

EAST SUFFOLK TRAVEL ASSOCIATION

STATION TICKET OFFICES

Greater Anglia's plans and implications

As the long-established independent voluntary body for public transport users in eastern Suffolk, ESTA welcomes the opportunity to comment.

Greater Anglia, like other train operating companies, have been encouraged to close ticket offices, including those at Lowestoft, Ipswich and Norwich, all of which are used by ESTA members.

Although the figure of 12% of tickets bought at ticket offices is being quoted by GA, the reality in East Anglia is 16%. This is despite the fact that GA only has 6 station ticket offices in Norfolk and Suffolk. GA say they have 54 stations with ticket offices but do not say that only 6 of these are in our two counties. We suspect the percentage of passengers using ticket offices in larger towns will be even higher because, of course, those passengers living in towns and villages on the rail network without a staffed station clearly have no ticket office to use. Will GA reveal what percentage of the tickets from Lowestoft are issued by the ticket office?

There does not appear to be any protection of jobs. The danger, at the very least, is that staff who leave, whatever through retirement or dissatisfaction with new working conditions, will not be replaced. Yet GA says it wants to "improve customer service".

We appreciate that passengers can buy tickets to anywhere in Great Britain from the conductors on our local trains, and these men and women do an amazing job, but they cannot always get round all passengers on a busy train, such as between Oulton Broad and Lowestoft, Woodbridge and Ipswich or Brundall and Norwich. Staff on barriers at Ipswich or Norwich are not always equipped to issue tickets in such cases.

The importance of conductors on our regional trains cannot be emphasised enough, not the need to ensure that all fares are collected. These staff must be

retained in full, as must ticket office staff. Consideration must also be given to the needs of customers less able to use technology, for whatever reason.

We also appreciate that ticket vending machines are very handy, especially for simple local journeys, providing that they are working, that they are not in bright sunlight and (for those in the open air) that it is not raining; and indeed that the passenger is not distracted by noise, crowds etc.

We also appreciate that it is possible to speak to a member of call centre staff from at least some of the ticket vending machines, subject to the provisos in the above paragraph.

GA try to justify their ticket office closures by drawing a comparison with London Underground. But the fares structure there is much simpler than on the National Rail network – and how many ticket vending machines at Underground stations are in the open air? Equally, trying to equate the operation of a station in the middle of a town of 65,000 with a GA suburban station in London is, to put it mildly, misleading.

Questions to be answered by GA

Comparison is made with banks, post offices and other places where transactions take place. Our experience is that post offices have at least one counter with a screen and that so do banks – where a customer can ask to go to a private booth instead of having their business conducted standing up in a crowded area.

Why can this not be done in GA stations? A rail customer is apparently going to be expected to stand on a platform or in a booking hall to conduct their business, which may involve substantial sums of money, with no privacy.

If a staff member is helping them, will that person have a laptop or tablet? Will they still be able to print off an itinerary or timetable for the customer – as frequently happens at present? What about the security implications for staff with valuable equipment and no protective screen?

Furthermore, we are told that staff at Lowestoft station will only be available for reduced hours and not at all on a Sunday. Yet nowadays Sunday can be a busy day on the rail network, Lowestoft has almost as frequent a service on a

Sunday as on a weekday – which is good. Sunday can also be a day when there are replacement buses because of engineering work. Who is going to help customers then? The promise that a “mobile team” may drop in at some time does not inspire confidence.

“More flexible roles for staff”

In principle we agree, but the strengths of the current system must not be weakened. At a medium-sized station such as Lowestoft, staff often have to deal with complex queries and transactions. They have a body of expertise which is useful to both local residents and to visitors.

They can advise on alternatives to help passengers obtain the best deal for them – which is not necessarily the case with an impersonal website or ticket vending machine. They also issue key cards for bicycles, and in general the human presence of such staff discourages vandalism. Lack of staff for longer periods of the working day would have implications for other commercial and community facilities in a station such as Lowestoft.

The staff also go on to the concourse or platforms to assist passengers and, in such cases, post a notice in the ticket office window, if they are the only staff on duty, saying that they will be absent for, say, 10 minutes.

Nowadays it is accepted that staff do more than just sell rail tickets, so some rewriting of their job descriptions may be justified. They could, for example, also sell car park tickets and local bus tickets (the latter is now quite common in Dutch stations with ticket offices). At Lowestoft they also have litter and cleaning duties in the latter part of the day.

But in the final analysis the staff are professionals and deserve a proper secure and well-equipped office in which to work.

Lowestoft and other medium-sized stations should have “Customer Information Centres selling a full range of products”, just like the “seven major stations” cited by GA and it should be made clear to customers that they can purchase tickets there. This will preserve and enhance the customer experience in a way that GA’s proposals will not.

Trevor Garrod, ESTA Chairman 13/07/23