



To: Transport Focus
Ticket Office consultation (Great Western Railway)

25th July 2023

PLANNED TICKET OFFICE CLOSURES: SUBMISSION BY EXETER GREEN PARTY COUNCILLOR GROUP

We are Green Party councillors on Exeter City Council where we form the largest opposition group. Constituents have contacted us to express their concern at Great Western Railway's plans to close ticket offices across its network including those at Exeter Central and Exeter St Davids

As Greens we are committed to achieving net zero emissions (and beyond). Rail has a vital role both as a less polluting industry and in offering a clean alternative to private cars.

It follows that we would oppose any initiative which makes it more difficult for people to travel by train, and it is against this yardstick that we have assessed GWR's proposals.

The business case

GWR justifies its plans on the basis that fewer people now make use of ticket offices given the availability of online services. The document cites an average figure of 13% of all tickets being bought at ticket offices.

We comment below on why withdrawing services from this 13% is unacceptable. First, we review the figures underlying that averaged total.

On the evidence of GWR's own figures in their proposals note, the 13% covers a wide range of usage figures. For example, at Barnstaple station here in Devon a massive 45.5% of tickets are purchased at the booking office. At the other end of the scale, the Cotswold station of Kemble scores 1%. In Devon, the lowest scoring station is Tiverton Parkway at 9.2%.

Stations with a high proportion of passengers buying tickets at the ticket office (30% or more) are disproportionately concentrated in Devon and Cornwall, at 3 stations in each county. The other 3 on the list in this category are in the Thames Valley.

The two Exeter stations sit broadly mid-range: Central at 18.1% and St Davids at 12.1%. We assume the greater popularity of Central, despite it having fewer train services, is its location in the city centre, making it easier to access than St Davids for people with booking enquiries. Both these figures represent significant numbers of purchases, over 247,000 in the last financial year. That translates into a lot of people.

In Devon it is worth noting that Totnes, though a small station but with a good service to Bristol, London and the Midlands, has a relatively low proportion of sales at the ticket office. We suspect

that this may be linked to the well-heeled nature of its catchment population – the South Hams.

We make these points to show that applying a single solution of closing everything is to ignore important local variations.

No savings estimates are given, so preventing informed judgement about whether the closures will have a strong and positive impact on the train operators' scope for improving other elements of services. Given that GWR states it will redeploy staff elsewhere on stations, it seems fair to conclude that savings will be minimal.

In short, GWR's presentation of its financial case is incomplete and misleading.

The impact on passengers

The impacts of closing ticket offices on many passengers who currently use them will be adverse. Other advocacy organisations have commented on the additional difficulties to be faced by people with disabilities: we endorse these concerns and will not repeat them here.

It is a reasonable assumption that most of those passengers using ticket offices are people who lack the confidence to use online services or ticket vending machines. They may be elderly (or not), they may lack confidence generally (or not), or they may find navigating fares and routes too challenging and simply want face to face help.

GWR's alternative is for passengers needing assistance to approach a redeployed member of staff somewhere on the station. This may just be feasible at smaller less busy stations, but to assume it will work at, say, either of the Exeter stations on the list is fanciful.

At present passengers can have a civilised semi-private conversation at a ticket office, with a counter to lean on and without problems as to whose turn is next. Contrast this with having to mill around a concourse, trying to attract a staff member's attention and getting in before more aggressive people who see no queue. In addition, the circulation area at Exeter St Davids on the public side of the gateline is small and easily congested, so particularly unsuited to complex conversations and for those who may require additional help because of disability and illness or lacking in confidence.

It may be that there is a case for a small number of closures at stations where the evidence suggests these would cause minimal inconvenience. But the approach being taken by GWR and the other operators of full-scale closures is misguided: implementation of the closure plans will make using the railway less attractive to many and inaccessible to others, and accordingly we oppose them and invite you to do the same.

Councillor Diana Moore

Councillor Carol Bennett

Councillor Andy Ketchin

Councillor Tess Read

Councillor Catherine Rees

Councillor Amy Sparling