



Policy Briefing



October 2021

Rebuilding passenger confidence through staffing the post-Covid Railway

The rail industry has announced plans to push ahead with thousands of job losses across the rail network, via a Government funded Voluntary Severance scheme. The proposed job loss scheme is applicable to all train operators signed up to the Rail Industry Recovery Group's (RIRG) 'Enabling Framework Agreement'. The scheme has not been agreed with the RMT and RMT is opposed to the job cuts which will threaten passenger safety, service and accessibility.

This briefing sets out why RMT believes these short-sighted cuts will damage the UK's railway and hinder the rail sector's recovery from the pandemic, specifically:

- Job losses run counter to what passengers want. The Government is planning to use public money to fund the redundancies, despite research from its passenger watchdog showing that passengers want more, not less, staff on the railway.
- The rail industry is seeking to justify these cuts by citing projections of future rail usage. However, the reality is that it is far too soon to know what the level of rail demand will be in the future, and the cuts will only deter passengers from the railway.
- Rather than cutting jobs, the rail industry should be planning for a long-term recovery of the green and sustainable rail network. With COP26 fast approaching, it is unfathomable that the rail industry and Government are ploughing ahead with cuts to the low carbon rail network, which has a central role to play in a green recovery from Covid-19.

Transport Focus's research into passenger attitudes to public transport after the pandemic confirmed that staff are central importance.

'The ideal response to the pandemic would be to see more staff on trains and at the station, rather than less'

"I believe staff do play a big role in the future safety of the rail network. Without staff I would not, and do not, feel totally safe. They're a human deterrent and reassure passengers and offer advice if needed."¹

Staff are of central importance to rebuilding passenger confidence in rail travel. Research conducted by the passenger watchdog *Transport Focus*, based on interviews with a user community and published in October 2020, reveals that passengers view staff on platforms, on board trains and cleaning staff as of decisive importance.

- "Staff play an important role in terms of managing behaviour at the station –well recognised as a pinch-point in terms of congestion –serving as a consistent and reassuring monitoring presence that can challenge lapses in social distancing."
- "Greater visibility of cleaning staff, as well as ticket and crowd management workers, would serve to reassure passengers. While many have heard that trains are being cleaned more extensively, few if any have seen this happen with their own eyes."²
- A later report reiterates this point more forcefully: "All our insight now suggests greater levels of concern about cleanliness are likely to persist well beyond the pandemic – with a cultural shift towards greater care over hygiene and health. Passengers do not want to see the standard of cleanliness slip for the foreseeable future."³
- As *Transport Focus* conclude, 'There is 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'.⁴

Attacks on ticket offices

RMT believes that the rail industry's job loss scheme would inevitably lead to widespread ticket office closures. The rail industry has made no attempts to hide its desire for Schedule 17, which regulates ticket office opening hours, to be withdrawn and the Williams-Shapps plan also appears to envisage attacks on ticket offices.

For instance, at an appearance at the Transport Select Committee, Peter Hendy identified ticket offices as an area of possible efficiency savings, describing them as part of a 'Victorian' retail offer.

¹ Passenger quoted in <https://www.transportfocus.org.uk/research-publications/publications/transport-user-community-role-of-staff-in-passengers-feeling-safe/>, pp. 5-7

² <https://www.transportfocus.org.uk/research-publications/publications/transport-user-community-role-of-staff-in-passengers-feeling-safe/>

³ Public transport: a cleaner future? *Transport Focus*, May 2021.

⁴ Passenger quoted in <https://www.transportfocus.org.uk/research-publications/publications/transport-user-community-role-of-staff-in-passengers-feeling-safe/>, pp. 5-7

Already there have been attempts from the rail industry to attack ticket offices. For instance, rail operator LNER recently consulted over proposals to significantly reduce ticket office opening hours at 13 major rail stations on its network. South Western Railway, which has also recently proposed a significant cut to rail services from December 2022, has advised that it is undertaking a review of its Schedule 17 requirements with the DfT.

Yet this is not what passengers want.

- Transport Focus research from 2016 into the introduction of smartcards in the South East of England reported that 'passengers expressed concern that the introduction of smartcards will mean the loss of staff and they seek reassurances that positive relationships already built with staff will be maintained.' It goes on to say that 'staff are considered the first point of reference when at the station'.⁵
- A *Transport Focus* report into passenger attitudes towards rail staff from 2016 set out a number of reasons why passengers prefer face to face contact with ticket office staff over TVMs. Transport Focus said that passenger concerns about the complexity of ticketing and lack of confidence in TVMs 'is reflected in passenger reactions to proposals to change ticket office opening hours at stations'.

Cuts to staffing ahead of the pandemic

RMT has long argued that staffing levels have lagged behind the needs of passengers. In the years before the Covid crisis, this led to issues of safety connected with overcrowding and lack of accessibility.

For too long, the privatised railway has been run on the assumption that staff represent a cost to be cut. Train Operating Companies have attempted to cut staffing costs, partly to pay for their rising rolling stock costs and partly to pay out dividends to their shareholders.

- Since 2013/14, for example, staff costs have fallen from 24 to 23% of TOC spending, while the costs of rolling stock leases rose from 14 to 17%.⁶
- On average, the TOCs pay out £220 million each year in dividends.⁷

As a result of this model, before the pandemic broke, the industry saw years of cutting staff from stations. Across the UK's rail network, just 11% of stations are staffed from first to last train, while a further 45% are only partially staffed, which often means for just a few hours during the commuting peak and the rest are totally unstaffed. Even before the Covid-19 pandemic, station grades were under attack by Government and train companies, seeking to maximise revenue. Jobs are being cut, staff are being deskilled and there is an increase in agency working at rail stations.

⁵ <http://d3cez36w5wymxj.cloudfront.net/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/25124757/TF-Smarter-Travel-NORTH-Oct16-WEB.pdf>

⁶ <https://www.rmt.org.uk/news/minister-confirms-that-the-public-pay-for-railway-profiteering/>

⁷ <https://www.rmt.org.uk/news/rmt-reveals-full-extent-of-shareholders-bonanza/>

When platforms were increasingly crowded, this increased the risk of accidents. Platforms are the second most common location for passenger injuries by slips, trips and falls, while there has been a general trend toward rising numbers of injuries at the Platform Train Interface.⁸

In addition, government and train operating companies attempted to remove Guards from trains or bring in Driver Controlled Operation (DCO), which enables operators to run trains without Guards. This has led to many disputes but has also enabled around a third of services to run without a guard through unstaffed stations. This was described as a 'toxic combination' for disabled people wishing to use the railways by the Disabled People's Transport Advisory Committee.

Similarly, in 2019, the Equalities and Human Rights Commission wrote to the Transport Select Committee, saying that it was concerned about the 'impact of ongoing transport policies', and 'in particular the move to driver only operated (DOO) trains, as well as reductions in staffed stations'. The Commission said that it believed 'the shift to DOO trains, with the increased likelihood of there being no second member of staff on board to assist passengers, and a decrease in staffed stations could represent a diminution of protection for disabled people, and potentially a breach of the Equality Act 2010'.⁹

Even a report by the transport consultancy Steer, commissioned by the Government and the RDG found that when a second member of staff is absent but the train runs anyway, 'the train will run under driver only operation conditions. This removes support for assistance on-train and at un-staffed locations.'

When the researchers asked disabled people what they considered were the biggest improvements that could be made to the accessibility of the railways, disabled passengers of all categories overwhelmingly identified providing more staff at stations and providing more staff on trains.¹⁰

Safety, service and accessibility: the passenger lottery on the pre-pandemic railway

As a result of years of attempting to cut staff from stations and services, as well as reduce cleaning costs by outsourcing them, passengers turning up to travel on Britain's railways could experience highly varied levels of safety, service and accessibility.

In a general context in which around one third of services were running without a second person on the train and just under 90% of stations are unstaffed all or part of the time:

- The most fortunate passengers would be able to access a staffed station, with a separately staffed ticket office, and board a train running with a second safety-critical trained member of staff on-board and would terminate their journey at a staffed station;

⁸ <https://www.rssb.co.uk/en/safety-and-health/monitoring-safety/safety-performance-reports>

⁹ ECHR letter to Lilian Greenwood MP, Chair of the Transport Committee, 5 February 2019

¹⁰ *Effects of modes of train operations on passengers with disabilities*, Steer Group, September 2019, pp. 6-7 and 22-23..

- Others would be able travel on a service with a second member of staff but would have to board or alight at a station with a part-time (peak hours) ticket office but no other staff;
- Still more will have to board and alight at a station with no ticket office and no staff;
- Many will have to board at an unstaffed stations, with no ticket office and travel on services with no second member of on-board staff. This is becoming more widespread and is likely to become even more commonplace if the rail industry's job cuts programme goes ahead.

This was an unacceptable lottery in service quality, safety and accessibility before the pandemic. Covid-19 has made these problems more acute.

Government and TOCs resort to austerity and job losses

"Your members have been True Heroes" Grant Shapps MP, Secretary of State for Transport, letter to the RMT General Secretary, May 2020"

Last year, rail workers were hailed as heroes and key workers who kept the UK's vital rail networks running throughout the pandemic.

Yet the reality is now quite different.

RMT believes that the government is using its ERMA contracts, new National Rail Contracts and its planned Great British Railways to renew the drive to cut staff costs.

- The job cuts scheme announced on 13th October 2021 is likely to lead to thousands of job losses across the rail network. RMT believes that these severe cuts are effectively being used as 'fire and rehire' tactics and staff could be recruited in the future on inferior terms and conditions.
- The government has already mandated the imposition of a pay freeze for staff employed by TOCs and said it wants 'changing working practices.'
- Network Rail has threatened an open-ended pay freeze and a 50% cut to maintenance scheduled tasks with a potentially massive effect on maintenance staffing.
- Great British Railways is being given a mandate to drive costs out of the railway while focusing entirely on one cost: staff. Staff costs are identified as a problem. GBR will be mandated to seek efficiency savings and the ORR will be given responsibility for monitoring how well it does this. As a first step, in collaboration with ORR, the government will introduce new transparency requirements and reporting and analysis on productivity and pay. ORR will collect and publish comprehensive data on salaries and provide comparisons with other sectors and

labour markets. It will also oversee, report and benchmark the sector's productivity.

- Great British Railways and the ORR appear to be being reinvented as mechanisms for delivering permanent austerity for rail staff.

Future demand on the rail network

The rail industry is seeking to justify the job losses by citing projections of possible passenger levels in the future.

The rail industry body, the Rail Delivery Group, has referred to research conducted by Imperial Consultants in Summer 2020 as justification for its cuts.

Yet, the reality is that passenger numbers have been steadily increasing in recent weeks and months, and it is far too soon to tell what passenger numbers will look like in the future.

The Imperial Consultants research was carried out in the Summer of 2020, when rail numbers were far lower than they are now.

RMT believes that seeking to justify massive job cuts with presumptions around what rail passenger numbers may or may not be in the future is completely the wrong approach and will only serve to deter passengers away from the rail network, hindering the sector's recovery.

Indeed, Transport for Wales, which has been in public ownership with the Welsh Government since February 2021, and is not a member of the RIRG, has taken a contrasting approach to rail passenger growth, stating that 'in response to the climate emergency, we expect to go much further in terms of passenger numbers than the pre-covid levels' and that 'in the long term, passenger numbers will continue to grow'.

Long-term recovery of the railway

RMT believes that the rail industry's short-sighted attack on transport workers' jobs and conditions completely fails to consider the long-term recovery of the railway and the central role the rail network will play in meeting the UK's carbon reduction targets.

With transport remaining the largest emitting sector of Greenhouse Gases (GHG), and the majority of transport emissions coming from cars, lorries and vans, it is widely recognised that there needs to be a significant modal shift from cars to rail and public transport.

With COP26 now just weeks away and the need for far-reaching action to reduce harmful carbon emissions, it is simply unfathomable that the rail industry and Government are proposing massive cuts across the low carbon rail network. This will only deter passengers from the railway and do nothing to deliver modal shift.

It also does not make economic sense. Rather than seeking to drive down the railway, a proper investment and expansion programme could deliver significant benefits as part of a

green recovery. For instance, a report published in September 2021 by the Rail Industry Association (RIA) assessed the economic contribution of UK rail and found that for every £1 spent on rail, £2.50 of income was generated in the wider economy, an increase from £2.20 in 2016.

Conclusion

The Covid-19 crisis is a historic opportunity to break with the failed legacy of attempts to de-staff trains and stations. It is quite clear that passengers never wanted staff removed from on-board services, their stations emptied of staff or ticket offices closed.

Transport Focus research shows that passengers considering travelling on the network now want to see more staff. Some rail authorities have recognised this and are acting accordingly. But it is clear that the government and the TOCs are seeking to resort to the failed approach of trying to cut staff costs by holding down pay, cutting jobs and threatening the future of ticket offices.

With the need for radical and far-reaching action to reduce harmful carbon emissions, it is more vital than ever that the rail network is properly staffed and that passengers not only feel confident to return to the rail network but modal shift from high carbon cars to the sustainable rail network is delivered.