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Dear Ms McLachlan

Proposed reduction in opening hours at Sherborne ticket office

Your reference: SSWT/DFT/0611/792

Thank you for your letter of 9th June on SWT's proposal to reduce the ticket-office opening hours at Sherborne.

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 which 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, but welcomes the extended opening hours - compared with other days of the week - on Friday afternoon.

We make the following observations about the proposal

General:

- Passengers will be obliged to rely on a ticket vending machine (TVM).
 - Passenger Focus's research *Ticket Vending Machine Usability* published in July 2010, shows that passengers need information when purchasing tickets, on validity, routing etc. 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 sold; 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.
- In many instances ticket office staff are the only staff presence at the station so reducing ticket office opening hours results in the station being unstaffed. Personal security is a concern for many passengers at unstaffed stations and 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. CCTV is not regarded as sufficient alternative to staff presence. Response times to events on the station are a particular issue; at a fairly remote location such as Sherborne, attendance by British Transport Police or the 'local' police 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.

Specific:

- As only one Ticket Vending Machine is provided at Sherborne:
 - 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 few minutes between departures in each direction for most of the day – 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, a major disadvantage at a station from which penalty fares apply.
- Closure of the ticket office will almost inevitably involve closure of the booking hall.
 - If that occurs, it seems that no weather-proof accommodation will be available on the platform for London-bound services as only a canopy, without protection against wind, is provided.



- If the booking hall is closed, access to the station cafe - which while open provides not only refreshment but also protection from the elements - will be denied.
 - Closure of the booking hall will also prevent access to the ladies' toilet.
 - Passengers will have no access to racked information leaflets and timetables which are not available on trains either.
- The removal of ticket office staff will result in the effective de-staffing of the station. This will also presumably cause a number of other facilities to be locked out of use:
 - the gents' toilet, leading off the platform.
 - the waiting room on the platform for Exeter-bound services;
 - It is unclear whether the accessible toilet will remain available; this will depend on whether it is fitted with an NKS lock.
 - Accessibility will become an issue for many passengers, especially as the platform for Exeter-bound services can be reached only by means of a 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 a 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 removal of staff.
 - Passengers with prams will be expected, presumably, to cross the line by using the footbridge.

However, we note that the number of ticket sales during 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 a good part of each day. We are also conscious that we 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 satisfactory arrangements for access to the station café and ladies' toilets.

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 Sunday mornings are also 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.

We would urge SWT to consider providing a staff presence on Sunday morning. In saying this we note that there is a reasonable demand between 09.00 and 11.00 already. Given the already extensive reductions in Sunday opening hours since 2009 (when the booking office was open from 07.00-21.00) this seems to us a reasonable compromise; it recognises the decrease in sales on most weekday and Sunday afternoons, but retains a staffed facility for at least part of each day.

Yours sincerely,

Mike Hewitson
Passenger Focus