

Maidstone East Line

11 am

Sir John Stanley (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): Almost exactly four years ago, on 14 December 2005, I initiated a debate in this House on the integrated Kent rail franchise, which had just been awarded to Govia and its rail subsidiary, Southeastern. In my contribution to that debate, I referred to the substantial growth along the Maidstone East line that was taking place, not least in the mini-new town of Kings Hill in my constituency, where it was estimated that some 20,000 people would be living and working by the end of the franchise period, which was six to eight years in length. We are now more than halfway through that franchise period and in my remarks in December 2005, I said:

“That clearly necessitates significant improvement and growth in rail services. Sadly, we are starting from a base in which rail services are clearly inadequate to meet demand.”—[*Official Report*, 14 December 2005; Vol. 440, c. 1410.]

That was four years ago and where are we now? The rail services on the Maidstone East line into the city stations in London have continued to be inadequate throughout that four-year period. In fact, what was inadequate has now become disastrous, if not catastrophic, as a result of last month’s decision by the Minister who is here today to axe the services on the Maidstone East line into Cannon Street, Charing Cross and London Bridge. I wonder if the Minister really appreciates the truly devastating impact of his decision on the lives of hundreds, if not thousands, of individuals. They are facing significantly increased journey times, way in excess of the increased journey times that the Minister referred to in his letter to me on 27 November 2009, which I will come to in a moment. Those individuals are facing increased travel costs that run into hundreds of pounds a year and they are facing increased stress and hassle.

As the Minister must surely know, Victoria is the most congested rail terminus in London. It is a station where access to the underground quite regularly has to be closed because there are too many people already standing on the underground platforms. Surely it is madness to take decisions that will send hundreds, if not thousands, more people into Victoria station, which in the peak periods already cannot cope with the level of demand to use it.

Mr. Harold Sim, my constituent, wrote to me, telling me that his journey home, as he now must use Victoria station rather than Cannon Street station, can take up to an hour longer and is costing him more than £350 a year. Another constituent, Mr. Keely Oliver, wrote to me as follows, “Not only has my journey time been increased by 45mins per day/3.45hrs a week but I have to pay £600 more a year.” Another constituent, Mr. Phil Brooks, tells me that because of his increased journey time his child care arrangements have been completely upset and he is now having to ask his mother and his father-in-law to pick up his children four days a week, because of the delays that he faces in returning home. My constituent, Mr. Jamie Gardiner, wrote to me, saying, “My quality of life has been reduced to the point that we are now selling our house in King’s Hill”. So the Minister’s decision is leading directly to people being forced to sell up their homes.

That is the real impact on the constituents that I represent and also on those constituents who are represented by my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe), my hon. Friend the Member for Faversham and Mid-Kent (Hugh Robertson) and the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Jonathan Shaw). As the Minister knows, all of us were signatories to our joint letter to him on 14 August last year, enclosing the submissions that we had received from the Maidstone and Malling rail users associations; the local authorities, including Kent county council, Maidstone borough council and Tonbridge & Malling borough council; the firm Liberty, which is a joint developer with the Kent County council at King's Hill, and other key parties. We concluded that letter by saying to the Minister:

"It is quite clear to us that the material in these submissions taken as a whole makes a totally conclusive case for the retention of the rail services to Cannon Street, Charing Cross and London Bridge on the Maidstone East line."

To bring home to the Minister the devastating impact of these cuts on the lives of so many people in the Malling, Maidstone and mid-Kent area, I shall tell him what the equivalent treatment would be of individuals in the town of Ipswich, which he represents here in Parliament, if he dealt with his own constituents in the same way. The action by a rail Minister that would be equivalent to what he has exposed my constituents and people in the neighbouring constituencies of my right hon. and hon. Friends to would be for that rail Minister to say, "I am not going to take a blind bit of notice of the representations that you have put to me, I am not going to take a blind bit of notice of the exhaustive demand information that has been submitted to you, including by the rail travellers associations. Notwithstanding that, I am now going to axe all the rail services into Liverpool Street station and instead you will be obliged to get out of the train in Paddington station." That would be the impact on the Minister's constituents in Ipswich that would be equivalent to what he has inflicted upon my own constituents. He will not be surprised to know that my constituents are hopping mad and, frankly, so am I. The decision to axe these crucial rail services is thoroughly bad and thoroughly irresponsible. Frankly, it also makes complete nonsense of the Government's housing and planning policies for the whole of the Maidstone, Malling and mid-Kent area.

I have sought the intervention of the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, the right hon. Member for Southampton, Itchen (Mr. Denham) and I must say that I have been surprised and amazed that he has chosen to stand aside while his own Department's housing and planning policies for our area are effectively being torn up by the Department for Transport.

The Minister has quite recently received a fresh submission from the planning director of the Tonbridge & Malling borough council, Mr. Steve Humphrey. In the letter that Mr. Humphrey sent to the Minister on 17 December 2009, he said this:

"I believe we now have a flawed and ultimately disastrous outcome that will have seriously adverse effects on the proper planning and regeneration of mid and west Kent and a backward step in terms of sustainable transport."

Coming from a very professional and, of course, politically wholly independent senior planning officer, that is indeed a very serious indictment of the Minister's decision.

That decision might have been slightly better received—it would not have been accepted, but it might have been slightly better received—if the Minister had managed to come up with a more remotely credible and accurate justification for it than he managed to come up with in his letter to me on 27 November 2009. In that letter, he said that these cuts will only affect some 200 to 300 people in the peak periods. Frankly, that is a grotesque understatement of the real demand, which was demonstrated by the demand surveys that were carried out by the Maidstone and Malling rail travellers associations and submitted to him in August 2009. On the issue of the numbers of people using the Maidstone East line into the city, my constituent Mr. Martin Tripp, wrote to me as follows:

“On Friday 11th December, the final day of the City services, myself and a colleague caught every train to and from West Malling (barring one) to make a final count of the users and to hand out leaflets. We handed out 1,000 leaflets and counted 1,213 journeys being made on these trains (despite missing one train and having incomplete counts on three)—a rather significant increase from the 200 to 300 quoted in Chris Mole's letter.”

Of course, the figure of 1,213 for a single day includes only those on the West Malling to City trains and takes no account of the hundreds more living in the area who were already railheading, or driving to other stations all over west Kent and, in some cases, south-east London, in order to get a better rail service into the City stations. That number will increase further as a result of the Minister's axing of City services on the Maidstone East line.

The Minister says that Maidstone and Malling rail commuters face a “journey time disbenefit” of 15 to 30 minutes as a result of the cuts. I do not know who in the Department for Transport thought up the phrase “journey time disbenefit”, but whoever it was deserves an alpha for euphemism and a delta for accuracy. The crucial factor is not time spent station to station but time spent station to office, which is a quite different figure. It is clear from the many representations that I have received from my constituents that the Minister's decision to make the cuts is obliging people to spend up to two hours each day, and even more in one or two cases, making their journeys to and from work.

The Minister says that it would cost an additional £637,000 in annual subsidy to keep the City services going, and claims that he cannot find that sum after April 2010. I must point out that that additional subsidy arises for only one reason: the Government misjudged—that is the politest word that I can use—in deciding to allow Southeastern Trains to axe those services at a time when growth in the area was taking place at a considerable rate. As a result of that decision to allow Southeastern to axe the services in its franchise contract under the integrated Kent franchise, the Government are effectively being held to ransom by Southeastern for the £637,000. The Government claim that they cannot find the money. I will leave aside the fact that they had no difficulty finding billions to give the banks; taking into account the money and the financial relationship between the Department and Southeastern, it is clear that the Government could find the money if they wished.

Look at what is happening to the question of subsidy under the integrated Kent franchise contract. Charles Horton, the managing director of Southeastern, said to me in a letter of 23 July 2008:

“With regard to subsidy, that given to Southeastern started at £139.9 million in year one and will decline to £24.7 million in year seven. In year eight, we will be expected to pay a premium of £9.3 million to the DfT to operate the franchise.”

With such an enormous turnaround in annual subsidy in the Department’s favour—from a negative outflow of £139.9 million in year one to a positive cash inflow of £9.3 million in year eight—the Department is making a cash gain well in excess of £200 million over the lifetime of the franchise. For the Minister to say that he cannot find £637,000 is ridiculous. He is acting like the multi-millionaire who says that he cannot afford a fiver. In light of the subsidy situation, the Government’s statement that they cannot find the £637,000 required has no credibility with my constituents.

In an excellent letter to the Minister of 8 December, Ms Laura Cloke and Mr. Felipe Alviar-Baquero, the chairpersons of the Maidstone Area Rail Users Association and the Malling and District Rail Travellers Association, say:

“Your decision to axe the services into Cannon Street and London Bridge from Maidstone East and Malling is shameful and it has serious consequences for thousands of people that live in the area. Moreover, the area will suffer and it is likely that business cease to invest and leave, house prices fall and people lose jobs.”

I agree entirely with that analysis.

My fellow MPs from mid-Kent and Maidstone and I urge the Minister in the strongest terms to reconsider and reverse his decision. If he declines to do so, I can say with the utmost clarity that should I be returned in the general election in a few months’ time, I shall once again beat a path to the door of the rail Minister, whoever he or she is, early in the next Parliament to urge most determinedly the restoration of City services on the Maidstone East line.

11.16 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Mole): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Sir John Stanley) on securing this debate on rail services to and from the Maidstone area. If I am unable to deal with all the issues that he raised, I will ensure that I write to him further.

The current timetable started on 13 December 2009 and represents the biggest change to train services in the area for more than 50 years. The timetable offers an integrated mainline, metro and high-speed service across Kent, south-east London and East Sussex and provides more choice to people visiting, living in or working in the area. The timetable was developed after several years’ extensive research and feedback from stakeholders and the public. In 2003 and 2004, public consultations were held to determine what minimum service level would be required to meet current and future demand in the region. The principles of the timetable are set out in

the Department's service level commitment, which forms part of Southeastern's franchise agreement.

The franchise was awarded to Southeastern in 2006. Since then, Southeastern has undertaken further extensive consultation with local stakeholders while developing the detailed timetable required to meet the specification. Southeastern has also undertaken extensive market research into travel patterns and preferences across its network. The study considered current and future demand for services.

The consultation in 2003 and 2004 proposed to withdraw the Ashford to London Bridge and Cannon Street via Maidstone East services as part of the December 2009 timetable. Those trains were lightly loaded, relative to other services, and it was felt that the December 2009 timetable offered suitable alternative journey opportunities for people in the area.

Historically, the line serving Maidstone East and East and West Malling stations did not have the same frequency of service as the two main lines running through Chatham and Tonbridge. The Maidstone East line has suffered from poor geographical layout and what has been described as an accident of history. In the 1840s, the landowners and MPs of Maidstone objected so strongly to the railway going through their town and park land that the Bill to build the London-Dover mainline was amended to serve Dover from a junction at Redhill on the Brighton line via Tonbridge. When the railways were finally built to Maidstone, they took a circuitous route and joined up other existing routes as a secondary line.

During the late 1980s, when the high-speed route for the channel tunnel rail link was being selected, it was proposed not to have a station at Ebbsfleet, but to have a Maidstone and Medway Parkway station in the Nashenden valley, adjacent to the A229. That was opposed strongly by local stakeholders because it would encourage development and threaten to close the green belt gap between Maidstone and Medway. At that time, the regeneration of east London was taking place and the idea of the Thames Gateway was forming. Ebbsfleet became the logical alternative to aid the development of brownfield sites. Had the original plans gone ahead, Maidstone would now be about 25 minutes from London and would have an international station.

Although some people who live in and around Maidstone choose to use the Maidstone East line to travel to Whitehall and the west end, those who travel to the City and Charing Cross generally choose to drive to stations at Headcorn, Tonbridge, Sevenoaks or along the M20 corridor as far as Orpington. Kent has three parallel routes that offer a great deal of choice for commuters. It takes only a short drive to access them on a less congested road network than the routes into or out of Maidstone. The appeal to commuters of using those roads is another factor behind the relatively low demand for services on the Maidstone East line.

It is important to set out exactly what services there are for customers travelling from Maidstone and Malling to London.

Sir John Stanley: Does the Minister agree that it is important to focus on the present and the future rather than on history? Will he acknowledge that there is

major growth at Kings Hill and across the Maidstone area that must be accommodated? Does he agree that it is highly undesirable and not in accordance with Government policy to force people to travel all over Kent and into south London to get to a railhead? Quite apart from the cost to the individual, it is infinitely better for the environment for people to commute from stations near their homes.

Chris Mole: I hope to cover those points generally in my speech. One would hope that sustainable development is in place to meet local demand, not just to provide a dormitory function for the city.

It is important to set out what services there are. There are two trains an hour to and from London Victoria. London Victoria offers a multi-modal interchange with underground and bus services for customers who are continuing their journeys. Additionally, all trains call at Bromley South station, which offers a cross-platform interchange with trains that serve London Blackfriars, City Thameslink, Farringdon and the Thameslink St. Pancras International station. There is no additional cost to people who travel to City Thameslink or London Blackfriars, which the right hon. Gentleman said some of his constituents face. The stations offer excellent connections to the City on foot, by bus and by underground.

During the detailed development work on the December 2009 timetable, it became clear that there was local opposition to the proposed withdrawal of services between Ashford and Cannon Street via Maidstone East. On 30 June 2009, I met the right hon. Gentleman and others to discuss the withdrawal of those services from December 2009. It was agreed that the local rail users groups would prepare a submission to support their case to reinstate the trains from Maidstone and Malling to London Bridge and Cannon Street that the December 2009 timetable proposed to withdraw. That report was submitted to me on 14 August 2009. It asserted that no services between Maidstone and London Bridge and Cannon Street should be withdrawn.

The submission had significant drawbacks. First, the passenger counts did not cover all trains and did not specify where people joined and alighted from the trains, so the figures did not help to improve our understanding of the demand for the services. The most accurate demand figures that we have were sent to the right hon. Gentleman by Southeastern's managing director in June 2007. Secondly, the report aimed to demonstrate the level of concealed demand for services to and from Maidstone and Malling, but did not achieve that objective. The report itself noted that it was not representative. Therefore, I did not consider that it gave a credible view of whether there was concealed demand for services.

On 27 November 2009, I wrote to the right hon. Gentleman and others explaining that I had decided not to reinstate the services. There were three key reasons behind my decision. First, there was no business case to retain off-peak services because passenger numbers were very low and some of the passengers, particularly those starting from Ashford, were accommodated on services to London Bridge and Cannon Street that do not operate via Maidstone East. Secondly, to reinstate the peak services would require an additional annual subsidy of £637,000, and it was not possible to identify sufficient funds for those services in the Department's resources.

Thirdly, between 20 and 50 per cent. of the people who use all of the services board and alight the trains at Ashford.

Sir John Stanley *rose*—

Mr. George Howarth (in the Chair): Order. I remind the right hon. Gentleman that interventions should be brief and to the point.

Sir John Stanley: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way again. Does he agree that the figures that I quoted, showing that the Department is making a cash gain of well in excess of £200 million from the franchise as a result of the change to the subsidy arrangements with Southeastern, are correct?

Chris Mole: The Department looks at its budget for the support of rail services as a whole, not on the basis of individual franchises. I can therefore tell him only what the position is as a whole.

Customers travelling from Maidstone and Malling to the City have two options. They can take the train to London Victoria and use the underground to reach a suitable station in the City, or they can change at Bromley South for services to London Blackfriars—I accept that that means that the journey will take slightly longer. My letter to the right hon. Gentleman of 27 November stated that the additional journey time would usually be between 15 and 30 minutes on each trip, but clearly individual circumstances will vary. The generalised journey times demonstrated by Transport for London's journey planning tools bear those figures out. If people really do wish to travel to and from London quicker than the services from Maidstone and Malling allow, other reasonable options are available.

London Victoria is a busy station and Transport for London has developed plans to improve it. However, it provides a range of interchange opportunities for passengers. Approximately 70,000 people use Victoria underground station during peak hours and it is anticipated that a further 200 to 300 people will need to use it as a result of the December 2009 timetable change.

I note the right hon. Gentleman's assertion that higher numbers of passengers have been counted on some trains by users. However, the 200 to 300 people refers to those who board and alight in Maidstone and Malling. The total numbers include people travelling to and from Ashford, who have a different journey option. As I said, people who do not wish to use the underground can take advantage of the cross-platform connection at Bromley South.

It has been suggested that withdrawing the services might adversely affect the local economy. We have not seen evidence that there will be any detriment to the local economy as a direct result of the services being withdrawn. I reiterate that independent market research confirmed that withdrawing the services would be the correct decision because there is insufficient demand to make their continuation cost-effective.

It has been argued that removing the services will force people to drive to other stations to reduce their commuting time. Nobody is being forced to drive away from

where they live to make a rail journey between Maidstone or Malling and London. Southeastern offers a wide variety of services to different destinations. It is inevitable that people will make the individual journey choice that suits them best.

Southeastern's network serves seven London terminal stations, in contrast to the situation that the right hon. Gentleman described with my rail service. That makes it the best connected commuter network in the UK. Most commuter operators serve only one or two terminal stations.

The December 2009 timetable seeks to make the best use of the rail network in Kent and delivers wider benefits to communities across the network. It delivers new high-speed services that provide significantly faster journey times for towns such as Dover, Folkestone, Ashford, Canterbury, Ramsgate, Gravesend and Chatham. It also provides new capacity and journey opportunities for the wider area. **The timetable delivers benefits to west Kent with additional capacity at Sevenoaks, Tonbridge and Tunbridge Wells**, which result from the freeing-up of seats and the introduction of the high-speed service. The timetable delivers capacity improvements to the Medway towns for the same reasons.

Looking ahead, the rail industry's route utilisation strategy for Kent proposes many improvements. It proposes the improvement of signalling and track between Faversham and Ramsgate. It suggests an improvement in capacity across the network by allowing platforms to take longer trains. For the Maidstone East line, that will mean ensuring that all stations can take trains with up to eight coaches. In addition to existing services to and from London Victoria, it is proposed that Thameslink services run directly to and from the Maidstone East line as part of the longer term Thameslink programme. That will ensure that there is a direct service to and from the Maidstone East line that serves London Blackfriars, City Thameslink, Farringdon and St. Pancras International.

I believe that the December 2009 timetable offers people in the Maidstone and Malling area a good choice of destinations in London. It is worth noting that that choice is greater than that offered to customers by most rail companies. A change of this type must be reviewed to ensure that all objectives have been achieved. Therefore, the Department has agreed with Southeastern that there will be a full review of the timetable early in 2010. That will include, but will not be limited to, monitoring loadings, performance and connectivity, and reviewing the success of the overall implementation. If the review highlights areas where the implementation has not been as successful as anticipated, the Department and Southeastern will consider carefully what to do.