

## **Friends of Eccles Station response to Proposals to Close Rail Ticket Offices**

The Friends of Eccles Station (FRECCLES) have been helping improve the Station environment at Eccles since 2005. We therefore have a considerable understanding of how the Station operates and the needs of Station users. We would therefore like to make the following points in relation to the proposal to close the ticket office at our Station. However, we believe these points are also more widely applicable to similar closures at other stations in the region.

To focus our comments on the consultation information provided by Northern, our comments primarily, specifically address the points made in the Public Consultation document issued by Northern, as follows:

### **1) Only 1 in 6 journeys on Northern services are bought through a ticket office, compared with almost half of all journeys in 2018**

*This equates to approximately journeys 2 million in the Greater Manchester region. The ticket offices are particularly important if these individuals have special needs, are making more complex journeys, or are spending more to make longer journeys. Has any research been done to evaluate this?* The net result of the planned closures will be to discourage and reduce the number of people travelling by train, when we should be trying to increase that number, with the aim of reducing road congestion, pollution and carbon emissions.

*Ticket machines and phone applications have severe limitations in what they can offer to passengers. They cannot advise on cheapest options: e.g. split-ticketing or off-peak v super off-peak etc., which will mean travellers paying more for their journey than they need to? Railcards are currently available on the day at ticket offices. Will these be available elsewhere near the Station?*

### **2) Northern operate ticket offices at 149 stations**

In Greater Manchester 50 ticket offices (86%) are scheduled to close, with the remainder having reduced operating hours (14%). Of the 53 Northern ticket offices, 46 would close and seven will have reduced hours

It is interesting to note that Merseyrail has no plans to close their station ticket offices.

### **3) A Journey Maker will be provided to help customers around the station**

One of the headline announcements has been that ticket office staff will be coming out of their offices to help passengers. However, it is less widely acknowledged that this will be for far less hours. This suggests the closure plans are entirely driven by cost, rather than proper consideration of rail travellers' needs, with the obvious long-term aim to cut the number of staff employed. Yet, when these franchises were offered, the specification was that staffing should actually be increased.

At Eccles the current Station Ticket office hours Monday to Friday are 6:25 a.m. to 12:55 p.m., to be substituted by a Journey Maker between 7 and 9 a.m. On Saturday the ticket office hours are 7.25 a.m. to 13.55 p.m., to be substituted by a Journey Maker between 9 and 11 a.m. This represents a 69% reduction in staff availability each day.

**Journey Maker roles are stated to be to:**

- a) **Give customers information** – This is least likely to be required at the weekday Journey Maker hours given for our station, since most people are of working age and know where they are going at those times.
- b) **Keep stations clean and tidy** – How will they do this at the times when the station platform is most crowded?
- c) **Assist during service disruption** – Our experience is that disruption is less of an issue at the peak hours where the Journey Maker is scheduled to be present.
- d) **Help resolve customer issues** – Again, least likely to be required at the weekday Journey Maker hours given for our station.
- e) **Sell tickets at ticket offices only** – Not available after closure of our ticket office.
- f) **Make announcements at stations** – How will this work when there is no facility for local announcements?
- g) **Provide extra assistance to those who need it** – It would be helpful to have the types of assistance specified.
- h) **Help customers to buy tickets online and via machines** – Perhaps the most useful role but, again, least likely to be required at the weekday Journey Maker hours given for our station.

4) **Ticket availability at local retail outlets (e.g. convenience stores)**

How convenient to the Station will these be? What training will be given to store staff? Will they be able to advise on the most appropriate tickets?

- 5) **Using a Promise to Pay notice that allows them [passengers] to board a train as long as they exchange the notice for a ticket (and pay in cash) at the first opportunity, either on board (from a conductor), or from a ticket office.**

Conductors frequently have trouble getting through crowded trains and can be unable to answer questions about onward travel or best ticketing, with their limited resources. Clearly the possibility of subsequent purchase from a ticket office is going to be untenable in most cases, after they have been closed.

**6) An Equality Impact Assessment is done to look into the potential impact of a change on people with protected characteristics (such as age, race or disability)**

Assessing impact after the event is all very well, but it will then almost certainly be too late to reverse the closures. The changes will clearly affect the elderly, those without smartphones or those who are not tech savvy, which breaches equality and fairness principles that must underpin any organisation's practice in the modern era. Passengers with disabilities rely on the ticket office at Eccles to ensure that they get accessible options with the tickets they buy. One of our station users commented that it *'would be impossible for me and other disabled people if booking offices were closed. If I am travelling from Eccles to Chatham that involves 3 journeys and you have to do all separately and then do similar for coming back. If I book tickets on line then I have to collect them from the ticket machine at the station and often many are out of order so I have to queue and that is difficult for me. Many people are not happy collecting tickets from the machine for a number of reasons. One of these is a fear of 'getting it wrong' on the day and not being able to travel.'* This must then result in a decline in train use among these particular disadvantaged groups, which surely flies in the face of government and railway industry policy.

**7) Customer help points at over half of our stations, which can be used in emergencies as well as providing information ?**

Are these really going to be available to answer ticketing and other travel information. They are also usually well away from the ticket machines.

Additional Comments

The level of customer service that passengers receive is dictated by the interaction they have with staff who work for the railway. They give advice, direction when asked for and help for those who need it. They know the railway and how it works, so are able to direct sensitively those that need help and advice.

The disappearance or, reduced hours at more major rail stations is at least as disturbing, since it provides reduced, or no, resort for those requiring personal assistance with their ticketing and other travel problems, including tourists unfamiliar with the rail system.

Finally, we would like to know what will happen to the ticket offices. Will they be used as financial assets to be sold off? Will they be available to Community Rail and Station Volunteer groups?