

John MacQuarrie
Franchise Manager
Rail Service Delivery
Department for Transport
Great Minster House
76 Marsham Street
London
SW1P 4DR

Contact	Steve Humphrey
Direct line	01732 876256
Email	Steve.Humphrey@tmbs.gov.uk
Fax	01732 876317
Your ref	
Our ref	PTLS/MMC/IKF
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Dear Mr MacQuarrie

West Malling Maidstone East Line - Service Specification

Thank you for your letter of 25 January and the various points you have made in reply to my earlier letter of 17 December. With genuine respect I have to say that you have not adequately dealt with the concerns expressed in earlier letters either directly to you or through the Rt Hon Sir John Stanley MP. Consequently, I have no option but to come back to you even if it means repeating some of the earlier points.

I am coming at this from a series of simple premises.

Firstly, there is significant development in local development plans for both Tonbridge and Malling and for Maidstone over the next decade or so. Maidstone is of course a Growth Point designated in the South East Plan whereas in the Tonbridge & Malling Local Development Framework Core Strategy, during the period 2006/21, there is a forecast provision for 6,375 homes and this has subsequently been increased in the South East Plan based on the annual figure increasing from 425 per annum to 450 through to 2026.

Within these figures there are local focuses of development of direct relevance to the Maidstone East line. During the period 2006 to 2016 there is planned provision for the following homes at a range of developments in the northern part of Tonbridge & Malling Borough.

- Kings Hill 1446 units.
- Leybourne Grange 723 units
- Holborough 938 units
- Peters Pit 1000 units

I should point out that these and the other developments in this part of the Borough are coming forward on a planned basis, led by the Borough Council's careful but progressive forward planning. This position cannot therefore be of any surprise to policymakers and is undermined by the decision that has been taken concerning city services.

In parallel, Maidstone has Growth Point status in the South East Plan and a planned requirement for an additional 11,080 houses during the period between 2006 and 2026.

Additionally, please do not lose sight of how important the major development at Kings Hill is. West Malling Station provides inward access from London to this major and expanding mixed use development at Kings Hill. It includes one of the largest business parks planned in

the South East region which will provide two million square feet of business space and over 5000 jobs, creating a significant generator of city based rail services both to and from the site.

It is heartening to note that the Route Utilisation Strategy reinstates access to the west of the city through Blackfriars beyond 2015. However, there is a strong business case for city

services now from mid-Kent to support the roll out of future development. A related aspect of this is that the development plans do not tell the whole story. A considerable amount of new development is secured through 'wind-fall' sites but these are no longer included in the development plan figures. The figures are not inconsequential, as demonstrated by our monitoring reports.

Secondly, the RUS document provides no relief to over-crowding on the West Kent corridor from Tonbridge and certainly has no answer to the long term forecast that rail passenger numbers will double over the next thirty years. Yet some of the existing over-crowding is created by rail-heading from places near stations on the Maidstone East line. You have a ready solution to provide some partial alleviation to one of the most significant gaps in the RUS analysis but, in my reading of your comments, you appear sanguine about rail-heading. This surprises me because the focus of all recent and not so recent policy and guidance from other parts of the DfT has been focused on creating sustainable travel patterns, reducing reliance on the private car and reducing the carbon footprint of personal travel. As I see it, there appears to be two mutually inconsistent policies.

I shall not rehearse the detail of whether a train to Victoria and an onward tube journey is or is not acceptable, reasonable or affordable. The two User Groups that have been engendered by the timetable changes have made the case far more eloquently than I can about how practical this is based on their direct daily experiences of using the services. They are adamant that the earlier response from the Minister did not fully reflect how adverse the impact on individual commuters is and I suggest that the passengers are worth paying special heed to in this matter.

Nor do I consider a change at Bromley South to represent real choice. A broken journey means additional travel time and potential for hold ups. I acknowledge your reference to the RUS improvements in the fullness of time and I am sure these will be welcomed by local commuters.

Thirdly, I acknowledge that there will be matters related to costs that will inevitably be commercially confidential. Even so, I am surprised that there is no attempt to explain the nature of the analysis that took place, what options it might have opened up for a stripped down service, for example, rather than a broad dismissal of the points raised. I believe that a fast train into Cannon Street from West Malling at around 8am would be extremely successful, well patronised and, most critically, sufficiently profitable to justify the service. Yet we are not allowed to know whether this was even considered as part of an additional costed service. I believe it to be a perfectly fair question on behalf of rail passengers, both existing and to come, to ask what would the order of magnitude cost be to put on a service at 8am returning at 6pm from Cannon Street?

Fourthly, I am surprised at the mention of the history of rail development and how this explains why services on the Maidstone East line are slow relative to most other of the radial routes into the capital. It is an interesting historical context for those of us who have an interest in these matters but the relevance of what happened in the middle of the nineteenth century as a result of the intransigence of some land-owners in the Maidstone area to the regeneration and development of Tonbridge and Malling in the first half to the twenty-first century escapes me. I suggest that the current state of the line is a base-line to work from, irrespective of how it came about, and what should be important is how well we can match the demand from existing and proposed developments with associated improvements on the road and rail networks.

I am of course very happy to discuss with you and your DfT and Network Rail planning colleagues the details of our Local Development Framework and what we expect to happen if this will help achieve a better understanding of future development in this area. We may have an opportunity to do so as part of the review exercise that the Minister promised for early 2010 in the debate in the House on 6 January with Sir John Stanley. These comments are intended to be constructive and I hope you consider them in that way.

Yours sincerely

Steve Humphrey

Director of Planning, Transport & Leisure

cc: The Rt Hon Sir John Stanley MP
The Rt Hon John Denham MP
The Rt Hon Ann Widdecombe MP
Jonathan Shaw MP
Hugh Robertson MP
Mick Sutch (KCC)
Cllr Robertson (Maidstone BC)
David Petford (Maidstone BC)
Felipe Alviar-Baqueiro (MDRTA)
Rob Douglas (Chairman – South East Partnership Board)
Cllr Nick Chard (KCC)
Cllr Alex King (KCC)
Charles Horton (SER)

