platforms:**
   * Difficult to use, particularly if you have sight impairments.
   * Can only really be used for very basic tickets. Cannot be used for more complex journeys or give you advice on the best/cheapest route.
   * Cannot be used to get rail passes e.g. senior rail cards. How will those needing passes get them once the ticket offices close (and if they don’t want to use the website because of fears of online fraud)?
   * Often do not accept cash as payment.
   * Lengthy queues form when travellers try to all use the same machine (it’s a particular problem where you have just one ticket machine in one station). Trains can be missed as a consequence.
   * Tickets machines are not 100% reliable and often break down causing bigger queues.
   * Cannot apply the 50% travel discount for disabled people (currently you can only get this at the ticket office).
   * Some machines are positioned at full height so are not accessible to people in wheelchairs.
2. **Encouraging users to book tickets online:**
   * Some people, particularly the elderly and vulnerable groups, do not use or even own smart phones or have access to the internet. Some are reluctant to put their personal details, such as bank details, online.
   * In a rural area, 3/4G is very patchy, as is broadband in places, so it is difficult to book tickets from smart phones at certain stations.
   * Online ticket sales often incur a booking fee so it’s cheaper to go direct to the ticket office.
3. **Staffing at category 2 and 3 stations** 
   * Where a station isn’t staffed on a particular day (e.g. Liphook and Liss are on a 5 day staffing rotation under the proposals), what happens if you can’t use the ticket machine or it is not working? Will you receive a fine if you board the train without a ticket or will the current penalties be suspended?
   * In the consultation document, it states that you can travel to your nearest manned station to get help booking a ticket if your local station is unmanned that day, but that is not easy in rural areas where bus services are sometimes limited to once daily and, unless you have a car, it’s very difficult to travel between stations (even if they are geographically not that far from each other).
   * Alton is an end of line station and so can get very busy with school children, elderly and other vulnerable groups. It’s going to be difficult for all of these groups to locate a roving member of staff for assistance, particularly at peak times, and will only serve to cause confusion and delay.
   * The mitigations that have been proposed to address the removal of ticket offices are piecemeal and inconsistent. At one station, passengers may have to use a video-call function on a Ticket Vending Machine, at another they may have to call a mobile staff member, at another they may have to travel to a hub. This fractured approach will make navigating the railway prohibitively confusing, and fails to provide an adequate alternative to current ticket office arrangements.
4. **Vulnerable groups are disproportionately impacted by the proposals**
   * The ticket office is one of the most vital and permanent accessibility features of local stations; it impacts everything from disabled people's ability to buy tickets, work out concessions, receive assistance, access site facilities, navigate the station, plan routes, and feel confident in making journeys. With this gone, these individuals are going to find it incredibly difficult to navigate their way around the station and onto a train with the best ticket for their journey.
   * For visually impaired people, it will be particularly difficult for them to locate the staff member to help them with their tickets if they are not in a fixed place.
   * If there is only one member of staff at a station at any one time, how will this individual offer help to disabled individuals needing assistance to not only book tickets but to access facilities at the station (e.g. unlocking a toilet or waiting room) if they’re also dispatching trains at the same time?
   * Ticket offices are the only designated point in the station with a hearing induction loop. Many deaf people will be unable to access the assistance they need without this.
   * Before the ticket offices are closed, significant improvements need to be made to station design, repairing faulty announcements, inadequate or missing signage and inconsistent tactile paving so that disabled people are able to safely navigate the station.
   * Disabled people are more likely to have a health-related emergency than other users of the service so it’s important that staff are visible and on hand quickly to support passengers who need help. At the moment, users will generally head to the ticket office to get help. Will their be an designated emergency point at each station under the proposals?
   * ‘Help Points’ are often located beyond the ticket barrier (and are difficult for disabled people to find at the best of times) so how will users access these facilities to ask about tickets (if no member of staff is present) and if they haven’t already bought a ticket?
5. **General comments:** 
   * There are long queues already at Petersfield station for the ticket machines and ticket offices. How will this work with fewer dedicated staff on hand to help people with their ticket purchases because they’re busy with other tasks?
   * Will the proposals increase the number of fare dodgers (both accidental and intentional) as users jump on trains either without a ticket because they weren’t able to purchase one in time or because staff were too distracted by other enquiries to notice that they have deliberately not brought one?
   * Could we have some discretion with very small, single track rural train stations? It makes no sense to close a ticket office to make staff stand outside 2 yards away in the cold and away from a computer and the various maps they use to help plan customers’ journeys.
   * Where stations will have different staffing hours to currently (e.g. Saturday cover but no cover on Mondays – as in the case of Bentley), how will users, particularly commuters, find out if there’s an issue on the track (as there so often is in between Alton and Waterloo) if there is no-one around on that particular day? Also, Monday mornings are often susceptible to delays caused by the overrunning of weekend engineering works so it doesn’t seem sensible to have a station such as Bentley, which sits on a commuting line to London, unstaffed on these mornings.

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