

RAILFUTURE RESPONSE TO TRANSPENNINE EXPRESS CONSULTATION ON PROPOSALS FOR MODERNISING CUSTOMER SERVICE AT STATIONS

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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 in areas served by TransPennine Express and affiliated Rail User Groups, as authorised by Railfuture's national Board of Directors.
2. This response relates specifically to issues arising from the consultation document issued by TransPennine Express and is aligned with Railfuture's National Response on this issue covering all stations for all TOCs currently consulting on Ticket Office changes. In the case of accidental conflict, the Railfuture National Response is the primary submission.

Background

3. TransPennine Express is '*proposing changes to how it sells tickets and provides customer service at its staffed stations*'. These proposals form part of a wider consultation exercise across all train operators providing staffed ticket offices in England, which, if adopted, will see a significant reduction in the number of ticket offices open.
4. TransPennine Express states that '*nationally, ticket office sales now account for only 12% of transactions*' and '*At TPE stations we have witnessed an even faster transition to digital channels ... on average only 8% of transactions of journeys to or from a staffed TPE station were retailed by the ticket office*'.

The Need for Change?

5. Patronage of ticket offices has been declining. 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 ticket offices.
6. Railfuture recognises the need to adapt to changing circumstances and agrees it is right and proper that provision and opening hours should be reviewed regularly to ensure resources are allocated effectively. However, we believe any changes should consider the wider functions and benefits delivered to the community by ticket offices that would otherwise be lost to the railway as a whole.

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Service at Stations**

General Observations

7. At busy times the ticket office will generate considerable revenue. 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
 - Providing a collection and storage point for items of lost property
 - Providing a visible presence to aid security: Deterring issues of vandalism, assault, and potential suicide.
 - Fielding a multitude of other enquiries specific to the location concerned.

It is essential that all these services continue to be accessible in clear and conspicuous manner.

8. The ticket 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 or closure 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.
9. A greater proportion of the passengers who continue to frequent and rely on ticket offices are more likely to be persons with physical or sensory impairments or those without easy access to online or mobile ticketing alternatives. It is important that such passengers are not deterred or even excluded from travelling.
10. The railway's fare 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. Many passengers find this complexity daunting and rely on the ticket office to advise the correct, cheapest fare for their journey. It is essential that access to this advice continues to be made available.
11. Ticket 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, including those who are already deprived.

Observations Specific to TransPennine Express

12. We are disappointed by TransPennine Express's failure to provide any statistical data concerning ticket office usage. Other train operators, notably Northern Trains, have supplied detailed station-specific information about the different channels used to buy tickets, method of payment and retailing facilities. TransPennine Express declined to provide any such information, either in its consultation documentation or following direct **Railfuture Response to TransPennine Express Consultation on Proposals for Modernising Customer Service at Stations**

approach by Railfuture. The lack of such information impacts the ability of Railfuture and other respondents to make informed comment and calls into question the adequacy of the consultation procedure. We call upon Transport Focus and the Government to insist this vital information is published.

13. We welcome proposals to provide visible trained assistance staff *'to deliver a wider range of customer services, including helping customers with buying tickets at self-service machines or online, providing customer information and passenger assistance'*. However, we are very concerned that the specific hours at which these staff will be deployed are undefined. The consultation document states *'we will advertise the times station staff are scheduled to be at stations, so that customers will know when they can get help from our colleagues'*. Such provision of service information is fundamental to the proposals and should have been made available in the consultation documentation. Furthermore, ticket office hours are subject to statutory protections outlined in Schedule 17 of the Ticketing and Settlement Agreement. We believe the scope of those protections should be clarified to encompass trained assistance staff and the hours they provide service, rather than be linked to the physical building in which, until now, the service they provide has been delivered.
14. We are very concerned that TransPennine Express has no plans for assistance staff to sell any tickets directly to customers, other than the small number of tickets that cannot be purchased at self-service ticket machines. This will be detrimental to customers who cannot use ticket vending machines, a disproportionate number of whom are vulnerable members of society; those with physical impairments, predominant cash users and those less digitally-literate for example.
15. Of the 14 stations where ticket offices are proposed for closure, only 3 are proposed to be provided with a ticket vending machine capable of accepting cash payment. Given that the consultation document states 35% of transactions at TransPennine Express ticket offices are in cash, we feel this will cause undue hardship for those customers who are not digitally enabled or who have no option other than to pay in cash.
16. The ticket office is a clear and obvious first point of contact. No information has been provided about where assistance staff are proposed to be located and how customers will be directed to access the services they will provide. Clear and obvious direction to a permanent point of access will be essential at every station.
17. TransPennine Express states that no changes are proposed to *'the availability of amenities such as waiting rooms and toilets'*, but gives no specific details of the hours at which these facilities will continue to be made available. We would not support any reduction in hours arising from reduced staffing hours at stations and would consider any such reduction in provision to be contrary to TransPennine Express's claim to be *'Delivering improved customer service at our stations'*.
18. TransPennine Express proposes that *'station staff who are not already multi-skilled will, as part of this proposal, receive the necessary training to allow them to deliver a wider range of customer service'*. The demand for assistance at many stations will likely be substantial and require staff dedicated to that role for a substantial part of the day. Whilst we welcome the principle of training staff to be multi-skilled, we do not believe the assistance role can be adequately delivered by staff whose roles cover a multitude of tasks and we are concerned that insufficient resources may be allocated to providing the assistance role.
19. TransPennine Express states *'Around 35% of ticket transactions made at our ticket offices are made by cash'* and *'Cash will still be accepted at stations with cash TVMs, at TPE and other train operator ticket offices or on-board'*. Only 3 of the TPE stations where

ticket offices are proposed for closure are intended to be equipped with cash TVMs; across all train operators, only 8 stations in Yorkshire are proposed to retain a ticket office. Thus, it is highly likely that on-board staff will be required to dispense a high volume of tickets which will likely impact on their other duties, some of which are safety critical. Furthermore, some TransPennine Express trains are formed of two train sets, with no corridor connection between the two sets, making it impossible for a single on-board staff member to service all customer requirements.

20. Any reduction in station staffing hours will require a greater proportion of passenger assist to be provided by on-board staff, which will likely impact on their other duties, some of which are safety critical. The demands on on-board staff will be further exacerbated by the need to sell tickets to cash purchasers described at point 19.
21. Insufficient information has been provided about the quantity of ticket vending machines to be installed at each station and their exact location. Requirements will vary by station but will need to address local factors such as number of entry/exit points to station and proximity to platforms, as well as considering passenger volumes.
22. TransPennine Express states *'67% of tickets sold at ticket offices are available on the new TVMs and this will increase to 97% when planned upgrades to include advance purchase and car parking tickets are delivered'*. As ticket vending machines become capable of issuing tickets for complex journeys, the average transaction time will inevitably increase, likely giving rise to a requirement for a greater number of machines. It is essential that both machines and users are adequately protected from the elements.

Observations on Specific Locations

23. Notwithstanding our comments in point 12 about the lack of any detailed statistical data concerning ticket office usage on which to base our comments, we make the following observations about specific stations on the TransPennine Express network.

Huddersfield

24. We welcome the retention of the ticket office at Huddersfield, but we are disappointed by the reduced opening hours and concerned that that TransPennine Express states this office *'will also close in the future'*. Huddersfield is a sizeable conurbation; its ticket office will be the sole remaining example in Kirklees. We also consider it is disingenuous of TransPennine Express to list current and proposed staffing hours as 0000-2359, when there are permanent signs outside Huddersfield station stating that it is closed between the hours of 0015 and 0530. Public service is not currently available at the times TransPennine Express claims in its consultation document and further demonstrates the operator's lack of regard to this public consultation.

Manchester Airport

25. We welcome the retention of the ticket office at Manchester Airport, but we are concerned at the reduced opening hours and concerned that TransPennine Express states this office *'will also close in the future'*. By its very nature, Manchester Airport station is the first point of contact with the rail network for a substantial number of visitors from overseas, many of whom will be unfamiliar with rail travel in this country. Demand for advice is likely to be very high at this location. Furthermore, air passengers arrive at Manchester Airport throughout the day, so it is particularly disappointing to see opening times contract to close at 1500 or 1600, instead of the current 2230. Although it is stated the station will be staffed 0000-2359, no details have been provided of the times

customer assistance staff will be available. We therefore consider it essential that the ticket office remains open for most of the period when trains are running.

Hull Paragon

26. TransPennine Express states *'Where a customer cannot purchase a product online or from a TVM at their TPE station, they will be able to purchase the product from either **another station that has a ticket office**, from train operator contact centres that offer telesales or on-board.'* Closure of the ticket office at Hull Paragon will leave no other ticket offices anywhere in the East Riding, the nearest facilities being at York or Doncaster. The problem is particularly acute in the East Riding because Northern Trains also plans to close all its ticket offices in the region. We think it is unacceptable that a city of the stature and importance of Hull should be left without any ticket office to support the region and consider arrangements should be made to transfer operation of the ticket office to Northern Trains (the principal operator of services at Hull Paragon station), before any material changes are made to the TransPennine Express facility.

Middlesbrough

27. We are concerned by the proposed closure of the ticket office at this large population centre which forms the hub of the region. We note that staffing hours are proposed to increase at Middlesbrough but are concerned that the specific hours in which assistance staff will be available has not been disclosed.

Brough, Grimsby Town, Malton, Northallerton, Scunthorpe, Stalybridge and Thornaby

28. We are very concerned that ticket offices at each of these locations are proposed for closure and staffing hours are proposed to be reduced to a level well below the current ticket office opening hours. Specifically, all will cease to have a staff presence from mid-afternoon onwards. Since the Covid-19 pandemic we have seen a shift in rail travel away from traditional commuting, with a greater number of travellers now using the railway for leisure purposes. Leisure travellers tend to make their journeys later in the day, so demand for face-to-face services is likely to be correspondingly later. We believe TransPennine Express should undertake a detailed analysis of such trends at these stations.

Cleethorpes, Dewsbury, Scarborough, Selby and Thirsk

29. We are very concerned that ticket offices at each of these locations are proposed for closure. We note that each station will retain a staff presence into the early evening but are concerned that no detail has been provided of exactly when assistance staff will be available.

Conclusions

30. We believe the proposals for closure of ticket offices and changes to staffing times put forward in this consultation do not adequately address the needs of many rail passengers and will cause hardship. People with physical or sensory impairments or mental health issues, people without access to digital channels and those reliant on cash will find the proposed alternatives challenging or impossible and may suffer social exclusion as a result.

31. We are concerned that many services currently supplied by the ticket office will no longer be easily accessible, or only accessible for reduced hours. We also worry that the alternative arrangements proposed for ticket purchase are inadequate and, if

implemented, these proposals will discourage train travel generally. Consequent loss of revenue would negate any cost savings that might arise from ticket office closures.

32. We believe that TransPennine Express's proposals should be suspended, pending a rigorous examination of their suitability on a station-by-station basis, with a range of options to be considered in conjunction with passengers and other stakeholders.

RAILFUTURE YORKSHIRE BRANCH

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