

December 2008 Timetable Consultation
Response
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Dear Sirs

Timetable Proposals for December 2008

I am taking the opportunity to provide an **officer level response** to the current consultation exercise you are conducting on proposed changes to timetables on the Tonbridge – Redhill line.

This Council does not appear to have received any direct consultation on this matter and I have been alerted to it through the kind assistance of Mr Lionel Shields of the Tonbridge Line Commuters and Mr Mick Sutch at Kent County Council. Consequently, I have not yet had an opportunity to take on board comments from the Council members and I would like to reserve my position so that I can follow up this submission with any further comments that they may wish to add when the matter is considered at the Councils Planning and Transportation Advisory Board on 25 February. In the meantime, the general tenor of this letter will reflect a good degree of astonishment and concern that Southern are suggesting proposals that could have a devastating effect on the quality of service on the Tonbridge to Redhill line. From experience, I would be surprised if any supplementary comment from my members were to express anything other than a wish for even more emphasis than I am able to provide on just how unacceptable the proposed changes are.

The changes being proposed are contained in two documents under the general heading of 'Brighton Main Line Route Utilisation Strategy'. One is entitled 'Timetable Proposals for December 2008 – Stakeholder Consultation' and the other 'Timetable Proposals for December 2008 – Off Peak Redhill – Tonbridge Services'. If I understand the proposals correctly, the changes would result in:

- No direct trains from Tonbridge to Gatwick
- No direct off-peak trains from Tonbridge to London Bridge
- Off-peak frequency between Tonbridge and Redhill to drop from two trains an hour to one train an hour.

At a time when national transportation policy is consistently and uniformly directed towards improving access through public transport and reducing reliance on the private car, such proposals strike me as being perverse. This is all the more so when Tonbridge/Tunbridge Wells has been established as a 'Regional Hub' in the South East Plan, such a status being strongly underpinned by 'provision or potential to provide a range of multimodal transport services', to quote the Plan. The proposals from Southern appear to be totally at odds with Regional Planning Policy.

I used the word 'astonishment' earlier and I believe it is justified in expressing how much the proposals appear illogical as well as being counter to transportation policy. Without a direct connection to and from Gatwick, with the off-peak service cut in half and no through trains to London, this line will inevitably become unattractive to those who need to use it or those who might want to use it in the future.

Passengers from the heart of Kent who could provide a growing market for future direct services will be deterred by train changes at Redhill and the delay that will ensue. Perhaps the intention is to 'encourage' passenger movement from Kent through Victoria and then outwards on the Gatwick Express service. If that is so, it is not in passengers' best interests most of whom would be better served by a proper service on the Tonbridge-Redhill line.

Furthermore, the Medway Valley line is currently experiencing a degree of renaissance and it has recently taken on a role as a Community Rail Partnership. Integrating and co-ordinating services along this route could create significant passenger opportunities on an east west corridor through Tonbridge.

The historic character of railway services around London is highly radial and the Route Utilisation Strategy for the Brighton Main Line you are currently consulting upon perpetuates this pattern. In economic and social terms, it is inevitable that there will be a strongly radial pattern. All the more reason, therefore, to be careful that demand for journeys circumferentially around London and to particular destinations is met. Where this occurs within a franchise area, it is likely that such demand can be readily identified and addressed. The major concern must be that where the network is fragmented, demand for travel between franchise areas is not so readily recognised and, more critically, if it is, there is less chance that it will be operationally dealt with. This appears to be a factor in the proposals for the Tonbridge to Redhill line and it certainly warrants closer working between the respective franchisees to secure a more integrated rail network.

Finally, I am concerned about how widely spread your consultation is. All District Councils with a station along the routes affected or within reasonable distance of the line will have a view, more than likely a strong one, about these proposals and unless you have approached them directly or they have learned third hand, they will be unaware of the consultation. You may wish to revisit your list of consultees and reassure yourself that you have brought this formally to the attention of those with a legitimate interest in the matter.

I hope you find these comments helpful and that you are clear that this Council objects to what is proposed for the Tonbridge to Redhill line within the current consultation. My members may wish to comment further and, if so, I shall write to you at the end of February.

Yours sincerely

Steve Humphrey
Director of Planning Transport and Leisure