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Dear Mr Southall

Proposed reduction in opening hours at Melton Mowbray ticket office

Thank you for your letter of 16th August giving notice of the East Midlands Trains (EMT) proposal to reduce the ticket-office opening hours at Melton Mowbray.

Passenger Focus appreciates that it is necessary from time to time to review staffing at stations, especially in the current financial climate. However, we are also keenly aware that any reduction in ticket-office hours and any subsequent withdrawal of booking staff effectively removes any official staff presence on the station – and the benefits that staffed presence brings – a matter causing concern to both passengers and ourselves. For this reason, it is important that any restructuring of staff presence is balanced with the need of ensuring that passengers receive the service and facilities which they reasonably expect.

Monday-Saturday

Passenger Focus very much regrets the proposals to curtail ticket-office hours on weekday and Saturday afternoons.

We make the following observations about the proposal

General:

- Passengers will be obliged to rely on a single Ticket Vending Machine (TVM).
 - Passenger Focus's research *Ticket Vending Machine Usability* published in July 2010, shows that passengers need information on validity, routing etc. when purchasing tickets. TVMs neither provide full ticket-validity details nor identify the most appropriate ticket for the journey which the passenger intends to make. Absence of staff removes access to virtually all information, apart from immediate real-time train-running information.
 - TVMs do not offer the full range of products which the ticket office sells (e.g. no railcards; no on-train reservations; no sales for future travel).



- They do not offer the full range of ticket types.
 - Some passengers are not conversant with the operation of TVMs; the lack of dexterity of some passengers prevents them using such machines.
 - Passengers do not all make identical journeys; a one-size-fits-all approach does not address the bespoke-ticket needs which many passengers have. Buying tickets for routine journeys is wholly different to that for one-off travel.
 - Given the recent and surprise proposal to add several small EMT stations to the penalty-fares area, our concerns at the status of sales at Melton Mowbray are raised against a backdrop of potential extension of penalty fares to the Leicester – Peterborough line. If this happens, the assurances given regarding the current ability to seek details and buy tickets from on-train staff will no longer apply. We agree that relatively few passengers buy tickets to less-popular destinations, but that does not blind us to the fact that those who do are at a major disadvantage should they need to do so when staff are unavailable.
- Personal security is a concern for many passengers at unstaffed stations. Absence of staff can prove a disincentive to travel in the evenings and at weekends.
 - Passengers are generally concerned at anti-social behaviour. They report an increased sense of security when members of staff are present on the station. Closed-circuit television (CCTV) is not regarded as a sufficient alternative to staff presence. Response times to events on the station are a particular issue; at a location such as Melton Mowbray, attendance by British Transport Police (or even county constabulary officers) is likely to take some time.
 - Potential vandalism in the absence of staff is another passenger concern. Even minor vandalism, such as graffiti and dropping litter, produces a very negative perception of the station and of rail travel in general. Vandalism has a direct effect on costs: damage has to be repaired and, if fewer people choose to travel as a result of the vandalism, revenue is lost.
 - It is unclear whether passengers have access to a help point at this station. The *Stations Made Easy* database contradicts itself on this point. (Further references to this and other discrepancies are made below.)

Specific:

- We have concerns that in the 13.00 to 13.59 slot, Monday to Friday sales are 11, but Saturday sales are 17; these are significant given that the office is closed between 13.00 and 13.30. These sales must take place in the second half of the hour, which is after the proposed closure time of 13.30 and in any case, 17 in half an hour exceeds the 12-per-hour minimum and the weekday 11 in half an hour supposes that at least 12 would have been sold in the full hour. As trains leave at or around xx.33 in both directions for much of the day, it seems odd to close the booking office in the half hour before the trains depart in any case.



- Given the sales levels for weekdays and Saturdays, by the 12-per-hour rule we would argue that a minimum opening time should be 7.00 – 14.00 on all six days.
- As only one Ticket Vending Machine is provided at Melton Mowbray:
 - it is unclear whether this single machine can cope with demand in the short time available for ticket purchase given the trains' calling pattern – literally only a minute or two between departures in the Birmingham and Peterborough directions, in addition to early morning departures at 06.50 and 06.52 – and issue tickets within the queuing standards applicable to the ticket office.
 - if the TVM is subject to malfunction or vandalism, the station will be entirely bereft of booking facilities, creating additional pressures for on-train staff.
 - Again, given the recent and surprise proposal to add several small EMT stations to the penalty-fares area, our concerns at the status of sales at Melton Mowbray are raised against a backdrop of potential extension of penalty fares to the Leicester – Peterborough line. If this happens, the assurances given regarding the current ability to seek details and buy tickets from on-train staff will no longer apply, creating additional impact on passengers.
- Closure of the ticket office will almost inevitably involve closure of the booking hall.
 - If that occurs, no weather-proof waiting accommodation will be available on the platforms as only a canopy, without protection against wind, is provided.
 - Closure of the booking hall will also prevent access to the unisex accessible toilet, which is the only one available. Toilets are provided because station users need them, not simply at times when the booking office is open. The station design is unsuitable if facilities are locked beyond use when the ticket office is shut. The trains may have toilets on them, but with an hourly service passengers tend to arrive in good time for the train and may wish to benefit from the facility before the train arrives. Some disabled passengers are reluctant to use on-train toilets.
 - Passengers will have no access to racked information leaflets and timetables which are not available on trains either.
- Accessibility will become an issue for many passengers, especially for those requiring Leicester-bound services who have difficulty using or who cannot use the overbridge and need to use the barrow crossing for which staff attendance is required.
 - On-train staff can deploy the boarding/alighting ramp, but some passengers require assistance on the platform.
 - We appreciate that 24 hours' notice is the uniform suggested booking period across the industry, but passengers with reduced mobility are as likely to need to travel at short notice in an emergency, or make impulse journeys, as anyone else



- except other passengers are not expected to make special arrangements. This flexibility will be seriously curtailed by the withdrawal of staff.
 - Passengers with prams, pushchairs and luggage will be expected, presumably, to cross the line by using the footbridge.
- Melton Council's new offices, which are adjacent to the station, are now open.
 - As well as Melton Council's staff it is intended that the building will be used by the Leicestershire Partnership NHS Trust, county council staff, social services, and probation service.
 - Limited car parking and the proximity of the station to these new offices should generate greater use of the railway services.

We note that the number of ticket sales during most of the periods marked for closure falls below the nominal 12 per hour threshold used by the Department for Transport in previous consultations, and that booking office facilities remain open for, in effect, one shift each day. We are also conscious that we have received only one letter of objection from the public during the official consultation period. Accordingly, whilst it is disappointing for passengers to lose booking facilities, we do not object to the Monday – Saturday proposals, subject to the booking office remaining open until at least 14.00 in recognition of the high sales still at that time. However, in light of the potential increase in passengers from council, NHS and other staff and their visitors, we would like to see a review period prior to this proposal being implemented, to allow for analysis of changes to sales figures to take place.

Sunday

We are deeply concerned, however, at the proposal for the complete closure of the ticket office on Sundays. While we appreciate that the issue figures for ticket sales on Sundays are below the twelve-per-hour threshold, we believe that a complete closure magnifies the impact of the issues raised above.

We draw a distinction between restricting access to passenger facilities (as is the case Monday to Saturday) and curtailing access all day. We believe such a move would have a serious effect on passengers and object in principle to the closure of the ticket office on Sundays, bearing in mind that it will already have been closed since Saturday afternoon.

We urge EMT to provide a staff presence on Sunday afternoon, although we appreciate that the booking-office issues fall below the threshold. Given the late start-up time of services on this line on Sunday no purpose is served by earlier staffing more in line with Monday to Saturday arrangements. We would not object to closing the booking office after the 16.33 departures.

We have noticed during the compilation of this response that the information available to the public through the EMT website and the *Stations Made Easy* database about the facilities and



services provided at Melton Mowbray station is sometimes contradictory. There are a number of cases where the text portions of *Stations Made Easy* show different information to the diagrams and photographic evidence of the station's facilities. Furthermore, these details are often at odds with those on EMT's own website for Melton Mowbray, which for example, does not even carry the opening hours of the booking office or confirm that the station has a TVM.

It is vital that Knowledgebase is corrected to ensure that the information provided to passengers is accurate and up to date; otherwise the whole purpose of the system is undermined.

We would of course, be happy to discuss our response in more detail with you.

Yours sincerely

David Beer
Passenger Executive