Ticket Office
Mystery Shopping Report

Prepared by:
Continental Research
132-140 Goswell Road
London EC1V 7DY
t: 020 7490 5944
f: 020 7490 1174

Agency Contact:
Dave Chilvers
Colin Shaddick

Ticket Office
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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background

Passenger Focus commissioned Continental Research to carry out a mystery shopping programme to measure the performance of the following aspects of the rail service:

- ticket machines
- ticket offices
- on train provision of tickets
- telesales

The results of the ticket office services are provided in this report. The findings for the other services are provided under separate cover.

1.2. Methodology

All mystery shopping at the stations was carried out between mid-October and mid-November 2006. In total 53 shoppers worked on the project and a total of 421 shops to stations were made. Quotas by station size category (A, B, C, D, E, and F)[1] were imposed at the sampling stage to ensure sufficient numbers of the larger stations were included in the sample. This meant that for the larger stations more than one shop was made. For the smaller category D, E and F stations only one shop to an individual station was made. Likewise quotas by day of week and time of day were imposed to ensure sufficient weekend days and peak time weekday travel times (especially Monday and Fridays) were included. The sample in Scotland was also boosted. A full copy of the data tabulations has been provided to Passenger Focus under separate cover.

It should be noted that some of the sub-samples reported are too small to report actual percentages. For this reason numbers are used instead as these are more reliable and indicate that statistical caution should be observed.

[1] Network Rail categorises stations into six groups (A-F) on the basis of both size and facilities. Category A stations are the largest (e.g. Victoria), with F being the smallest (e.g. Taffs Well).

2. MAIN FINDINGS

2.1. Ticket office windows

From a total of 421 shops, 356 (85%) were to stations that had a ticket office. Of these 356, 90% had at least one ticket office window open. This is lower for Sundays. Of the 84 shops carried out on a Sunday, 83% had at least one window open.

2.2. Type of window

The next part of the shopping exercise required shoppers to observe the types of windows available at each station they visited. This was done at those stations which had a least one window open. For this reason the base drops from 356 shops where there was a ticket office to 320 where these had at least one ticket office open. The following different types of window were observed:

1. General windows – all tickets
2. General windows – travel today only
3. General windows advance bookings
4. Own train company windows - all tickets

For each visit shoppers were asked to note what types of windows were available, and for **each** available office to make a note of:

(a) total number of windows
(b) how many were open

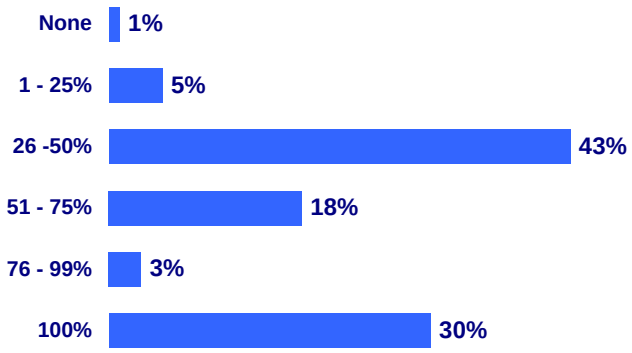
2.2.1. General windows – all tickets

The key observations for this type of window at the 320 shops, where a ticket office was open, were:

- 12% of shops had none of this type of window. Category A and B stations were least likely to have this type of window as they tended to spilt queues by travel today and advance booking windows.

- Of those with an all ticket window, just 1% (4 shops) found no window open. Nearly half (48%) were functioning on less than half capacity, with between one to 50% of their all ticket windows being open. Nearly a third (30%) had all their general windows open.

Table 1: general window (all tickets) – proportion open



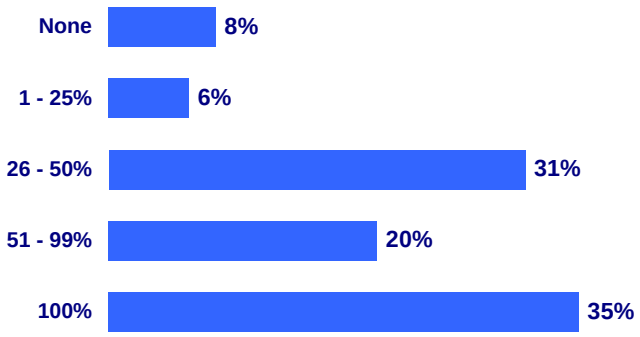
Base: 282 station shops

2.2.2. General windows – travel today

The key observations for this type of window at the 320 shops where at least one ticket office was open were:

- 80% of station visits had none of this type of window. Smaller category stations (e.g. D, E and F) were least likely to have this type of window, whereas 48% of category A stations and 24% of category B stations had these windows.
- Of those with a travel today window, 8% had no window open. Just over a third (35%) had all their travel today windows open.

Table 2: general windows (travel today tickets) – proportion open



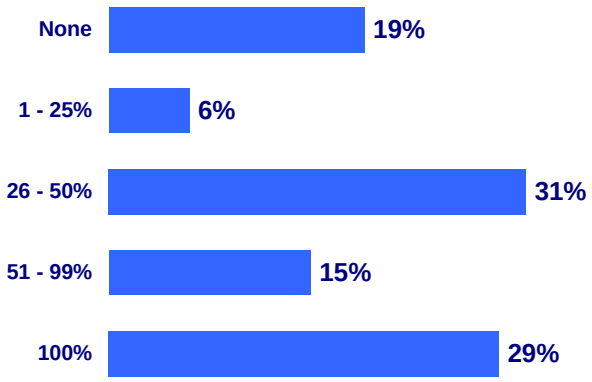
Base: 65 station shops

2.2.3. General windows – advance booking

The key observations for this type of window for the 320 shops, where at least one ticket office was open were:

- 79% of shops didn't encounter this type of window. Larger stations were more likely to have this type of window: 51% of category A and 24% of category B stations had one.
- Of those with an advance ticket window, nearly one in five (19%) had no window open. Just under a third (29%) had all their advance booking windows open.

Table 3: general window (advance booking) – proportion open



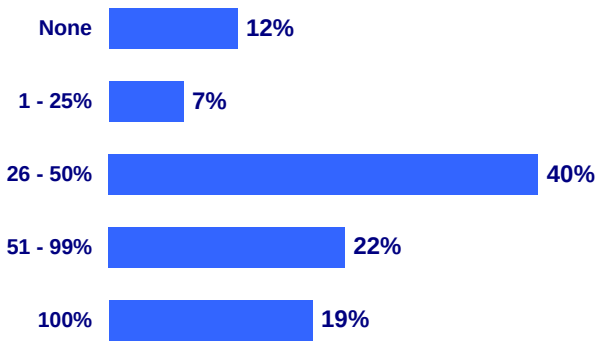
Base: 68 station shops

2.2.4. Train company windows – all tickets

The key observations for this type of window at the 320 shops where at least one ticket office window was open were:

- Most shops (87%) had none of this type of window. Larger category stations (e.g. A and B) were more likely to have this type of window. 38% of category A and 12% of category B stations had these types of windows.
- Of those stations with train company all-ticket windows, most (88%) had at least one window open.

Table 4: train company (all tickets) – proportion open

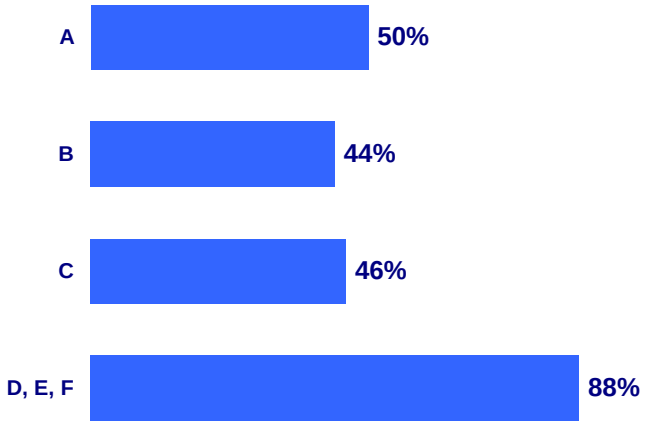


Base: 43 station shops

2.3. Clarity of opening hours

Amongst the 234 shops where there was an open ticket window and an observation was made, just over a half (51%) had opening hours that were clearly displayed. The smaller D, E, and F category stations were more likely to have clearer opening hours (88%) compared to the larger A, B or C type stations.

Table 5: clarity of opening hours by station category

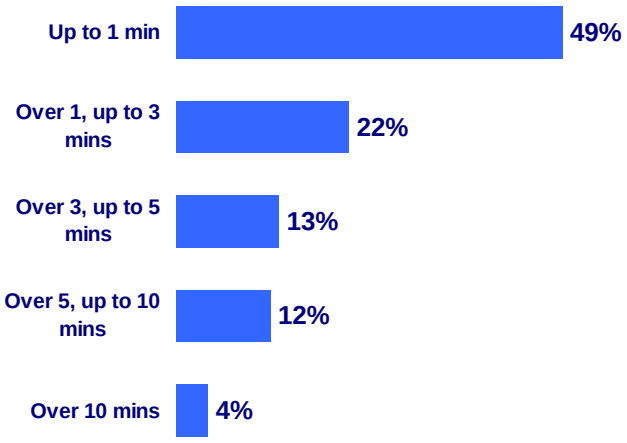


Base: 234 observations

2.4. Average queuing time

The next part of the shoppers visit required each to purchase a single ticket. The queuing time distribution at the ticket office is shown in table 6.

Table 6: queuing time to purchase a ticket



Base: 320 station visits

The average queue time was 2.5 minutes.

2.5. Peak and off-peak queue times

Table 7 below details this data further and shows the queue times during weekday peak hours and all off-peak hours including the weekends.

The number who needed to queue for over 5 minutes during peak hours and over 3 minutes at off-peak times[2] indicates where queuing times exceed agreed targets

During the peak hours, just over one in ten (11%) queued for over 5 minutes. This rose to 29% queuing for over 3 minutes during off-peak periods.

Table 7: peak and off-peak queue times

Queuing time	Weekday peak times	All off peak times
(Base)	(77)	(243)
Up to 1 min	47%	50%
Over 1, up to 3 mins	28%	21%
Over 3, up to 5 mins	14%	12%
Over 5, up to 10 mins	10%	12%
Over 10 mins	1%	5%
Average length	***1.9 mins***	***2.7 mins***

Base: All making a ticket purchase / shading reflects where targets have not been met.

Table 8 details the off-peak shops and compares the queue times during off-peak periods on a weekday to the queue times that occurred at the weekend. For both these off-peak periods the proportion queuing over 3 minutes is high, 27% on a weekday and 34% at the weekend.

[2] For the purposes of this study, peak hours were defined as: 0700-1000 and 1600-1900, Monday to Friday. Off peak hours are defined as all other hours.

Table 8: weekday and weekend off-peak queue times

Queuing time	Weekday off -peak	Weekend off peak
(Base)	(143)	(100)
Up to 1 min	51%	48%
Over 1, up to 3 mins	22%	18%
Over 3, up to 5 mins	10%	15%
Over 5, up to 10 mins	12%	13%
Over 10 mins	5%	6%
Average length	***2.7 mins***	***2.7 mins***

Base: All making a ticket purchase / shading reflects where targets have not been met.

The queue times do vary by category of station. Table 9a shows what these are during weekday peak times. Table 9b details what queuing times are at off-peak periods including weekends.

Table 9a: peak period queue times by category of station

Queuing time	A	B	C	DEF
(Base)	(21)	(26)	(19)	(11)
Up to 1 min	38%	42%	47%	73%
Over 1, up to 3 mins	23%	23%	43%	18%
Over 3, up to 5 mins	15%	27%	5%	0%
Over 5, up to 10 mins	19%	8%	5%	9%
Over 10 mins	5%	0%	0%	0%
Average length	***2.9 mins***	***2.0 mins***	***1.3 mins***	***0.9 mins***

Base: All making a ticket purchase / shading reflects where targets have not been met.

From table 9a it can be seen that the category A stations had considerably more instances where shoppers needed to queue for over 5 minutes at peak weekday periods.

Table 9b: off-peak period queue times by category of station

Queuing time	A	B	C	DEF
(Base)	(50)	(97)	(62)	(34)
Up to 1 min	38%	36%	66%	76%
Over 1, up to 3 mins	14%	27%	23%	12%
Over 3, up to 5 mins	20%	16%	5%	0%
Over 5, up to 10 mins	18%	16%	3%	9%
Over 10 mins	10%	5%	3%	3%
Average length	***4.0 mins***	***3.0 mins***	***2.0 mins***	***1.3 mins***

Base: All making a ticket purchase / shading reflects where targets have not been met.

During off-peak periods, which include the weekends, once again it is the category A stations that experienced the longest queue times.

2.6. Queue times and number of windows open

There is a relationship between queuing times and the number of windows that are open. Tables 10a and b combine the data for all ticket windows observed. This data is then cross-referenced with the queuing times shoppers experienced whilst purchasing a ticket.

Table 10a shows what percentages of windows were open for the different queuing times experienced during the 77 shops made during peak hours.

It should be noted that some of the base sizes are small and the usual statistical caution should be observed when viewing these findings.

Table 10a: queue time against number of windows open during peak hours

Queuing time	**(Base)**	% of windows open
Up to 1 min	**(36)**	71%
Over 1, up to 3 mins	**(21)**	68%
Over 3, up to 5 mins	**(11)**	81%
Over 5 mins	**(9)**	46%

Base: All making a ticket purchase during peak hours

Queuing times (to proportion of windows open) are shown for the off-peak periods in Table 10b below.

Table 10b: queue time against number of windows open during off-peak hours

Queuing time	**(Base)**	% of windows open
Up to 1 min	**(120)**	67%
Over 1, up to 3 mins	**(51)**	61%
Over 3, up to 5 mins	**(29)**	55%
Over 5 mins	**(43)**	60%
Over 3 mins (net)	***(72)***	***58%***

Base: All making a ticket purchase during off peak hours

If both the data from peak time and off-peak times are combined (thus providing larger more robust base sizes), this relationship can be further observed, as shown in table 10c.

Table 10c: correlation of queue time to number of windows open during peak and off peak hours

Queuing time	**(Base)**	% of windows open
Up to 1 min	**(156)**	67%
Over 1 to 3 mins	**(72)**	63%
Over 3 to 5 mins	**(40)**	62%
Over 5 mins	**(52)**	57%

Base: All making a ticket purchase during peak hours

Therefore, put simply, the higher the percentage of ticket windows open, the shorter the queuing length.

2.7. Ticket office staff helpfulness

A scale of 1 to 5 was used to measure how polite the staff were. A score of 1 meant the staff were rude or abusive and a score of 5 that they were very helpful and courteous. The mid-point of 3 indicated they were business like, impersonal but not helpful. The shoppers found little sign of rudeness amongst staff with only 4% of shops scoring 2 or below.

score 1 – rude, abusive or aggressive	0%
score 2	4%
score 3 - business like, impersonal but not helpful	11%
score 4	31%
score 5 - excellent, very courteous and helpful	54%

Interestingly, of the three larger categories of station A, B and C, the category B stations achieved the lowest excellent rating of score 5. The respective numbers who achieved a score 5 for these three categories of station were:

Category C	62% (base 81)
Category A	57% (base 69)
Category B	41% (base 123)

2.8. Accuracy of the prices quoted

The mystery shoppers read out a travel scenario at ticket office windows and asked for the price of tickets for that journey. These prices were then fed back to Passenger Focus and it was determined whether the price quoted was correct. Staff were generally good at quoting the correct price. Below are the examples where this was not the case:

At a medium sized station in Surrey, the mystery shopper asked:

"I am making 3 journeys from London to Newcastle Upon-Tyne next week all travelling in the peak (leaving 8AM, coming back 5PM) going and coming back, what's the best ticket(s) for me to get?"

The ticket clerk should have quoted the price for the All-Line Rail Rover (£375) unless there were cheap advance purchase tickets available. Instead, the ticket clerk at the station quoted £504.

The following scenario caused multiple incorrect quotes at various stations:

"I am making 3 journeys from London to Swindon next week all travelling in the peak (leaving 8AM, coming back 5PM) going and coming back, what's the best ticket(s) for me to get? "

The correct quote would have been to offer the weekly season ticket – price £147.80. Instead, at five separate stations, a price of £255 was quoted (3 Standard Open Returns at £85).

At a large station in London, the mystery shopper asked*:*

"I am travelling from London to Bath Spa next week, I was thinking of travelling at 9AM and coming back at 8PM but I'm quite flexible with my travel times really as I want to get a cheap ticket what can you offer me? "

The ticket clerk should have offered a Saver Return, considering the mystery shopper stated that they were "quite flexible". Instead, they were quoted £114 for the standard Open Return – an overcharge of £69.

The following scenario caused two incorrect quotes:

"I want to go First Class from Exeter to London travelling on Saturday morning and returning the following Saturday, I'm not sure what time exactly I will be travelling. What's the best priced ticket available?"

The ticket clerk could have quoted the Saver Return plus First Class upgrade (£59+£10 each way) price of £79. At two seperate stations, the price of £139 for the Saver First was quoted – an overcharge of £60.

As was apparent amongst the telesales checks (under separate cover), it appears that those ticket prices that are misquoted at train stations are tickets for: multiple trips during the week and; where the ticket clerk has not informed our shoppers about 1st Class upgrades available during the weekend.

End*