

Ms Alex Burnand
 Clerk to Select Committee
 Kent County Council
 Environment & Regeneration Directorate
 Invicta House
 County Hall
 Maidstone ME14 1XX

Contact	Steve Humphrey
Direct line	01732 876256
Email	Steve.Humphrey@tmbc.gov.uk
Fax	01732 876317
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Dear Ms Burnand

KCC Select Committee on the CTRL Domestic Service

I have recently learned that a KCC Select Committee is currently considering matters related to the CTRL Domestic Service and I would be grateful if you were able to pass the following comments from Tonbridge & Malling Council forward to the Chairman. By way of setting a context for my comments, I regard the significant increase in rail capacity resulting from the CTRL Domestic Service as presenting genuine opportunity to improve travelling conditions and service choice for rail passengers in the County. The test of success is the extent to which what has already been proposed by Southeastern Railway for the period beyond November 2009 is capable of achieving the desired improvements.

Broadly speaking, in the short term, it does and that is only to be expected with the freeing up of capacity on the classic network. Yet frustratingly, opportunities remain unexploited and, for one particular element of the proposed timetable, the proposed removal of the off-peak service to the city on the Maidstone East line, it prompts considerable concern here in Tonbridge & Malling.

Some years ago we carried out studies in partnership with the County Council and the train operating company to identify travel patterns at West Malling Station. It was clear at that time that there was already a degree of rail-heading past West Malling towards Paddock Wood to pick up a service perceived to be better and more direct into the city. Removing the service to Cannon Street on the Maidstone East line in the off peak period can only lead to an increased level of rail-heading towards the Tonbridge line, a travel pattern that any modern transportation planning would seek to reduce or eliminate rather than actively promote as the Southeastern Railway proposed timetable is bound to do.

It is worth considering the special factors that apply at West Malling Station. This is a portal into and out of the significant development at Kings Hill and, as such, it merits particular attention. It is a major attractor in its own right and not simply the generator of outward journeys. People coming from the city may well need to visit businesses on Kings Hill so the flow is two way.

Furthermore, Kings Hill is still growing and there are other strategic development sites in the locality. In the light of this, it is surprising that there is no reflection of this in the short, medium or long term thinking of the train operating company in the period after November 2009. Indeed, this systematic lack of overt provision for specific large

developments with potentially significant transportation impacts is serious. For locations away from the High Speed stations, the policy appears to be to allow for an annual percentage increase in footfall based on the average of the past few years. It is not a desirable or rational way to cater for development impacts that are broadly predictable and should be overtly provided for. Just to illustrate this point further, Network Rail is currently working on a scheme entitled the National Station Improvement Programme that is focused on a number of stations nationwide. Even although there is a strong need to enhance the station forecourt at West Malling to accommodate buses better and allow them to manoeuvre safely and efficiently, the work does not feature in the national programme despite the fact that there is already an earmarked contribution from a nearby development. I am aware that Southeastern Railway has tried to justify the proposed removal of the off-peak city service on the grounds that there are insufficient passengers using the service. However, this is an assessment of what is currently happening and takes no account of inevitable future growth in the locality let alone what additional numbers might result from growth in Maidstone.

In any case, from separate work the Borough Council has been carrying out on parking near Tonbridge station, it is clear that the traditional concept of business hours has been changing over the past decade or so and the trend is towards shift patterns in London that require them to travel in the off-peak period. From a train operating point of view, such "peak spreading" should be a welcome development allowing better use of trains across the day. It should also be an imperative to ensuring that the choices of destination are retained to accommodate and even encourage these alterations in working patterns.

The recent study carried out for the County Council and Southeastern Railway by the consultant, MVA, suggested a modest level of transfer from the classic network to the HS line at Ebbsfleet. Such transfer would create its own potential highway problems and unsustainable additional journeys by car. At the same time, the direct consequences for the existing rail routes should be benign in that trains that are currently considerably over-capacity might be less so for at least a short period after 2009 until passenger growth picks up again.

In all projections and estimates from the train operating company, demand is expected to rise inexorably despite a fare formula based on RPI+3% throughout the franchise period. In addition, the TOC is assuming that a premium of around 30% for the HS services will be acceptable to new passengers or those transferring from the classic services. I am content to leave the TOC to see how robust its predictions turn out to be in practice but I would be extremely concerned if there were to be any attempt to make the HS service more attractive by contriving a quality gap between it and the classic services through making the classic service slower or, as has already been mooted for the Maidstone East line, removing a London destination that many people still wish to go to in the off-peak period. The HS service from Ebbsfleet depends in part on a degree of transfer from the existing network and there needs to be some scrutiny in the medium term to ensure the classic network is not affected if the predicted amount of transfer does not occur. This applies also to the fare structure on the classic network if the revenue predictions for the HS part of the business are not fulfilled. Any prospect of hidden subsidy to attract business to the HS line by fare increases on the classic network would be intolerable.

As far as the Medway Valley Line is concerned, I will confine my comment to one point and leave the Community Rail Partnership to continue its brief of nurturing this line. The timetable on the Medway Valley Line should be adjusted to ensure that it coordinates with the HS service at Strood to offer an acceptable level of service for people along the route wishing to go to St Pancras.

I have commented little on the Tonbridge main-line because there appears to be little change in the off-peak service and the proposals for the peak period are still awaited. Indeed, I have just received an invitation from Southeastern to a stakeholders forum where one of the items for discussion will be the 2009 service specification. Coincidentally it meets at County Hall on the last day of your evidence gathering sessions on 29 September and, no doubt, there will be information shared that you will wish to consider because it is entirely relevant to the matters your committee is reviewing.

The other train service operating out of Tonbridge is the link to Redhill and then to either Gatwick or to Charing Cross via East Croydon. It may on the surface appear to have little linkage with the changes arising from the introduction of the CTRL Domestic Service but I believe the future of this service is relevant to your Committee's consideration of the longer term impacts of the wider rail network. The service used to be part of the south east franchise area but is being transferred in a few weeks time to the south central area and will be run by Southern Railway to a new and much worse timetable that removes the direct line from Tonbridge and Tunbridge Wells to Gatwick and reduces the off-peak frequency of the connection to London Bridge through East Croydon from two to one train an hour. These changes are being consolidated in the draft specification for the new South Central franchise that starts in September 2009. Potential to improve passenger choice in line with local and regional transportation policy are being significantly eroded in mid and west Kent and this is a matter that I am sure your Committee will wish to consider in its scrutiny of the wider impacts of the Domestic Service changes beyond 2009.

I hope you find these comments helpful and I look forward to reading your report in due course.

Yours sincerely

Steve Humphrey
Director of Planning, Transport & Leisure

Cc: Sir John Stanley
Mike Sutch
Trevor Gasson
David Hughes