



HOUSE OF COMMONS

LONDON SW1A 0AA

London Travel Watch
PO Box 5594
Southend-on-Sea
SS1 9PZ

August 2023

To whom it may concern,

Re: Consultation Response on Proposed Changes to SWR Stations

I am writing to you in response to the public consultation on South Western Railway's proposed station changes across their network.

These proposals represent a substantial step backward for SWR services. While I welcome the addition of staffing hours at Richmond, Kingston, and New Malden, the proposals constitute an unacceptable reduction in service at Mortlake Station.

The station, which is currently staffed 7 days a week until 7:50 pm on weekdays, will now have no evening staff service at any time and will lose any staffing on both Fridays and Saturdays.

Beyond the reduction in staffing hours at Mortlake, by cutting staffing hours at smaller stations across the UK, rail operators make their networks less safe, less accessible, and ultimately less likely to be used as alternative to private vehicles.

I would urge South Western Railway and other operators to reconsider their proposals and reflect on the wider impact loss of staffing is having on their image and on the communities they serve.

Reduced staffing hours at Mortlake Station: Accessibility

Mortlake Station functions as a key transport hub for the local community, allowing commuters easy access to Waterloo and providing access to Kingston Hospital via the Kingston loop line. Crucially, it is also the only wheelchair accessible station serving the north-east of Richmond Upon Thames. If SWR's proposals are accepted, wheelchair users travelling outside of the extremely limited staffing hours at the station, will have to travel to either Richmond or Putney and double back on themselves.

With the roads connecting both Putney and Richmond to Mortlake extremely congested in part due to the closure of Hammersmith Bridge, this could easily mean an additional 45 minute journey time for disabled residents.

Passengers with visual impairment will also be disproportionately impacted by the reduction in staffing. In a recent One-Poll of 200 people with visual impairment, 85% of respondents indicated that the closure of ticket offices would have a substantial impact on their confidence when travelling. To mitigate against this, I understand SWR have promised enhanced training in customer support for staff, however, this does not address the root of the issue. If staff are not present at the station, many visually impaired travellers will be unable to purchase tickets and use the rail networks.

Reduced staffing hours at Mortlake Station: Safety

Unfortunately, Mortlake has been identified by the police and local authority as an area with

increasing issues related to anti-social behaviour and crime. Drug dealers regularly use the entryway to the station to conduct deals and I often receive correspondence from women in my constituency detailing how they have felt threatened or harassed when exiting the station. While it is not for staff to enforce the law, they act as a source of support for individuals travelling alone at night and a deterrent against obvious criminal activity.

Tragically, the station has also been the site of a number of recent suicides. Last summer, I met with SWR staff to discuss what they were doing to protect vulnerable people at the station and ensure help was on hand. At the time, I was reassured that the company had invested in augmented reality cameras at the station which could automatically identify at risk individuals and alert staff to their presence. However, without a staff member present, these cameras cease to be an effective tool. While they may identify at risk individuals, help will be too far away to prevent any incident taking place.

Inadequacy of self-service infrastructure

The current self-service infrastructure in place across SWR's network is currently too poorly designed or out of date to deliver a good standard of service without a staff member being present.

While staff are generally able to use the machines to get the best deal for customers and can splitting journeys, apply discounts, and find the best prices on tickets, this is not something many older or less technologically capable passengers can do.

Automating ticket sales may allow staff members to engage in other activities in the station, however, it does not negate the need for staff all together. While I appreciate modernisation efforts are underway, the technology is not yet able to fully replace a human presence.

Safety and accessibility concerns across the network

During a recent series of public meetings in my constituency, there was a continually-recurring theme of the difficulties people experience in their daily lives as a result of increased deployment of machines in place of people.

Fewer people in public spaces leads to people feeling unsafe, isolated and lacking the information they need. On the rail network, a lack of staff means that passengers have to take responsibility for ensuring that they pay the correct fare without assistance from trained staff but be subject to fare avoidance penalties if they make a mistake. Passengers who do not make frequent journeys lack the reassurance of having somebody they can ask questions of. Vulnerable users cannot find out if their needs are supported on the route they plan to use.

As Member of Parliament for Richmond Park, I would urge SWR to review their proposals and make significant changes before considering implementation. The safety of stations, accessibility of the network, and wellbeing of passengers needs to be considered before all else.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading 'Sarah Olney'.

Sarah Olney MP
Member of Parliament for Richmond Park