

Sevenoaks Rail Travellers Association

*Sevenoaks Rail Travellers Association (SRTA) represents the interests of commuters and other rail travellers using **Sevenoaks** and stations nearby - **Bat and Ball, Dunton Green, Eynsford, Kemsing, Otford, and Shoreham**. According to the latest available annual statistics, **more than 4.5 million train journeys** began or ended at our stations.*

Rail transport in the Sevenoaks is in a period of dramatic transition. Firstly we face having up to three new train operating companies (TOC) at Sevenoaks in place of one at present. The South Eastern franchise is due to finish in 2014. The First Capital Connect franchise (providing the Bat & Ball service) is due to finish in 2013 after which it will be combined with the current Southern franchise and jointly re-let. Both refranchising processes are currently stopped following the mistakes found in the West Coast franchising procedures. A delay of up to a year is being predicted. Since the new SE franchise was only running for around 5-6 years this franchising exercise may have to be modified. SRTA believe this could well result in SER remaining our principle train operator until around 2020.

The third potential TOC results from Transport for London expressing keenness to take over responsibility from the DfT for providing the existing SE Metro services including the slow services from Sevenoaks from as early as 2015. TfL would not be responsible for Sevenoaks station, just to Dunton Green. TfL told us their policy is to staff all stations during opening hours. SRTA's view is that TfL involvement would probably constrain Sevenoaks area fare rises and lead to the availability of Oyster cards between Sevenoaks and London. However, we remain concerned about how democratic accountability over service provision can be achieved which we believe is vital to safeguarding the interests of passengers from outside the GLA area.

Notwithstanding the changes to the TOCs, in SRTA's view the dominant factor in all discussions of local railway issues until 2018 is the impact of rebuilding of London Bridge station. This is reported to be a £6Billion project. The project will create a magnificent new station at London Bridge and allow trains from the Brighton line to access the Thameslink route through London Bridge and Blackfriars to St Pancras and onwards to the north of London. Undertaking such a massive project whilst keeping the trains running will require significant changes to regular travel patterns by many local commuters. Further they face the potential for major disruption at short notice caused by unplanned engineering problems. The critical period is for three years between 2015 and 2018 although major works have already started.

This paper will address briefly three issues – a general overview of current performance, the impact of the London Bridge rebuilding and finally we have been asked to comment in general terms on the possible impact on the Sevenoaks area of the BML2 (Brighton Main Line 2) campaign. The comments on BML2 are those of the author as the SRTA committee has not had time to discuss the matter.

Current Performance - Mainline

After the initial impact of the recession which reduced passenger numbers, SRTA is once again receiving reports of significant overcrowding on peak period trains between Sevenoaks and London. We accept a recent Network Rail report that there is no short term solution.

Specifically there are three operational pinch points – the two line track between Tonbridge and Orpington has a maximum capacity of 16 trains per hour. This is fully utilised in the peak period. In addition the tracks around St Johns are at full capacity and finally there are no spare platforms at the London termini. Operating at the limit means minor events can cause disproportionate disruption due to limited recovery capacity.

Train length is limited to 12 carriages which matches the positioning of signals and points. Longer trains cannot be accommodated at London termini. Indeed half of Charing Cross platforms can accommodate only 10 coaches. Most peak trains from Sevenoaks operate at the maximum 12 coach length. Tunnels (over 3 miles in length in the Sevenoaks area alone) and overbridges prevent the use of double deck trains.

In summary, there is very little that can be done to improve the current situation without very large scale investment and long, disruptive engineering projects. Today's railway is stretched to the limit during peak periods. Mainline services from Sevenoaks have no easy upgrade path.

Current Performance - Other Routes

Opportunities for some improvement do exist on neighbouring routes which might reduce the number of commuters who railhead to Sevenoaks from a wide area of west Kent and Sussex. However, experience shows that the potential benefit for many such schemes is limited when set against annual passenger growth of up to 5%. HS1, the high speed service between Ashford and London, is estimated to have reduced passenger numbers on the existing mainline by less than the equivalent of 2 years growth in numbers.

The first option is a **substantial upgrade to services on the Maidstone East line via Otford** with a new half hourly service throughout the day including the peaks running semi-fast to the Thameslink route via Bromley South onward to the north of London. It connects with Crossrail at a rebuilt Farringdon interchange in London allowing commuters to reach Heathrow and Docklands with just one change. This is likely to be the only significant benefit to Kent of the Thameslink project despite the huge inconvenience which we will suffer. This new service from Otford could prove very attractive in the Sevenoaks area. However this proposal planned to start in 2018, while enjoying widespread support including from KCC, is not yet committed and continued lobbying is needed to ensure it goes ahead.

The other involves **enhancing services on the Uckfield line to London Bridge which calls at Edenbridge**. This service has substantial potential for improvement by lengthening trains with new rolling stock, improving the frequency and improving the infrastructure to increase line speeds. These improvements would benefit local residents around Edenbridge as well as having some potential to reduce pressure on the SE mainline services. No substantial investment is currently planned for this but the Southern franchise is being re-let and now is a good time to lobby bidders to make commitments to make significant enhancements.

London Bridge Rebuilding

London Bridge is a very old station in two parts - through lines to Charing Cross, Cannon Street and Blackfriars and terminal platforms serving the Brighton line. Platform 6 is the busiest railway platform in Europe. The station struggles daily to handle far more passengers than it was ever designed for partly due to the new property developments around the station as well as being a major interchange to reach Docklands. Much of the station is elevated above street level and the plan is to create a massive modern concourse beneath the station giving access to the platforms above. In addition, the current through lines are being moved southwards to allow a new island platform to be created to allow Brighton line services to reach the Thameslink route via Blackfriars without interrupting the smooth flow of services into Charing Cross as happens at the moment.

The critical part of the project takes place between 2015 and 2018 when the current Charing Cross and Cannon Street platforms are relocated in turn while ensuring that most of the hundreds of peak time trains continue to run. This period is being divided into two 18 month spells during the first of which Cannon Street

trains will be unable to stop at London Bridge and during the second no Charing Cross services will be able to stop. Network Rail is currently running roadshows for all affected. Basically there will have to be some reduction in train numbers (especially in the peak) and clearly any unexpected engineering mishap has the potential for widespread chaos.

SRTA is pressing for early consultation on the arrangements. We are keen to comment on the feasibility of alternative arrangements and are pressing for major investment in staff and infrastructure to ensure that there is effective management of passengers during the inevitable periods of unplanned disruption.

Brighton Mainline 2 (BML2)

This is a campaign to create a second mainline between Sussex and London using a mixture of existing, disused and new rail lines which would ultimately link Brighton with Docklands and potentially Stansted.

As a concept it ticks many boxes. Firstly, the existing Brighton mainline is heavily overcrowded with a growing numbers of passengers. There is no simple solution to increasing its capacity. Secondly, employment in London has shifted substantially to the east from the City into Docklands and potentially around the Olympic site in Stratford. While tube and DLR links have been built the first new rail link to these new employment zones will not come until 2018 with the completion of Crossrail linking central London to Canary Wharf. A link from Kent and Sussex would provide local residents direct access to these new work opportunities.

Its potential interest for the Sevenoaks district is that the route incorporates the existing Uckfield line through Edenbridge. While a substantial upgrade to that line would be very beneficial for those living along the line there would be at best a marginal reduction in Sevenoaks mainline commuters.

It is a very ambitious scheme. Network Rail has so far been unconvinced by its financial viability but that is beyond our competence to assess.

Further, the proposal faces some major physical obstacles. Starting from the Brighton end it needs a new 1½ mile tunnel. The proposed route then uses mostly existing or disused rail routes as far as East Croydon from where onwards to Victoria there is no spare capacity. Therefore the proposal is to build a largely new line from East Croydon through Canary Wharf potentially joining the existing line at Stratford towards Stansted.

Without creating additional capacity in the London area this scheme is only displacing capacity from the Brighton line to a line whose infrastructure and hence linespeed mean it will always be an inferior option despite the local benefits provided. The politics of transport in London, in my view, mean that without the active support of the very influential TfL this project cannot progress. However, support from TfL appears unlikely to me since their interests have focussed very largely on creating intensive metro style services serving central London rather than on long distance rail projects.

My personal conclusions are that BML2 is an ambitious and constructive proposal but that regrettably the likely timescale for any progress probably places it outside meaningful planning horizons.

Roger Johnson

Vice Chair, Sevenoaks Rail Travellers Association

November 2012