



Policy Briefing

December 2021

LNER's proposed cuts to ticket office hours

LNER's proposals

In September 2021, train operator LNER, which runs the East Coast Main Line franchise, launched a consultation, via the passenger watchdogs Transport Focus and London TravelWatch, on proposals to reduce ticket office opening hours at 13 stations: **Berwick-upon-Tweed; Darlington; Doncaster; Durham; Edinburgh; Grantham; London King's Cross; Newark North Gate; Newcastle; Peterborough; Retford; Wakefield Westgate and York.**

The full list of proposals, including the weekly reduction in opening hours proposed at each station, is listed in the table on the following page. The proposals would see the ticket offices open later and close earlier, with a number of stations including London Kings Cross and Berwick-Upon-Tweed facing particularly significant cuts to their ticket office opening hours. The proposals would lead to a cumulative weekly reduction of over 300 hours across the 13 ticket offices.

RMT's position

RMT believes that the proposals will be detrimental for passengers and will lead to a worsening of the passenger experience. The proposals affect some of the UK's busiest stations and RMT believes it is unfathomable that LNER is proposing to restrict the times that passengers will be able to access the ticket offices.

RMT also believes that the proposed cuts will deter passengers from using the rail network and hinder the post-Covid recovery of the railway which is a sustainable and low carbon form of transport. This is completely at odds with the UK Government's climate change targets.

Schedule 17, which regulates ticket office opening hours, states that a train operator can only change a station's regulated hours if:

"The change would represent an improvement on current arrangements in terms of quality of service and/or cost effectiveness and members of the public would continue to enjoy widespread and easy access to the Purchase of Rail Products, notwithstanding the change."

RMT believes, for the reasons set out in this briefing, that the proposals would fundamentally not lead to an improvement on current arrangements in terms of quality of service and the range of services and products available to passengers would be

significantly reduced at the times the ticket offices would no longer be open.

Table 1: Current and proposed ticket office opening hours

Station	Monday-Friday		Saturday		Sunday		Weekly reduction in hours under proposals
	Current	Proposed	Current	Proposed	Current	Proposed	
Berwick-upon-Tweed	0545 – 1830	0700 – 1200	0645 – 1515	0800 – 1300	0945 – 1620	0800 – 1300	43 ¾
Darlington	0600 – 2000	0600 – 1900	0600 – 1945	0700 – 1900	0800 – 2000	0800 – 1800	9 ¾
	0600 – 2100 (Fri)	0600 – 1900 (Fri)					
Doncaster	0515 – 2000	0600 – 2000	0515 – 2000	0600 – 1900	0800 – 2000	0800 – 1800	8 ½
	0515 – 2100 (Fri)	0600 – 2000 (Fri)					
Durham	0600 – 1930	0600 – 1800	0600 – 1900	0700 – 1700	0800 – 2000	0900 – 1600	16
	0600 – 2000 (Fri)	0600 – 1800 (Fri)					
Edinburgh	0500 – 2359	0600 – 2200	0530 – 2359	0600 – 2300	0700 – 2359	0700 – 2200	18 ½
Grantham	0550 – 2000	0530 – 1600	0550 – 2000	0700 – 1600	0920 – 2000	0900 – 1300	30
London King's Cross	0515 – 0140	0600 – 2200	0515 – 0040	0600 – 2200	0600 – 0140	0700 – 2200	30
Newark North Gate	0545 – 2015	0515 – 1300	0545 – 1940	0900 – 1500	0845 – 2000	0900 – 1500	48 ½
		0600 – 1300					
		(Thu & Fri)					
Newcastle	0500 – 2120	0600 – 1900	0500 – 2120	0700 – 1900	0700 – 2120	0700 – 1900	23
Peterborough	0600 – 2100	0600 – 2000	0600 – 2100	0600 – 2000	0805 – 2100	0800 – 2000	7
Retford	0535 – 1800	0700 – 1200	0535 – 1610	0800 – 1300	0820 – 1610	0800 – 1300	45 ½
Wakefield Westgate	0600 – 2000	0600 – 1900	0600 – 2030	0700 – 1900	0800 – 2000	0900 – 1600	13
	0600 – 2030 (Fri)	0600 – 1900 (Fri)					
York	0545 – 2115	0600 – 2000	0545 – 2100	0600 – 2000	0730 – 2130	0800 – 1900	11 ¾

Importance of station staff

Research shows time and time again that the presence of staff is of critical importance to passengers' experiences of the rail network. As the Government's watchdog, Transport Focus, states, throughout its research *'there is a consistent message coming through about staff - put simply, passengers like and value having staff around'*¹

The importance of staff is even more critical in the Covid-19 era. As Transport Focus points out, the pandemic has *'added a new dimension to their role'*.² Indeed, passenger research conducted by Transport Focus and published in October 2020 found that *'staff play a central role in helping passengers feel safe and secure'* and that *'a strong sense that the ideal response to the pandemic would be to see more staff on trains and at the station, rather than less'*.³ Cuts to ticket office hours are therefore in complete contrast to what research consistently shows passengers want.

While LNER states that its stations will still be staffed from first to last train, it is also the case that once ticket office opening hours are no longer regulated by Schedule 17 requirements, it makes it far easier for train companies to reduce station staffing and leave vacancies permanently unfilled.

Accessibility

RMT believes that LNER's proposals will worsen passenger accessibility. The ticket office provides a central location where passengers know they can easily go to for advice and assistance and closing the ticket office for more of the day removes access to this central hub. This will be particularly damaging for disabled and elderly passengers, who may particularly value the assistance of staff and may struggle to locate staff at the station if the ticket office is not open.

Already, disabled people are less likely to use the railways overall and also more likely to use them less frequently. Studies also agree that disabled people would like to use the railways more than they do but feel that there are significant barriers to them doing so.⁴ LNER's proposed cuts to its ticket offices will only serve to make the rail network less accessible for disabled people.

Passenger safety and security

RMT also believes that the proposals will worsen passenger safety and security. A 2016 Transport Focus report into passenger concerns about safety when travelling by rail reported that one in ten passengers had cause to worry about their personal security during a rail journey during the past six months.⁵ The main causes of these concerns were the anti-social behaviour of passengers and the lack of staff. When passengers were asked what could allay concerns about safety they *'consistently identified staff presence as the*

¹ <https://www.transportfocus.org.uk/blog/has-the-need-for-visible-public-transport-staff-risen-during-covid-19/>

² Ibid

³ <https://www.transportfocus.org.uk/publication/transport-user-community-role-of-staff-in-passengers-feeling-safe/>

⁴ Elizabeth Clery, Zsolt Kiss, Eleanor Taylor and Valdeep Gill, *Disabled People's travel behaviour and attitudes to travel* (Department for Transport, 2017), pp. 14-20; *Research on experiences of disabled rail passengers* (Department for Transport, 2019); *Disabled Travellers Awareness of Rights* (Office of Rail Regulation, March 2014).

⁵ <https://www.transportfocus.org.uk/research-publications/publications/passenger-attitudes-towards-rail-staff/>

key'. In the report Transport Focus confirmed that 'cutting the number of staff, either at stations or on the trains, runs counter to what passengers actually want and could jeopardise their confidence in their ability to get to their destination safely'.

RMT believes that the safety and security of certain groups of passengers may be particularly impacted by LNER's proposals and any subsequent reduction in staffing. For instance, DfT figures published earlier the year show that hate crimes towards disabled people travelling on the railway rose 24% in the last three years.⁶ British Transport Police (BTP) figures show that reports of sexual harassment on public transport between April and October 2021 increased by 63% compared to the year before the pandemic. Closing ticket offices for larger parts of the day will do nothing to help passengers' feelings around safety and security when at the rail station.

Limitations of TVMs and online ticketing

LNER's justification for its proposals centres around the number of rail product transactions completed during the proposed closure periods at the ticket offices. However, RMT believes that this is an intentionally narrow and restrictive way of approaching the issue, and completely ignores the wide range of advice that is provided at the ticket office. Ticket offices and travel shops provide a wide range of services and advice in addition to ticket sales. Passengers are absolutely not able to access this level of advice from Ticket Vending Machines (TVMs) or online ticketing platforms.

The fare and ticketing system is complex and many passengers find it hard to navigate, instead relying on the expertise and advice of staff in the ticket offices. LNER's proposals will make it harder for passengers to get the cheapest and most appropriate fare for their journey and restrict the type of services that are available to them at the station.

The proposed cuts will further exclude older and disabled passengers, and people on lower incomes who may not have access to digital ticketing and/or have difficulty using TVMs. For instance, the Office for National Statistics reports that around 18% of disabled people (as defined by the Equality Act) have never used the internet, compared to 4% of non-Equality Act disabled people. These figures rises sharply with age, with 52% of Equality Act disabled, and 40% of non-Equality Act disabled people over the age of 75 having never used the internet.

Twenty-two per cent of the UK population lack basic digital skills⁷ and the likelihood of having access to the internet at home rises with income with only 51% of households earning between £6000 – £10,000 having access to the internet at home.⁸

RMT therefore believes that the amount and quality of advice that ticket office staff can provide must also be taken into account. In its response to the consultation RMT requested that LNER provide a comprehensive breakdown of the range of advice and services that would not be available for passengers if the ticket offices were going to close at the times proposed.

⁶ <https://www.rmt.org.uk/news/shocking-rise-in-hate-crimes-toward-disabled-people-on-the-rail/>

⁷ <https://www.cam.ac.uk/stories/digitaldivide>

⁸ Ibid

Next steps

The consultations over the proposals closed in September 2021. Transport Focus states that it received 170 comments relating to the proposals and it would be 'giving LNER a response on the changes using this insight from passengers'.

Whilst the formal consultation has closed, RMT believes it is important to continue raising awareness about the proposals and the potential impact on passengers.

- **You can sign and share RMT's petition, opposing the proposed cuts, here - <https://www.megaphone.org.uk/petitions/oppose-the-cuts-to-lner-ticket-office-hours>**
- **RMT is also holding action days at stations affected by the proposals, to make passengers aware about the cuts being proposed at their local stations. Details of upcoming events will be shared on RMT's social media accounts @RMTUnion.**
- **RMT is also asking passengers who are concerned about the proposed cuts to contact their local MPs, councillors and metro mayor (where applicable) and ask them to raise these concerns with Transport Focus (or London TravelWatch in relation to London Kings Cross) and the Government.**