

South West Trains (SWT) proposals to reduce ticket office opening hours

March 2010

Passenger Focus objects to the proposals to reduce ticket office opening hours on the grounds that not all of the proposals meet the criteria for allowing such changes. However passengers concerns about ticket office opening hours are not confined to these criteria. Passengers have written to Passenger Focus with a wide range of concerns all of which are relevant to meeting passengers' needs both now and in the future. This document will address both sets of issues.

1. Response under The Ticket and Settlement Agreement (TSA) and other guidance

Passenger Focus recognises that the retailing has changed in recent years and offers passengers new modes of purchase. However not all passenger groups have, or can embraced new systems and it is important that their needs are protected. The following guidance which is used to determine reductions in ticket office hours seeks to balance cost effectiveness and service to passengers.

“Under clause 6-18 (1) of the TSA, changes to opening hours may be made under the Major Change procedure if:

- (a) the change would represent an improvement on current arrangements in terms of quality of service and/or cost effectiveness and*
- (b) members of the public would continue to enjoy widespread and easy access to the purchase of rail products, notwithstanding the change. “*

Further guidance states that stations that make “on average of about 12 issues an hour” are considered too busy to permit reduction in ticket office hours.

A wide range of the stations in SWT proposals fall outside of the above criteria in terms of issues per hour. We object to reductions at all stations where ticket issues are at least 12 per hour. The stations in the table fall outside of the criteria.

Ashvale	Sunday	11-12 am 13.6 issues			
Barnes	Monday - Friday	4-5 pm 12 issues	5-6 pm 14.4 issues		
	Sunday	10-11am 14.8 issues	11-12 am 17.4 issues	12-1 am 18.1 issues	
Berrylands	Saturday	9-10 am 15 issues	10-11am 12.6 issues	11-12 15.1 issues	
Christchurch	Sunday	10-11 am 15.9 issues	11 - 12 am 15 issues	12-1pm 13.5 issues	
Farncombe	Monday- Friday	4-5 pm 13.6 issues	5-6 pm 12 issues		
	Sunday	10-11 am 16.5 issues	11-12 am 14.6 issues		
Fulwell	Saturday	9-10 am 14 issues	10-11 am 17.6 issues	12-1 pm 15.8 issues	
Hampton	Monday- Friday	2-3 pm 15.2 issues	3-4pm 15.2 issues	4-5pm 18 issues	5-6 pm 20.4 issues
	Saturday	3-4 pm 16.6 issues	4-5 pm 17.4 issues	5-6 pm 18 issues	
Maldon Manor	Saturday	9-10 am 12.4 issues	10-11 am 19.3 issues	11-12 am 17.6 issues	1-2 pm 15.3 issues
Motspur Park	Sunday	9-10 am 15.1 issues	10-11 am 19.4 issues	11-12 am 20.1 issues	12-1 pm 13.8 issues
St Denys	Saturday	11-12am 13 issues			
Greater London	Monday- Friday	1-2 pm 20.7 issues	2-3 pm 15.8 issues	3-4 pm 17 issues	4-5 pm 18.1 issues
				5-6 pm 19 issues	6- 7 pm 26.5 issues
Strawberry Hill	Monday -Friday	4-5 pm 10.2 issues	5-6 pm 15.1 issues	6-7 pm 16.7 issues	
	Saturday	3-4 pm 13.8 issues			
	Sunday	9-10 am 13.3 issues	10-11 am 14.8 issues	11-12 am 20.4 issues	12 1 pm 15 issues
Thames Ditton	Saturday	9-10 am 19.9 issues	10-11 am 20.9 issues	11-12 am 22.4 issues	12-1 pm 19.9 issues
Virginia Water	Monday -Friday	3-4 pm 12.2 issues	4-5 pm 12.7 issues	5-6 pm 12.7 issues	
	Saturday	3-4 pm 13 issues			
Whitton	Monday -Friday	1-2 pm 20.2 issues	2-3 pm 15.5 issues	3-4pm 13.9 issues	4-5 pm 17.9 issues
					5-6 26 issues
	Saturday	3-4 pm 21.6 issues	4-5 pm 17 issues	5-6pm 14.5 issues	6-7 pm 17.5 issues
					7-8 pm 25.9 issues

In relation to easy access to the purchase of rail products some passengers have raised the issue that the provision of a ticket vending machine (TVM) does not necessarily equate to ease of use. Objections have been raised by individual passengers, and via a petition at Crewkerne on the basis that the area has a high number of older passengers. Many of these passengers state they find TVMs impossible to use due to functionality or dexterity issues.

Objections have also been raised on the grounds that TVMs do not provide an adequate range of products including group save. A ticket that is particularly relevant to weekend travel.

SWT has a strict “buy before you board” policy. They advise if you are unable to buy a ticket before boarding you must seek out the guard before boarding. Passengers tell us that this is not always practical when time is limited to board. The “buy before you board” requirement is stringent and therefore the provision of retailing outlets must be of the highest standard. The figures for TVM usage across the country show an increase and it is clear that many passengers are willing and able to use them. However there are a number of passengers who do not find them easy to use, especially those who do not make regular purchases. Passenger Focus is currently researching this area and will present its results in due course.

In future consultations, we urge that the guidance of 12 ticket issues per hour be refined. Queues are not consistent across an hour and the key periods for retailing are just before off peak/super off peak commences, and before train arrive. Consideration should be made of the ability of the TOC to retail tickets in a timely way at these periods. Provision of data showing issues by 15 minutes time slots would assist. The capacity of the TVM to issue the additional tickets normally sold from the ticket office during these periods is also relevant. Provision of information for both ticket office and TVM issues by 15 minute time slots would clarify capacity issues.

2. Other issues raised by passengers

While the issues raised above relate directly to the criteria set out in the TSA there are a wide range of other issues that are relevant to SWT proposals and to the wider industry.

2.1 Ticket vending machines

Guidance allows for ticket vending machines (TVM) to be used to substitute for a ticket office where sales fall below 12 issues an hour. TVMs are welcomed by many passengers for some purchases. However passengers remain concerned about the times when they malfunction, for example when machines:

- Fail to accept credit cards
- Fail to accept specific bank notes
- Cease functioning due to faults or vandalism

It is widely known that some faults do not show up on the system e.g. failure to accept a bank note. In this case a guard would not be able to ascertain if the reason provided for failure to purchase a ticket is bona fide. This leaves passengers open to the imposition of a penalty fare. There are further concerns about the reliability of machines as train companies do not publish figures for down times on TVMs, or the time required to complete repairs.

Choosing the correct ticket to purchase when using a TVM is also an issue in some cases. There are situations where TVMs offer passengers a choice of routes and fares that leave them uncertain about choice and how to proceed.

Routes

Although not affected by the proposals a recent example that came to our attention involved a choice of fares from Waterloo to Basingstoke. The TVM offers two choices of routes:

- any route permitted
- via Woking. If any route permitted is selected the machine accepts a payment card but then refuses to proceed. The only route from Waterloo to Basingstoke is via Woking and if this is selected then the transaction proceeds.

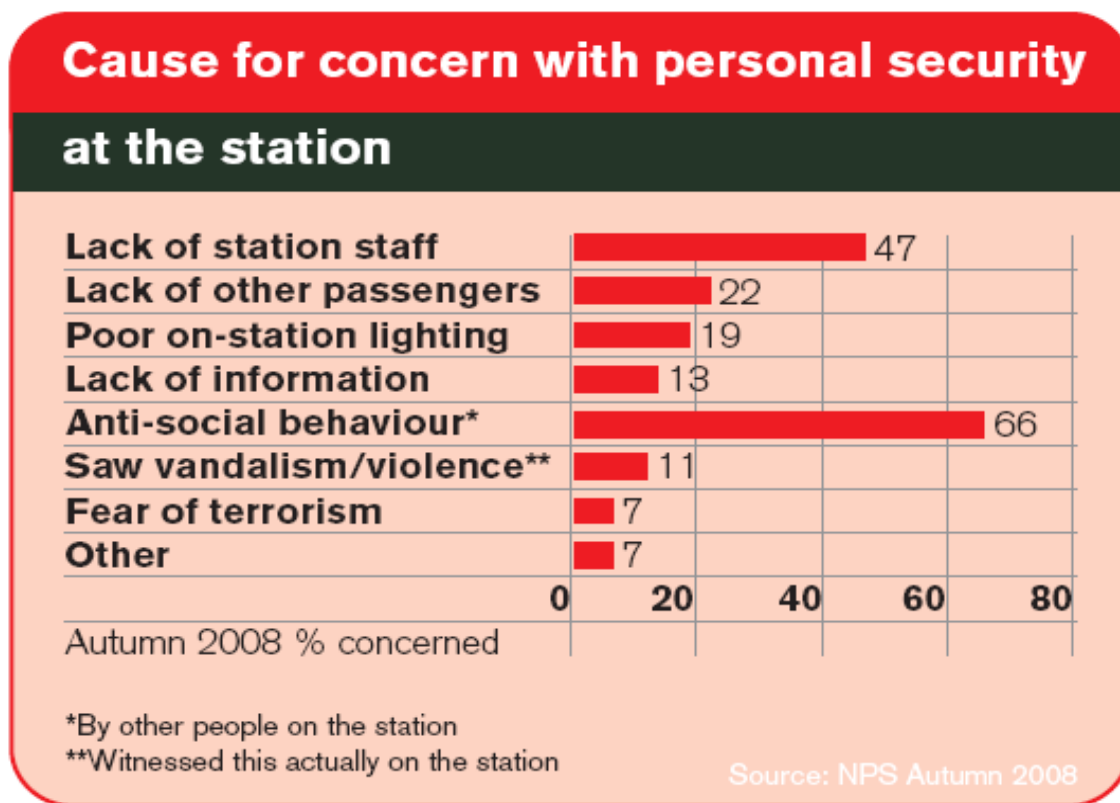
Fares

Off peak, network card and super off peak fares do not appear on the machines until they become valid. Those seeking to purchase tickets a short time prior to departure are presented with the more expensive option for the current time of travel. We have unconfirmed reports of passengers inadvertently purchasing the dearer ticket option as it is the only one presented. We also receive reports that passengers miss trains as a consequence of waiting for time restricted tickets to become available.

2.2 Station security

Our latest passenger priority research shows staff on stations are a rising priority for all passengers moving from twelfth in 2007 to seventh highest in 2009 for leisure passengers who will be most affected by SWT proposals.

Some passengers who responded to the consultation stated that vandalism and people other than passengers hanging around on stations gave them cause for concern. In terms of security our latest anti social behaviour research shows that lack of station staff causes increased concern about safety among passengers.



2.3 Passengers requiring assistance

Some passengers have expressed concern that help is being reduced at stations. While SWT does have guards on trains, it is not available to assist passengers to purchase a ticket or to access the station. Passengers can book assistance in advance but our research shows the system is currently unreliable. When passengers are travelling short distances between local stations it does not seem reasonable to expect them to book 24 hours in advance of travel. There are concerns that in reality some elderly and disabled passengers are finding their ability to use the local rail station curtailed because of destaffing.

2.4 Station cleanliness

Passengers state that ticket office staff are not simply on site to sell tickets but that they also help keep the stations clean and provide assistance. Although SWT has spoken about peripatetic cleaners caring for unstaffed stations previously, no evidence of cleaning schedules have been provided. The NPS shows the following SWT off peak passenger satisfaction scores for station attributes.

	Spring 08	Autumn 08	Spring 09	Autumn 09
Upkeep and repair of stations	61%	60%	59%	56%
Station cleanliness	67%	67%	64%	62%

2.5 Station facilities

The majority of the stations outside London that are named in the proposals have toilets and waiting rooms. Reduction in staffing hours will lead to a further reduction in access to facilities.

2.6 Perception of discouragement to use ticket offices

Passengers have raised issues about ticket machines being made more prominent than ticket offices and of ticket office opening hours not being made obvious. The concern is this potentially suppresses the use of ticket offices below its natural level.

An issue raised in the context of underplaying the role of the ticket office is ticket on departure (TOD). This product is not available from ticket offices which some passenger would find more convenient than the current system. TOD is available from TVMs but this requires inputting a separate code for each ticket which can lead to a lengthy transaction time.

3 Conclusion

The objections to reducing ticket office hours are made by passengers on the basis of ease of purchase and availability of a full range of products. With a complex fares system and a rigorous penalty fares policy passengers frequently require information before they can select a ticket. Sources of information on stations are constantly reducing. Travel centres are now closed (except Waterloo which is pending) and this year's round of proposals follows closely on earlier reductions in hours.

Passengers are raising valid concerns about services provided by staff on stations that are diminishing. They are concerned about facilities that cease to be available when staff are removed. They want to know if this is just cost cutting or if staff will be redeployed to assist in functions that maintain stations and help to support passengers using TVMs.

Beneath the immediate concerns there is a deeper question for passengers about where the process will end. What is the future for smaller stations in terms not only of advice and help but in relation to toilet facilities, waiting rooms, vandalism and safe environment?

At the very least passengers should know the answers to the following questions before any further action is taken.

- How will the named stations be cleaned?
- Will staff be redeployed as floor walkers to assist with the use of TVMs? If they are how long will this service be maintained?
- While the needs of some passengers groups are being met has a full assessment been made of the impact on passengers with disability and others who experience barriers to using TVMs?
- What reassurances are there about the reliability of machines and the time taken to reinstate them after down time? Are these figures measured and are they monitored by the Department for Transport?
- What is the impact of the proposals on queue times at periods of higher demand with in the hours outlined?

Appendix – Respondents to the Consultation

Passenger Focus received 140 responses from individual passengers and eight petitions containing a total of approximately 864 signatures. The following organisations have also responded:

- Campaign For Better transport
- RNIB
- ASLEF
- Bus Users UK
- Guide Dogs
- Living street
- National Pensioners Convention
- Windsor Line Passengers Association
- RMT
- SERA
- Crewkerne Community Board
- Transport Salaried Staffs Association (TSSA)
- West Clandon Parish Council
- WATAG
- County Council Crewkerne Councillor
- Railfuture
- Campaign For Better Transport
- Eastleigh Borough Council
- Ash Vale Council
- Misterton Parish Council
- Crewkerne Town Council
- Clandon and Horsey Borough Council
- Thames Ditton and Weston Green Residents Association
- TUC