



**Response to Transport Focus**  
on the

**Ticket Office Closure Consultations**  
Issued by Northern Trains and LNER

Submitted by email to [ticketoffice.northern@transportfocus.org.uk](mailto:ticketoffice.northern@transportfocus.org.uk) and  
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## **1. Introduction**

a) This is SENUG's response to Transport Focus Consultations on Ticket Office closures for Northern Trains and LNER. Responses to the consultations are required by 26<sup>th</sup> July 2023 (LNER) and 28<sup>th</sup> July 2023 (Northern) and can be submitted via email to [ticketoffice.northern@transportfocus.org.uk](mailto:ticketoffice.northern@transportfocus.org.uk) (for Northern Trains) and to [TicketOffice.LNER@transportfocus.org.uk](mailto:TicketOffice.LNER@transportfocus.org.uk) for LNER.

b) SENUG is The South East Northumberland Rail User Group, an unincorporated voluntary organisation that promotes rail travel and campaigns for better rail services in, within, to, from and through South East and East Northumberland, representing the interests of both existing and potential rail travellers in the area. By 'potential', SENUG means those who would use rail services if only the trains went where they want to go, at the time they want to go, at a price they can afford, and in a clean, safe, secure, accessible and easy to understand manner. SENUG has 188 members and 15 corporate members that include both local businesses and 4 Town or Parish Councils (as at 21st May 2023).

## **2. What Is Being Proposed?**

a) The rail-industry is proposing wholesale closure of station ticket offices across the country. Although this appears to be a national initiative being driven by DfT, each train company is

planning to implement it in different ways, and has initiated its own consultation.

b) SENRUG is responding to the consultations issued by Northern Trains (who manage Morpeth and Alnmouth stations) and LNER (who managed Newcastle and Berwick-Upon-Tweed); however many of our comments apply nationally. In the case of LNER, no changes are proposed for Newcastle so our response covers Berwick-Upon-Tweed only.

c) Northern Trains are proposing to introduce a new role of “Journey Maker” who will be able to sell tickets, but not from the Ticket Office. The Journey Makers will be on duty for significantly less hours than the Ticket Offices are currently open, and will not accept cash sales.

d) LNER say that although the Ticket Office at Berwick-Upon-Tweed will close, station staff will still be available for the same hours and will be able to sell most, but not all types of tickets. LNER do not give details of the role of their station staff but we assume it will be something similar to Northern’s “Journey Maker”.

e) The new station ticket sales hours proposals for Morpeth, Alnmouth and Berwick-Upon-Tweed are given at Annex 1.

### **3. Why?**

a) Rail companies are aware that a far higher proportion of rail tickets are now purchased online. Furthermore, those tickets that are purchased at stations are generally purchased by card, meaning station ticket offices are no longer handling high volumes of cash. Thus, they say, there is less need for ticket sales staff to be positioned behind thick plate glass, and the rail industry thinks there is scope to deploy these staff more flexibly and to improve the customer experience. Additionally, the rail industry wants to reduce its costs.

b) SENRUG believes several aspects of the proposals will not improve the customer experience and will lead to less people travelling by train, and may not reduce costs.

### **4. Implications for Mid-Sized and Rural Stations**

a) Many stations in the north of England are staffed by just one person, who is currently located in the ticket office. A distinction should be made between:

- Redeploying this member of staff elsewhere and giving them a wider range of responsibilities, which, subject to addressing the concerns listed in Section 8, might be the right thing to do, and could be supported by SENRUG, and
- De-staffing the station, which SENRUG strongly opposes, for the reasons given in Section 7

b) In fact, details of Northern’s proposals indicate a combination of both objectives for Morpeth and Alnmouth as the new Journey Makers will be on duty for significantly fewer hours than the station Ticket Offices are currently open (See Annex 1). This is not acceptable.

## 5. Consultation Period

a) The consultation period for such a significant change on a national basis is woefully inadequate, with consultations issued on 5<sup>th</sup> July 2023 and responses required by 26<sup>th</sup> July 2023 (LNER) or 28<sup>th</sup> July (Northern) – just 3 weeks to respond and in the summer holiday period. There is a sense of the industry trying to “hurry this through”, and a fear the consultation is a sham with decisions already taken. Northern have issued several updates to their information during the consultation period implying they had not even determined the detail of their own proposals by the time the consultation started.

## 6. General Comments About the Proposals

a) SENRUG has not seen, and suspect there has not been any research or modelling comparing the loss of rail ticket revenue arising from people being less willing or able to travel by train, verses any potential savings in operating cost. Thus the whole proposal could add cost to the rail industry, not remove it, and lead to a degree of modal shift back to car, contrary to government de-carbonisation targets.

b) There will also be significant implementation costs. Noting current queues at station ticket office sales points, the number of station TVMs (Ticket Vending Machines) needs to significantly increase. Morpeth for instance, needs to have TVMs on the northbound platform. It is not clear whether the existing TVMs inside the Ticket Office on the southbound platform will still be accessible if the Ticket Office itself is closed.

c) There has been no serious attempt to trial retaining staff at station ticket offices but reducing costs by multi-purposing stations. Stations could act as community Post Offices, convenience stores, tourist information points, internet access hot desk points, Council Customer Service points, Amazon or other courier pick-up lockers, laundry, dry-cleaning or ironing service drop-off and pick-up point to name just a few suggestions. There appears to have been no innovative thinking around the role of staffed stations in rural and mid-sized market town communities.

d) The rail industry fares structure is incredibly and unnecessarily complicated. Any suggestion of encouraging greater use of internet ticketing purchasing should be deferred to after a massive simplification of the current fares structure. SENRUG’s proposal for a radical simplification of the fares system is available on our website [here](#), and formed our basis to our response to the 2018 RDG / Transport Focus Fares Consultation, which is also available on our website [here](#). Mobile phone apps in particular often only show one or two trains, so later, cheaper trains are excluded. This is a deterrent to people travelling by train as the journey appears dearer than it needs to be.

e) Northern Trains say their proposals for reduced station staffing hours are based on ticket office sales volumes and station footfall. They do not clarify whether it is based on sales as a physical number of transactions or total value of sales. Neither it is based on the complexity of journey and ticket options available from that station. SENRUG believes it is ridiculous that any station serving long-distance trains or a multiple number of train operators should not have a

staffed ticket office. Both Morpeth and Alnmouth serve trains running to Aberdeen and Penzance (as well as London). Morpeth serves 4 long-distance operators and Alnmouth serves 3 (in addition to Northern itself).

f) In cases such as Morpeth and Alnmouth where the station is staffed by the local operator, but the stations also serve long-distance operators, SENRUG believes that the majority of staff assistance required (ticket sales, advice in the event of disruption etc) is needed by long-distance passengers. There may therefore need to be a change in the funding formula so that the local operator is better recompensed for staffing a station when the majority of the benefit of the staff is experienced by passengers of the long-distance operator.

g) It is not clear to SENRUG why the need for station staff to despatch a train is safety critical at times when a station is staffed, but not apparently necessary when a station is not staffed. The rail industry must decide whether train despatch is safety critical or not, and if it is, it follows that stations serving long-distance trains must continue to be staffed.

## **7. Why Stations Should Not Be De-Staffed, or Have Staffing Hours Reduced.**

a) There are some sections of the community who are unable to buy tickets digitally. These groups of people need to be able to buy from a person at a station. These groups include:

- The disabled and vulnerable, including those with mental health needs and learning difficulties
- The digitally excluded (ie those without home internet access, computer or smartphone)
- The financially excluded (people without credit or debit cards - this includes teenagers and children, and people who are on a debt recovery programme and have been advised by their debt counsellor not to hold a debit or credit card to avoid the temptation to overspend.
- Tourists and visitors from abroad
- Persons travelling as a group who may struggle to load tickets for several people onto one smartphone.

All these groups of people need the continuation of the ability to purchase tickets from a person at a station ticket office, and in some cases, in cash.

b) The ability of the rail industry to provide meaningful information in instances of disruption at unstaffed stations is extremely poor. Customer Service Screens (CIS) and automated tannoy announcements can show baffling and often totally erroneous information. See examples at **Table 1**, next page. Attempts to contact train operators service desks via whatsapp or similar normally results in a standard template text reply apologizing for the delay but not offering any practical advice as to what a passenger should do. Stations need staff – particularly those stations serving long distance operators.

c) It is not clear how disabled assistance is to be provided at those stations where the staffing hours is to be reduced, or to be de-staffed completely. SENRUG strongly opposes any reduction in the rail industry's ability to provide disabled assistance, which SENRUG believes would be discriminatory.

**Table 1: Examples of Meaningless CIS**

 <p>Departures          11:58 Edinburgh          Cancelled          11:58 Edinburgh          Expt 12:17 Plat -          12:09 Plymouth          Expt 12:12 Plat 1          12:38 Edinburgh          On time Plat 2          Please check nothern</p> <p><small>This car park is private property. It is provided for rail users only and is subject to Railway Byelaws. We cannot guarantee you a space in this car park, nor can we accept responsibility for any damage caused to your vehicle. As a user of this car park you must</small></p>	 <p>Departures          14:49 Metrocentre          On time Plat 1          14:50 Edinburgh          Cancelled          14:50 Edinburgh          Expt 14:51 Plat -          15:49 Metrocentre          On time Plat 1          ng place due to a l</p>
<p><i>Alnmouth: 15<sup>th</sup> July 2023. Is the 11:58 Edinburgh service cancelled or not?</i></p>	<p><i>Morpeth: 10<sup>th</sup> Feb 2016. Station unstaffed. Is the 14:50 Edinburgh service cancelled or not? With the next Edinburgh departure not for several hours, passengers flying from Edinburgh Airport didn't know whether to call for a taxi.</i></p>
 <p>st 12:34 London Kings X On time          Please Note: A Obfuscated service.          BETWEEN YORK AND DONCASTER.          12:02:17</p>	 <p>1st 17:57 Newcastle On time          Calling at:          2nd 13:02 Newcastle On time          17:30:54</p>
<p><i>Morpeth: 21<sup>st</sup> March 2022. The 12:34 Lumo service does not stop at either York or Doncaster. But what will happen to it between these stations? Will it actually arrive at London, or disappear en route?</i></p>	<p><i>Cramlington: 7<sup>th</sup> October 2016. Station unstaffed. Does the 13:02 refer to that morning's train, which is curiously shown as on time despite it being over 4 hours overdue, or does it mean the next morning, in which case all the evening trains and all the following morning trains from Cramlington, until 13:02 are presumably cancelled, although no cancellations are listed?</i></p>

d) It is not clear whether or how access to station facilities such as toilets and waiting rooms will be retained at stations where the staffing hours is to be reduced, or to be de-staffed completely. Access to toilets is really important for passengers waiting for long distance trains which from time to time can be delayed for an hour or more.

e) According to Northern's own data, (see **Table 2**, next page) there has been very little decrease in the percentage of tickets sold by Ticket Offices at Morpeth or Alnmouth. The percentage of Ticket office sales in cash at both stations is quite high, almost one quarter at Morpeth. However, these figures are by ticket transactions, not value of sales. At Morpeth for

instance, regular commuters to Newcastle might be buying their tickets through an App, whereas occasional travellers to Exeter, Penzance, Edinburgh or Aberdeen might be buying very high value tickets at the Ticket Office.

**Table 2: Percentage of Sales at Ticket Offices**

	April 22 – March 23	April 23 – June 23
<b>Morpeth</b>		
Percentage of sales through Ticket Office	3%	2%
Percentage of Ticket Office sales in cash	26%	22%
<b>Alnmouth</b>		
Percentage of sales through Ticket Office	6%	6%
Percentage of Ticket Office sales in cash	16%	16%

Source: Northern Railway Changes to NTL Ticket Retailing July 23

f) The total volume of Ticket Office sales has decreased, reflecting an overall reduction in tickets sold, which SENRUG believes is due to the failure of the industry to recover from Covid, the excessive and unacceptably high number of cancellations and strikes. All this has led to a loss of confidence in the rail industry, which the closure of Ticket Offices will add to. However, with good management, we can expect the physical number of ticket sales to return to pre-Covid levels, and no evidence has been presented that the percentage of Ticket Office sales will not remain steady.

## **8. What’s Wrong With the New “Journey Maker” (and LNER equivalent) Role?**

a) Passengers arriving at a station and needing to buy a ticket need to be able to locate where the member of staff is. They should not be required to hunt up and down for them, leading to inevitable disputes where a customer states they were not able to buy a ticket because the station wasn’t staffed, but the rail operator saying “yes it was”. Thus, SENRUG could accept perhaps staff being located in a fixed position, such as at a desk in a more open plan Ticket office

b) Journey Makers will not be able to accept cash for ticket sales. There are some sections of society who need to purchase in cash, and such persons should not be discriminated against. LNER do not clarify whether station staff at Berwick-Upon-Tweed will be able to take cash for ticket sales.

c) It is not clear whether Journey Makers (and LNER equivalent at Berwick-Upon-Tweed) will be willing to actually sell a customer a ticket, or simply show the customer how to purchase a ticket themselves. The latter is not acceptable.

d) It is observed that when LNER introduced mandatory seat reservations on their trains, they stated their platform staff would be able to make a seat reservation for a passenger up to 5 minutes before the train is scheduled to leave. The author of this response notes that on the 3 occasions he has asked LNER platform staff to do this, they have refused, saying either it can’t

be done, it is not necessary, or do it yourself. Therefore, SENRUG has legitimate doubts as to whether platform based staff will indeed be willing to sell tickets.

## 9. Conclusions

Reductions in the hours stations are staffed is unacceptable. Indeed, for stations served by a variety of long-distance operators, and with complex journey opportunities, staffing should be from the first long-distance train to the last, every day of the week, which therefore means staffing hours should increase to include evenings and Sundays. Additionally, at Morpeth, note should be taken of the recent £2.3m spent in renovating the ticket office building, and the recent increase in passenger numbers recent developments at the station, including extending the opening hours of the ticket office, have brought about. However, for stations currently staffed by just one employee, a more flexible job role might be acceptable provided the concerns listed in section 8, particularly a designated position for finding staff and ability to accept cash sales are addressed. The proposals should not therefore be implemented until these issues are resolved. In the meantime, the rail industry should significantly simplify its fares structure, along the lines suggested by SENRUG.

### Annex 1: Changes Proposed for Stations in the SENRUG Area

Station	Day	Current	Planned	Comment
<b>Northern Stations</b>		<i>Ticket Office</i>	<i>Journey Maker</i>	
Morpeth	Mon – Fri	06:30 – 17:30	06:30 – 12:00	
	Sat	06:30 – 13:00	06:30 – 12:00	
	Sun	Closed	Closed	
Alnmouth	Mon – Fri	06:40 – 18:00	06:30 – 13:00	
	Sat	06:40 – 18:00	06:30 – 13:00	
	Sun	10:20 – 21:30	11:00 – 21:00	
<b>LNER Stations</b>				
Newcastle	Mon – Fri	06:00 – 19:00	06:00 – 19:00	No change
	Sat	07:00 – 19:00	07:00 – 19:00	
	Sun	07:30 – 19:00	07:30 – 19:00	
		<i>Ticket Office</i>	<i>Station staff</i>	
Berwick	Mon – Fri	06:00 – 19:00	First to Last Train	<b>The following tickets will not be available:</b> Season Replacement, Rovers & Rangers, Excesses; Photocards, Refunds, Seat Reservations, and Rail Cards.
	Sat	07:00 – 19:00	First to Last Train	
	Sun	07:30 – 19:00	First to Last Train	