Sent via email to:-
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31 August 2023

To whom it may concern,

Woodley Town Council's response to both the South Western Railway and Great Western Railway consultations regarding proposed changes to ticket offices – August 2023

Woodley Town Council welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the rail operators' consultation on proposals to close most station ticket offices.

The Council supports promotion of rail transport as a key part of the UK's climate change policy and as an enabler of economic and social well-being. As our residents contribute to the public subsidy of railways, we are also keen to ensure that the service provides value for money for people locally and is on a sound financial footing.

With these points in mind, we note that the operators' objectives in proposing the closure of ticket offices are to provide better service to customers and to ensure that the railway is 'more financially sustainable'. These objectives are admirable – but it is currently unclear exactly how they will be achieved and indeed whether they are mutually compatible. We are also concerned about the effects of the changes on our national and local obligations in respect of equality of access for all and ensuring staff and customer safety.

Therefore, can you please give us reassurance on the following points:

Better service to customers
We note that several local councils and disability rights groups have flagged concerns regarding access to ticketing and the danger of marginalising some rail users. We will not reiterate all these issues but refer you to the response provided by our primary local authority 'Wokingham Borough Council'. However, we would like to raise the following specific points:

We welcome the initiative to provide hands-on help for users to learn how to use Ticket Vending Machines (TVMs)*.* However, GWR reports that around 25% of tickets sold at two of our local stations (Reading and Twyford) are bought from the Ticket Offices. Is there any evidence that the only barrier to replacing these transactions with a TVM is lack of user training?

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Three of our local stations (Reading, Winnersh Triangle and Earley) will have significantly reduced staffing times under the new proposals; i.e. a smaller window for those who need to talk to someone about their requirements. There is a danger of creating a self-fulfilling prophecy here; e.g. we don't need to staff Earley station on a Saturday as hardly anybody needing ticketing assistance uses it then - which means that subsequently *nobody* needing ticketing assistance can use the station on that day.

What measures are being taken to improve the 'usability' of ticketing software for apps, online portals and TVMs? For example, ensuring that: software is consistent across operators; there is a facility to compare different fare options (including split-ticketing) before purchasing a ticket; all types of ticket are supported; cash, voucher/warrants and card payments can be made; TVMs accessible from wheelchairs; text-to-speech, ability to change text size and high contrast displays available for the visually impaired. We also urge that a representative panel of customers be established to effect User Acceptance Testing.

We ask that train staff be given discretion to take account of difficulties in getting a ticket at unstaffed stations when dealing with penalties for possible fare evasion or breaking restrictions on ticket use.

Financial Sustainability
We assume that the source of 'financial sustainability' arising from closure of ticket offices will be a reduction in staff costs and/or the sale of more tickets. Is this correct? Leaving aside the customer service consideration for the moment, what does your modelling predict in respect of loss of custom (journeys and revenue) owing to the removal of ticket offices?

Safety
Given the proposed increase in the time many stations will be unstaffed, what additional provision will be in place to support customers needing to re-plan journeys owing to service disruptions?

Similarly, what emergency facilities will be provided for vulnerable people regarding personal safety at unstaffed stations? SWT refer to video-call facilities being made available at Cat 3 stations – will this be available across the network whenever trains are running?

We ask that safety procedures be put in place to protect both lone workers at smaller stations and ticket inspectors on trains.

Monitoring and Measuring Success
How will the effects of the change be monitored and measured? Is there an intention to run staff and customer satisfaction surveys? How will any 'lost' customers be identified? How will financial benefits be calculated?

We note appreciatively that GWR has published transaction data, including number of tickets sold at ticket offices, online and via TVMs for journeys from each station. We request that each operator publish this info before the closures are affected and at regular intervals thereafter in order to identify any trends in rail usage following the change.

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Governance

With the closure of all / most ticket offices, does this mean that Schedule 17 of the Secretary of State's 'Transport Ticketing & Settlement Agreement' is defunct; i.e. there will no longer be any statutory regulation of station staffing? If so, how will customers' (and tax payers') interests be represented independently?

Also, SWT has made a number of 'pledges' in their consultation paper, including:
- All colleagues will be treated fairly and their new roles will be more varied and engaging
- Customers will never have to travel out of their way to buy tickets
- Those with accessibility needs* will always be supported.

How will performance against these pledges be measured and shared with the public. What is the consequence of failing to meet them?

* Note that SoS 'Transport & 'Ticketing Settlement Agreement' includes access to ticketing as well as physical access. Section 5.7 refers

Disabled Access

We are also concerned regarding the impact on disabled users of the railway which the potential closure to ticket offices will cause. It is already difficult go via British rail from our local stations. The lack of staff has made travel a frightening experience, especially for women travelling together or alone, and those in wheelchairs.

Currently, at Twyford, the guard goes off duty at 7pm. The ramps to get wheelchairs off the train are locked up, as are the lifts. For users travelling from London, if a wheelchair user has booked their journey a week in advance, then the train will be diverted to platform one. However, issues occur for disabled travellers in the evenings and at night. If the train can't be diverted, passengers must continue to Reading, where they are then put on the next train back that stops at platform one; this can add up to an hour to journey times, and requires the driver to agree to help a disabled traveller off the train.

In Wokingham, the station is unmanned after 8pm. Travellers from London can access the ticket office on the flat by walking around to the front of the station, provided the gate isn't locked and assuming wheelchair users have managed to get their wheelchair off the train. Visually impaired travellers travelling alone would have difficulty accessing the ticket office if they were unfamiliar with the station.

Anecdotally, the ticket office staff at both these stations have always helped travellers when a guard is not on duty, by helping disabled passengers off the train and helping to find their way out of the station. The closure of ticket offices is likely to make travel for disabled users even more difficult.

Thank you again for the chance to comment on the proposed changes. We hope our constructive observations will be helpful to you and look forward to hearing the outcome of the consultation.

Yours sincerely,

Planning & Community Committee
on behalf of **Woodley Town Council**

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