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18th July 2023

Settle and Carlisle DevCo Response to the Ticket Office consultation from Avanti West Coast and Northern Trains Ltd

This response to the above consultation is written on behalf of the Settle and Carlisle Development Company (DevCo). It describes what we believe are the affects that the proposals will have on the Settle to Carlisle Railway and more importantly those that it, and the DevCo serves.

The Settle to Carlisle Railway is over 70 miles long, running north from the City of Leeds, through Settle and the Dales, to Carlisle in Cumbria. The stations are:

- **Leeds***
- **Shipley**
- **Bingley**
- **Keighley**
- **Skipton***
- Gargrave
- Hellifield
- Long Preston
- **Settle**
- Horton in Ribblesdale
- Ribblehead
- Dent
- Garsdale
- Kirkby Stephen
- **Appleby**
- Langwathby
- Lazonby and Kirkoswald
- Armathwaite
- **Carlisle**

The stations in **red** are operated by Avanti West Coast (AWC), the remainder being under the control of Northern Trains. Those marked in **bold** are staffed, so form the basis of much of the following.

Broadly the DevCo feels that it cannot support the proposals outlined in the documents supplied by Northern Trains Ltd and AWC.

These proposals point to the Northern Ticket Offices in Leeds and Skipton remaining open, with altered hours, with all five remaining ticket offices closing. The AWC Ticket Office in Carlisle will also close, with the personnel redeployed to other duties on the station (albeit for a similar period during the working day). For the Northern Ticket Offices that close, Northern state that a new grade of employee (Journey Maker) will be deployed on the stations, but for a much shorter period of time.

The rationale behind these changes is, according to the operators' figures, that the numbers of tickets retailed through a traditional ticket office have fallen dramatically over the last few years. While we cannot argue with this reasoning, we feel that it is important to understand that the 'value' of a ticket office goes well beyond the sale of railway tickets alone. And while the redeployment of personnel to duties outside of the ticket office may indeed ease some of these concerns; the lack of detail in both operators' documentation is a key worry, and the DevCo needs to understand fully how this will happen.

Perceived Shortcomings in the proposals as currently explained.

As stated above, our concern is not with ticket sales, but with those other duties that ticket offices (or rather those therein) perform and we feel will be lost in these proposed changes.

1. **Accessibility 1:** There are stations on the UK network, which only offer level access because there are station staff present. Good examples of these across the Northern network include Thorne North, Bridlington and Hexham, but on this line, both Settle and Appleby will be rendered inaccessible when there are no station staff on duty. This is because all these stations allow level (step-free) access via a gate-controlled foot crossing, which is locked and only usable by the public when accompanied by station staff. It is true that the Journey Maker in Northern's concept paper could do this, but there hours of coverage are dramatically less than that seen currently. Therefore, this would result in a worsening of the stations accessibility by those with access difficulties, or indeed those who wish to take luggage across the line. This is something that the DevCo could never endorse.
2. **Accessibility 2:** It is true that at 318 of Northern stations no station staff exist (in other words the station is unstaffed). At these stations when a customer in a wheelchair needs access, the train conductor deploys a ramp to allow access to the train. This system works well, and as both Northern and AWC state that they intend to keep conductors on the train, it will continue to do so. At staffed stations however, it is the station staff who deploy the ramp (ramps are provided on stations for them to use), and if the people are not there then clearly, they cannot continue to do so. Again, the Journey Maker could help here, but their restricted hours points to the onus being placed on the conductor. This we believe will result in station delays as conductors deploy ramps at busy stations. Again, this is difficult to support as we believe that it will represent a worsening of conditions for customers and train service performance.
3. **Accessibility 3:** This point relies on a generalisation, which we admit is dangerous, but the industry points to an increased use of electronically realised tickets, and indeed it is easy to see that this is true. There are however those for whom this is not an option. The elderly, disabled, inexperienced or for those for whom English is not their first language all being examples of this. Without a ticket office, there is a distinct danger that these groups may be excluded from the railway network. Journey Makers (or other redeployed personnel) could help once more, but only if they had genuine access to the industry systems, which is far from clear in much of the documentation received thus far. Simply using a ticket vending machine (TVM) for the customer is not ideal because TVMs do not offer a full range of tickets and will result in queues if a complex transaction is pushed through one. Fewer hours of coverage by the Journey Maker (vs the current ticket office) potentially exacerbates this problem; and again, means a worsening for those customers most in need of help. This we understand is an emotive subject, but we believe is core to our concerns about the proposals. It is true to say that a common response from customers spoken to by our group is, that the proposed closures will put them off travelling by rail.

Statement by Dementia Forward, a group that uses the Settle to Carlisle Line regularly:

The closure of the Ticket Offices on the Settle-Carlisle line will have a significant impact on people who need additional support to travel on the railway. Dementia Forward is particularly concerned about how this will affect people living with dementia. In collaboration with Dev Co and FoSCL we are working towards making the line Dementia Aware, and this involves ensuring the whole travel experience is as straightforward as possible, so people with dementia feel confident using their railway. The human element at a station is vital in instilling confidence and reducing stress, from access to platforms to purchasing tickets, understanding timetables to journey support. Let's not underestimate the importance of real human interaction on our railways for people who are often already overlooked, isolated, and detached from society.

4. **TVMs 1:** Ticket Vending Machines are great, but they are not straightforward to use because they offer a wide range of products. Not a full range however, and there is the rub. In truth the range probably needs restricting further in order for them to be easier to operate (quicker too), but if these are to be the sole method of purchasing tickets on a once staffed station, they need to offer more, and indeed a full range of ticket choices. We feel that products such as railcards, rover tickets and tickets from stations other than that on which the TVM is situated, must be available. The reason for this is they are now, from the ticket office, but not necessarily from the TVM. If the Journey Maker is to truly replace the ticket office, and he/she is not equipped with a device with which to purchase tickets, then the TVM is the only option, and unless it is upgraded as above

then the customer will receive a worsening level of service. As already stated there may be other options, but from what both operators point to is the practice of re-deployed staff using TVMs.

5. **TVMs 2:** Even with an experienced user at the helm, a TVM takes longer to dispense a ticket than a practised ticket sales point operator. This situation will be further exacerbated as the total number of on-station sales points will diminish. Currently a small station may have two slow TVMs and one fast ticket window. Neither Northern nor AWC are promising more TVMs so we feel that this will cause a bottleneck, especially at rush hour or when the station is busy. It is true that customers will purchase online electronically, and that the operators could position short-term ticket sellers on the platform. Not everyone can purchase tickets online however, and a smartphone is not a prerequisite of rail travel, so there is a risk to the revenue line, or worse still in the days of £100 penalty fares, to the customer. Neither operator explains how this is going to be properly managed, which considering in most new franchises the revenue risk stands with the Treasury and by extension the taxpayer, this we feel is not acceptable.
6. **Cash Sales:** Almost all TVMs only accept credit cards, this is a potential issue for those for whom cash is the only option. Remembering that these can often be people who are potentially in difficulty. It is true that ticket offices were never designed from a social care point of view, but they do have a socioeconomic value, and we feel that the social points are being lost in many of these current proposals. Northern talk about third party retailers selling tickets and accepting cash. This is encouraging, but in these days when traditional ticket sales are decreasing, it is difficult to see an attractive business model. Therefore, we would rather see the operation working successfully before the current cash sales option is closed.
7. **Access and Security 1:** In many cases the ticket office personnel often physically unlock the station and its facilities such as waiting rooms and lavatories. With the closing of the ticket offices, we need to understand how this will be done. Again, the Journey Makers could cover the duties, but their hours are much less, so potentially we will have important facilities locked out of use. Clearly there are other ways to ensure stations etc are opened, but neither proposal covers this in detail, and we are concerned that once more we will see a worsening of facilities for those that we represent. For the DevCo in particular there is a risk here, because the catering trolley service, so popular on our line, depends on station staff allowing access. If this is at a time when the Journey Maker is not on duty (ie all day on a Sunday), then catering cannot be provided.
8. **Access and Security 2:** Journey Makers will be on the station and will have cleaning as part of their duties. This is welcome and encouraging, but as they will not be there as long as the current arrangements, we fear an increase in vandalism and antisocial behaviour. If an employee arrives at the station early in the morning, he or she can deal with any damage or issues that may have happened during the previous evening. In this new Journey Maker model, they will more often than not be arriving after the morning peak, which potentially could mean customers dealing with the issues themselves. You could argue that this happens now on unstaffed stations, and of course it does; but staffed stations are often busier (that is why they retained their staff in the first place), so the risk must be higher.
9. **Information and Degraded Service:** Station staff can be compared to fire or lifeboat crews; in other words, it is not until things go wrong that they really earn their money. A tad dramatic it is true, but there is some reasoning in this comparison. We stated above that ticket offices do much more than simply sell tickets. They give information, and much of the public feedback that we have received (and it has been extensive) hangs round the fact that customers like the ticket office because they can get help and advice there. This is of course true, and especially with the elderly it is vital. It seems clear that no demographic profiling has been done, so no one knows the mean age of the customers prevalent in any station's curtilage. Remember that on most of our stations the ticket office staff are the only people on the station. Again of course Journey Makers will cover this, but again this coverage is much shorter than that we currently enjoy. Finally, there is another point worth mentioning, which is the loss of skills and experience (and good quality jobs) to the area, region and rail industry.
10. **Longevity and Mistrust:** Both operators point to the ticket offices being replaced by an on-platform resource, often made up by the displaced ticket office personnel themselves (at Northern these are to be called Journey Makers). While in principle there is much to be praised in this concept, and the CRP would certainly welcome a fuller degree of customer engagement. As said

above, the hours are much less than the current ticket office however, and this we feel is not acceptable. Even more concerning, is the fact that they are in no way regulated. Currently the opening hours of a ticket office are tightly controlled with any change part of a formal regulatory framework, hence this consultation procedure. The Journey Makers will enjoy none of this protection, and as such there is nothing to stop the railway companies removing them in the future. Given that these people are likely to hold a social rather than monetary value; one can easily envisage a desire to find cost savings in the not-too-distant future and the removal of the Journey Makers being an easy way to offer this. We would therefore request that the train operators are mandated to ensure that the customer service personnel, whatever they are called, are properly resourced, their dispositions are monitored, and reported upon.

In conclusion, we hope the above is useful. We fully accept that things must change and as taxpayers we want to get the best value out of the railway. People like people however, and these proposals rob so many stations of that person-to-person interaction that is so vital. The current situation is probably unsustainable, and we welcome the concept of *'getting people from behind the glass'* and on to the station. In fairness the Journey Maker model does this, but not for much of the day, and it is these gaps in service that really concern us. Couple this to the wholesale removal (outside of the TVM) of ticket sales points on the station, we feel the proposals are a retrograde step.

A sad fact on our line is Journey Makers have existed (all but in name) for years, with all the station staff covering a peripatetic role, as they move from selling tickets and giving information, to helping people with buggies, wheelchairs etc, posting posters and information and cleaning the station. Therefore, the feeling we have is: *'if a thing isn't broken then don't fix it'*!

Our real complaint however is in the lack of clarity, clearly there must be a saving here, and as we say we understand that this is important, but we don't know what this saving is, so it is impossible to take a view on what the value of it is. The common feeling amongst the public seems to be this is the *'thin end of the wedge'* and the Journey Makers worry us too. This worry hangs around the fact that in none of the documentation is there any guarantee that the Journey Makers will not be removed later if they are unsuccessful. There is a powerful argument here, because given they will only be on the stations for a short period of time and will not be able to retail tickets, then their value may be marginal. It is important to understand that while at Carlisle the ticket office staff will be redeployed onto the station. At the Northern stations: Shipley, Bingley, Keighley, Settle and Appleby (and of course at numerous other stations) the staff will go altogether replaced by Journey Makers for short periods of time, which means when they are not there the station is effectively unstaffed.

The DevCo will happily work with Northern, AWC and the rail industry looking at options for all the stations to ensure that high levels of customer service are maintained, while savings and shared services are maximised. Sadly, however until the points above are fully answered we cannot support the proposals from either operator because they so clearly run contrary to the ethos of community rail.

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