

RDG - RAILWAY TICKET OFFICE CLOSURE PLANS

July 2023

The English Train Operating Companies (TOCs), coordinated by the Rail Development Group (RDG) and pushed by Government, are proposing the mass closure of railway ticket/booking offices (BOs) and Travel Centres (TCs). The plans, if implemented, will have a disastrous impact on the quality of service to railway passengers. My explanation follows, based on personal experience of working on the front line of the railway until my retirement last year.

According to RDG and all the TOCs (*plans are presented company by company but the wording is mostly similar if not identical*) BOs/TCs can be closed because they can be replaced by a combination of Ticket Vending Machines (TVMs) and staff in 'customer help'/'customer host'/floorwalker roles. Based on my [many] years of working on railway stations, both in a BO/TC and as a floorwalker, I am able to compare these roles and see the advantages/disadvantages of both. I therefore dispute RDG's simplistic description of these changes as "better". Floorwalkers & TVMs are useful in addition to a BO/TC - NOT as replacement for it. In the absence of a BO/TC, they are less able or totally unable to do significant parts of the job.

Whilst the proposals were issued at very short notice, TOCs have been moving in this direction for some years, so the announcement came as no surprise - except for its suddenness and brutality. It is in line with the content of the Shapps/Williams report on the future of the railways (June 2022) - para. 2.56 onwards. This summary by me includes material going back as far as May 2017 when Northern (my employer at the time) were proposing a reorganisation, including a reduction in the number of BO jobs. Even at that time, we could see very clearly the direction that the company (and other TOCs) were heading, and have been warning about it since then to anybody who wanted to listen. Previously a slow but steady process of "salami slicing" - now the whole of the remaining salami is being thrown out.

The reason given for the proposal is that the number of ticket issues in offices are going steadily down. RDG quotes global figures of estimated 82% of tickets being sold through BO/TCs in the mid-1990s compared to 12% now. Whilst the figures quoted are (probably) accurate they are very selectively quoted and do not tell the whole story. There is only very superficial analysis of the causes. The reason for this is obvious... any more detail seriously undermines the case for closures.

In this, I see a close comparison with the early 1980s when a number of rail routes were proposed for total closure. Campaigners against these plans used the expression "CLOSURE BY STEALTH" to describe the way British Rail paved the way to line closure proposals: mess with timetables to make the service less attractive, run the route down, divert traffic to other routes, find faults in infrastructure needing significant expenditure, etc. This is very similar to what the TOCs have been doing with their BO/TCs. Having said that, they are occasionally explicit about their aims - e.g. this quote from a retail staff circular issued by Northern in February 2018:

"We are installing... brand new TVMs at almost all locations. We want more people to buy online and use the app/TVM, but the role our station staff play is more important than ever..."

Since the 1990s various new ways of purchasing and obtaining tickets have become available (or at least more widespread) e.g.:

- * Telesales with ticket posted to passenger
- * Ticket Vending Machines (TVMs)
- * Booking through website, ticket printed by passenger
- * Booking through website, ticket printed at station using bank card & collection code
- * Booking through an App, ticket displayed on mobile phone
- * Smartcards loaded with tickets for specific journeys
- * Smartcards using tap in/out
- * Contactless payment with bank card, working like a smartcard.

All of these are promoted as offering more choice and making journeys easier. Whilst it is undeniable that there are some advantages (e.g. can help those with language difficulties) there are also many DISADVANTAGES (see below) which go unrecognised - "see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil". Newer is not always "better" and new ways of getting tickets do not render the BO/TC obsolete.

For comparison, think about how you get your NEWS. First there were newspapers, then came the radio, then television and, most recently, the internet. All of the older methods are still available - the same should apply to railway ticket offices. If they are closed then this is not offering people a choice - it is DENYING CHOICE.

The reduction in BO sales is often presented as if it happened by magic - or at least by customer preference. This is a totally false picture. TOCs have effectively SABOTAGED their own sales outlets, and have gone to great lengths to drive trade away from them. Passengers have been encouraged, bribed or forced into using other ways of getting tickets. Examples:

- * ALL publicity and promotion for ticket sales, wherever you see it, is aimed at persuading passengers to book online, download the app, use the TVMs... anything but use a BO/TC. There is never any attempt to promote the use of our BO/TCs - or even to mention their existence.

- * Many special promotions have been run, with tickets available online or in an app only. For an extreme example of this, see appendix D to this document ref. The Northern Family & Friends promotion.

- * Many fares have been offered cheaper online than they can be bought over the counter. This is done mainly with "Advance" train-specific tickets. These are available in limited numbers to even out the loading of trains and fill spare capacity. There are two different sections of the computer reservation system for online and station sales. Allocation of tickets in the different price bands very often favours online sales. No reason has ever been given for this, but it amounts to BRIBERY.

- * Sometimes "Advance" tickets are available for purchase on the day of travel (making a mockery of the title). See below for one specific example with Cross-Country Trains, which has only ever sold them online. Northern also introduced this facility, with BOs/TCs able to issue them. Then, recently, it was moved online only. BRIBERY again.

- * This applies to tickets and other products, e.g. railcards (1 year railcards can be bought from stations ; 3 year cards are available only online). This discriminates against those who do not have internet access, particularly older people.

- * When the well-established Young Persons' railcard concept had its age limit extended, the new 26-30 Railcards were not made available in BO/TCs

- * M-Card sales were taken away from BO/TCs - *more detail in appendix C.*

- * SPLIT TICKETING is massively complicated and adds to the already hideous complexity of the railway fares structure, but it can save you money. Various websites offer this facility. BO/TC staff are willing to help passengers by doing the same, but the software to easily search for all options has not been provided for BO/TC staff.

- * Leeds Travel Centre faces outwards onto the street. It was highly visible at the front of the station until most of its windows were covered with advertisements. These are made of a material which lets light in from outside but obscures the interior when viewed from outside, thus making the presence of the place much less obvious. Some other stations (e.g. York) have had their BO moved to a less prominent location.

No attempt is ever made to promote the fact that BO/TC staff can offer professional advice and often help passengers to avoid the many pitfalls associated with these various types and formats of tickets. Also, in spite of everything said above, they can often find cheaper fares than are offered by a TVM, website or app (*see appendix B for example*) with no hidden extras like booking fees and credit card payment fees.

Obviously COVID-19 provided an opportunity and, for a time, justification for pushing the trend away from BOs. Any justification has now gone.

The number of issues in BOs is down but staff workload is often not down by nearly the same amount. As a measure of workload, the number of ticket issues is at best very crude and at worst positively misleading. As bookings have been forced away, a significant part of BO staff workload has shifted from ticket sales to dealing with ticket-related customer service issues; the former is easy to measure, but the latter is much harder. Management have never made any attempt to do this.

Even if less tickets are being sold, the best place to do the remaining work and advise passengers on ticket-related issues is from a counter in a ticket office, where all the information and resources needed to do the job are EASILY ACCESSIBLE IN THE SAME PLACE. This is compounded by the general disappearance of a lot of useful information (timetables etc.) from display around stations (it may be considered "untidy" or not in line with the image that the marketing department want to project). Staff roaming round a station are useful, but very often the best thing they can do is point passengers towards

the BO for the help they need. Usually help is only sought after a problem arises - why not avoid problems in the first place by promoting BO/TCs?

RDG: "*88% of customer SALES already happen without customers setting foot in a ticket office*"... no mention of those who come in with problems. This is a good example of disingenuous use of figures.

Looking in more detail at the DISADVANTAGES of some of the alternative methods of obtaining tickets:

Note - this is a short summary - I could write a book on the subject!

Ticket Vending Machines (TVMs)

When TVMs were first introduced, they were relatively simple, offering some of the more popular fares for travel on the day of issue, making them quick and easy to use. Over the years, more features have progressively been added, such as:

- * Tickets from other stations,
- * Full range of destinations,
- * Tickets with reservations,
- * Advance issues,
- * Weekly season tickets,
- * Smartcard tickets,
- * Payment by card as well as (or instead of) cash.

The downside of the increasing versatility of TVMs is increasing complexity, making them confusing, clumsy and slow, as well as very unreliable.

A large number of passengers buy tickets from TVMs without knowing what they are buying, often paying less or more than they need to, and maybe getting into trouble for having wrong tickets as a result.

Examples:

- * Making the wrong choice between anytime or off-peak fares (both offered)
- * Choosing the wrong train operator (e.g. Leeds to Manchester, where Northern and TransPennine Express each have their own fares) - even after more than 20 years of privatisation, many passengers don't understand different TOCs.
- * At times of disruption to train services, passengers often buy tickets without first checking that their train is running on time (or running at all)

In spite of the increasing versatility, TVMs still do not offer the full range of fares, products and services available from a BO. Examples:

- * Rover & Ranger tickets
- * Multi-modal tickets (e.g. day rovers)
- * Railcards
- * Season tickets (longer periods - monthly to annual)
- * Seat reservations (booked separately - not included as an integral part of a ticket)
- * Tickets to "London International" - if connecting with Eurostar
- * Excess fares for extensions, upgrades, changes of route etc.
- * Some discounted fares, including discounts for disabled passengers with no railcard, also the privilege rates for railway workers.
- * Platform tickets (at stations with ticket barriers)
- * Split payment (part card, part cash)
- * Payment by travel warrant.
- * Transfer of funds between stations to rescue stranded passengers ("SILK")
- * Refunds on unused/part-used tickets.

According to RDG: "an estimated 99% of ticket office transactions could have been made at TVMs or online last year. Where needed, TVMs will be improved."

This does not even gloss over - it totally and wilfully ignores - the fact that most of these transactions can be done much more easily and quickly at a BO. This is true even if there is a host/floorwalker on hand to help with the TVM.

And why not turn that argument on its head and say "The BO can do anything the TVM can..."?
TVMs come in various shapes and sizes and with various different software, but none that I have ever seen comes close to being a substitute for a desktop machine in a BO/TC. They will have to improve out of all recognition. The problems (complex, confusing, slow and unreliable) that I have briefly described here can only get worse if more features are added.
With no ticket offices, where will passengers go to change their tickets if they are wrong - or ask for refunds of the fare if not using the tickets?

TVMs are also open to abuse - e.g. 19 year old kids buying half fare tickets!

There is a particular problem at Leeds, where two TOCs` (Northern + LNER) both provide TVMs. A regular problem is when tickets are bought from the LNER machines, then not needed; the BO (run by Northern) is unable to pay out refunds, although it can do this for tickets from the Northern machines.

Passengers booking tickets online for collection at a station are always directed by the website to collect them from a TVM. There is never any mention of the fact that they can be collected from the office. However a great deal of help from BOs is required.

Problems include:

- * Failure to recognise the payment card,
- * No payment card held - maybe due to different payment method e.g. Paypal,
- * Different payment card because ticket was bought for them by someone else,
- * Failure to recognise the collection reference number (possibly the number was written or read wrongly)
- * Failure to print some or all tickets ; TVM shows an error message referring them to the office,
- * Alleged failure to print some or all tickets. This is sometimes a machine fault but more often because the people are not paying attention. Many of them snatch at the first ticket that appears but do not check it and often do not wait for printing to finish, with the frequent consequence that someone else picks up their ticket and they have to pay again.

Most of these problems could be eliminated by having the BO as the main method of collection.

Probably the most popular alternative format is **E-Tickets**. Staff are frequently asked for help with these, which can only be provided to a very limited extent because the websites and apps that they are linked to are all products of a different company (even if using the website/app with the same company logo)

Problems include :

- * Unable to download ticket from website,
- * Unable to download the app,
- * Ticket downloaded to wrong device & cannot be transferred,
- * Flat battery so the ticket dies along with the mobile phone,
- * Changes to travel plans requiring changes to the ticket, which is impossible with this ticket format.
- * Tickets in app for multiple passengers who now want to travel separately - impossible.
- * It is very obvious that a very large number of people buy tickets in apps, but do not know what they are buying. They see a journey and a price and usually select the cheapest option without knowing the conditions attached to it. The management and those who promote these ticketing systems do not see the resulting problems - station & BO staff do!

For most of these problems, the only thing staff can do is refer people back to where they purchased their tickets. This is usually difficult/impossible. The biggest, and worst, company for this is the Trainline (see below... most rail staff hate the Trainline!)

* Many items on the list (above) of tickets/services not available at TVMs apply also to online bookings, e.g. excess fares, disabled discounts, cash or split payment, warrant payment.

Advertising for "the Trainline" is regularly plastered all over the railway. One of its adverts a few years ago urged people to book on its website rather than stand in an "endless ticket office queue". In practice a major cause of slow moving BO queues is passengers who have problems (examples above) with their Trainline tickets! All that staff can do with most of them is advise them to contact Trainline.

This company has managed (encouraged by TOCs) to make itself appear to be an integral part of the railway industry, so it is very hard to convince some passengers that it is really just an agency with a licence to sell railway tickets - not an organisation whose tickets can be sorted out by the railway itself.

Trainline, and many other third party retailers, charge hidden extras: booking fees, credit card payment fees etc., unlike BO/TCs, so their widely-advertised claims to be cheaper are often totally false. Trade Unions have made complaints to the Advertising Standards Authority about this and other misleading advertising by the Trainline.

This company takes away revenue from railway sales outlets, whilst effectively using them as a free after-sales service (its own after-sales service is extremely poor) so it is adding insult to injury that their advertising is tolerated.

Note: the Shapps/Williams report, chapter 2, includes a section headed "Fares, ticketing and retail - ensuring fairness for third party retailers". There is no mention of fairness for in-house staff. It is a very one-sided document.

The publicity and promotion of online bookings and mobile tickets is not limited to one company ; it is industry wide. Sometimes different parts of the railway industry work against each other, e.g. CrossCountry, who operate trains but no stations or BOs. However, they do sell tickets on their website, which offers advance fares on the day of travel, which are not available from any BO/TC. Impartial retailing rules dictate that staff cannot conceal the existence of such fares from passengers who enquire about journeys covered by these fares. No attempt has ever been made to counter this undercutting of our outlets.

Even TOCs with ticket offices advertise their websites and apps and actively encourage passengers NOT to buy at the station. These websites and apps, and the ticket sales that they promote, are not run in-house, but contracted out to third parties - like the Trainline! This leads to absurdities such as: Passenger buys ticket from Northern Rail website, does not make the journey, comes to Northern Rail BO, asks for refund, and is told "that's not our ticket, so we can't pay out a refund on it". Result: time wasted on unnecessary argument with unhappy customer. Injury + Insult again.

On one occasion, Northern booking offices received a stock of cards to hand out to passengers advising them to book on the Northern website. Staff were disgusted at this and did not hand them out. All requests for information about how much money was wasted on printing the things were met with silence.

Assistance for DISABLED PASSENGERS is given some attention in the proposals, which try to present the plans as an improvement in this department. In fact it will be the exact opposite. The process for arranging assistance involves collecting a considerable amount of information about the journey and the exact requirements for the type of assistance, then making sure this information goes to the right places. This can only be done at a desk or counter - exactly the places that are proposed for abolition. In the past, a form was filled in and faxed to the customer service centre ; more recently it has been entered directly by staff into the website, which takes several times as long... that's progress! The passengers could do this for themselves if they have internet access, but the great majority are unable to do this or at least not confident with it, so need railway staff to do it for them.

Discounted fares are available for disabled passengers with railcards. Some discounts (less generous but still worthwhile) are also available for blind or wheelchair-bound passengers without railcards. These fares are available only from a BO/TC - not in TVMs - it would cause great confusion if they were added to TVMs. Add this to the fact that TVMs are usually difficult or impossible to use for many people with disabilities - the proposals represent DISCRIMINATION against disabled passengers. The TOCs are facing at least 2 legal actions over this issue (source: DPAC)

The proposals also represent DISCRIMINATION against older people - maybe not quite to the same extent as disabled, but still significant - in general they are less likely to have access to the internet.

A few quick points:

* "Putting staff closer to passengers" is a mantra in these proposals. Maybe - but it's putting them further away from the best equipment to help them do the job - and is over a desk/ticket window not close enough? If you have a problem and want to ask somebody about it, is it more convenient to search the whole station than go straight to where you know there are staff - i.e. the BO/TC??

* Is all of this merely neglect or is it CONSPIRACY to marginalise BOs? Evidence points to conspiracy. The motivation is obvious - cut costs to increase profits. Some sort of Cost/Benefit Analysis is needed here. You can measure staff costs but can't measure passengers & revenue lost by abolishing staff/Bos.

* In spite of the massive effort that has been made for years to marginalise BOs, the TOCs have still had to resort to deception when advertising their closure plans. The posters at stations where BOs are proposed for closure or reduction in hours all make the claim that passengers will not be inconvenienced or suffer any reduction in their ability to get the tickets they need. As should be obvious from this document, these claims come somewhere between misleading and totally false.

* If BO/TCs shut down, problems will be so massive that we will want them back. It will cost far more to reopen than to keep them as they are. A comparison here is ticket barriers, which were abolished almost everywhere then had to be brought back. At barriers, if there is a problem with a ticket, the passenger is sent to the BO - if the BO is not there, where will they be dealt with? A floorwalker is often poorly equipped for it.

* The ongoing general neglect and rundown of BO/TCs has enabled the railway to get away with not implementing a commitment made a few years ago. When WAKEFIELD KIRKGATE station was renovated, it was promised a ticket office. There has never been any attempt to open one in spite of the station having a greatly improved train service. Immediately pre-COVID it had more trains than at any time in its history. It is in fact comparable to Wakefield Westgate in the number of trains and destinations served, but has far fewer passengers. Key difference between the 2 stations is that Kirkgate is unstaffed (the biggest unstaffed station in Britain, which is a disgrace)

* Ticketing systems are designed by people who never come into contact with them in daily use and never see the trouble they cause. If they have not spent time on the front line, interacting directly with passengers, they have no hope of understanding this.

* This document is mainly written from the viewpoint of frontline rail staff. The interests of staff and passengers may diverge sometimes, but mostly they are closely aligned - Happy passengers = happy staff. All of this has been raised repeatedly with management, who turn a deaf ear to protests.

* RDG/TOC answer to all this: "Yes but staff will still be on hand to help"... OH NO THEY WON'T! Salami slicing will continue with floorwalkers. The result will be a lot of stations effectively (or actually) unstaffed. These companies have form - and shareholders who are never satisfied.

* Staff safety issues. Floorwalkers need somewhere to go - like into an office (but with no window)

* As this document has grown steadily, I have also produced a short (one sheet) summary – mainly a set of bullet points.

Steve Wiltshire

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Appendix A

Abbreviations used:

BO = Booking office/ticket office

DPAC = Disabled People Against Cuts

RDG = Rail Development Group (Umbrella organisation covering all TOCs)

TC = Travel Centre

TOC = Train Operating Company (All station BOs are attached to one of these companies)

TVM = Ticket Vending Machine

Appendix B

[My reply to a Facebook post arguing that LNER's single leg pricing strategy is wrong]

In the context of our railways' ludicrously complicated fares structure, single leg pricing actually does make some sense. We had already moved a long way towards it with the spread of "Advance" fares.

At the time it was introduced, I worked for Northern Rail in Leeds ticket office. The off-peak return from Leeds to London was about £120. They halved that to make an off-peak single for about £60. Previously the only walk-up single fare was the anytime ticket for around £100, so some journeys became cheaper. Staff in our office would happily explain all this to passengers and sell the tickets.

The inconsistency was that it was only a trial on the Leeds-London route. These fares did not apply at intermediate stations so, for example, a walk-up single fare from Wakefield to London was still around £100. However, with break of journey allowed, you could buy a £60 Leeds-London ticket and get on at Wakefield. This is totally legitimate, and staff in Wakefield Westgate ticket office (LNER) will happily explain all this to passengers and sell the tickets.

There is no Ticket Vending Machine, website, or app that will do that for you.

Appendix C

Metrocard / M-Card

Another example of business being driven away from ticket offices was Metrocards (West Yorkshire's zonal train/bus season ticket). These were sold in large numbers at BOs. Then sales were discontinued in September 2016. They were replaced by "M-Cards" (issued on a smartcard) which, at that time, we did not have the means to issue. However, we still had to explain this change to people unfamiliar with the system and had to send many of them off to a Metro (West Yorks. PTE) travel centre to get one.

Note: Metro has itself been shutting down some of its TCs, e.g. the one at Wakefield Bus Station.

Publicity and implementation of the change was poor. BOs were initially supplied with a small stock of smart cards to hand to passengers, but that did not continue. M-Cards were made available to purchase from the TVMs and we were unable to deal with any problems that passengers experienced in getting these tickets. Sending people away to the Metro TC gave many of them the feeling of being fobbed off and given poor service. This could almost all have been solved by installing the machinery to handle smart cards in the BOs. This equipment was actually installed about 3 years later when smartcards became the favoured method for issuing rail season tickets. However, BOs were still not able to issue M-Cards. This was said to be due to an instruction from "Metro", but Metrocard sales continued at BOs run by TransPennine Express (Dewsbury & Huddersfield) after the product was withdrawn by Northern. No explanation was ever given for this discrepancy, in spite of repeated requests but, clearly, the issue was financial, not technical.

Appendix D

Northern Family and Friends (NFF)

The story of this promotion is a CASE STUDY of the extreme lengths to which TOCs have gone to drive trade away from their own BOs.

For a number of years, Northern Rail has run this scheme, whereby employees were issued with a number of vouchers which they could hand out to other people. The vouchers were filled in with a few details (name, date of travel, number of tickets) and handed in at a BO/TC to obtain flat fare tickets for travel on Northern trains. The process for purchasing tickets was simple and quick and, in this form, the promotion was popular and well-received.

Then in 2022, it continued in a different form. Instead of printed vouchers, a set of PIN numbers were issued, each of which allowed one booking. These were used online or in an app - the facility to issue the tickets was taken away from BO/TCs. This was said to be in order to make it easier (!) and accessible to more people.

The revised promotion was a CATASTROPHIC FAILURE. Almost nobody could navigate their way through the ludicrously complicated process for purchasing tickets. I personally gave PIN numbers + instructions for their use to about half a dozen people... not one of them succeeded! This was not down to any lack of computer literacy by any of them; one was a booking clerk with another Train Operator.

There was a sequence of six screens to navigate through on the website. Nobody got past screen 2 due to some combination of: failure to recognise the pin code, failure to recognise the NFF promotion, or an "access denied" screen appearing when the search criteria were entered. On receiving these reports, I checked it out by trying to book some of these tickets myself. I also failed (twice - using different computers, operating systems, and web browsers).

Among the information circulated about this scheme was a suggestion that anyone with queries about it should call the Northern customer experience centre. I tried this, and spoke to a person who was polite and sympathetic, but did not have the knowledge to answer my questions. They said it was a matter for the technical department, but were unable to put me through or give me any contact details.

I then e-mailed the person in Northern who had originally circulated details of the revised scheme, giving some detail and pointing out that, far from being "accessible to more people", it now appeared to be accessible to nobody. This produced a reply including "> I'm so sorry that you have had problems buying Friends and Family. I recently helped another colleague who was also having problems and walked him through it step by step using the attached pdf.
> Let me know when is best to call and we'll get this working for you."
- there was no admission of any fault in the system.

To cut a very long story short, using the pdf guide which they kindly supplied, and with a large amount of trial & error, I was able to work out the necessary sequence of inputs to get through to screen 6 and complete the booking. It took hours to do something that would have taken about one minute at a BO! All of this was reported back to the manager in Northern, together with a plea to scrap this system for booking them, or at least provide an alternative. If an experienced booking clerk such as myself had so much difficulty with it, then what hope was there for the family & friends who it was meant for? Needless to say, this was totally ignored. There has never been any acknowledgement of the problems of this system, nor any attempt to change it - with the small exception that the expiry dates for use of the PIN codes were extended without limit (a tacit admission maybe?)

Anyway, I was able to book some of these tickets on behalf of my friends. I actually managed to do it several times! And then there was a change in the website.

In this change to the website, there was a revised initial input screen (number 1 of the sequence of 6 referred to above). On the face of it, this was very similar to the previous version - it asked for the same information to start the process, but it did not recognise the code for this promotion, so it led nowhere.

Fortunately a knowledgeable former work colleague was able to give me an alternative route into the system, which took me to the earlier version of screen #1 and enabled me again to obtain some of these tickets.

Anybody could be forgiven for thinking that Northern have been trying to sabotage this promotion. Why they should want to do that is a mystery, as it fetched in a useful extra bit of revenue that they would not otherwise have had, and also produced a bit of goodwill, which has been squandered.
