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Dear Karen

Ticket office opening hours

Thank you for your letter dated 22 December 2008 outlining proposed changes to ticket office opening hours at a number of stations.

Responses to the consultation

As you know, under the Ticketing and Settlement Agreement train companies must invite passengers to make comments to Passenger Focus or London TravelWatch. That exercise resulted in 503 contacts with Passenger Focus.

All were objections and the key issues raised were:

- That ticket vending machines (TVMs) cannot give advice, or help with journey planning.
- That TVMs are difficult to use/baffling for some passengers, including older people.
- That TVMs are difficult for some passengers with disabilities to use.
- That TVMs do not allow passengers to purchase various types of ticket (e.g. zone boundary extensions, monthly season tickets, Plus Bus add ons, Bedfordshire County Council senior citizens' half fare tickets, Gold Card discounts, GroupSave).
- That TVMs are often out of order, including through vandalism or the result of theft/attempted theft from the machines. The number of reports of TVMs that will not take cash was notable.
- That toilets and or waiting rooms will be unavailable for longer periods.
- That passengers will, at times, be forced to board trains without tickets, leading to potential conflict with revenue protection staff.
- That delivery of services to passengers with disabilities will be compromised.
- That passengers will be, or believe they will be, less safe using those stations if staffing hours are reduced.



We have included below some direct quotations from the responses:

- “My 80 year old mother loves the freedom of being able to use the station for trips into Cambridge and London and feels safe doing so if the station is manned - she will not go anywhere near an automatic ticket machine and will therefore suffer from losing the freedom of travel - a real pity”
- “In busy periods, particularly Saturdays and there are often queues at the ticket machine. It is very complicated and slow to buy tickets from the machine, especially if it is not a straightforward route you have planned. The ticket office can deal with these queries much more efficiently.”
- “The proposed de-manning in the afternoon is the very time that the sun in the west bleaches out the (west-facing) screen of the self-service ticket machine and makes it impossible to use.”
- “Our 13 year old son, who is just beginning to use the trains on his own, recently could not buy a ticket and when he went to pay at the destination was accused of trying to get away without buying a ticket - it was only when other passengers supported him that he was allowed to pay at the destination.”
- “The restriction on the use of cash are also a problem on a number of fronts. The machine installed is physically incapable of returning coins. This causes real problems when
 - 1 a) you could not read the screen saying 'cards only' because of the light conditions
 - 2 b) having put in coins and then having a note rejected you cannot get your coins back
 - 3 c) exact money is required - a real problem for someone who buys different tickets and cannot be expected to know what money to bring in advance
 - 4 d) Sometimes cash is not accepted at all - it still allows you to put money in (as you cannot read the screen) but then will not return coins.”
- “Bear in mind also that when the office is unmanned, the toilets are not available nor is the warm waiting room and the likelihood of vandalism is much higher.”
- “There is only one narrow exit/entrance to each platform, which means there is nowhere to run (except onto the tracks) if there is any trouble. A reduction in staffing will inevitably mean the station becomes less safe still.”

Existing problems to address

Within the above there are some matters that FCC needs to address anyway, irrespective of any proposal to reduce ticket office opening times. These are:

- That TVMs do not currently retail a number of add ons, discounts and group products that passengers are entitled to purchase. Some passengers are therefore being inconvenienced or potentially overcharged.
- That TVMs appear frequently to be operating in ‘card only’ mode. As well as the inconvenience, this is a social inclusion issue and presents real difficulties for some passengers (e.g. children).
- That the effect of sunlight on the ‘touchscreen’ of TVMs is creating difficulties for passengers. Note: we are aware that FCC has proposals to fit anti-glare screens at a number of locations.



All three have implications for the proper operation of FCC's penalty fares policy. Passengers are being put in a position where they must either buy the wrong ticket or board without a ticket and risk a penalty fare. Convincing a revenue protection inspector (RPI) that you are not fare dodging is, for some, a daunting prospect. We are concerned by reports of passengers having to rely on fellow travellers to assure RPIs of the veracity of their claim that the TVM wasn't working. These are issues now – with more limited opening hours they will be worse.

National Passenger Survey

In considering your proposals we have reviewed FCC National Passenger Survey results. The scores for the three relevant station measures are in line with other London and South East TOCs (ticket buying facilities 67%; your personal security using 62%; availability of staff 55%) – however, they lag behind overall satisfaction at 77%. In addition, almost one in five FCC passengers surveyed in the Autumn 2008 survey was positively dissatisfied with ticket buying facilities and the availability of staff at stations. These proposals are likely to worsen the position.

Ticket Vending Machine research

We have also looked at research undertaken into passengers' attitudes towards ticket vending machines: respondents in our recent study were South West Trains passengers, but their views are likely to be representative. In that research we found that most passengers using ticket offices could have used a TVM, but took a conscious decision not to do so. The reasons were:

- the purchaser's lack of confidence in using the machine
- the purchaser's lack of confidence in their ability to select a ticket at the appropriate price with the necessary validity or relevant route (as specified on the ticket and reflected in the price)
- older passengers who are less inclined to use ticket machines
- a preference for face-to-face transactions for reassurance.

Trust in TVMs

In 2006 Passenger Focus research, passengers were asked to indicate the extent to which they trust ticket sources to provide them with the best value for money tickets for train journeys.

	Commuters	Leisure	Business
Ticket office at train station	87%	88%	82%
Ticket machine at train station	48%	36%	34%
Internet	57%	55%	68%
Telephone	45%	46%	54%
Staff on train	66%	68%	58%
Travel agent	32%	42%	38%

Note: respondents answering trust entirely or tend to trust each outlet to provide them with the best value for money tickets.



Existing Passenger Focus policy

In our submission to the DfT in relation to the South Central franchise we said “the needs of passengers who value staff at ticket offices must be a consideration in bidders’ retailing proposals. Alternative forms of ticketing must not be used as an excuse to eliminate staffing from stations.”

Conclusions

Our conclusions are given below in two parts:

Part A

A1. Passenger Focus objects to all the major changes proposed. This blanket objection is for two reasons.

1 First, because the proposals were drawn up using five transactions in a 15 minute period (i.e. 20 per hour), whereas on 13 January 2009 DfT rejected proposals from South West Trains to close offices “during times when on average 12 or more tickets are issued hourly”. An average of 12 issues per hour appears relevant to these changes and we were surprised that FCC did not review its proposals in the light of the SWT decision.

2 Second, because the consultation has revealed a number of difficulties passengers are experiencing with FCC TVMs.

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4 If FCC withdraws proposals to reduce hours at times when on average 12 or more tickets are issued hourly, and brings forward satisfactory proposals to address concerns about TVMs, Passenger Focus would be minded to withdraw its blanket objection in favour of Part B below.

Part B

Passenger Focus objects to the following:

B1. Any reduction in ticket office opening hours in the London area where Oyster ‘pay as you go’ is not yet valid and at which it is not yet possible to top up an Oyster card at that station. We believe FCC should defer any decision about changes to hours at any London station until Oyster ‘pay as you go’ has been fully implemented and the level of remaining demand at ticket offices assessed.

B2. Reductions that involve a station being closed entirely on a Saturday or Sunday or both. We do not believe it is reasonable for passengers with transactions requiring face to face contact to be restricted to weekdays. The representations we have received suggest that there is demand from passengers to buy ordinary tickets, renew season tickets and make enquiries at the weekend – this facility should be maintained. We do not want passengers driving to staffed stations in order to buy tickets, as is reported to happen in some areas. We have also noted the view of many passengers that their personal safety will be reduced if staff are not present at stations, that passenger facilities (e.g. waiting rooms, toilets) will be locked out of use for longer periods and that delivery of assistance to disabled passengers is likely to be compromised.



B3. Reductions on Mondays to Fridays which involve ticket offices that normally close in the early evening closing at lunchtime. We believe that the abandonment of entire afternoon shifts is unacceptable. Apart from the ticket retailing issues, passenger facilities will be locked out of use for longer and delivery of assistance to disabled passengers is likely to be compromised. Furthermore, having a staff presence in the afternoon and early evening provides reassurance to passengers about their personal security using that station, particularly after dark in the winter.

Passenger Focus recognises that ticket retailing cannot be set in aspic and that train companies are not immune from the current economic downturn. There are therefore potential exceptions to the objections in Part B at four stations:

Haydons Road

The number of tickets recorded as being sold at this station on Saturdays is very low. If FCC can demonstrate that this level represents the average sales in the past six rail industry periods, and that in the same period the ticket office has been open for the hours currently required on all, or substantially all, Saturdays in the same period, we would be minded to withdraw our objection to Saturday closure.

Blackfriars, Elephant and Castle, Loughborough Junction

Thameslink Programme construction means that the need for ticket retailing facilities at these stations at weekends will be very limited in the immediate future. However we believe that, on restoration of through running at weekends ticket offices should reopen staffed to substantially the current Schedule 17 hours for a minimum of 18 months in order to assess the ongoing level of demand. If FCC is willing to give a formal undertaking to DfT to do this, Passenger Focus would be minded to withdraw its objection to these weekend closures.

Yours sincerely

Guy Dangerfield

Passenger Link Manager

**cc Department for Transport
Rail Settlement Plan**