

## Transport Salaried Staffs' Association

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Dear Member of the Legislative Assembly,

I am writing to you because I am concerned about plans for Northern Ireland's Railway following an initial meeting with Northern Ireland Railways management on the 31st of March 2023 and since confirmed by writing.

At the meeting TSSA were advised of Northern Ireland Railways current plan to close most ticket offices throughout the Northern Ireland railway network with only a small number of ticket office locations to remain at key sites such as the new hub and at integrated ticket offices which sell both bus and rail tickets.

The plan, as explained to TSSA, will include the installation of automated ticket vending machines (TVM's) and barriers across the railway network while utilising members of platform staff to sell tickets from handheld machines where required. It is worthwhile noting that these staff members will also be responsible for train despatch, station maintenance, passenger assistance and barrier security amongst other things.

While there is no firm timeline for this proposal, we are advised the installation of ticket vending machines is expected to begin in August this year with a full roll out expected to be complete by early 2024.

Any proposal to replace a member of staff with a machine would be a terrible decision, not only for our members who face being made redundant from their jobs, but for the communities that depend upon their local ticket offices.

They depend on the ticket offices, not only for ticket sales but also for advice, safety, and assistance. It's a move that discriminates against vulnerable communities who need the extra support. It will make rail travel a less attractive option for women, for people with disabilities and the elderly, to mention just a few.

In terms of vulnerable passengers, or passengers who require additional assistance to purchase tickets, or who may require assistance to board the train, it is unclear how the introduction of TVMs and barriers will support them in terms of accessibility particularly when the remaining station staff will be responsible for other duties such as train despatch or station maintenance.

Some vulnerable passengers may not feel confident or capable navigating or purchasing tickets online or via the TVM while others simply may prefer an interaction with a dedicated member of staff who can provide advice and information on tickets, connections and onward journeys.

[www.tssa.org.uk](http://www.tssa.org.uk)

members' helpdesk **0800 3282673**

General Secretary **Manuel Cortes**



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While not exclusively and by no means universally, elderly, and disabled passengers may find it difficult to use more modern systems without assistance and this could result in purchasing the wrong ticket at the station or not purchasing a ticket at all.

For most Train Operating Companies neither Ticket Vending Machines (TVM's) nor on-board staff can currently guarantee passengers the cheapest possible ticket for their journey. Unlike ticket office staff TVM's are simply not designed to help passengers decide between peak and off-peak tickets and many passengers do not understand the complexity of the ticketing system.

This leaves passengers with the option of purchasing a more expensive ticket or risk travelling with an invalid ticket for which they may face penalties as Northern Ireland Railways state:

*“If you travel without a valid ticket - but had the opportunity to purchase one - you will be issued with a penalty fare of £50, plus the value of the full single fare of the journey you're making.*

*This can be paid on the spot or within 21 days, provided you can produce acceptable identification. (If you do not pay on the spot and are unable to produce ID, the Revenue Protection Officer may bring the matter to the attention of the police.) Non-payment of the penalty fare may result in a court appearance plus a fine of up to £1000.”*

On the Belfast to Derry/Londonderry route alone there are no less than 27 different ticket types available to purchase and this will cause great confusion as to the cheapest or best option for the passenger which a member of ticket office staff will know and communicate to the customer immediately based on their understanding of the ticket system and the needs of the passenger.

It should be noted that TVMs and barriers are notoriously unreliable and frequently break down or are vandalised. If the TVM is broken or a passenger is unable to purchase a ticket from the TVM due to long lines this usually results in a debate aboard the train carriage with the ticket examiner over the cost of the ticket.

Given the need to increase passenger numbers it appears counterproductive to place barriers such as those detailed above in front of passengers who wish to utilise the rail network. Technology is a great asset when it is utilised to support operations, but it is neither acceptable nor a sufficient replacement for a human being as it fails to offer anywhere near the same level of understanding, support, and customer service that a member of staff can provide to passengers.

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We also have significant concerns in terms of safety as we expect that stations will be left to operate with one member of staff, as currently happens in Newry, who is responsible for train despatch, selling tickets, barrier security, station maintenance and passenger assistance. What were to happen if this member of staff faces anti-social behaviour or has a serious accident at work? Who will be present to raise the alarm or to seek medical assistance?

It is our view that the company have mismanaged booking offices through understaffing and poor rostering for several years leaving many windows unstaffed which has an impact on revenue collection. Therefore, any decision to replace ticket office staff with machines based on the current revenue figures taken from the ticket offices will be misleading at best.

We have written to Northern Ireland Railways to request that they immediately review and change their current position vis a vis ticket office closures and confirm that staffed ticket offices will remain open for the foreseeable future. Their response was less than satisfactory.

We are bringing the matter to your attention to request your support either on an individual basis on behalf of those of your constituents who use the rail network or to highlight as a campaigning issue for you, or your party, in anticipation of elections to the Legislative Assembly.

It should be noted that while there are currently no known plans to close ticket offices in either Ulsterbus or Metro, TSSA believe that the plan to close ticket offices in Northern Ireland Railways is the thin end of the wedge and the parent company Translink will not hesitate to move forward with similar proposals if they are successful here.

In Solidarity

Gary Kelly  
TSSA Organiser - Scotland & Ireland

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