

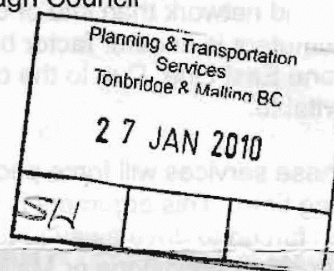
Department for
Transport

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Dear Mr Humphrey,

Maidstone East Line

Thank you for your letter of 17th December 2009 addressed to Chris Mole, the Minister responsible for Rail. I am responding this as the Franchise Manager responsible for the Southeastern Franchise. Please note, the points that I raise have been set out in a response from the Minister, to the Rt Hon Sir John Stanley MP to a letter which was sent on your behalf.

The December 2009 timetable was developed following extensive research and feedback from stakeholders and the public going back several years. In 2003 and 2004 there were public consultations to determine what the minimum service level would be required to meet current and future demand in the region. The principles of this timetable are set out in the Department for Transport's service level commitment, which forms part of Southeastern's Franchise Agreement.

The current franchise was awarded to Southeastern in 2006. Since then, Southeastern have undertaken extensive consultation with local stakeholders as they have developed the detailed timetable required to meet the specification. Southeastern have also undertaken extensive market research into travel patterns and preferences across its network. This study looked at demand for services both now and in the future.

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. Relative to other services, these trains were very lightly loaded trains and it was felt that the December 2009 timetable offered suitable alternative journey opportunities for people in this area.

The Maidstone East line has suffered from poor geographical layout and what has been described as an 'accident of history'. In the 1840's the landowners and MPs of Maidstone objected so strongly to the railway going through their town and parkland, that the Act to build the London to 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.

Whilst there are those who live in and around Maidstone who will choose to use the Maidstone East line to travel into Whitehall or the West End, those who travel into the City or Charing Cross will generally choose to drive to stations between Headcorn to Tonbridge, Sevenoaks or along the M20 corridor as far as Orpington. Kent has three parallel routes which offer a great deal of choice for commuters with short drives to access them and a less congested road network than into or out of Maidstone. The appeal of using these roads for commuters is another factor behind the relatively low demand for services on the Maidstone East Line. Due to the composition of the rail network in Kent, rail heading is inevitable.

It has been argued that removing these services will force people to drive to other stations in an effort to reduce their commuting time. This argument is noted but I do not agree with this statement. Nobody is being forced to drive away from where they live to make a rail journey to and from London from either Maidstone or Malling. Southeastern offer a wide variety of services to different destinations and it is therefore inevitable that people will make the individual journey choice that suits them best. Also, Southeastern's network serves seven London terminal stations, making this the best connected commuter network in the UK. Most commuter operators serve only one or two terminal stations.

Customers travelling from Maidstone and Malling to the City now have two options. They can take the train to London Victoria and use the underground to reach a suitable station in the City. They can change at Bromley South for a cross platform connection for services to London Blackfriars and City Thameslink, therefore they will not need to pay for Underground or bus travel.

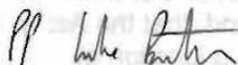
Looking ahead, the rail industry's draft Route Utilisation Strategy for Kent proposes to:

- Improve capacity across the whole of the network allowing platform to take longer trains. Specifically, in the case of the Maidstone East line this will mean ensuring that all stations can take trains of up to 8 coaches long
- It is proposed that, in addition to the existing services to and from London Victoria, the Thameslink services will run directly to and from the Maidstone East line as part of the longer term Thameslink programme. This 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.

You raise various points about the £637,000 required to operate these services. The information relating to how this is calculated and negotiated is commercially sensitive. Therefore, I cannot offer any comments on the points raised.

I hope this is helpful.

Yours sincerely,



John MacQuarrie