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Telephone: 01707 357000

Email: jane.quinton@welhat.gov.uk

London TravelWatch
PO Box 5594
Southend-on-Sea
SS1 9PZ.

Dear Sir

Railway Station Ticket Offices Consultation

I am writing on behalf of Welwyn Hatfield Borough Council to the above consultation, and I would like to express very strong concerns about what is being proposed.

Welwyn Hatfield Borough Council declared a climate emergency in 2019 and set five ambitious objectives, one of which was to reduce carbon emissions across the borough by promoting a number of measures including sustainable transport. Improvements to, and facilitating easy access to, public transport are key elements of this, so it is of concern that measures are being proposed which may discourage or make more difficult the use of rail.

Welwyn Hatfield is a borough in southern Hertfordshire based on the two towns of Welwyn Garden City and Hatfield. As well as stations in both of these towns, the borough also has four other railway stations: Welwyn North, Welham Green and Brookmans Park on the Stevenage to Kings Cross route, and further to the east Cuffley on the Stevenage to Moorgate route. These stations are an important part of the communities they serve, and facilitate people going to and from work, travelling for education or leisure, or accessing other important services. Despite the proximity to London, many of these stations are also important as destinations, with both Welwyn Garden City and Hatfield being significant centres for employment and further and higher education.

Whilst Welwyn Hatfield Borough Council acknowledges that the majority of tickets are not now bought at ticket offices, the Council is concerned that the proposed closure of the ticket offices will discourage people from using the railway, and may adversely impact more vulnerable travellers or those who find using ticket machines difficult, for example some older passengers, or those with disabilities or visual impairments. There are a significant number of fares and discounts which are only available at a ticket office as well as services such as assisting with costing different routes, refunds, railcard issues or changes to travel plans. Before any ticket office closures, a clear plan needs to be put in place to assist passengers to access the full range of services ticket office staff currently provide.

It is acknowledged that the consultation says that staff will be available to assist customers despite the closure of ticket offices, though it is unclear what this means in practice, and in particular the numbers of such staff that will be available throughout the day. It is important that the number of staff to assist passengers is retained throughout the day, so that customers can be confident that someone will be available to help at whatever time of the day they may wish to travel. The FAQ’s on the Great Northern website acknowledges that not all tickets can be bought online, but that those that can’t can be bought at larger stations, including Welwyn Garden City. However, it does not explain how a customer gets to the larger station to purchase this ticket if they live – and would thus start their journey - somewhere else.,

Likewise, the FAQ suggests that staff will be available to assist passengers, but that they will be on the station concourse rather than in the ticket office. Whilst this may be feasible in some locations, the Council would have concerns about how this would work at Welwyn Garden City station where – because of the design of the station - the ticket office and ticket machines are on a different level to the rest of the station.

Finally, the Council would have a concern about the possible perception of safety of stations which are unstaffed, such as for vulnerable passengers travelling alone after dark. We would request that following any ticket office closures, that this was strongly considered when looking at staffing levels and times.

Overall, the Council is concerned that the proposed closure of ticket offices will discourage or potentially make more difficult use of the railways at a time when increased use of public transport should be encouraged and made easier in order to help reduce carbon emissions. In contrast, these proposals risk making travelling more difficult for some passengers, and may potentially act as a deterrent in some cases and we believe that they should be rethought.

Yours sincerely

Cllr Jane Quinton

Executive Member, Planning and Regeneration