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Dear Sir

Kent RUS: Response from Kent County Council

Thank you for the opportunity for the County Council to respond to the draft RUS and for the extensive consultation we have been offered over the development of the RUS to date. We also welcome the inclusion of the recommendations of the County Council's Select Committee in the RUS document.

The County Council welcomes the publication of the draft RUS – particularly the early chapters and the comprehensive information given in the Current Demand, Capability and Delivery chapter. However, it is considered that the Planning Context chapter should be brought up to date with inclusion of the household growth figures from the South East Plan for the whole of Kent and with mention of Maidstone and Dover being designated Growth Points and Ebbsfleet and Dover as regional transport hubs (para 5.2.4 and first bullet point of Figure 5.5). These latest projections should be used for modelling future passenger demand.

We note that it is intended to publish the final Kent RUS early next year and to produce a broader London and the South East RUS later in 2010. It is essential that these documents fully reflect the impact of the changed timetable from this December and in particular the performance of the High Speed domestic trains. There is also a need to keep the RUS's refreshed to take into account not only the changing timetable but also the objectives of the Government's High Level Output Statement which will lead up to the Transport White Paper at the end of 2012.

The current financial climate is uncertain but high levels of funding rail enhancements are essential to attract people out of the private car. It is therefore necessary for franchise periods to be increased so that the Train Operating Companies can contribute more to infrastructure improvements on the rail network and see a return of their investments.

Although the RUS mainly concentrates on proposals beyond 2014, early developments are mentioned in the document and comments on these proposals are made below:

December 2009 Timetable

Overall, the County Council recognises that the timetable proposals from December represents a significant improvement with more trains running in the peak periods, reduced journey times from

east and north Kent and a reversal of many of the cuts in classic services which were proposed by the SRA/DfT in 2005. We particularly welcome that journey times on the High Speed services to and from Canterbury and Folkestone will be under an hour and hope and expect that the new high speed services will be successful.

However, the proposed cuts in services between London and Maidstone and West Malling/Kings Hill are very hard to accept. The Maidstone East Route has long been the Cinderella service on the South Eastern network – slow, infrequent and often with inappropriate rolling stock. With the renaissance of rail in the rest of the County the service to Maidstone should be made better and not worse. Maidstone is the only major town in the County to have a proposed reduction in services, yet is the County Town, a regional transport hub and a Growth Point. Kings Hill is a very successful business park containing many multi-national companies which need good links to the City and also has many residents who also wish to travel to the London Bridge/Blackfriars/Cannon Street area.

Yet, from December, the proposals are to cut the services to Cannon Street/Charing Cross leaving only two trains up to Blackfriars in the am peak and one back in the evening with all other trains going to and from Victoria. We are aware of discussions being held between the Department for Transport and Southeastern and hope and expect that the restoration of at least the most popular trains can be achieved.

Control Period 4 (CP4) to March 2014

Beyond the changes mentioned above, the RUS outlines the expected improvements for the end of CP4 including the introduction of more longer trains to Sevenoaks/Tonbridge/Tunbridge Wells and Maidstone so that most of the peak hour trains serving those stations will be extended to 12 and 8 carriages respectively. This development is welcomed to contain overcrowding levels, but it is noted that the average volume to seat ratio on services between Tunbridge Wells and London via Tonbridge and Sevenoaks remains far in excess of 80% in 2019 despite these measures.

The inclusion of a scheme for the improvement of Gravesend Station to enable it to handle 12 car trains and to accommodate a possible extension of Crossrail to Kent is welcomed, but there is a need for this scheme to progress quickly to enable integration with the proposals for the Gravesend Transport Quarter.

Control Period 5 (CP5) April 2014 – March 2019

Overall, it is disappointing that, beyond the known commitment of the Thameslink service, the proposed schemes recommended for implementation or for further development are so limited in scope. These proposals are for either train lengthening or extending the reach of the High Speed services and there are no significant infrastructure works to increase capacity in Kent, such as the four-tracking of the section of railway between Dartford and Slade Green or the Rochester Bridge Junction.

Longer Trains

The only new recommendation for implementation is for all peak hour trains on the Chatham and Maidstone lines to be 12 and 8 cars long during CP5, with the possibility of extending train lengths in the shoulder peak (ie the other two hours in the total three hour peak period) to the maximum length allowable. This is welcomed as a way to reduce overcrowding levels and would require the use of more Class 375 trains (with Selected Door Opening) for the Maidstone services which are much preferred to the alternative Networker trains.

Extended Services

Other proposals which are recommended for further development are mainly consideration of extending existing services, mostly the High Speed Domestic services. The County Council supports the extension of such services to Maidstone West to provide a direct link from the County Town to St. Pancras, Stratford for Docklands, Kent Thameside and Eurostar services at Ebbsfleet and would be preferable to the alternative extension of the Ebbsfleet shuttles to Ashford, which is problematic because of lack of platform capacity. Ashford already enjoys a high level of services to a variety of London destinations, including St. Pancras/Stratford, and the possible use of one or both of the international platforms to provide capacity for additional services would greatly concern the Council due to the threat to Eurostar services. As additional capacity at Ashford will be required in the future, the County Council would prefer extending the terminating services from and to Maidstone to Canterbury West instead.

The County Council would also support in principle the extension of the Rochester – St. Pancras services to Faversham but would want to know the full operational consequences on such services from Faversham and Sittingbourne.

Of the two options put forward to reduce overcrowding on services between Bromley South and London, the County Council would prefer to see longer trains from and to Maidstone utilising Selected Door Opening.

Thameslink

The County Council welcomes the current assumed Thameslink routes from 2015 – additional, all day services to/from Maidstone; substitutional peak hour services to/from Tunbridge Wells and Paddock Wood; as well as the current service between Sevenoaks via Swanley. This proposal illustrates the error in cutting services to the City from this December and the County Council would like to see the option of introducing Thameslink services to and from Maidstone after Phase 1 of the Thameslink works investigated when they are completed in 2012. Coupled with the possible extension of High Speed domestic services to Maidstone East, this proposal would give Maidstone, in its role as a regional transport hub and Growth Point, an appropriate level of service.

In principle, the County Council would welcome increasing the number of peak period destinations in London from West Kent, but would want to know the full consequences of the resultant service offer before committing itself fully.

The RUS mentions the significant disruption to Kent's rail services which will be caused by the Thameslink works, particularly from 2012 onwards. The County Council would like to know the proposed adjustments to services as soon as possible.

Journey Time Improvements

The County Council would welcome journey time improvements – particularly between Maidstone and London and between Ashford and Thanet. It is disappointing that the draft RUS only states the potential financial benefits which could be reaped if speeds were increased, which are meaningless without the potential costs of measures to achieve the increase being known. The document says that Network Rail will identify potential schemes for the full RUS next year but the County Council would want to be informed of viable proposals as and when they are identified.

Parkway Stations

The attitude of the RUS to potential parkways stations is particularly disappointing when it dismisses a new station which could serve the Thanet Towns, Kent International Airport, Thanet Earth, China Gateway, Westwood Cross and Pfizer with onward direct bus links. The County Council would like to discuss the potential for a Thanet Parkway with Network Rail.

It is also unfortunate that the RUS states that consideration of a Maidstone Parkway on High Speed 1 is outside of the scope of the RUS. The RUS should consider all aspects of rail irrespective of the ownership of the particular line, and whereas the RUS looks at services on HS1, it ignores the potential that additional infrastructure could bring. Although there are proposals to improve services to Maidstone by extending High Speed Domestic Services down the Medway Valley Line and by linking Maidstone into the Thameslink network, these are by no means guaranteed and the opportunity and practicality of providing a parkway station for Maidstone should be addressed in the RUS.

The opportunity that improved car parking at Appledore could offer should also be included in the RUS. It would be attractive to residents of Romney Marsh as well as those in Tenterden who currently drive to Headcorn. There is a danger that those people could be tempted to drive to Ashford when the full High Speed services start. If the services between Hastings and Ashford were adjusted to offer a good connection with the High Speed services, the potential at Appledore would be increased. The future potential for running Ashford – Hastings trains directly onto HS1 should also be investigated.

Existing stations

The statement that the Ebbsfleet –Northfleet pedestrian link is recommended for further development is welcomed and it is hoped that this can be established soon in conjunction with the complete rebuilding of Northfleet Station.

The stated intention to review car parking provision at stations to be served by High Speed services is welcomed as it is anticipated that there will be a very strong demand for expansion at Canterbury West, Dover Priory and Ramsgate. Provisions at stations already under pressure should also be expanded – many have very long waiting lists for season tickets and, although the RUS states that schemes exist at Sevenoaks and Sittingbourne stations, these need to be realised as soon as possible. There are other stations where the available spaces are full before 8am which prevents off-peak passengers from using rail at a time when the trains are more empty.

The County Council has been frustrated by the legal arguments concerning Dover Priory Station and the insistence on the County Council underwriting any risk for the construction costs rising above budget. It is considered that where partners are fully or part funding improvement to the assets of Network Rail and the proposals are agreed by the company, it should be for Network Rail to pick up any risk on an approved budget.

There are station improvements funded by the Access for All programme and the national Stations Improvement Programme (NSIP). These funding streams are time-limited and it would be very useful if Network Rail could map out which station improvements are to be prioritised for the CP5 period.

There is a need to improve interchange between modes at stations with improved parking, access by buses, cyclists and pedestrians. The County Council would be pleased to work together with Network Rail to make the necessary improvements.

Services to Gatwick

The severing of the direct link between Kent and Gatwick Airport and the reduction of trains between Tonbridge and Redhill to one per hour are of concern to the County Council and it is particularly disappointing that the RUS does not recommend their reinstatement because of insufficient demand. These actions are contrary to regional and national policy with reducing rail accessibility between regional transport hubs and it forces Kent residents to either have to access Gatwick, Guildford etc by travelling by rail via London or, far more likely, by car.

Ashford - Hastings

It is most disappointing to see that the infill electrification scheme between Ashford and Ore is dismissed in the RUS. It would be useful to know the cost of the scheme as infill electrification schemes, particularly DC, would be far more affordable than whole-line schemes which currently enjoy higher priority. The Ashford – Ore section is a relatively small section of a route linking through to Brighton (a designated Diamond for Investment and Growth), Hastings (a priority area for generation) and Ashford (a Growth Area). Demands on this line will increase with the significant growth in housing and employment at Ashford and the attraction of the High Speed services to St. Pancras which will dramatically reduce journey times to London. With the right connection times at Ashford, journeys from Rye and Hastings to St. Pancras and Stratford (Docklands) would be attracted and ultimately a seamless service, not terminating at Ashford, would become very attractive from these towns.

Medway Valley Line

The option to extend High Speed domestic services to Maidstone West via the Medway Valley Line is supported but its inclusion begs the question why existing services could not be extended to Ebbsfleet sooner than 2015 in the same way that Medway Valley Line trains will run through to Tonbridge from this December. This would give Maidstone direct access to Bluewater and Eurostar services as well as linking up with more St. Pancras/Stratford trains than will be available at Strood.

Freight

The County Council wants railfreight flows to be significantly increased and the RUS rightly points out that the extent to which Channel Tunnel railfreight uses the High Speed Line in the future is a key consideration. There is concern that high track access charges will mean that the take up of train paths on the new line will not be as high as the County Council would like and so increasing the loading gauge on the existing lines from the Channel Tunnel to the West Coast Main Line would be necessary.

Longer term Issues

Crossrail extension to Gravesend

The County Council supports the extension of Crossrail to Gravesend, including the capacity improvement between Dartford and Slade Green. The County Council is a partner in the Kent Thameside Delivery Partnership which has recently commissioned consultants to look at the economic case for the scheme.

Dover – Folkestone section

The County Council is concerned that there is a long-term threat to the section of railway between Dover and Folkestone and seeks more clarity from Network Rail of this threat and reassurance that it will continue to maintain the line to prevent its closure in the foreseeable future.

Conversion of the Hayes Branch

It is of concern that relief of overcrowding on the line between London and the West Kent towns is forecast to be relatively small by 2019 and this is partially predicated on a fall in demand of passengers from Ashford using services via Tonbridge and Sevenoaks and switching to the High Speed services. More should be done to make other services such as those from Maidstone more attractive, so reducing the degree of railheading to Sevenoaks.

The County Council supports the conversion of the Hayes Branch to free up more capacity in London for the services from West Kent and would like Network Rail to consider bringing this scheme forward.

Yours faithfully

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