



HOUSE OF COMMONS

LONDON SW1A 0AA

The Rt Hon Grant Shapps MP
Secretary of State
Department for Transport
Great Minster House
33 Horseferry Road
London SW1P 4DR

2 August 2022

Dear Grant,

I write regarding the ongoing consultation on legislative changes to implement rail reform, which closes later this week.

As I have set out in our previous correspondence, Bromley and Chislehurst is quintessential commuter-belt territory. Indeed, prior to the pandemic the constituency had the second-largest number of commuters of any constituency in England and Wales, following only Lewisham West and Penge, and while numbers have inevitably dipped over the last two years, a considerable number of residents still rely on local rail services to get from A to B. Given the age demographic of the constituency, its proximity to central London, and the relative lack of TfL provision in Bromley compared to many other London boroughs, that not only includes those employed in the City and the West End, but also more elderly residents and pupils journeying to and from school.

There is much to be welcomed in the consultation, not least the desire to see greater integration between track and train, the repeated ambition to reform and simplify fares and ticketing, and its focus on improving accessibility. On the latter, I hope we will soon see further rounds of the excellent Access for All scheme, which has been a gamechanger in many areas.

I do, however, wish to raise with you a number of concerns, both as a commuter myself, and on behalf of the residents who have contacted me over recent weeks. The first relates to the consultation itself.

Lasting for just eight weeks, I am concerned at the short length of time the consultation is open to responses. Moreover, and perhaps a greater worry, is how few people appear to be aware that it is even taking place, especially in a constituency, like mine, where almost every household relies on our local rail services to some degree. I would be interested to know what rationale was used to decide the duration of the consultation, and from the number of responses it has received, whether it is still considered long enough.



Additionally, while I appreciate that broader questions about rail reform were consulted on in 2019 in the call for evidence on the Williams Rail Review, and that this particular consultation focuses on legislative changes required to implement parts of the Williams-Shapps Plan for Rail, will there be an opportunity for further consultation on the commitments that do not necessitate primary legislation? After all, it is the latter tranche that includes many aspects of rail travel that passengers have a direct, day-to-day interface with, for example ticketing, station accessibility, the compensation process, and the look and design of trains.

A notable case in point is the future of ticket offices. Although I expect the overwhelming majority of passengers would agree with the stated aim of modernising the ticketing process, enabling far greater flexibility to purchase fares online, that should not preclude the availability of manned ticket offices. Many elderly residents will feel deeply uncomfortable purchasing tickets online, while others will still want to make use of the expertise and advice offered by ticketing staff on journey options.

While I recognise that rail travel may be permanently altered by the pandemic, proposals floated by the Rail Delivery Group - which could see a large number of ticket offices closed, with only hubs like Bromley South and Orpington remaining open in my area - represent a significant step backwards, undermining efforts to improve the passenger experience. Station staff, including those in ticket offices, as well as the retail and cafe vendors, are highly valued members of the community who many of us have got to know well over the years. Any potential changes to the availability of specific ticket offices must not be judged a fait accompli, but instead fully and widely consulted on once firm proposals have been brought forward.

I should reiterate that I support the vast majority of what is included in the consultation, but would be grateful for a response on the concerns raised above.

Yours ever,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Bob Neill', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Sir Bob Neill MP