



HOUSE OF COMMONS
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London TravelWatch
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25 July 2023

To whom it may concern

Re: Consultation Response on Proposed Changes at SWR Stations

I am writing to you in response to the public consultation on South Western Railway's proposed station changes across their network, which include closing ticket offices and significantly reducing staffing hours at a number of stations both in my constituency of Twickenham and across the South of England.

It is important to state that I recognise and welcome some of the steps SWR is taking towards modernising their network, and I support plans to upskill the workforce and the principle of making staff members more visible and approachable in stations.

However, South Western Railway has portrayed these station changes not merely as a cost-cutting exercise, but also a positive move towards improving customer service for passengers. With staff hours set to be slashed at stations across the network and much-needed modernisation of the ticketing system yet to be delivered, I fail to see how ticket office closures at this moment in time will present any benefit to the average SWR customer.

Regardless of whether staff are sat in a ticket office or out on the concourse, reducing their hours will result in a reduction in service for all passengers. This will be most significant for those who are heavily reliant on SWR staff to travel confidently and safely, such as those with disabilities and/or additional needs. I am, therefore, deeply concerned that no Equality Impact Assessments have yet been carried out for affected stations.

As MP for Twickenham, a community that is home to many who travel across London for work or education and therefore rely on a safe, well-run and accessible railway, I cannot support this drastic reduction in service which will see some stations in my constituency having staffing hours cut to just a fifth of their current levels.

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I am concerned that SWR moving staff out onto concourses will create a new obstacle for those customers who already frequently use and rely on the service at a traditional ticket office. For passengers who are deaf or hard of hearing, ticket offices are often the only place in stations with hearing induction loops, for example. They also present a fixed, designated space for seeking assistance for those who are blind or partially sighted to navigate to, without the obvious safety risk of wandering around the station in search of a staff member on the move.

Additionally, there are concerns about what impact the removal of ticket offices and reduction in staffing hours will have on provision and accessibility of other facilities at SWR stations, such as heating and lighting in waiting rooms and opening hours for toilets.

As things stand, there are also a number of tickets and discounts which simply cannot be purchased at ticket vending machines. This includes D50 discounts and purchase of extension tickets for Freedom Pass holders travelling outside of the zone. Whilst it has been suggested that conditions of travel may be changed to allow passengers to begin their journey without a ticket, this would require a considerable information campaign and changes to how ticket inspections are carried out. It would also potentially entail a passenger having to break their journey at a Category 1 station to purchase the ticket they need, which is impractical and time-consuming for somebody with reduced mobility. I therefore call for any closures or changes in ticket office opening hours to be postponed until *every* ticket type and discount is available on ticket vending machines at *every* station on the network.

Stations in Twickenham

In addition to these broader concerns, I would also like to express my opposition to some of the specific changes proposed for the eight stations in my constituency of Twickenham: Fulwell, Hampton, Hampton Wick, St Margarets, Strawberry Hill, Teddington, Twickenham and Whitton.

Under the proposals, I am aware that staffing is set to increase at two stations, namely Twickenham and St Margarets. These are both located in the northeast of the constituency and are the closest stops to our nearest Category 1 station in Richmond. The remaining six stations, which cover much of the south and west of Twickenham, will see staffing significantly reduced to just 20 hours per week, spread across five 4-hour morning shifts.

This will mean that there will be no staff presence for passengers returning to or travelling home from Fulwell, Hampton, Hampton Wick, Strawberry Hill, Teddington or Whitton in the afternoons and evenings, and no staff whatsoever at each of these stations on two days each week – one day of which will fall during the typical Monday to Friday work week for commuters.

These changes will affect the entire community, but as above, I am particularly concerned about the impact on passengers with disabilities, reduced mobility and/or additional needs. These passengers deserve to travel confidently, independently and safely and it is often assistance from SWR staff members which enables them to do so. Railways are essential public services, and I am concerned that these proposals will restrict their access to the SWR network in an area of London with no Underground tube stations.

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Wheelchair users and those with reduced mobility make up a significant proportion of those who rely on staff assistance at stations, yet SWR seems to have completely disregarded this in designing its proposals. Their approach to station changes in my community, which has two, soon to be three, fully accessible stations demonstrates that they have not considered how staff availability and step-free access need to interact in an accessible railway.

In my constituency, Twickenham and Whitton are currently the only stations with full step-free access from the concourse and ticket hall to all platforms. Earlier this year, however, we welcomed the announcement that Network Rail had secured £4.2 million in funding from the Department for Transport's Access for All scheme to install lifts, CCTV and lighting at Teddington to adapt it into our third step-free station.

Yet inexplicably, despite Whitton and Teddington being two of three step-free or soon to be step-free stations in our area, SWR is proposing to slash staffing hours at both from around 90 hours per week to just 20, with two days completely unstaffed at each. This is utterly unacceptable, reducing travel options for those who require step-free access and staff assistance to just Twickenham station for the majority of the week. This means passengers such as wheelchair users and those with reduced mobility being left to travel miles out of their way at additional cost to access the service they need and are entitled to from SWR.

To put the impact of these changes into context, for a wheelchair user living in my constituency, SWR's proposals would mean not only factoring in the need to travel to a step-free station, but also to check staffing hours, ensure they have time to locate a staff member upon arrival and find a vending machine that can apply the 50% wheelchair user discount they are entitled to (which is currently impossible).

Not only is the case to maintain the current level of staffing at Whitton and Teddington strong from an accessibility standpoint, they are also the second and third most used stations in the constituency. According to data from the Office of Rail and Road, Teddington was the departure or destination station for over 1 million journeys on the SWR network last year, as well as nearly 50,000 interchanges. Whitton was not far behind this total, with over three-quarters of a million passengers using the station in the same period. I therefore strongly oppose the staffing cuts at these stations.

This severe reduction in service level at some of our most accessible and frequently used stations is only made worse by the cuts to staffing hours at other nearby stations relied upon by commuters, such as Strawberry Hill, Fulwell, Hampton Wick and Hampton, the lattermost of which will see its total weekly staffing hours plummet from 73 to just 20.

The lack of any staffing at these stations, Whitton and Teddington in the afternoons, evenings and into the night is also of concern particularly for female passengers travelling alone on later trains. For women and girls, staff members at railway stations are a welcome sight, allowing them to feel safe on their journeys home. Given the spate of violence against women and girls which has left many feeling vulnerable in public spaces, cutting railway station staffing hours particularly in the evenings when trains run late into the night will only erode the confidence of passengers travelling home, particularly at stations in remote or dimly lit areas of our borough.

Railways are an essential public service, allowing people to travel safely to school, work and hospital appointments, to visit family and friends and to see new parts of our fantastic city and corner of the country. As MP for Twickenham, I cannot support any changes that would reduce access to this public service for those who rely on it.

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Unfortunately, without significant improvement, the proposed changes in their current form run the real risk of excluding passengers from our railway, so I therefore call on South Western Railway to maintain current staffing hours at all stations on its network and to pause any changes to ticket offices opening hours until the modernisation of the ticketing system has been implemented and all tickets can be purchased at all stations.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Munira Wilson', written in a cursive style.

MUNIRA WILSON MP
MP for Twickenham