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Dear Sirs

GTR Proposal to make changes to Ticket Office arrangements

APTU (The Association of Public Transport Users) is the rail user group for travelers between West Hampstead Thameslink and Harlington inclusive on the Thameslink North route. Our response has been informed by a briefing to our members and a request to them for changes they see important if ticket office usage is to be reduced.

Conclusion: Proposal is unacceptable in isolation

Our key conclusion is that the consultation does not contain the information needed to form a considered judgment. This is because there is no detail on the improvements to alternatives to ticket office use; in isolation, we regard this proposal as unacceptable as ticket office users often either have no alternative (eg immediate purchase of an off peak ticket for the following day (Sunday through Thursday) or have little trust in the ability of the alternative (a ticket vending machine (TVM) to offer the lowest price. We believe these improvements will require many more months than the time allowed in the current proposal.

Actions required to create a sensible proposal

We believe that London TravelWatch and Transport Focus need to obtain the following additional information from GTR before concluding on the appropriateness of this proposal:

1. Details of the nature of, and timetable for, introduction of alternatives to the traditional Orange Striped ticket. In practice, this is likely to be GTR's Key Go Smartcard, and bank contactless cards and products like ApplePay,
 - a. GTR's the Key is only available for Season tickets for Thameslink and Great Northern stations at present.
 - b. In some cases, there may be a need to accelerate other commitments in the franchise such as single off-peak tickets at half the price of off-peak returns.
2. Details of improvements to the functionality, reliability and usability of TVMs.
3. Details of improvements to functionality and usability of the Internet ticket issuing application.

4. An overall programme plan that links 1, 2 & 3 above with the ticket office changes and includes mandatory milestone requirements (eg delivery of single & day tickets on Smartcards) before ticket office changes (other than pilots) are made.
5. Additional details on the ticket issuing facilities to be available to Hosts – both in terms of proportion of ticket office functionality available and performance / speed of use.
6. A commitment to undertake local informal consultation on the changes at each station before implementation – the physical layout of each station has significant impact.

We believe that items 1 to 4 are sufficiently important to justify their own separate consultation. Once there is an agreed way forward to improve the alternatives to ticket office issued tickets – and these changes have been implemented, then the multi-purpose Host role can make good sense (subject to the more detailed concerns described later).

The GTR Proposal refers to starting this in the summer of 2016. We regard this date as far too soon – the pre-requisites described elsewhere in this response are likely to take far longer to deliver than the next few months, and accordingly, whilst the revised date should be primarily dependent on the timetable for these improvements, we envisage it to be at least 12 to 24 months away (although we would very much be pleased to be proven unduly pessimistic as regards this).

It is to be noted that certain aspects of the proposal, that will provide the Host Role at times the ticket office is not currently opened are unequivocally an improvement, although we do note that the need to provide first to last staffing referred to as a plus is a specific franchise commitment.

Approach required

We believe that this change can only be of benefit to the travelling community if the need to purchase any form of ticket at the station is eliminated for many users (through Smartcard and similar technologies) and that TVMs move from an unwelcome choice (when compared to a ticket office) towards at least equal. This will require both extensions to the range of tickets available (and the elimination of time restrictions) and in machine usability. We consider both of these improvements are essential pre-requisites to successful implementation of the Station Host concept, as we believe it can only be effective once demand for tickets issued by a member of staff has much reduced. This will provide them with enough time to both complete their new tasks and to be available for ticket issuing for travelers who cannot use alternate methods easily.

Purchase via the Internet

We note that there is a reference to the ability to purchase via the Internet. We believe this needs to be treated as a disadvantage to the user community whilst the end product is an Orange Striped ticket, as this means a change from a one step to a two step process – and still retains the uncertainty of how long needs to be allowed for collection (and the worry that all TVMs will be broken). Once Smartcard tickets are more widely available, then we

agree that it can be an alternative for many (but not all) travelers – if the speed of time between purchase and availability is much reduced from the current two hours.

Ticket Vending Machines as an alternative

Ticket Vending Machines (TVMs) are quoted as an alternative. A consistent feedback from the membership is dissatisfaction with them. The following emerge as consistent themes:

1. Lack of functionality [see below].
2. Lack of usability – difficult to use, particularly for non-standard needs. This is not helped by differing designs in use.
3. Ticket types not available [see below].
4. Badly located machines – made unusable at times by glare, and unpleasant to use at others (eg rain).
5. Low reliability.
 - a. As a simple example of this, when I visited my local station recently, 3 were broken, 1 was refusing to issue pre-ordered tickets, leaving only 2 functional machines.

Detail on improvements required

We set out below a number of improvements that need to be made to Smartcard issued tickets, to the Internet and to TVM functionality. Effectively each of these is a reason to retain ticket office hours ‘as is’ until delivered:

- Smartcard - The key
 - Vast improvement in availability time from current 2 hours – it should be possible to buy a ticket on-line at the station and then immediately upload it.
 - Pay As You Go available – including mixed journeys (peak one way, off peak the other etc¹).
 - Covers singles, peak, off peak, super off-peak.
 - Covers all discounts – eg Local Authority, Student specials etc.
 - Covers special ticket types.
 - Covers add-ons such as Freedom pass and Boundary tickets .
- All the above also available via contactless cards (in some cases after registration).
- Oyster delivered to all promised locations.
- Internet purchases:
 - Further improvements in availability time from current 15 minutes – it should be possible to buy a ticket on-line at the station and then immediately print it.
 - All missing ticket types added – refer Smartcards.
 - Boundary tickets available.

¹ Members regularly referred to buying a zones 1 to 6 off-peak travel card and a return to Elstree to save money when returning during the evening peak. Equivalent price tickets need to be available on Smartcards and from TVMs

- Station TVMs
 - Full range of ticket types available – refer Smartcards.
 - Tickets that do not start / end at the station the TVM is based at.
 - Fully usable by PRMs (persons with reduced mobility).
 - Off peak / future dated time of sale restrictions removed.
 - Always offer lowest price.

We enclose, as an appendix some sample quotes from our members.

The last point on station TVMs is an important point, which may require fundamental re-design – away from “sell me an off-peak ticket” towards “I am travelling at 8am and 3pm, sell me the cheapest ticket”.

My members have highlighted that TVMs do not issue Advance tickets and have suggested that they should. I believe this requires more thought – it seems to me that the role of a TVM is to issue a ticket quickly and to provide throughput, and allowing advance tickets, including seat selection is inconsistent with this. It may prove worthwhile to provide one such TVM in busier stations located near the host. It may also prove sensible to allow some more local Advance tickets that do not involve seat reservations to be purchased at machines.

Whilst some travellers will naturally migrate towards Smartcards (et al) and improved TVMs, we also believe incentives should be considered, such as discounts, quicker delay-repay etc.

Demand for ticket issuing

We also note that there is reference to lower average ticket sales per hour at times of the day when Hosts are to the only option for staff issued tickets. We are not convinced that hourly is the appropriate measure, as there are peaks before and after trains depart / arrive – If demand is 12 tickets per hour, the requirement is not to sell a ticket every 5 minutes – it is more likely to be to sell 4 tickets as quickly as possible every 15 minutes. As an example, last time I used a TVM at Harpenden in the evening (when the ticket office is planned to be closed), there were 7 people in the ticket office queue (including the person being served) – and all 3 TVMs near the ticket office were in use.

The timing of ticket office opening hours also needs to take account of other factors such as school holidays – it may well be sensible to have much more differential in the opening hours.

Role of the Host

Depending on their location, we are not currently clear whether or not station hosts will have a role in supporting arriving passengers at the ticket barriers – eg dealing with those without tickets, those with failed tickets (eg mag stripe errors). To the degree that they take over any of these roles from existing barrier staff (or allow barriers to be operated for

longer) then we are concerned they will be overwhelmed with demand for their services, resulting in delayed passengers and the benefits expected not being achieved. This will be exacerbated if the machines issued to host either cannot issue all ticket types (we would regard this as unacceptable) or if ticket issue (and other tasks – eg season ticket re-print) times increase as this would reduce capacity compared to the ticket office is open option

We are also concerned as to how Persons of Reduced Mobility and others with special needs will be supported – not conceptually – the role of the Host is an improvement, but practically – given other demands for the Host’s time – including anger and disappointment from others whilst they wait.

Finally, we have concerns about cash handling as the Host could be vulnerable to theft – something that could also put travelers at risk

Individual stations

Detail has not been made available as to where Hosts will be typically expected to be located, nor where the Station Hosting point will be located. We believe this information needs to be made available, and subject to an informal local consultation. For instance, we can see natural locations for the Station Hosting point at stations like City Thameslink and West Hampstead Thameslink, but it is less clear how they can well positioned at stations like Harpenden (ticket office away from natural pedestrian flow) and Elstree and Borehamwood (congestion).

Prototyping

We can see that there are benefits from prototyping, and once improved mobile ticket issuing functionality available to Hosts there should be two trials in London zones 1 to 6 - central London excluding St Pancras and elsewhere to start to iron out issues. A further trial outside London should then occur. In each case, ticket office hours should not be reduced – if the Host concept is successful, they should become the preferred option for staff based ticket issuance.

Conclusion

We look forward to hearing from you; if you would like to meet me, we would welcome such a meeting.

Yours sincerely

Neil Middleton

Neil Middleton
Chairman
APTU

Appendix – Sample quotes

1. One ticket machine currently always refuses my credit card – and I am not the only passenger with that experience
2. Not all types of tickets are available on the website eg Senior railcard for Supersaver fare on Sat 12th March same day return. This option was not available on the website. Had I bought the ticket online I would have paid double the fare of £6.60. Nor did the website tell me about the Railcard option for onward travel across Zones 1-6
3. School holiday periods are exceptionally busy at Leagrave station with many family groups travelling and needing advice about ticket options. There needs to be extended opening hours during all the school holidays
4. don't seem to be possible at a machine as one transaction:
 - a. Buy an off-peak travel card together with a full fare return from the boundary of zone 6 to Harpenden
 - b. Buy two off-peak travel cards with senior discount as a single transaction
 - c. Buy an off-peak travelcard with senior discount without having to seemingly start the transaction again after pressing the button for senior railcard
 - d. Buy a travelcard plus return from boundary of zone 6 to anywhere e.g. Worthing or Woking
5. The category of ticket I have been most inconvenienced by not being able to buy it from TVMs (unless this has changed very recently) is the half-fare travel available for journeys within Hertfordshire by holders of HCC concessionary passes.
6. The existing machines are tedious, frustrating and sometimes impossible. The screens are insufficiently touch sensitive [or even fail to register entirely]; locating the required destination using the 'keyboard' is slow and cumbersome; selecting the ticket type is prone to error; the LACON discount is not available; and the 'bar' on buying an off peak fare is not set early enough to ensure catching the first cheap train. In other words they are hopeless and nobody in their right mind would use them when a staffed ticket office is available.