

Sevenoaks Rail Travellers Association

London Bridge Rebuilding, Risks for Sevenoaks Commuters Ver 1 - 5th December 2014.

Safeguarding local rail users – how the JTB could help

We ask Kent County Council and Sevenoaks District Council to:

- *recognise the risks to commuters and other users of the main rail artery through West Kent during the London Bridge rebuilding, and that these are likely to fall disproportionately on Sevenoaks*
- *express concern at the lack of effective action in advance by the rail companies, and TfL, to manage risks to passenger journeys*
- *urge rail operators to enhance customer information at stations, on trains and before leaving home*
- *press the Department for Transport and the rail companies to address these issues urgently, especially the problems with passenger information.*

Background

The rebuilding of London Bridge will provide a 21st century station serving three key routes into central London. At the end of the project in 2018, London Bridge will offer commuters three operationally independent rail routes through the station - (1) to Waterloo East and Charing Cross, (2) to Cannon Street and (3) Thameslink services to Blackfriars, Kings Cross/St Pancras and the north of London. These will operate all day including the peak period with easy interchange between the three routes. By providing each service with dedicated platforms much of the congestion experienced today by trains in the LB area should be eliminated.

However, the price for rebuilding a station including one of the busiest platforms in Europe (platform 6) while running the trains is serious disruption for rail customers.

Why is Sevenoaks especially challenged?

The morning peak service pattern is substantially changed while the evening service is largely unchanged (except for stopping patterns at London Bridge). In the morning peak SER have accepted publicly that the capacity on Cannon Street services stopping at London Bridge is substantially less than demand.

The additional risk at Sevenoaks is that in the morning our commuters get on last – if any space remains available on certain services.

Evening services from Cannon Street and London Bridge will again be very crowded but the longer duration of the evening peak should avoid the very heavy loadings in the morning.

Timescale of changes

From **January 2015 to August 2016** the platforms currently used by Charing Cross trains will be rebuilt. During this period trains to Charing Cross will not be able to stop at London Bridge. Passengers using LB will need to use Cannon Street services.

From **August 2016 until January 2018** the Cannon Street platforms will be rebuilt and trains to/from Cannon Street will not call at London Bridge. Passengers for London Bridge will then use Charing Cross services.

In addition the Thameslink services will be diverted away from London Bridge for the entire project so the easy connections to Farringdon, Kings Cross / St Pancras and Gatwick will be lost for three years

Risks to Rail Users

Operating arrangements for trains during this £6.5 billion project were agreed between the rail companies, DfT, Network Rail and Transport for London very late indeed. While work on planning the timetable has been going on for over a year, the final versions were published only in November. Arrangements to help passengers to plan their journeys with a very different rail service started to be planned in September. The information services to do this will not be in place by January – the recruitment adverts for some extra staff were published 1st December. Arrangements with TfL to allow passengers to use the underground and a limited number of buses to move between affected termini were only agreed in November and are difficult for passengers to understand.

It is clear that the changes to services will mean that **many commuters will have to catch different trains** to reach their place of work and this will affect train loadings. Many will need to change at Waterloo East as London Bridge is not available – eg to get to Docklands via the Jubilee line. This will cause crowding both on trains and at interchange station platforms. The access to the Jubilee Line at the Southwark exit from Waterloo East is limited in capacity, with a long stairway, and certainly not able to take the volume of people who currently change at London Bridge.

But the biggest risk that SRTA has been flagging for the last year to DfT, to Network Rail and to SER is the **need to radically improve the customer information services** and the approach to helping them, when things go wrong. In such a big engineering project work overruns, signal failures and other glitches are inevitable, and making sure that rail travellers have reliable information on how to get to work and – more importantly – how to get home is vital. The rail operator claims to have plans in place, but these do not address the basic ‘missing pieces’ in the railway information systems.

A small number of passenger facing staff are being recruited and they will be equipped with tablets, but their access to accurate and up to date information will be limited. It is very difficult to see how these limited staff resources available to SER can manage large numbers of passengers during a major disruption.

SER’s problems with passenger information

These have been demonstrated twice in the last two weeks. A combination of track problems, signal failure and train failures between London and the Tonbridge areas disrupted the evening service and caused chaos at London Bridge, Waterloo East and Cannon Street stations. The worst ‘incident’ is detailed on the SRTA website. The analysis of passenger social media messages is worth reading. It makes clear that:

- The rail operator failed to give accurate information on what had happened, and why trains were delayed
- There was no information given on how long it might last or when people might get home
- More attention was given to speeding up trains, by missing out stations, than to getting people home
- Platforms were overcrowded and left passengers feeling very unsafe, with frustrated people not knowing what to do
- There were cases of good information from the announcer at Charing Cross, but this was the exception

These incidents tell us that South Eastern railways, unable to handle disruption with seven tracks through London Bridge, will almost certainly fail when there are only four. SRTA has therefore drafted its own ‘survivors guide’ for Sevenoaks rail users, warning commuters that in a £6.5 billion project the cash for helping them through the work has been minimal.

Key points in SRTA’s advice to local travellers

Recommendations, based on likely train loadings, include:

- avoid using London Bridge and Cannon Street from January 2014 whenever possible
- have a smart phone and load relevant apps and website links
- expect the worst - think “snow” and you are unlikely to be disappointed
- if you have a National Rail only season ticket you will have to have it reissued to travel free between affected London termini and operate London Underground gates.
- SRTA’s website and Twitter feed will provide updates; share up to the minute information on services with fellow travellers through social media.

It is clear that nothing like the scale of passenger support has been planned as was done – successfully – for the Olympics. **But the mismatch between capacity and demand, and scope for things to go wrong, suddenly and without warning, is much greater than 2012.**

The rail companies need much greater investment in information systems to manage successfully, as well as a radical change in operator attitude so that priority is given to getting people where they need to go, with up to date and accurate information to help them make the right decisions. It is vital that the range of alternative route options for travellers is made clear and information is conveyed as quickly as possible when disruptions occurs either to the trains or the alternative tube and bus services on which travellers will be relying. This needs very close and agile cooperation between all operators in a way never seen before.

***Further information is available via the SRTA website and Twitter feed at www.srta.org.uk
The SRTA Survivors Guide will also be available from our website.***