

Rail Services (West Kent)

10.59 am

Sir John Stanley (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): This winter, my rail-travelling constituents, of whom there are a large number, have experienced unprecedented disruption in their rail services, for which they have had to fork out an unprecedented hike in rail fares. This debate is timely and I am very glad to have been able to secure it. I am delighted to see in their places many of my hon. Friends from west Kent constituencies. I want to focus on four issues: specific rail services; the enormous increase in rail fares; the frankly dismal performance of Southeastern, Southern and Network Rail in trying to cope with the difficult weather conditions in December; and the financial penalties regime that applies to train operating companies.

As the Minister knows from the meeting that we had with her in the House of Commons in July 2010, the biggest single rail services issue in my constituency is the axing of services into the key London termini serving the City—Cannon Street, Charing Cross and London Bridge—on the Maidstone East line. Once again, I must stress to the Minister the truly devastating impact that that has had on my constituents and on the constituents of others along the Maidstone East line. As a result of those services being axed, individuals have had to move house, move their children's schools and, in some cases, move jobs. Where they have chosen to stay put, they have had to incur substantial extra travelling time and cost driving to stations all over Kent and, in some cases, to south London to gain access to a station with a better rail service to London.

I was encouraged to receive the Minister's reply in November, in which she said that she was considering options for dealing with this situation. One option, revealed to us in the meeting that Kent MPs had in December with the managing director of Southeastern, was to establish peak-time services on the Maidstone East line into Blackfriars station from May 2012, when its rebuild finishes and new platforms become available. Is that one of the options that the Minister has under consideration? I hope that she will also be able to give us, in her reply to this debate, information about the other options that she has under consideration. I would be particularly grateful for her assurance that, before any final decision is taken on which option to follow, the range of options put before her will be made public and that MPs, rail traveller organisations, local authorities and individual rail travellers will have an option to put their views on those alternatives to the Minister before any final decision is taken.

The other rail service to which I would like to refer specifically and which was axed under the previous Government is the through-rail service on the Tonbridge to Redhill line to Gatwick. We now have, frankly, the ludicrous position where Gatwick is the second largest airport in the UK—2 million people in Kent use it every year—and it is impossible to get a train service from any rail station in Kent, on a through-service basis, to Gatwick airport. The coalition Government pride themselves on their green credentials, but I have to point out that access to Gatwick from Kent is about as non-green as it is possible to be. I hope, therefore, that the Minister will be able to assure us that she and the Secretary of State will look with considerable urgency at the need to restore the through-rail service from Kent to Gatwick airport. That is a necessity and would be highly valued by the people of Kent.

I would like to come to two significant policy points that have a bearing on rail services but cover a wider policy issue. First, the Minister is a London MP and will therefore understand

that there is an inevitable tension between the interests of commuters inside London and those who commute from outside London, because capacity is limited. Last year, in my constituency, I had a situation in which Transport for London unilaterally took over critically important train paths on the Uckfield line, used by Uckfield line commuters trying to get to London, for East London line services. That had devastating consequences for my constituents from Edenbridge in terms of overcrowding and inadequate capacity. This year, we hear that Transport for London is now trying to get Maidstone East line trains to stop at additional stations in London, adding still further to the inadequacy of the services on the Maidstone East line in terms of additional journey time and overcrowding. It is imperative that the Minister and the Secretary of State hold the ring between the interests of those who commute to London from outside the city and those who commute to the centre of the capital from inside. There has to be a fair and reasonable balance between those two competing interests and limited capacity.

Secondly, it is not reasonable to create a position in the commuter areas where train operating companies can axe individual services almost at will. In commuter land, individual families—huge numbers of them—make important decisions and lay out substantial sums of money on the assumption that current rail services will continue. That is the basis on which they buy their homes and decide to send their children to particular schools and, in some cases, whether to accept a particular job. It is simply not reasonable for those people to then find that, almost with no notice, those rail services, on which they are critically dependent for their family life, suddenly disappear. I therefore put it strongly to the Minister, and through her to the Secretary of State, that when they come to their review of franchising policy, they must avoid a situation in which train operating companies can turn individual services on their lines on and off like a kitchen tap. That is simply not acceptable or reasonable, given the massive decisions that individual families make when they locate to a village or town with a particular rail service and a particular station.

On rail fares, it is wholly unreasonable to put them through the roof at a time when people's incomes are either frozen or, in many cases, significantly reduced. That is precisely what has happened to west Kent rail travellers. In west Kent, we feel particularly aggrieved on two scores. First, we feel aggrieved because Southern and Southeastern have justified their fare increases by virtue of investment. I do not deny that Southeastern has made investment, but the issue for us in west Kent is that our rail travellers cannot get any benefit from its two most significant investments. The investments that it has made, under the terms of the integrated Kent franchise, are on the channel tunnel rail link route domestic services into St Pancras and the high-speed services now available on the north Kent line. Those services are of no benefit or use whatsoever to our constituents and rail travellers.

Precisely for that reason, when the integrated Kent franchise was first let, I made strong representations to the then Secretary of State that finances for the channel tunnel rail link domestic services should be ring-fenced. I foresaw exactly what has happened, which is that those of us in west Kent would have to pick up a good proportion of the bill for the financing of those services. Our rail travellers have to pay substantially increased fares as a result of that investment.

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Mrs Theresa Villiers): I would like to reassure my right hon. Friend that the RPI plus 3% formula for Kent, which I shall address in my remarks, is not related to high-speed services but to the rolling stock. It was added to the lines on conventional services and is not related to High Speed 1.

Sir John Stanley: I am glad to have my right hon. Friend's assurance, which brings me to my second point. The statement that she just made presents me with even more of a puzzle and sense of grievance than I had previously.

The second point of grievance for west Kent rail travellers is the fact that their rail fare increase is substantially greater than those being faced by commuters on other lines. For example, on the Brighton line, which is operated by First Capital Connect, the fare increase is 3.1%, but the increase for Tonbridge line commuters is 11.8%. I cannot see any reason or justification for why the fare increase for my constituents commuting from Tonbridge should be nearly three times as much as the one for those who commute from Brighton.

I put it to my right hon. Friend that it is imperative, within the limits of the present contractual arrangements entered into by the previous Government, that we re-establish a fairer and more reasonable fare regulation regime. After all, the companies are in effect monopolies, and monopolies tend to exploit. Therefore, one has to couple monopolies with effective and firm regulation, but all the evidence so far, as far as Southeastern and the people of west Kent are concerned, is that a firm and fair regulation system simply does not exist.

I said in a speech almost exactly two years ago, on 20 January 2009:

“I must put it to the Minister that the Government's policy, as far as the thousands of commuters in the south-east are concerned, is resulting in one very clear trend: our commuters—our constituents—are paying ever more for ever less.”—[*Official Report*, 20 January 2009; Vol. 486, c. 727.]

What happened over the cold weather period is that our constituents and commuters actually were paying ever more for no services at all on several days.

My first question to the Minister is about whether she will tackle Southeastern and Southern to bring in a system of reimbursement for rail travellers for the days on which they have paid their fares but are not able to travel. It seems wholly wrong that someone can pay a fare through a season ticket, whether annually or monthly, but not be able to get reimbursement.

A fundamental point I must put to the Minister is that it was shown during the bad weather in December that the investment by Southeastern, Southern and, most particularly, Network Rail has been totally inadequate to deal with severe weather conditions. The franchise arrangements need to be changed to ensure that we have all-weather services.

Michael Fallon (Sevenoaks) (Con): My constituents in Sevenoaks would certainly endorse all the points that my right hon. Friend has made, but does he agree that rather than a blame game between Southeastern and Network Rail over what happened in the winter, we now need a much more effective system of compensation for services that were cancelled or could have been run than we have at present and that the current penalty arrangements need to be thoroughly re-examined in the light of what happened in December?

Sir John Stanley: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who rightly anticipates my final point.

Mrs Helen Grant (Maidstone and The Weald) (Con): My constituents in Maidstone and The Weald are certainly suffering from the same appalling service outlined by my right hon. Friend: delays, overcrowding, wrong information on websites, lack of toilets, dirty rolling

stock, lack of a City of London service, exorbitant rail fares—the list goes on. Does he agree that Kent commuters are feeling very let down and used and abused, and that urgent action is needed?

Sir John Stanley: I wholeheartedly endorse everything that my hon. Friend said. I come now to my final point, which is on penalties.

Gareth Johnson (Dartford) (Con): This is about the issues that Southeastern had to contend with during the recent bad weather. Part of the problem was with communication. Many of my constituents in Dartford were informed by the website that Southeastern advertises that services were running and embarked on treacherous journeys only to find that the services were not, in fact, running. That is part and parcel of the problems that Southeastern needs to overcome.

Sir John Stanley: I wholly agree with my hon. Friend. The communication failures by both Southeastern and Southern during that period were abysmal.

My final point is that the penalties regime is wholly unsatisfactory, because it impacts solely on lateness. One important question for the Minister on a specific issue: is she satisfied with the accuracy and independence of Southeastern's calculation? By the most wafer-thin of wafer-thin margins—0.04%—it has managed to escape financial penalties for lateness in its latest figures.

I come to the wider issue of the gross failure of the penalties regime—this was a failure by the previous Government—which applies to lateness but fails to apply to cancellations. As I said in a letter to the Secretary of State, that produces a perverse financial incentive for train operating companies to cancel services willy-nilly to avoid lateness, but the reality on the ground is that our long-suffering constituents and rail travellers would much rather travel on a train that arrives late than stand at the station from which they want to depart, waiting for a train that has not come.

Mr Roger Gale (North Thanet) (Con): As an aside, I am totally taken aback by the Minister's assertion that the 12.8% fare increase experienced in east Kent does not include a contribution towards High Speed 1, because that is certainly not the impression that we have been given in the past.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling has just given the figures used by Southeastern to make the case for not paying compensation, but have the figures not been massaged by including the High Speed 1 service, which is normally fairly reliable? Were that taken out, the case for compensation would be overwhelming. Is it not a greater irony that if compensation were finally paid, the travellers on High Speed 1 would benefit from it?

Sir John Stanley: I am grateful for that intervention. We shall look forward to the Minister's reply in respect of Southeastern's figures. I hope that she and the Secretary of State will look fundamentally at the penalty regime for train operating companies, because it is clearly grossly inadequate and is actually working to the disadvantage of the rail-travelling public.

In conclusion, rail travellers in west Kent are, without doubt, getting a raw deal: they are getting inadequate services at excessive cost. What rail travellers and our constituents in west Kent want are satisfactory services that are accessible from a station reasonably close to their

home, at a cost that they can afford. I look to the Secretary of State and the Minister to deliver just that.

11.19 am

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Mrs Theresa Villiers): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Sir John Stanley) on securing the debate on west Kent rail services.

I note the array of Kent MPs who have come to express their concerns today, namely my hon. Friends the Members for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch), for Maidstone and The Weald (Mrs Grant), for North Thanet (Mr Gale), for Dartford (Gareth Johnson) and for Sevenoaks (Michael Fallon).

I cannot think of a set of MPs more assiduous on rail matters than those gathered in the Chamber today. In particular, my right hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling scrutinises the performance of train operators and Network Rail in his constituency with the greatest diligence, and he holds the Government to account when their decisions impact on passengers. He has expressed serious concerns today.

Before turning to the details that my right hon. Friend has raised, I emphasise the commitment of the coalition to investment in rail as a vitally important part of our transport system and the importance that we devote to improving services for passengers, addressing reliability problems such as those that my right hon. Friend has highlighted.

In the past, the axe has tended to fall first and hardest on infrastructure projects, including rail, following a spending spree. The Government have sought to break away from that, because we know the enormous importance of the rail network to our economy and, of course, to thousands of commuters throughout the country. Over the next four years, we will invest £18 billion in rail capital projects, on top of the money spent day to day on funding rail operations on the network, on infrastructure and on the subsidy for passenger train services. The Southeastern franchise is in receipt of the highest level of subsidy of any train operator in London and the south-east.

We are focused on dealing with capacity issues on services in Kent, Sussex and Surrey. We have secured the funding for Thameslink to be delivered in its entirety, albeit over a slightly longer time frame than originally intended. That major investment programme will virtually double the number of north-south trains running through central London at peak times, delivering up to 1,200 new carriages and providing commuters in Kent, Sussex and Surrey with a wide range of new journey opportunities to central London and beyond.

On the timetable issues highlighted by my right hon. Friend, December 2009 saw a radical overhaul of services throughout the county of Kent, delivering approximately 200 additional services per day as well as the introduction of the UK's first domestic high-speed services. Unfortunately, with change on that scale, the concerns of people on different parts of the line will always mean conflicting interests and trade-offs. However, it is important that such timetable changes are properly consulted on. My right hon. Friend would like me to guarantee that there will be no changes in future to current timetabling arrangements. It would not be wise for me to give that assurance, although I can give an assurance about the

importance that the Government place on ensuring that train operators consult the communities affected properly when making major timetabling decisions.

I am very much aware of the constituents of my right hon. Friend who are unhappy about the impact of the December '09 timetable on the services at their station. As we heard from my right hon. Friend, I met him and others who are in the Chamber today at a meeting to discuss the issues, and they urged me to reassess the decision taken by the previous Government to remove direct services from Maidstone East to Cannon Street. I agreed to review the business case for the service and to look again at Labour's decision not to introduce the service.

Following initial evaluation of the business case, I asked my officials to work with Southeastern to assess a range of options that could improve services to stations in the Maidstone area. That work is ongoing, and I am not as yet in a position to share any conclusions with my right hon. Friend or the Chamber, but I hope to write to him about the conclusions by the end of February. We are still assessing the different options. However, I emphasise that, given the current state of the public finances, changes will only be possible if they do not require funding from the Government in addition to the substantial sums already subsidising the Southeastern franchise and the infrastructure supporting it.

My right hon. Friend raised the Uckfield line issues resulting from Transport for London's decision to strengthen services on the East London line. Again, that is a controversial matter. Local authorities are involved in deciding how rail services will be configured through a system of increments and decrements, which was what operated in that case. However, I emphasise that decisions on such changes must always take into account the interests of all the communities affected.

I can give an assurance to my right hon. Friend that the Government, in the decisions they take on the configuration of rail services, very much take on board the interests of those who live in London and those who live outside. In response to his concerns about whether his constituents are getting proper consideration in such decisions in comparison with people who live inside London, it is important to treat both groups fairly.

Looking ahead, the completion of Thameslink work at London Bridge in 2018 will trigger another extensive recast of train services throughout much of the county of Kent. Network Rail is developing options for the shape of those services from 2018, but decisions will not be made for some years yet. However, my right hon. Friend's input into those decisions will be very welcome.

A number of my hon. Friends have expressed concern about disruption to rail services in Kent as a result of the severe weather in November and December. Throughout the crisis, officials were in constant touch with the rail industry, and the Secretary of State and I were also in contact with senior management at Network Rail and at the various train operators. Some disruption is inevitable in extreme weather conditions, but we need to ensure that transport operators work as hard as possible to deliver the services that are feasible in such circumstances.

On reliability as opposed to cancellations and the perverse incentives that my right hon. Friend is concerned about, I have urged the rail industry to consider how it assesses punctuality to ensure that it works on overall reliability as well as seeking to minimise cancellations and instances of significant lateness.

Tracey Crouch (Chatham and Aylesford) (Con): Will the Minister give way?

Mrs Villiers: Unfortunately, I have only a few minutes left.

The Secretary of State also asked David Quarmby to audit the performance of rail operators during the severe weather conditions, and his conclusions make it clearer than ever that rail operators and Network Rail must do much better on the provision of information to passengers about the new timetables imposed as a result of severe weather conditions. We are looking to the rail industry to respond to and learn lessons from what happened, and to do much better on providing accurate information to passengers about the impact of disruption.

We are also urging Network Rail to address the fragility seemingly revealed in the infrastructure on the part of the rail network served by Southeastern. Network Rail is looking to extend its trial on heating the conductor rail at key locations. It is also working to test the use of de-icing equipment on passenger trains.

Last week, I met senior representatives of the rail industry to assess overall performance after the severe weather. I singled out Kent and emphasised to Network Rail that improving the performance of the rail infrastructure used by the Southeastern franchise is vital. The rail industry's national task force will, as a result, be reviewing operational performance of Southeastern and Network Rail in Kent. I emphasise that the review will not be limited to the adverse weather episode and will cover general performance levels. I expect senior figures from the operator and from Network Rail to discuss the work of the national task force with me.

The compensation and penalty arrangements that my right hon. Friend asked about are set out in the franchise. We take every step to ensure that train operators, whether Southeastern or anyone else, comply with their obligations. The passenger charter and compensation arrangements have to be regularly audited by an independent body. The penalties regime is also kept under review. I have no reason to believe that the figures produced by Southeastern have been inaccurate, and the franchise requires independent auditing.

11.30 am

Sitting suspended.