

RAILFUTURE RESPONSE TO CONSULTATION ON PROPOSED CHANGES TO LNER TRAVEL CENTRE OPENING TIMES

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Submitted to: Transport Focus, London Travel Watch

Introduction

1. Railfuture is Britain's leading, longest-established, national independent voluntary organisation campaigning for a bigger and better railway network for passenger and freight users. This response draws together the views of Railfuture branches and affiliated Rail User Groups, as authorised by Railfuture's national Board of Directors.

Background

2. LNER has proposed to change some of its booking office opening hours, stating on its website: *The change is being proposed to reflect the reduced level of customer demand during these times. There are Ticket Vending Machines on the Station Concourse where tickets can be purchased outside of the Travel Centre opening times.*
3. Use of the phrase 'during these times' is rather ambiguous. It could be taken to imply the changes are a temporary measure in response to reduced passenger numbers arising from the Covid-19 pandemic. However, there is nothing else to suggest the proposals are temporary.

The Need for Change

4. Patronage of booking offices has been declining for many years. The growth in popularity of eTickets, mTickets, Smartcards and the like has resulted in much lower footfall and consequent lower demand for the services traditionally offered by booking offices.
5. It is right and proper that opening hours should be reviewed regularly to ensure resources are allocated effectively, but the changes should take into account the wider functions and benefits delivered to the community by booking offices that would otherwise be lost to the railway as a whole.

General Observations

6. At busy times the booking office will generate considerable revenue for the train operator and will be considered commercially viable. At less busy times its role will include many service elements, including, but not limited to:
 - Selling tickets
 - Advising the best ticket for the journey to be undertaken
 - Providing information about train times for intending passengers
 - Assisting with seat reservations
 - Organising Passenger Assist
 - Advising on the location and accessibility of station facilities
 - Assisting with ticket refunds and delay repay
 - Assisting with changes to travel plans
 - Fielding a multitude of other enquiries specific to the location concerned
7. The booking office is the main customer face of the railway and often the first point of contact for intending passengers. In general terms, any reduction in opening hours will make the railway less accessible, particularly for those passengers with limited access to other methods of ticket purchase or those who lack confidence in using those other methods.
8. A sensible balance needs to be struck between the commercial interests of the operator and the service requirements of the passenger.
9. Some of the proposals involve minor changes to early morning or late evening opening times. The removal of very early and very late opening is unlikely to be adversely detrimental, but opening hours should reflect the specific requirements at each station. This may mean later opening at, for example, Edinburgh Waverley, which is served by Caledonian Sleeper services.
10. A greater proportion of the passengers who continue to frequent and rely on booking offices are more likely to be persons without easy access to online or mobile ticketing alternatives. It is important that such passengers are not deterred or even excluded from travelling. We are disappointed that there appears to be no published equalities assessment to consider this issue in more depth.
11. The railway's fares structure is extremely complicated. Several different fares are available for journeys between almost all pairs of stations – the different options often run into double figures. Occasional passengers find this complexity daunting and rely on the booking office to advise the correct, cheapest fare for their journey. It is essential that access to this advice continues to be made available throughout the day.
12. Penalty fares are in operation and operator-specific tickets are available for many journeys capable of being undertaken by more than one operator. Implementation of penalties should be treated with leniency in areas where ticket offices are not open during the daytime.
13. Proposed weekend opening hours are considerably shorter than weekdays at many locations. Some operators are beginning to adopt consistent 7-day timetables where possible, hence opening hours should reflect this consistency over the week. In addition, we believe that those that those who are most likely to need most help to travel are as

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likely to be travelling at the weekend as during the week. Notably morning opening times should be the same at weekends as on weekdays (although a slightly later start on Sundays may be sensible).

14. Provision should be made to ensure assistance with ticketing is available throughout the day at staffed stations. This could be through the expansion of manned 'help points' or through provision of trained staff deployed at ticket machines to assist passengers in their use of ticket machines. The retention of customer-facing staff throughout the day is essential. LNER should usefully address to what extent existing staff roles could be amended to create a more effective customer-facing presence and to what degree there might need to be an increase in staff to handle queries that would otherwise be handled by the booking office.
15. Booking offices present the opportunity to purchase tickets using cash, which is rarely possible at ticket machines. Loss of this facility would be detrimental to travel for some sections of society.
16. LNER has been at the forefront of promoting the value of seat reservations and until very recently had been insisting all passengers make a seat reservation to travel on its services. It is often impossible to make a seat reservation when purchasing tickets from a machine.
17. We were disappointed by the omission of any detail of the rationale for the reasons for the planned reductions in ticket office hours, such as average visits by hour, analysis to confirm that tickets being bought during this time are easy to purchase on TVMs, the competency levels of other staff on the station as regards ticketing advice and confirmation that stations are staffed throughout the planned closure hours.

Observations on Specific Locations

Berwick

18. The new opening time of 0700 is after the first LNER and CrossCountry trains, to London and Plymouth respectively, have departed. It also gives very little time before the 07.11 departure to London and 07.18 to Edinburgh. An opening time of 06.00 would be more suitable on weekdays and at the weekend.
19. Closure at 12.00 on weekdays and 13.00 at weekends represents a substantial reduction in opening hours – over 43 hours over the week. We oppose a reduction on this scale and believe LNER should provide detailed evidence to justify the proposal before any reduction in hours is adopted.

Darlington

20. We see little justification for the new later opening time of 07.00 on Saturdays. The Saturday timetable has only five trains between 06.00 and 07.00, compared to seven on weekdays, but an opening time of 07.00 would make it virtually impossible to use booking office services prior to catching the 07.02 to London or 07.09 to Edinburgh.
21. We accept the earlier closing times will cause minimal hardship.

Doncaster

22. We believe consideration should be given to opening slightly earlier than the proposed 06.00 on weekdays and Saturdays. Five trains depart Doncaster between 06.03 and 06.14 on weekdays (four on Saturdays), all of which would be difficult to catch if relying on booking office services.
23. We accept the earlier closing times will cause minimal hardship.

Durham

24. We believe consideration should be given to opening slightly earlier than the proposed 07.00 on Saturdays. The Saturday timetable has three trains departing between 06.30 and 07.00, compared to seven on weekdays, but an opening time of 07.00 would also make it virtually impossible to use booking office services prior to catching the 07.08 to London.
25. We accept the earlier closing times will cause minimal hardship.

Edinburgh

26. We see little justification for the new later opening time of 06.00 on weekdays and Saturdays. There are eight departures from Edinburgh between 05.00 and 06.00 on weekdays, including the first two LNER trains of the day to London Kings' Cross, and a further six departures between 06.00 and 06.15. We welcome the earlier opening time on Sundays.
27. We accept the earlier closing times will cause minimal hardship, but request that consideration be given to extending opening hours during the period of the Edinburgh Festival.

Grantham

28. We believe consideration should be given to opening earlier than the proposed 07.00 on Saturdays. The Saturday timetable has three trains to London Kings' Cross between 06.00 and 07.00,
29. Closure at 16.00 on weekdays and Saturdays, and 13.00 on Sundays represents a substantial reduction in opening hours. We oppose a reduction on this scale and believe LNER should provide detailed evidence to justify the proposal before any reduction in hours is adopted.

London King's Cross

30. We believe consideration should be given to opening slightly earlier than the proposed 06.00 on weekdays. The first long-distance train of the day departs at 05.55 to Leeds.
31. We accept the earlier closing times will cause minimal hardship.

Newark

32. We see little justification for the much later opening time of 09.00 on Saturdays. This is in marked contrast to the weekday opening time of 05.45 and takes no account of the considerable number of departures before 09.00. We do not understand why the opening time for this station's booking office is much later than for Grantham and Retford.
33. Closure at 12.00 on weekdays and 15.00 at weekends represents a substantial reduction in opening hours – over 46 hours over the week. We oppose a reduction on this scale and believe LNER should provide detailed evidence to justify the proposal before any reduction in hours is adopted.

Newcastle

34. We believe consideration should be given to opening earlier than the proposed 06.00 on Weekdays. The weekday timetable has two trains to London Kings' Cross between 05.15 and 06.00. Similarly we see little justification for the new later opening time of 07.00 on Saturdays. There are seven departures from Newcastle between 06.00 and 07.00 on weekdays.
35. We accept the earlier closing times will cause minimal hardship.

Peterborough

36. We accept the earlier closing times will cause minimal hardship.

Retford

37. We see little justification for the later opening time of 07.00 on weekdays and much later opening time of 08.00 on Saturdays. The weekday timetable has five departures between 05.45 and 07.00 including two trains to London Kings' Cross. Similarly, there are six departures from Retford between 07.00 and 08.00 on Saturdays.
38. Closure at 12.00 on weekdays and 13.00 at weekends represents a substantial reduction in opening hours – over 44 hours over the week. We oppose a reduction on this scale and believe LNER should provide detailed evidence to justify the proposal before any reduction in hours is adopted.

Wakefield Westgate

39. We believe consideration should be given to opening earlier than the proposed 07.00 on Saturdays. The Saturday timetable has seven departures from Wakefield Westgate between 06.00 and 07.00, plus a further departure at 07.02. We also believe consideration should be given to retaining an opening time of 08.00 on Sundays.
40. We accept the earlier closing times will cause minimal hardship, except on Sundays where consideration should be given to extending closing time beyond the proposed 16.00.

York

41. We accept the marginally later opening times and earlier closing times will cause minimal hardship.