

By email

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Dear Stephen

Ticket offices: emerging issues and clarification questions

The public consultation period has now ended. We are continuing to process these submissions and analyse the points and concerns raised. We are also continuing to analyse the data you provided to Transport Focus, in particular the information within the major change template '(Annex B)' spreadsheet.

This analysis continues but there are a number of issues that we wanted to flag up at this point, along with a series of questions seeking further clarification.

At the beginning of the consultation process we set out the criteria (<https://www.transportfocus.org.uk/publication/transport-focuss-role-in-assessing-major-changes-to-ticket-office-opening-hours/>) we will use when assessing proposals. We have grouped these issues and questions under the main headings in our criteria.

Issues relating to whether passengers can easily buy the right ticket for the journey they want to make:

* Adequacy of retail facilities

Many proposals appear reliant on passengers switching to purchasing tickets online rather than at the station. We note that you will retain the Mobile Ticket machine (MTIS) facility but that this is intended as a 'contingency only'. While there is a clear trend in towards digital a substantial number of people either cannot or have chosen not to move to digital. We know from our research that resistance to booking online often comes from uncertainty and a lack of confidence, exacerbated by the complexity and variety of ticket options available.

Questions:

* What assumptions have you made about how many/what proportion of people will move to digital if ticket offices are closed?

- * Do you have any assessment of how your move to a multi-skilled team at Bicester Village and Oxford Parkway stations has worked? Did this include any programmes designed to help people migrate to digital and if so, how effective have these been?
- * Have you made an assessment of who will not/cannot move to digital and the effect on them of closing the ticket office?
- * How accessible is your app and your website, especially for those with a disability?
- * Do you have any forecast of the impact on revenue – i.e. in how many people will no longer travel as a result or will now travel without paying?
- * Why is the use of MTIS a ‘contingency’ rather than a formal retail channel? How will people know that they can buy a wider range of tickets if they approach staff and ask?

Without evidence to the contrary, we must assume that many of these people will continue to want advice and support at the station and not migrate to digital channels. From the data provided it has not been possible to get an accurate sense of whether the remaining retail capacity at the station (TVM and MTIS) will be sufficient to sell the expected number of tickets if the ticket office closes, especially at peak hours. If there is insufficient capacity there is the risk of passengers being faced with unacceptable queues to purchase tickets, of missing trains, or in boarding without a valid ticket.

Questions:

- * What reassurance/evidence can you provide that retail arrangements at each station will have sufficient capacity for the ticket sales displaced from the ticket office, especially at peak hours and at those stations with a higher than average proportion of sales from the ticket office?
- * Has any assessment of the TVM capacity at each station has been carried out? This is both in terms of overall capacity and ‘remaining’ capacity – i.e. factoring in existing sales and Ticket on Departure collection per hour from the TVM?
- * What assessment have you made of the impact of seasonal peaks, especially at tourist destinations?
- * Has any assessment of the location of TVMs been carried out – are they in the right place to meet demand?
- * How will the adequacy of retail arrangements at stations be monitored and reported (including to passengers)? What KPIs will be in place?
- * What impact is there on impartial retail obligations – something that currently applies to ticket offices. Will similar obligations be put onto other channels?

* Usability, functionality and accessibility of Ticket Vending Machines (TVMs)
 We note that MTIS machines will still be present at stations in Transport Focus’s area and will be able to sell most tickets not available via TVMs.

From the data provided (Annex B Spreadsheet) it appears that the only products/services that will no longer be available from the station will be:

- * Apex Single/Return
- * Refunds
- * Network Awaybreak/Stayaway.

We would welcome confirmation whether the following could still be

purchased/accessed from the station in future – and whether they will be available via the TVM or only via MTIS:

- * National concessions for disabled people (for wheelchair and visually impaired passengers plus a companion)
- * Boundary Zone add-ons
- * Staff travel discount
- * Buying tickets in advance rather than on the day of travel
- * Tickets for travel that do not involve the ‘host’ station (important for people wishing to use split-ticketing arrangements)
- * Seat reservations
- * Changing a booking/tickets
- * Use of rail vouchers
- * Use of rail warrants
- * Ranger and Rover tickets
- * Car parking
- * Plus Bus tickets
- * Ferry connections
- * Group Save
- * Off-peak purchases before the off-peak begins
- * Cycle reservations
- * Photocards for season tickets
- * Scholar tickets
- * Sleeper bookings
- * CIV tickets for connections with Eurostar international services.

If not available at the station those passengers who do not have access to digital would face a significant reduction in what they can purchase and could end up paying more than they needed to as a result.

Questions:

- * Could you confirm which tickets/services would not be available from the station in future?
- * Could you confirm whether the list of tickets above will be available and whether this would be via the TVM or the MTIS (or both)? For example, would an Advance Purchase ticket be available from a TVM and/or MTIS etc
- * Do you have any plans to upgrade TVM functionality and if so, what would this cover and when would it be complete?

TVMs are not physically accessible to all passengers and some people with cognitive disabilities can have difficulties in using them. We note that staff assistance to purchase a ticket from will be available at the station but would appreciate you confirming the following:

Questions:

- * How will someone who cannot use a TVM, for example a disabled person, purchase a ticket?
- * How will people summon a member of staff if they need help while using a TVM (i.e. the equivalent of the ‘red light’ at a supermarket self-checkout till)?
- * Is it proposed to upgrade TVMs to offer remote access/video help facilities?
- * Have you assessed the accessibility of existing TVMs, both in terms of their location at the station and useability (I.e are passengers protected from the weather when queuing, are they hard to see in sunlight)? Do you have any plans to relocate TVMs?
- * We are aware that some groups of disabled passengers are more likely to use

cash when purchasing tickets. Are 'cash TVMs' at accessible (step-free) locations in the station?

An increased reliance on TVMs makes it even more important that they are monitored and maintained. This applies to operational resilience and to customer service quality. We are mindful that there are standards for queuing times at present (3 minutes in the off-peak and 5 minutes in the peak) but that these apply only to the ticket office and not TVMs. It would be no more acceptable for a person to miss a train while queuing at a TVM than it would be if queueing at a ticket office.

Questions:

- * What are the contractual SLAs for fixing out of order TVMs and have these been reviewed given the future importance of TVMs? For example, in relation to replenishing consumables, i.e. ticket stock and ink, and repairs to faults
- * Will there be standards for maximum queuing times at TVMs and how will queue lengths be monitored?

* Availability of staff to provide retail advice and help

We note that at most stations the plans involve redeploying staff for the same hours/period as the ticket office. We also note the public statement such that 'the hours of operation where we have a member of staff on the station will remain the same as it is today'.

However, at one station this does not seem to be the case.

- * Solihull – Saturday morning to be 0640 rather than 0600. Though we acknowledge that this could just be a problem with the data rather than the actual proposal.

At some stations the proposals would also mean a reduction in the overall number of staff at the stations, both in general and in relation to those with specialist retail knowledge. For example: Solihull, Warwick and Warwick Parkway all see a reduction in specialist retail support.

Staffing resilience is also a consideration – the information provided on lost hours shows that there has been a problem in ensuring that Dorridge ticket office is open as advertised (lost hours listed as 11.3% for 2022). It will be important that any new staffing times can be met on a consistent and reliable basis.

We know from our research that passengers find the fares system complex and confusing and that many people find it difficult to use TVMs. Where staff numbers are substantially reduced, or where staff will now have multiple duties, this could make it harder for passengers to receive specialist advice or support from staff to make a ticket purchase.

Even where staff will still be present at the station, it's not always clear if they will still have sufficient expertise to help passengers navigate the complex fares system. In contrast to many other self-service retail situations, for example a self-checkout at a supermarket, many passengers will need support not just to use the ticket vending machine (TVM), but also to understand what they should purchase. It will be important that all staff with a retail function receive comprehensive training rather than an 'overview'.

A number of practical questions have also been raised about how the new arrangements would work in practice - for example, in how people will find a staff member if they need help and what queuing arrangements will apply when several people want help at the same time. Particularly where stations have multiple entrances or TVMs on different platforms. This is relevant for all passengers, but especially disabled passengers/those requiring assistance.

Questions:

- * Can you confirm the statement that: 'the hours of operation where we have a member of staff on the station will remain the same as it is today'?
- * Are staffing levels sufficient to ensure assistance with ticket purchases can still be offered at busier times alongside other duties? Do you have any evidence to support this?
- * What training will multi-functional staff have in ticketing/product range to ensure they can provide expert assistance necessary to navigate the complex fares system and ensure passengers get the right ticket? Will this replicate the training given to existing ticket office staff?
- * How will people find a staff member at the station if they are no longer in the ticket office: will there be a central point/method for calling them? What will the queuing arrangements be when multiple passengers want help/advice?
- * What resilience/contingency have you built into staffing plans to ensure that stations will be staffed as advertised and that 'lost hours' are minimised in future?

* Paying by cash

A proportion of tickets sold at some ticket offices are still purchased with cash. We note that all stations will continue to have a cash facility, either through TVMs or MTIS.

Questions:

- * Have you made any specific assessment of the ability of TVMs to cope with the increase in cash, especially at stations where there is a higher than average use of cash to purchase tickets?
- * If a person cannot pay by cash what arrangements will exist to enable them to travel, particularly where there are Driver Only Operated services? And will there be clear signage at the station to inform passengers about this?
- * Can you confirm that people will be able to buy the products listed on page 4 with cash?

Issues relating to whether passengers requiring assistance to travel receive that assistance in a timely and reliable manner.

We note that Chiltern's proposal focuses on redeploying retail staff and that - notwithstanding the queries above - these match existing staffing hours. This would mean that arrangements for seeking help and assistance should not change. However, we also note that, while staff presence is maintained, the number of staff available has been reduced at some stations. And in other instances, the staff member will now have multiple functions to perform.

Questions:

- * Are staffing levels sufficient to ensure assistance can still be offered at busier times alongside other duties? Do you have any evidence or analysis that addresses this - e.g. via your existing scheme at Oxford Parkway and Bicester

Village?

- * What assurances can you provide that staff will not be pulled away to other duties due to understaffing?
- * How will staff at the station know if passengers need help to board?
- * Can you confirm that there is no change in arrangements for 'turn up and go assistance' for disabled passengers?

Passengers, especially disabled passengers, may find it more difficult to find and get help from redeployed staff at stations. Currently passengers know to approach the ticket office – it is the focal point. We understand that guide dogs are trained to go to the ticket window, and it is also the case that ticket windows have induction loops to help people hear. Passengers need to know where they should go to reliably find staff or be able to notify staff that they need assistance.

Questions:

- * How will the focal point of the ticket office/window be replicated?
- * How will people summon help if staff are not there?
- * Will induction loop facilities be provided elsewhere on the station/concourse?
- * What mechanisms will exist to monitor instances where assistance is not provided and to investigate why it happened?

Issues relating to whether passengers can get the information they require to plan and make a journey, including during periods of disruption.

While the staff that remain at the station may be more visible outside of the ticket office, at some stations they may be harder to find when they are required, unless (and as set out above) an alternative focal point for information is provided.

Proposals to reduce the number of staff present risk may make it harder for people to access advice and information from staff at these times.

Questions:

- * How will ancillary information traditionally displayed in the ticket office be provided e.g. timetable leaflets, local travel information, local bus timetables etc?
- * What devices will staff have – e.g. will they be able to print journey itineraries for passengers who ask for one?
- * Will staff have the ability to print journey details for passengers?

One issue emerging concerns the operation and reliability of 'help points' at stations. If staff are harder to find, passengers may be increasingly reliant on help points to obtain assistance and information. However, research by the Office of Rail and Road [Accessible Travel Policy Implementation. Review of unbooked assistance and Help Points – 2022] identified a number of issues with their use. The report suggested that it may be difficult for disabled passengers to have confidence in boarding a train if they request assistance from a Help Point at an unstaffed or partially staffed accessible station.

Questions:

- * Are help points at every station and are they in an accessible location?
- * Are there any plans to position help points in concourse areas near ticket offices to avoid people having to walk along platforms or over bridges to summon help?
- * What are your existing processes and SLAs for monitoring that help points are working and the response time to faults???
- * What future commitments can you give?
- * What are the standards for answering help points - i.e. within how many seconds?
- * What are the standards for monitoring how quickly you respond to passengers using the emergency button?
- * How will you monitor/report time taken to answer help point calls/proportion not answered?
- * Do you have enough resource in place to ensure that an increase in calls via help points can be answered promptly and in accordance with standards?
- * Is it clear how a disabled passenger would use the help-point when seeking assistance to board - e.g. would they press the information button or are they, as with some train companies, expected to press the emergency button to receive more immediate assistance?

Issue relating to ensuring passengers are not penalised if they cannot buy the ticket they require from the station.

Passengers must be made aware that they can board a train without a ticket if they cannot buy the ticket they need from the station and be confident they will not be penalised if they do so. This must include people who are not able to use a TVM because of a disability.

Signage at a station must not send contradictory messages. For example, Penalty Fare notices that require you to have a ticket before boarding a train need to be consistent with other notices that may instruct people to buy certain tickets on board.

Questions:

- * What changes to ticketless travel rules will be made/where will these be written down to give people who can't buy a ticket some assurances that they won't be penalised?
- * What processes will be in place so that passengers do not have to publicly declare/evidence their disability to buy on the train without penalty?
- * How will you review signage to avoid sending inconsistent messages about revenue protection?

Issues relating to whether passengers can continue to use facilities at a station.

From the information provided it appears that access to vital station facilities including lifts, waiting rooms and toilets can be maintained when the ticket office is closed.

Questions:

- * Can you confirm that all station facilities that are currently provided during ticket office opening hours will remain open during those hours?
- * We understand that alarms for 'disabled' toilets are often located in ticket offices. Is this the case and, if so, where will these be moved to?

Issues relating to whether passengers feel safe at the station

We note that Chiltern's proposal focuses on redeploying retail staff and that these match the original ticket office hours. We also note the use of security staff at stations. This continued staff presence should help to ensure that passengers feel safe at the station.

Questions:

- * Have you liaised with the British Transport Police about the impact on staff and passenger security?
- * Are any mitigations planned?
- * Is CCTV coverage adequate, is it accessible 'live' from control and is there resource to monitor it remotely when required?

Other issues

A number of additional issues have also emerged during the consultation process:

* Future changes

The public consultation feedback has highlighted a widespread concern that if ticket offices are closed and 'schedule 17' regulation no longer applies, there will be no further protections to prevent train operators removing all station staff in future without passenger consultation. An alternative regulatory mechanism covering station staffing could provide significant reassurance to passengers and stakeholders on this point.

Questions:

- * What assurances can be provided that the level of station staffing outlined in the proposal is delivered and maintained in the future?
- * Can commitments be made that a fixed, advertised staff presence will not subsequently be removed without further passenger consultation?
- * How would any new staffing arrangements be advertised to passengers (in a similar manner to the way ticket office opening times are advertised)?
- * How will compliance with any agreed new hours be monitored and reported?
- * What arrangements have been made to provide staff cover for things like sickness and holiday?

* Timing of mitigations

There have been many comments about the sequencing of events and a call for fares and ticketing to be reformed and simplified before removing ticket offices. The same applies to the timing of potential mitigations designed to lessen the impact of closing ticket offices, such as upgrading TVMs.

Questions:

- * What guarantees can you offer that any mitigations proposed will be implemented before the implementation of a ticket office change?
- * Is there any reason that Transport Focus should not object to the change until the mitigations have implemented and can be demonstrated to be adequate?
- * Has any necessary funding/agreement been secured to implement any mitigations?

* Liaison with other operators

We are mindful that some stations also serve trains run by other train companies or involve Network Rail managed stations.

Questions:

* What assessment has been made of the impact on services operated by other train companies? Have those operators agreed to the changes?

* Have any discussions been had with Network Rail about the impact at NR managed stations?

We would welcome further clarification on these points. We recognise that there are a lot of questions and the issues raised are complicated, so we would be happy to meet to discuss these in more detail. However, if we are to reflect any comments in our final submission, we will ultimately require a formal written response on these points. We will need this by 27 September.

For absolute clarity – and to help ensure transparency – we also want to inform you that we intend to publish this letter and your formal response alongside our final submission. Please be aware of this when responding.

Yours sincerely

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Head of Policy

Copied to:
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