**Ticket Offices Consultation Summer 2023
A submission to Transport Focus & London TravelWatch – All stations, all Train Operators**

An August 2023 supplement on Ticket Vending machines

Since our submission on 26 July, we have continued to assess the suitability of Ticket Vending Machines (TVMs) as an alternative to the Ticket Office.

This assessment has not challenged our earlier conclusions – enclosed as appendix A.

Our sample of TOC TVMs now extends to 23 locations spread across 14 TOCs (The full results are available in PDF & Excel formats).

This extended sample has reinforced our earlier conclusions; it has become more clear to us that:

1. TVMs have not kept up with the times; in particular, as Advance Tickets have become more widely available for travel "today", it is still not usually possible to buy these tickets at a TVM. In only 6 of the TOCs (Avanti West Coast, Chiltern, East Midlands Railway, LNER, Northern and London Overground) did we encounter TVMs capable of selling advance tickets. And in the case of EMR we did not find these TVMs at large stations (Nottingham and London St Pancras) where Advance Tickets are an important option for travellers intending to travel "now".
2. There is a great deal of inconsistency in TVM functionality and software design. For instance:
   • EMR TVMs don't allow GroupSave to be selected, despite (in our sample) being located at a station (St Pancras) where the two other National Rail operators offer this incentive to travel. We think this particularly egregious as EMR's TVMs are the dominant offering and often the first to be encountered when entering the station.
   • The new, modern, large screen TVMs at Gatwick Airport (which doesn't have a ticket office) don't sell Advance Tickets, despite them being relevant to passengers travelling longer distances.
   • LNER's sample TVM, despite being well above average, still offered the option to buy return tickets between destinations only served by LNER services and single leg pricing now being fully in place.
3. It is often far from intuitive to buy tickets when departing in the near future, most notably towards the end of the morning peak, when the home screen will display peak tickets, but most users actually want off-peak tickets. This is further confused by differing expressions being used to bring up the selection of future dates and times.
4. It is both good and bad that many larger stations have TVMs from multiple operators – bad because they don't operate in the same way and confuse travellers, but good because of their varying functionality.
5. TVMs are sometimes imposing unnecessary restrictions and decisions on intending travellers – eg Northern's large screen TVMs not selling tickets for delayed services, and many large screen TVMs insisting on specific trains being chosen, even when flexible tickets are being chosen (and, indeed, may be the only option).

Whilst some TVMs – most noticeably the ones we inspected at LNER (Kings Cross), Euston (Avanti West Coast), Marylebone (Chiltern) and West Hampstead (London Overground) offer a much more comprehensive service that allows a granularity of purchase that allows Advance fare purchase and, except for London Overground, seat selection, it appears to us that most TVMs have not really moved on a lot from their original purpose of "crowd busting" – that is selling tickets for travelling "now" to local destinations. Whilst other flexible ticket purchase is possible (including, usually from any station to any station) and sometimes,

features like London Boundary tickets are available, we think these TVMs are woefully short of what is needed to replace a ticket office. And with the exception of West Hampstead and Marylebone, other operator's TVMs were present, which causes further confusion and uncertainty. Why should an intending traveller need to know that they need to look for a LNER machine to buy an Advance ticket when going to Leeds; why should a group of intending Thameslink traveller need to know that they need to avoid the most obviously placed TVMs on the way from the Underground to the Thameslink platforms at St Pancras (as they are operated by EMR and don't include GroupSave)?

It seems to us that making the changes needed to many TVMs to allow them to become even a partial alternative to the Ticket Office is essential. We have seen two broad approaches in use:

1. Static TVMs. These seem to have no awareness other than location, current time and date, which is used to determine the content of the home page. Beyond that, the customer gets a selection of flexible ticket offerings to choose from.
2. Dynamic TVMs. These seem to operate in two modes:
    a. Home page mode, where flexible tickets are sold in a similar manner to "Static TVMs".
    b. Detail mode, where the TVM is in communication with the TOC's back office systems in order to receive real time train services, ticket prices etc – and to reserve seats (if relevant).

A dynamic mode TVM is needed if Advance tickets are to be sold. We do not have the knowledge to assess whether many 'Static' TVMs are capable of operating in a dynamic way but have no reason to assume that they can't. But it is a very significant change to both the software and potentially the back end systems, so we are doubtful that this can be completed quickly.

We assessed TVMs on their ability to complete 12 tasks. Our updated summary is here:

	Conclusion	Comments	Way forward
1. Tickets to travel immediately to common destinations from the station	Available / easy	This feature on Northern large screen TVMs (eg Dore & Totley) should be universal: Display has next five available services, with cheapest fares for each. Option to display later / earlier services. the cheapest through fares are indicated (including Advance).	Evolution. Whilst generally "fine", improvements still of benefit (eg the inability in an otherwise welcome change on Northern's TVMs to allow the continued purchase of tickets for delayed services).
2. Tickets to travel in the near future to common destinations from the station (most noticeably for an Off-Peak starting within the next 30 minutes)	Available / easy	It is typically available but needs to be more intuitive (that it exists), so as to allow for easier purchasing of off-peak tickets towards the end of the Peak / Anytime only ticket travel times.	TVMs should be better at handling the transition from peak to off-peak; there is time period when both peak and off-peak tickets are equally wanted - eg a more dynamic home page around the end of peak times

	Conclusion	Comments	Way forward
3. This station to any station flexible tickets (Do specific trains have to be selected?)	Available / Mixed	Should be no requirement to select a specific train until Advance fares are included in the offer (should be clear on the times of the trains, list all the valid trains)	Always enable "Any to Any"; for flexible ticket only journeys without seat reservations, explain options by reference to time bands, not specific trains.
4. Any station to any station flexible tickets (Do specific trains have to be selected?)	Varied - sometimes not possible	This is a basic feature for someone planning a journey, including from a station without a TVM, or for a multi part journey and needs to be available	This is particularly important if Ticket Offices are to be closed.
5. Season tickets	Limited	Often issue weeklys, renew monthlys	In the current status quo (TVMs and Ticket Offices) we would not advocate change, but with the proposed demise of many Ticket Offices, enhanced functionality is needed.
6. Advance Fare Tickets	Rarely available	With the exception of LNER, Advance Ticket sales were only found on modern TVMs with large screens. But not all modern large screen TVMs (eg not on GTR). Advance Ticket sales requires the TVM to be in real-time communication with the back offices systems of the TOCs in order to receive dynamic timings, availability and prices	A generation of TVMs were created focusing mainly on same day travel at a time when Advance Tickets were not available for same day travel. This has now changed and TVMs need to catch up. This will require significant architectural changes to the TVM software (and possibly greater connectivity) as data needs to be exchanged real time to 'build' the transaction
7. Multiple passengers – a mix of Railcards / some with & some without Railcards (in one transaction)	Rarely available	A basket function is a partial mitigant, but it is not unreasonable for multiple railcards to be in use	Add this functionality
8. GroupSave is available	Mixed - sometimes not available	Missing on occasions when the owning TOC (eg EMR) does not offer the product on their own services	Needs to be made universally available
9. A Basket feature – Ie can buy multiple unrelated tickets together	Available, sometimes difficult	Needs to be clear, can address #7 in part	Needs to be clear, can address #7 in part

	Conclusion	Comments	Way forward
10. Seat Reservations (as standalone transaction)	Never found		With mandatory seat reservations now sometimes required, this service needs to be supported.
11. Rover & Ranger tickets	Unusual		Product needs to be added
12. Cash payment accepted	Some machines	Larger stations usually have a mix of card / cash and card only machines, but where a station has just one, or a few often none of them are cash	At least one per station.

Appendix – 26 July 2023 submission Ticket Vending Machines content

We consider TVM functionality to often be woefully short of the functionality needed to replace Ticket Offices. We think that the core functionality required is often present at least one TOC's TVMs, particularly

the newer, large screen TVMs (those with screen dimensions of 100-200cm), but coverage is significantly below the need if ticket office hours are to be significantly reduced.

We think that small screen outdoor TVMs, at best only meet the test of "easy" when selling tickets for flexible travel for travel now and in the near future from the current station. But factors such as low sensitivity on the touch screen, glare and other environmental factors can easily make this more difficult than "easy". This should include Rover and Ranger tickets. The requirements for protection from the weather and resilience against attacks often makes the screen unresponsive and difficult to use, particularly when many taps are required (eg when using on on-screen keyboard). Even achieving the 10 or so taps required to retrieve a pre-bought ticket can be challenging.

Larger screen TVMs are much more 'user friendly', but the member comments in the box to the right are relevant.

> A member writes: As an intending ticket purchaser approaches the ticket office, they will have a mental list of the information they need to impart: railcard held, day and/or time of travel (if not 'now'), number of passengers, destination (may be Zone 1' or 'as far as 'Hammersmith' etc rather than the official "Travelcard."). The clerk will register this information in whatever order the customer chooses to say it and will issue tickets accordingly.
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> A ticket machine on the other hand is quite inflexible in this regard, and the purchaser might miss or overlook a step and end up inadvertently buying the wrong ticket and innocently laying themselves open to penalty charges.

Our analysis of TVM functionality showed that none of 14 machines at 10 different TOCs had what we regarded as the absolute minimal functionality (full results available in PDF & Excel formats.

	Conclusion	Comments
1. Tickets to travel immediately to common destinations from the station	Available / easy	To include Advance fares if an option. And see below on Dore & Totley.
2. Tickets to travel in the near future to common destinations from the station (most noticeably for an Off-Peak starting within the next 30 minutes)	Available / easy	It is typically available but needs to be more intuitive (that exists) to allow for purchasing off-peak tickets towards the end of the peak.
3. This station to any station flexible tickets (Do specific trains have to be selected?)	Available / Mixed	Should be no requirement to select a specific train (should be clear on the times of the trains, list all the valid trains)
4. Any station to any station flexible tickets	Varied - sometimes not possible	This is a basic feature for someone planning a journey, including from a station without a TVM, or for a

		Conclusion	Comments
(Do specific trains have to be selected?)			multi part journey and needs to be available
5. Season tickets		Limited	Often issue weeklys, renew monthlys
6. Advance Fare Tickets		Rare	Including seat reservations
7. Multiple passengers – a mix of Railcards / some with & some without Railcards (in one transaction)		Difficult	But as a secondary reaction. So if relevant offer GroupSave, and then prompt
8. GroupSave is available		Mixed - often not available	Needs to be available
9. A Basket feature – Ie can buy multiple unrelated tickets together		Available, sometimes difficult	Needs to be clear, can address #7 in part
10. Seat Reservations (as standalone transaction)		Rare	Needs to be available
11. Rover & Ranger tickets		Unusual	Needs to be available
12. Cash payment accepted		Some machines	At least one per station.

We did see some beacons of good practice, but these were then marred by shortcomings. For instance on the machine at Dore & Totley (a Northern station):

2. Tickets to travel in the near future to common destinations from the station (most noticeably for an Off-Peak starting within the next 30 minutes)	Available / easy	Display shows next five available services, with cheapest fares for each. Option to display later/earlier services. the cheapest through fares are indicated (including Advance), but I don't think split-ticketing.

But then our reviewer goes on to make these comments:

- "For all ticket options it is necessary to specify which trains will be used. In the case of immediate travel, once the scheduled departure time of a train has passed it is no longer possible to buy a ticket for that train, even if it is running late (the TVM can show real-time running information). Thus, any passenger arriving between the scheduled and actual departure must specify a later scheduled train to purchase a ticket. Potentially confusing."

- "TVM offers assistance in the form of a video call with a help centre, but this didn't work. Called twice but no response in the time I was there (50 minutes). I know from other users the facility does work but only very occasionally".

We did not include it in our survey because it is rarely available except on Greater Anglia, but we regard a video assistance feature as a key improvement particularly if the video assistant can "send" a ticket to the TVM for purchase.

We also saw no real innovation, such as voice control.

Finally, we believe that it is time for TVMs to start to specialise – some for local journeys (which can be existing machines, repurposed) and others for more complex journeys, with larger screens etc (and also able to sell simple journeys).

> A member writes: At Hatfield (Herts) ticket machines don't understand Moorgate (the National Rail station) or Kings Cross – you have to input "London Terminals". Also the first screen shows a quick option of a specific point to point ticket to "Underground Zones 1-2" – but to select that as a destination for a different ticket, you have to input "London Underground Zones 1-2".
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> To which our Chair commented "Similarly SWR TVMs don't understand Waterloo."

We conclude that the TVM service needs substantial improvement to be an effective substitute for Ticket Office sales (note: as explained elsewhere, we think some travellers will always need the to be able to purchase from staff.