



Response to South West Trains' proposals to reduce ticket office opening hours

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Contents

1	Objection	2
2	Valid reasons for not using ticket machines	3
2.1	Unavailability of tickets	3
2.2	Securing the cheapest ticket	4
2.2.1	Trust	4
2.2.2	Complexity of ticket system	5
2.2.3	Price varies by route	5
2.2.4	Ticket machine limitations	6
2.2.5	Advice and information	6
2.3	Ticket machine reliability	7
2.4	Queuing times	7
2.5	Ticket machine improvements	8
3	Local issues	8
3.1	Data concerns	8
3.1.1	Were ticket offices actually open?	9
3.1.2	Other data issues	9
3.2	Current ticket sales do not justify reductions in hours	10
3.3	Potential growth in ticket sales	10
3.4	Local amenities	10
4	Accessibility	11
5	Staff at stations	12
5.1	Personal security	13
5.2	Facilities and environment at stations	15
5.2.1	Cleaning	15
5.2.2	TVM Maintenance	15
5.2.3	Waiting Rooms and Toilets	15
6	Conclusion	15

1 Objection

On 14 July 2008 South West Trains (SWT) advised Passenger Focus of their proposals to reduce opening hours at 114 ticket offices.

Passenger Focus recognises that over time, passengers will make more use of ticket machines to buy tickets and we do not seek to stand in the way of that change. However there are many valid reasons why passengers need or prefer to speak to staff. In some cases the rail products they need are simply not available. Even where the ticket is theoretically available, the complexity of the fares structure means that it can be extremely difficult to get the cheapest fare without advice. We do not want to see a situation where off-peak travellers find it increasingly difficult to purchase the right ticket and either find themselves spending more than they should, or choosing to travel by other means. In research passengers consistently say they want to see staff at stations – more ticket machines should not necessarily mean fewer staff.

In general, the South West Trains proposals amount to a significant limitation on the ability of off-peak passengers to obtain the cheapest ticket for their journey. In the absence of a clear programme to address the barriers raised by passengers, **Passenger Focus therefore objects to these proposals.**

In the three-week consultation period, we received over 3,100 postcards and more than 360 letters and emails representing all stations affected. The RMT and TSSA trades unions also sent a petition containing 3,200 signatures. Written responses were received from county, district and parish councils, and regional groups; members of both houses of Parliament; and individual passengers and rail user groups. Some responses contained petitions. One woman who had gathered 130 signatures wrote, “As I am an 88 year old I think you will appreciate the strength of our feelings, that I have been this involved.” While many correspondents valued the service SWT provides, without exception they raised objections to the proposals. They raised a wide range of issues, which this document attempts to summarise and set alongside research findings.

2 Valid reasons for not using ticket machines

Research undertaken jointly with South West Trains (SWT) shows that 91% of customers queuing at ticket offices could theoretically have purchased their ticket from a ticket vending machine (TVM) and 80% of passengers said they would be willing to use a TVM in the future. However as 78% (576 out of 738) of those queuing at the ticket office had used a TVM before, unfamiliarity was not the hindrance to use. When asked why they had not used a TVM on this occasion, only 18% of those passengers said they had simply not considered it. The remainder had active reasons for not using a TVM, which included:

- need to talk
- can't get my ticket
- long queues
- prefer ticket office
- not sure how to use
- don't like machines
- use travel card.

Source: "Pinch Point Queuing" Passenger Focus and SWT, forthcoming

2.1 Unavailability of tickets

Ticket Vending Machines (TVMs) do not sell the full range of rail products so there will be many journeys where passengers will be unable to buy the service they need:

- season ticket holders cannot buy extensions
- Oyster card holders cannot buy extensions
- tickets from other stations cannot be obtained
- seats cannot be reserved
- longer length car park tickets (e.g. four days) are unavailable
- advance tickets are not available
- the machines do not sell promotion tickets
- not all destinations are sold via TVMs.

Furthermore TVMs cannot process the following products or services:

- rail vouchers
- warrants
- replacements for damaged or mis-purchased tickets

- reclaimed partial cost of car park tickets for rail users, e.g. Winchester
- exchange tickets bought on web or from the telesales team.

Currently passengers without an extension ticket are required to leave the train when their ticket runs out and purchase the extension at the nearest station. Even if a transfer is being made at the station it is plainly impractical to pause to purchase a ticket if the connecting train is to be boarded. The alternative of finding a guard on a crowded train is unrealistic when passageways are blocked by other passengers.

There are also examples of TVMs not selling tickets in a timely manner. One passenger told us, “Passengers with a senior rail card are permitted to travel from Tisbury on the 9.52am train. The TVM will not issue a ticket with a senior rail card until 10 am.” Another from Guildford told us “The TVM sells off peak tickets at 9.30, but the first train I could catch is the 9.31.”

2.2 Securing the cheapest ticket

2.2.1 Trust

Passenger Focus fares research in 2006 showed relative levels of trust in each retail mode as follows:

Trust in ticket sources (%)				
		Commuters	Leisure	Business
<i>Sample size</i>		702	673	625
Ticket office at train station	Trust entirely	87	88	82
	Distrust	5	5	9
Ticket machine at train station	Trust	48	36	34
	Distrust	24	30	33
Internet	Trust	57	55	68
	Distrust	16	19	12
Telephone	Trust	44	46	54
	Distrust	21	25	18

The ticket system is extremely complex – South West Trains offers Cheap Day, peak, off-peak and super off-peak tickets – and TVMs cannot offer the range or depth of advice required for many ticket purchases. Passengers have more confidence that the ticket office will sell the cheapest and most appropriate ticket.

2.2.2 Complexity of ticket system

Passenger comment to Passenger Focus:

“My wife and a friend used the one (*TVM*) at Sunningdale for a day trip to Kew Gardens. Here are her observations as a new user.

Biggest problem was finding the right fare she had no idea from the list presented whether she should select standard, Cheap Day, or super off peak return. She selected super off peak and a pop up said this couldn't be used on trains due to arrive in London before 12. This is confusing because she wasn't going to London and arrival times are not displayed on the train information display.....She had a friend going with her and although she used the basket facility (*you have to repeat all request details for each ticket purchased*) she pointed out it would be much easier to have a prompt asking how many of these tickets do you need or a repeat last transaction. Not helped by the intimidation of a large queue behind. She estimated the transaction took about 5 times longer than at a ticket office.”

This passenger also noted that if you are too slow the machine “Times you out” and you have to start again

A particular cause of confusion is that Cheap Day tickets are offered alongside super off peak tickets but Cheap Day tickets are not the cheapest.

2.2.3 Price varies by route

TVMs do not provide sufficient route information. For example: The TVM at Guildford offers three tickets to Haywards Heath involving different routes. The price for each ticket is different and each has different restrictions. The cheapest may be selected but may not apply to the next

train going to Haywards Heath. Passengers can end up buying a ticket that is more expensive than they need or, in innocence, a ticket that is cheaper but invalid.

2.2.4 Ticket machine limitations

The range of advice offered by TVMs is limited. Some screens on the TVMs advise, "Valid as Advertised" but offer no further details. There is no access at the ticket purchase point to information about engineering and bus replacement services, which might well affect the decision to purchase the ticket.

2.2.5 Advice and information

Passengers report to us concerns that SWT do not sell tickets for other operators even though this is not the case. There are usually no posters or detailed instructions near to the machines to assist passengers. It is notable that inconsistency of machines and programmes across the network nationally does not support ease of use.

Passengers who are unfamiliar with TVMs and the products they provide need help. Providing information about machines, coaching in the use of the machines and simplification of use, all have a role to play. Removing staff from ticket offices will reduce the capacity of SWT to coach and advise, unless those staff are redeployed to deliver a station-based support function.

Passengers are already experiencing reduced access to information. Travel centres that offered a dedicated service have already been closed. When this happened, passengers were advised that ticket offices would provide the services previously delivered from travel centres. Furthermore it is proposed to shut ticket offices during quieter periods when passengers tell us they choose to seek advice.

This comes alongside reports from passengers of reductions in the number of windows staffed, increasing queue lengths, as well as reporting offices closed when they should be staffed.

Although web sites and telesales are trumpeted as being substitutes, they have their limitations. The SWT web site is viewed by many as difficult to use and passengers report problems finding information required.

2.3 Ticket machine reliability

The SWT proposal states that their TVMs have a 98% reliability rate. We understand this to be measured over a 24 hour period rather than the more important time that trains are running, and that it relates to engineering issues rather than matters addressed by SWT staff e.g. ticket refill, blockages, replacing change etc.

In order to assess the impact on ease of purchase, passengers need to be provided with clear information about the reliability of machines and how these proposals affect the ability to maintain them. This is especially pertinent where it is proposed to remove ticket office staff who are currently providing the TVM maintenance service. Down time due to vandalism and the time taken to get machines re-commissioned are particularly important.

There is currently no advice to passengers about what to do if a TVM malfunctions and they cannot purchase a ticket. Some passengers are reluctant to board a train for fear of being made subject to a penalty fare. Some passengers have requested the return of permit to travel machines and a poster at every station explaining the circumstances in which the robust penalty fares policy will be waived.

For example, passengers report to us that machines will from time-to-time reject some coins but may accept others immediately after. Passengers boarding the train in these circumstances would presumably be expected to pay a penalty fare as the machine would not be showing up on SWT systems as faulty, despite the passenger having made a genuine attempt to purchase a ticket.

2.4 Queuing times

The Ticketing and Settlement Agreement (TSA) says that queuing times for ticket purchase should not exceed three minutes off peak and five minutes at peak times. In research undertaken with SWT, 72% of passengers said they left 15 minutes or less to buy a ticket and board. The lack of availability of advice from staff is likely to increase queuing times as passengers attempt to understand ticket restrictions at ticket machines.

At some stations, for example Haslemere, the proposed reduction in ticket office opening hours means that anyone leaving London after 6pm will not be able to access the ticket office to make purchases for the following day. This is likely to increase queuing times in peak hours as returning commuters are more likely to have to make season ticket and other complex purchases in the morning peak.

Passengers already report to us examples of long queue times and missing trains because of delays in purchasing. South West Trains needs to put in place a robust monitoring system for queuing times covering **all** the affected stations with a clear commitment to take action should queuing times breach the TSA.

It is important to note that passengers report that some stations have already experienced a reduction in the number of open ticket office windows, e.g Winchester and Woking. Further reductions in windows available set alongside reductions in ticket office opening hours would concentrate ticket purchase into a smaller length of time, so threatening to lengthen queuing times to levels that breach the TSA. South West Trains needs to make clear any proposals it has for reducing the number of windows open at ticket offices as this will affect the extent to which the proposed reductions in ticket office hours threaten to increase queuing times to unacceptable levels.

2.5 Ticket machine improvements

Improved TVM programming is promised by South West Trains. Whilst this will still not provide the range of advice or products passengers need, clearly any improvements are welcome. It is premature to close ticket offices before ascertaining whether the planned improvements to the TVMs actually succeed in reducing passengers' barriers to purchase when using TVMs.

3 Local issues

3.1 Data concerns

There are a number of areas where there are concerns with the data used to justify ticket office closures.

3.1.1 Were ticket offices actually open?

In reviewing the data on usage of ticket offices there appears to be a number of anomalies. For some periods sales at ticket offices dip to nil, while TVM sales increase. This leads to the suggestion that the ticket offices were not fully staffed during the data collection period. Examples include:

- Ash
- Chandlers Ford – Sundays
- Woolston.

Passengers have advised us of a number of other examples where they suspect their offices have been shut for varying periods during the advertised opening hours:

- Branksome
- Crewkerne
- Ewell West
- Fleet
- Honiton
- Netley
- New Milton
- St Denys
- Tolworth
- Totton.

3.1.2 Other data issues

SWT data on ticket sales appear to pre-date travel centre closures. It is likely that travel centre closures, e.g. Salisbury, Winchester, and Guildford have subsequently increased usage of ticket offices.

Part of the South West Trains case for reduced ticket office hours includes data showing the average increase of use in TVMs across SWT routes. It would be preferable to see data specifically for the stations affected as there may be local factors that mean that these stations have different rates of increase.

3.2 Current ticket sales do not justify reductions in hours

South West Trains state that their case for reductions in ticket office hours are based on low volumes of sales but the following examples do not appear to meet the criteria.

- Woking loses 6am – 7am on Saturday morning when it currently sells 29 tickets
- Sunningdale tickets offices sells aver 100 tickets on Sunday morning (9 -1pm) but faces all day closure
- Guildford loses a 7-8am service when it normally sells 36 tickets
- Chandlers Ford 1-2pm Saturdays sells 24 tickets but faces closure at 13.20 pm
- Crewkerne sales are as high on Saturdays as on weekdays but Saturday is a proposed closure
- Wool loses 22 hours a week but serves two army camps with personnel who travel on warrants that can only be processed through a ticket office.

3.3 Potential growth in ticket sales

The data provided by SWT relates to current usage – as far as we are aware, no account has been taken of the following:

- ongoing growth in rail use
- developments around stations
- anticipated growth in the off peak market
- the impact of the increase in cost of motoring on rail travel
- the improved service to Exeter St David's when considering Axminster, Crewkerne, Feniton, Honiton and Yeovil Junction stations
- seasonal variation.

3.4 Local amenities

There appear to be examples where local amenities have not been taken into account when considering ticket office hours. For example, it is proposed to shut Portsmouth Harbour ticket office at 16.30 on Sundays when Gun Wharf Quays and the Historic Dockyard remain open. Ticket office closure on Sundays is proposed at Hampton Court station. Sports fans also seek reassurance that their needs will be met – e.g. Portsmouth fans travelling to home games from stations in Hampshire. Weymouth is being developed as an important Olympic site but faces a considerable reduction in customer service.

4 Accessibility

“It is our sincere belief that a major contributory factor to giving many blind and partially sighted people and other disabled people the confidence to travel on the rail network independently is having front line and on board staff that can give support, advice and assistance”
Clive Wood – The Guide Dogs for the Blind Association

TVMs are not always conveniently located. Some stations have TVMs inside of the ticket hall e.g. Basingstoke. Although Basingstoke faces a small reduction in staffing, when the ticket office is shut TVMs are not available at the main entrance. The only available TVM involves using the underpass and stairs. Other stations, for example Fleet, only have TVMs outside. Although the TVM has a small canopy there are often queues of passengers exposed to the elements. If the ticket office is closed there are no internal TVMs.

In spite of work undertaken by SWT externally situated machines sometimes have visibility issues in sunlight. This appears to be especially relevant to some elderly passengers or those with visual impairment. Horsley experiences this problem, while Swanwick has issues with sun and rain both making purchasing a ticket extremely difficult according to passenger feedback.

Passengers with disability can book assistance using the APRS system. Where many stations in a row are unstaffed access is restricted. Guards can assist passengers from the train but not from the stations. How will passengers' needs be met?

The majority of blind and partially sighted passengers cannot purchase tickets from a TVM. The machines have no audible facilities and the text is of an insufficient size for use by partially sighted passengers.

Some stations have barrow crossings that make them accessible to passengers using wheelchairs. These facilities can only be used when the station is staffed e.g. Alton, Sherborne, Fareham, Templecombe, Yeovil Junction. For example, the proposed closure time of 7.20 pm at Yeovil Junction on weekdays would mean that any disabled user travelling from Waterloo after 4.50 pm would no longer be able to receive assistance on arrival at Yeovil. A reduction in staffed hours, however

limited, has an impact. Passenger Focus seeks reassurances that there will be no loss of accessible facilities at any station.

Some passengers with disability or infirmity cannot feed money into the machines. These passengers are concerned about the embarrassment of explaining their disability to a guard. Some are not confident that if they board without a ticket they will not receive a penalty fare. Passengers need clear assurances that the penalty fares regime will take into account the absence of staff from stations.

It is clear that these proposals have the potential to affect people with a range of disability and so an equality impact assessment needs to be made (and the results made public) before a decision is made about the proposals.

5 Staff at stations

In research, passengers say consistently that they want to see staff at stations. The National Passenger Survey for Spring 2008 showed that only 58% of South West Trains passengers were satisfied with the availability of staff on stations. Ticket office staff are often the only staff on a station. Passengers wish to see that presence retained for provision of a number of essential services:

- advice about ticket purchase and trains
- provision of access to toilets and waiting room
- deterrence to loitering, graffiti, vandalism and other antisocial acts
- increased sense of security and improved ambience
- maintenance – cleaning, removal of rubbish, stocking of TVMs.

Research undertaken for the South Central franchise illustrates the importance passengers place on staffed stations. When asked to name the four most important facilities at stations staff were the third priority.

	Total %	Commute %	Business %	Leisure %
Accurate visual information on when trains will arrive	52	57	60	49
Toilets	47	43	49	51
Staff at the station	44	45	44	44
Accurate announcements about delays	34	41	35	30
Accurate announcements about arrival and departure times	30	33	32	29

5.1 Personal security

Passengers report an increased sense of personal security when stations are staffed. The Autumn 2007 National Passenger Survey asks passengers who have had cause to worry about personal safety whilst making a journey on that route why this was so. Lack of staff was a factor for 48% of the group. Antisocial behaviour, a factor passengers believe is aggravated by lack of staff was a factor for 66% of these passengers.

	National	London and South East
<i>Sample size</i>	<i>4854</i>	<i>3238</i>
Lack of station staff	48	49
Lack of other passengers	21	21
Poor on-station lighting	19	19
Lack of information	14	14
Anti-social behaviour by other people on station	66	67
Saw actual vandalism or violence on the station	12	12
Fear of terrorism	9	9
Other	8	7

Source: National Passenger Survey Autumn 2007

Passengers are very concerned about the effect on vandalism and antisocial behaviour where whole routes will be unstaffed or minimally staffed for the whole of the weekend. Passengers at Bookham advise of such behaviour impacting negatively on the station, and the surrounding area. They also state that young people use the relatively unstaffed rail network to travel to Bookham without purchasing a ticket. There is concern that this behaviour will become more widespread if the proposals are implemented.

Passengers tell us that some stations are already suffering from vandalism and anti social behaviour. Damage to TVMs that has put them out of commission is also reported. The concern is that reduced staffing will exacerbate this problem. Passengers have reported concerns at the following stations:

- Andover
- Branksome
- Bedhampton
- Winnersh
- Winnersh Triangle
- Swaythling
- Martins Heron
- Earley
- Cosham
- Bookham
- Ash Vale
- Camberley.

Swaythling has suffered extensively from vandalism and has undergone a complete refurbishment. Under the proposals it will be unstaffed at weekends. Earley station has the toilet shut even when the ticket office is open to avoid vandalism. Increased vandalism reduces cost effectiveness and inconveniences passengers.

Passengers do not view CCTV as an acceptable alternative to staff presence on stations. Response times are a particular issue. Bringing in security officers whilst reducing customer service staff does not give an impression of a welcoming transport system.

It is also important to note that vandalism has a cost in terms of repair, and may also impact on revenue if passengers are deterred from travelling. This cost should be taken into account when assessing the cost effectiveness of the SWT proposals.

5.2 Facilities and environment at stations

5.2.1 Cleaning

Where stations are unstaffed passengers need reassurance about cleaning and the removal of rubbish. There are particular concerns that if stations are left unstaffed over weekend periods they will be used as open toilets to an even greater extent than happens currently. Some platforms are susceptible to frost and ice and are currently salted, e.g. St Denys.

5.2.2 TVM maintenance

Where stations are unstaffed passengers need reassurance about the stocking of TVMs with change and blank tickets.

5.2.3 Waiting rooms and toilets

Where stations are closed on Sundays or weekends some passengers will experience loss of access to waiting rooms and toilets e.g.

- Tisbury
- Fleet
- Wool
- Ewell West.

When ticket halls are shut passengers are denied access to leaflets and information about local attractions.

6 Conclusion

Passengers are not all the same and the journeys they make are diverse. A one size fits all approach to ticket retailing will not meet the needs of current passengers, or allow for increased use of rail in the future.

Passengers making routine journeys to work have different purchasing requirements to the passengers making an unfamiliar one-off journey.

Disability, age, encumbrance, time of travel and spontaneity of travel all impact on purchasing requirements.

The structure of fare systems adds to the complexity of purchase for passengers. Peak fares for a regular journey may require little research, but off peak fares are more difficult to negotiate. In order to purchase the cheapest ticket off peak passengers must take into account the following information:

- intended time of travel and destination
- if disabled, infirm or encumbered station accessibility must be explored
- routes available
- times of trains
- restrictions on time of travel by ticket – including time train departs and time train arrives at Waterloo.

Whilst the SWT proposals might theoretically provide sufficient ticket vending capability to meet the number of passengers wishing to purchase, the proposals do not address:

- the need to provide advice in the face of a complex fares and routes system
- the need to provide assistance
- the requirement to present and care for stations in order to provide a reasonable level of cleanliness and access to amenities
- the need to manage disruption.

Where a robust penalty fares system is in place, passengers have an even greater right to expect a helpful and accessible retailing system. SWT proposals do not meet these criteria; TVMs on which SWT intend to rely so heavily have only limited retailing and advice capabilities.

In summary, Passenger Focus believes that the reductions in ticket office hours will impose a significant limitation on the ability of off-peak passengers to get the cheapest ticket for their journey and therefore objects to these proposals.



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