



Travel Topics

Issue 118

Autumn 2013

The watchdog for
all Rail Travellers from Tonbridge,
Paddock Wood and Hildenborough

E-mail: enquiry@tonbridgecommuters.org.uk

Rail Fares

It is good to see that the Government has finally recognised the importance to the economy of keeping rail fares down. A few years back there were prospects of regulated fares of RPI+3% with the option of a variation of up to +/- 5% 'within the 'basket of fares'. Then, following much campaigning, fares were capped at RPI+1%, but still with a variation of up to 5%.

For 2014, we have now been told that fares increases are to be capped at RPI+1% with a variation of +/- 2%. This means that while the 'basket of fares' will increase by 4.1%, the worst case will be only 6.1%. It is to be hoped that Southeastern once again pegs the increase in our fares to the average, unlike previous years when Kent passengers incurred higher rates. **KP**

Where do we go from here?

As we reported in the Spring 2013 edition of *Travel Topics*, the abandonment of the West Coast franchise has forced the Department for Transport (DfT) to reschedule rail franchising across the country. One result of this is that the current South Eastern franchise, which was due to end in April 2014, has been extended until June 2018 under a Direct Award to the current operator Govia, trading as Southeastern.

To clarify how this would work, we wrote to the DfT to ask whether, during the period of the Direct Award, the franchise would remain in 'revenue support', an arrangement under which the operator is not incentivised to run any services over and above its baseline contractual obligations, such as the Boxing Day services which were scrapped from 2010 onwards. Peter Foot, Rail Operations Advisor at the DfT, replied that "the new agreement will be negotiated on a new financial basis and will not include any revenue support mechanism, thus removing the perverse incentive to which you refer in your letter".

While the news about revenue support was welcome, we were still left in some doubt as to how our views would be taken into account in drawing up the contract for the Direct Award period. In September 2012 we had submitted a detailed response to the Department for Transport in reply to its consultation on the then planned competitive tender of the franchise. At the Kent Rail Summit on 20 May 2013 our Chairman

directly questioned a representative from the DfT about what had happened to our franchise consultation response, and whether it would be considered in drawing up the Direct Award contract. Little definite information was received, other than an assurance that the DfT still had our response to hand.

Since that time, Southeastern, as the current franchise holder, has launched its own consultation on what stakeholders would like to see during the franchise extension. In response we have sent them a copy of our earlier reply to DfT, together with a covering letter highlighting some major points we would now like to be considered. These include the restoration of direct services from Tonbridge to Gatwick Airport, services on Boxing Day and the provision of half-hourly Sunday services from Hildenborough. We have also taken the opportunity to stress the need for clear communication with passengers during the disruption caused by the rebuilding of London Bridge, and for more flexible season tickets for travellers who do not work a full five-day week.

Again, it is unclear how the consultation process will be managed and what results we will see. It appears that the DfT's emphasis is on keeping the franchise broadly as it is during the Direct Award period, rather than supporting new and innovative services. Notwithstanding this, we will keep up the pressure to make sure our voice is heard. **JM**

‘No’ to ‘BorisRail’

Earlier this year we were notified by our MP, Sir John Stanley, that TfL, through its mayor, were consulting on a proposal to devolve to them responsibility for all suburban Southeastern rail services, thus including the stopping services to Sevenoaks. Superficially the proposal seemed attractive: Sevenoaks would be likely to be included in the area in which fares have in the past been held down, and neighbouring areas such as Hildenborough and Tonbridge could possibly benefit. TfL also have a good record on spending on surface railways such as the recently completed Overground network. In view of these points our fellow organisation in Sevenoaks came out strongly in support of the mayor’s proposals. However, although the support documents said a lot about the protection that main line trains would receive under the proposals, this, as Sir John reminded us, can be often circumvented if found to be inconvenient, as was the case with trains on the Oxted line to London Bridge. Under a devolved system both **seats** and **train paths** could be at risk.

Seats for Kent (and Sussex) passengers would be at risk if TfL were to pursue proposals set out by the Strategic Rail Authority in the original Kent Franchise which envisaged 4 main line trains an hour stopping at Orpington throughout the peak hours. As local commuters will know, the current peak stopping schedule of Tonbridge main line trains (which has been in force for many years) is somewhat unusual in main line trains do not stop at Orpington during peak hours. While it can be consequently difficult to get to and from Orpington and stations further up the line, the system works and was preserved almost in its entirety under the new franchise when it began in 2009, despite the SRA’s wishes.

Train paths could suffer if TfL were to decide that Knockholt and Dunton Green deserved more stops than the current three trains each hour in each peak hour, and even one extra ‘stopping’ train scheduled to serve these stations could well reduce the number of fast trains over this section of line by two. There would therefore need to be a specified

limit on the number of trains allowed to serve these stations in peak hours in order to preserve long-distance capacity.

How would main line trains be protected, after the London Bridge scheme has been implemented? As a specific number of paths? As a preserved percentage of paths? The whole uncertainty prompted us to insist that nothing be done **until 2018** at the earliest, by when the service stopping pattern had become clearer. Even then, how could a railway timetable be compiled by two separate bodies with competing requirements, when the network was running at or near capacity? The danger is that an extra path is squeezed in, thereby compromising reliability, as happened in 1976, when too many trains were scheduled for the system to work reliably, and were later reduced in number.

However, our over-riding concern lay in the **day-to-day operation** of the network. Who would take control in the event of a disruptive effect such as a lorry hitting a bridge, a line-side fire, or a train failure, not to mention a few flakes of snow. Whose trains would be given priority, diverted to Victoria, or cancelled? Wouldn’t one body undoubtedly blame the other for any consequent information or other failure? What would happen to emergency timetables, when some trains are designated to make extra stops to cover others that may be cancelled, and these were the responsibility of the other franchisee? Furthermore, who would be responsible for the overall operation of a busy station like Charing Cross, where mainline trains fight for limited platform availability with those to the suburbs?

As a consequence we rejected these proposals. Members will know that while we have had our criticisms about Southeastern and the way they can or cannot handle disruption, the two proverbs ‘better the devil you know’, and ‘if it’s not broken don’t fix it’, look only too appropriate.

Fortunately Kent County Council and several other influential bodies supported us, and we understand that the Government have decided to abandon the proposals, at least for the foreseeable future. **LS**

Hildenborough says “Thank You”

It is with some sadness that we must say goodbye to Ian, who manages Hildenborough station. He is currently incapacitated with a serious back problem and will not be returning to work. Ian always greeted us with a smile, was extremely

knowledgeable, and would go out of his way to be helpful. His passion for customer service was evident in everything he did. We wish him a full and speedy recovery followed by a long, happy and healthy retirement. **KP**

Years of disruption

In our last edition we mentioned the disruption facing travellers during reconstruction of London Bridge station. This primarily involves the closure of various platforms, necessitating trains omitting stops at the station at different periods. Our main concern relates to the period from January 2015 to August 2016, when services to and from Charing Cross will not call at London Bridge, the station being served only by trains to Cannon Street. Members will note that without changes to train termini there would be no trains from this area to

and from London Bridge outside peak hours, so we understand the plan is to divert the short Tunbridge Wells trains from Charing Cross to and from Cannon Street, thus providing a London Bridge stop. We feel that while this is not unreasonable, the remaining Charing Cross departures would be very unbalanced with alternate 5 and 25 minute intervals, and late evening departures from Cannon Street would be heavily underused. We are currently seeking a meeting with Network Rail to see if any alleviation is possible. **LS**

Buses to the new Sainsbury's?

As well as monitoring train services, we keep an eye on the local bus network. We have noted that under the joint Tonbridge & Malling Borough Council and Sainsbury's proposals for regenerating Tonbridge Town Centre, the new Sainsbury's store will be even further away from the High Street than the existing Supermarket.

Although it is early days in the development of the plan, we believe there should be direct bus access to the new Sainsbury's. On the plans we have seen, the north end of the store is shown to be adjacent to Avenue Du Puy. This gives an opportunity to introduce new or diverted bus services to stops at this location. In advance of the

development we feel it would be sensible for a bus route such as the 7 or 77 to run along Cannon Lane, Vale Road, Sovereign Way, Avenue du Puy and then back onto the west end of Vale Road. This would give first time public transport access to the Town Centre from several large industrial estates and the new Blossom Bank residential development. [Perhaps the area could be served alternatively by extending local bus 211. *Ed*]

Following the recent exhibition at Tonbridge Castle we have suggested that serious consideration should be given to our ideas on improving the local bus network. **TH**

German bid for Channel Tunnel trains delayed

As mentioned in previous issues of *Travel Topics*, Eurostar are reluctant to increase the number of trains calling at Ashford. Following reports that Deutsche Bahn (German Railways) were bidding for a through Frankfurt – London service, we wrote to them requesting three stops daily in each direction. They have replied stating that “serious delays to the introduction of suitable trains means that the start date is some years away and unknown

at this time”. They have, however, promised to take our points into account when they plan the service. We remain fully supportive of Kent County Council's call for at least three trains daily to and from both Brussels and Paris. We are also keeping a close eye on the railway press so that any reports of further bids from other possible operators can be followed up. **JR**

Tonbridge Line Commuters – Your Committee

We are pleased to announce that the following were elected at this year's AGM:

Chairman: Kathy Pratt
96 Leigh Road, Hildenborough
TN11 9AG Tel. 01732 838620

Vice-Chairman: John Reynolds
14 Cumberland Court, Tonbridge
TN10 3AL Tel. 01732 355871

e-mail:
enquiry@tonbridgecommuters.org.uk

Hon. Secretary and Acting Treasurer: Lionel Shields
13 Streamside, Tonbridge
TN10 3PU Tel. 01732 355919

Membership Secretary: Steve Terry
6 Poppy Meadow, Paddock Wood
TN12 6BN Tel: 01892 833880

Public Relations Officer: John Morton
39 Rose Street, Tonbridge
TN9 2BN Tel: 01732 359308

Terry Hines
89 Hadlow Road, Tonbridge
TN9 1QD Tel. 01732 351383

On to Gatwick?

The Tonbridge-Redhill Line Community Rail Partnership (CRP) meets quarterly with the participation of rail user groups, local councils and Southern Railway. At the last meeting there were also representatives from Gatwick Airport Ltd, who reminded us of a 2012 report by Ove Arup on accessibility by rail which they had commissioned. Paragraph 7.2.2 in the 78-page report is interesting: "We understand that airport staff were major users of the direct services up to their withdrawal in December 2008. . . . Increasing the frequency of services along the Tonbridge-Redhill line to a consistent minimum of two trains each hour every hour, one to Gatwick and one or more to London Bridge/ Victoria, will strengthen connection opportunities at both ends of the route and make the service more attractive to all users".

While the report recognises there are constraints at

both Tonbridge and Redhill stations, planning permission was recently granted for an extra platform at Redhill. TLC have proposed to DfT that congestion at Tonbridge could be alleviated by combining the slow London via Redhill trains with Medway Valley trains, and extending Gatwick trains to and from Ashford. As Ove Arup comment, "At a regional level Ashford in Kent would be the most significant source of future commuter growth related to Gatwick, if a direct rail connection was available". 40% of airline passengers reach Gatwick by public transport; 35% use rail and Gatwick Airport Ltd are keen to increase this share to 45%.

As well as carrying many regular passengers (school-children, etc.), the line has considerable leisure potential, e.g. hikers, and various "events" to publicise the line are being prepared. **JR**

Keeping up to date

Travel Topics is published twice yearly, in Spring and in Autumn, in which we try to inform you of the latest and most significant news. (Please note that if your address sticker is highlighted in yellow your subscription is due and if not paid this will be the last issue you will receive.) To save postage, we plan from next April to move to electronic delivery for all those who have supplied an e-mail address. If you have not already done so, please help us by ensuring we have your current address.

(Of course, we comply fully with the Data Protection Act and never reveal your address to third parties. If you wish to continue to receive a printed copy please let us know.) To find out about events and announcements between successive issues, you are very welcome to log on to our website, www.tonbridgecommuters.org.uk. This is updated regularly and also gives much information about our group, and the stations and services we cover. **JR**

TONBRIDGE LINE COMMUTERS

The subscription now due for the year ending 31 Mar 2014 is £4.00. This includes UK-wide rail travel insurance. You may pay over the internet using the details given below:

Bank: **Santander** Sort code: **09-07-21** Account number: **90919302**

Please supply a reference, either your **membership number** (shown on the address label below) or **name**.

If any of the details on the label on the left are incorrect, please amend them. The date shown is the current expiry date of your subscription.

To enable us to send you messages electronically, including "Travel Topics", please give your e-mail address here:

.....

Please renew my Association membership for:

One year (£4.00)

Two years (£8.00)

... years (£)

Cheques should be made payable to Tonbridge Line Commuters, and sent to the Acting Treasurer, Lionel Shields, at 13 Streamside, Tonbridge, Kent, TN10 3PU.