



TICKET OFFICE CONSULTATION RESPONSE

Sent by email to Northern Trains & Transport Focus

09 August 2023

To Whom It May Concern

Proposed closure of ticket offices at Burnley Manchester Road and Burnley Central railway stations

I write further to the announcement on 5th July 2023 regarding the potential closure of ticket offices at Burnley Manchester Road rail station, Burnley Central rail station, and across the rail network more broadly.

As you will be aware, Burnley has seen significant growth in rail usage. This has been facilitated by the opening of the Todmorden Curve, which brought direct train services to Manchester; and by investment in Burnley Manchester Road train station to create a modern and attractive station. This will be enhanced further with the addition of a disability-friendly bridge connecting the two platform at Burnley Manchester Road, using funding secured from the Government's flagship Levelling Up Fund. Ensuring that this progress and investment is not lost is paramount in my mind.

It is widely accepted that all organisations must adapt, looking at customer habits, and find the most efficient and effective ways of operating. Train operating companies are no different.

We have seen, over the last decade, other organisations which traditionally have had staff behind glass screens change and modernise by removing such screens and getting staff out into customer areas. Doing so can bring enormous benefits and so I am supportive of the same happening at our railway stations.

I have split this response into two sections – the first is about the general change, and the second about the specific proposals for Burnley's two stations impacted.

Section One – General Comments

A key role of staff at ticket counters is to be available to customers with additional needs to offer help, advice, and support. This includes helping them book tickets if they struggle to use machines, alerting staff that a wheelchair ramp may be needed, and being a point of contact for queries in a place that is known to all – the ticket desk itself.

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Turning to their first role – helping customers book tickets.

This is the primary role of staff at a ticket counter and there remains a significant number of people who struggle to use alternative means of booking, including through apps, online, or at the digital ticket machines at stations. Whilst the reasons for this are varied, **it is vitally important, for customers and the sustainability of the railways, that these customers are not disenfranchised and can continue to book tickets with a member of staff face-to-face, and use trains like everyone else.**

However, it is accepted by most that it is possible for a member of staff to do this for a customer at a place that isn't sat behind a desk. Anyone who has travelled on a train in recent years, for example, will be used to seeing staff carrying an iPad and printer-on-the-hip. Using this method staff can speak to customers and book them a ticket for their journey, printing it instantly, much as they do at a ticket office but from the platform, waiting room or on the train itself.

If this task is to be taken on by new 'Journey Makers' then these staff members should be clearly identifiable, and available, to the general public. For some members of the public, Journey Makers showing them how to use digital ticket machines may be helpful, but there should be no requirement or pressure to do so, and staff should book tickets for customers if they find that easier.

With all the above in mind, I can see a rationale for moving staff from behind counters and screens to customer areas. Doing so should result in a more personalised and quicker service. However, this change must not result in disenfranchising customers from travelling by train and those who are best served by booking tickets with a person, in a face-to-face setting, should be supported to do so.

Secondly – supporting customers with accessibility requirements

Trains and the railways connect our towns, villages, cities, and transport hubs for millions of people. From Burnley's train stations you can get direct to Blackpool for a day out, Manchester for a meeting, Preston to connect to London, or over to Leeds to visit friends and family. And these are just some of the uses.

These varied uses mean that there is no 'typical' user of the railways. Like all our public transport network, there is every type of passenger. For those who have accessibility issues, be it physical, visual, or audible, having a member of staff who can offer support is vital. This could include knowing a wheelchair ramp needs to be used to get a passenger on the train and speaking to train staff in advance to alert them to this; helping a customer with a visual impairment book a ticket and get to the right platform; or a customer who might be slow moving because of arthritis being helped onto the train itself.

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As it stands today, all those customers would make their way to a ticket office to alert staff to this and from there would get the help and support they need.

It is for this reason that there is such anxiety about the closure of ticket offices and the results that could come from this. So, just as with booking tickets, none of the changes proposed should result in those with accessibility needs being disenfranchised from the rail network.

Moving staff from behind a glass screen and ticket counter to waiting rooms and along the platforms as 'Journey Makers' could, if done correctly, help to ensure that they are able to identify those customers with additional needs and offer them extra support. Rather than waiting for a visually impaired passenger to make their way to a ticket counter, for example, the staff member can monitor the station and proactively offer advice and support.

However, to do this staff will need to be clearly distinguishable from the travelling public, they should be encouraged to be more proactive, and greater use of 'Help Points' should be considered. I was disappointed to see that some of these did not feature prominently in the consultation document.

A highly visible, proactive Journey Maker will be the difference between helping passengers use the railway and the proposal only contributing to declining use by those who get the most value. This must include significant investment from train companies into skills and training for current and new staff, with a focus on proactivity and customer service.

Additional 'Help Points' should also be installed on platforms and in waiting rooms. These should be operating 24/7 and connect to a real person who can monitor CCTV at the station and speak to the Journey Makers who are at the station.

Thirdly – being a point of contact

The rail network can be a complicated network at the best of times, and this is only exacerbated by the significant volume of engineering works, cancellations, delays, and diversions that take place. Ticket counter staff are responsible for helping passengers navigate all of this, as well as resolving issues with related services like car parks and being a general source of reassurance.

As already mentioned, having staff on platforms and in waiting rooms could help deliver a more proactive service to passengers simply by being more accessible to the travelling public. But **more accessibility could also result in more queries. This is no bad thing and should not be discouraged.** In fact, it could, over time, result in increased usage of the railways as the public become more confident in using trains because they've engaged with staff more.

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We also know that having staff present in a station can be reassuring – particularly when it is late at night. I have concerns that closing ticket offices could result in people avoiding trains in the evening and at night because of this, and so ensuring staff are on hand will be paramount. When setting the working hours for ‘Journey Makers’, train companies should consider the type of customer using the train station and ensure that if there is regular night usage, staff are always present.

CCTV, lighting, and Help Points should **also** all be upgraded. These all provide visible reassurance and, in the event of an issue, a quick place to summon help from – including where ‘Journey Makers’ are present at the station but not within sight.

Work should also take place with the Police, and passenger groups, to display clear signage about support should there be an issue – much as there is for the current ‘See it, say it, sort it’.

Section Two – Burnley Specific Comments

With all the above general comments in mind, I wish to make some points specific to the proposals regarding Burnley Manchester Road railway station, and Burnley Central railway station.

As you will be aware, the footfall in these stations is significant – particularly at Burnley Manchester Road.

In the period April 2021 to March 2022, when the railways were still significantly below pre-pandemic levels of usage, Burnley Manchester Road had entry / exits of 421,608. This is higher than Accrington, Colne, Nelson, and Oswaldtwistle. Indeed, in all East Lancashire – an area that is receiving significant Government investment to help to level up – Burnley Manchester Road is second only to Blackburn in entry / exit numbers.

I have included the data from the Office of Rail and Road below, which shows clearly that passenger numbers are rebounding quickest at Burnley’s rail stations out of all East Lancashire railway stations – including Blackburn.

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Station	April 2021 to March 2022 entry / exit numbers	April 2020 to March 2021 entry / exit numbers	April 2019 to March 2020 entry / exit numbers
Burnley Manchester Road	421,608	99,694	482,736
Burnley Central	99,658	28,804	102,278
Burnley Barracks	26,928	9,316	26,008
Accrington	385,604	119,210	465,758
Nelson	90,644	28,748	121,256
Colne	68,804	21,090	81,126
Blackburn	1,065,362	393,174	1,323,216

It is disappointing that in launching this consultation, Northern has not released data which it must hold for the period April 2022 to March 2023, even if it comes with a health warning about not having been checked yet.

Given the significant number of matches held at Burnley Football Club in the last year, and the continued growth of both UCLAN and Burnley College, I would expect these numbers to show further growth.

Moreover, with Burnley FC returning to the Premier League and UCLAN opening a new university campus building within the next 12 months, it is a reasonable assumption that this will increase yet further still.

With respect to ticket offices, whilst Burnley Barracks does not have a manned ticket office both Burnley Central and Burnley Manchester Road stations do. At Burnley Central the ticket office is open from 6:30am until 1:30pm on every weekday. And at Burnley Manchester Road the ticket office is open from 6:35am until 9:45pm on every weekday and Saturdays, and 8:45am until 5pm on Sundays. These broader opening times at Burnley Manchester Road reflects that this is a hub for us locally, with significant footfall, welcoming football fans, students, visitors, and others. And it is commensurate to the significant footfall seen in the table above.

Under the proposals released by Northern, the ticket offices at both stations are to close entirely and this is, undoubtedly, a significant reduction in service.

As already covered in my general comments, above, I recognise that closing ticket counters and introducing a new member of staff as a 'Journey Maker' could mitigate this and, in some ways, enhance the current offering. Whether it does depends to a very large extent on the number of staff that will be employed as 'Journey Makers', the number of ticket counter staff that there are currently, and the hours those 'Journey Makers' will work.

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It is here that I have significant concerns.

Turning first to Burnley Central. The proposal is to replace the ticket counter (operating M-F, 6:30am to 1:30pm) with a 'Journey Maker' who works for just 2 hours – 10:30am to 12:30pm. This is clearly insufficient, and the new shift should more closely align with the current ticket counter. If there is limited use of the current ticket office at 6:30am then this could be moved slightly, but to remove 4 hours from the current situation is excessive and not justified by the passenger numbers highlighted.

The location of Burnley Central railway station also makes it prime for improved use as Pioneer Place – a new town centre leisure destination just 5 minutes' walk away – opens in full in just one month's time. It is also closest to one of Burnley's more deprived areas, where access to transport needs to be supported not hindered.

For this reason, it would seem sensible to match the new 'Journey Maker' hours with the current ticket office hours, thus ensuring continuity of service provision. And if usage increases on a weekend, including at night because of Pioneer Place where people can go to watch a film and have a meal out, consideration be given to expanding hours to include the weekend too.

I have similar concerns for Burnley Manchester Road. The proposal is to replace the ticket counter (operating M-ST 6:35am to 9:45pm; SN 8:45am to 5pm) with a 'Journey Maker' who works just 5 hours per day during the week, on a 7am to 12pm shift, 5 hours on a Saturday, on a 9am to 2pm shift, and not at all on a Sunday.

This is a dramatic reduction and one which would come at significant cost to the travelling public. It would have negative consequences for passenger numbers, accessibility, safety, and the overall attractiveness of our busiest railway station.

Burnley Manchester Road has seen significant investment over many years. This has included a brand-new station building and a new car park opened just months ago. Further investment is also planned with an accessible bridge due to be constructed from LUF funding (as mentioned previously) and it is set to become a 'mobility hub' using additional LUF funding to connect it even more to the university campus and town centre.

Indeed, it is because of this investment, and the significant rebound in passenger numbers, that there is a strong case to make for retaining a manned ticket office on the current hours. If this office is to be replaced by a 'Journey Maker', however, then this should be done on a like-for-like basis.

This would see a 'Journey Maker' working at Burnley Manchester Road from early morning through to late evening every Monday to Saturday, facilitating thousands of football fans, students, and visitors, and again on a Sunday for leisure visitors.

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Conclusion

In the consultation document, much is made of the new role of a 'Journey Maker'. As set out in this response the role could, if done correctly, result in a net benefit to the travelling public.

It is clear from the consultation that this role will assist customers with buying tickets, providing extra assistance, making announcements, resolving issues, assisting with disruption, keeping stations clean and safe, as well as no doubt much more too. No one can disagree with this. And, as I have explained in this response, I think it could be positive for people across Burnley and Padiham.

However, the proposals specific to Burnley's two main train stations are insufficient and need significant revision. The proposals include drastic reductions in the hours that stations will be staffed, and this could put a significant brake on our economic growth and passenger growth.

I have been contacted by a broad range of residents, some who are supportive of the changes and some who are vehemently against. Northern, and other train operating companies must find a way to bridge the gap between those positions and amending the hours of operation and taking on board other feedback I have provided around accessibility, lighting, CCTV and Help Points, would go some way to do so.

Yours Sincerely,

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