



Travel Topics

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

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Three years on, but now a decision!

On 7th August the Government's bidding process to decide which company should run rail services in Kent was finally brought to an unsatisfactory conclusion after three years with the news that the entire competition had been cancelled. The result is that Govia have been handed a further Direct Award extension to run services until April 2020. It is uncertain what will happen after that, but the possibilities are another extension for Govia (which would be the fifth time!), or the franchise being run as a public sector enterprise, as previously occurred between 2003 and 2006, following the demise of Connex.

The Department was officially evasive as to the reasons, but a subsequent letter to the House of Commons Transport Select Committee revealed that it was growing increasingly concerned about the deliverability of bids, and the companies' approach to pension liabilities (the issue that saw Stagecoach disqualified), and had decided to abandon the whole competition. The Department also cited the forthcoming Williams Rail Review (a review of the whole franchising process) as a reason not to go ahead with awarding the South Eastern franchise. Despite this, it had proceeded with the award of the West Coast franchise to First Trenitalia, claiming that it could do so in a way which reflected the Review even though it had not yet published any findings. It is difficult to see why the South Eastern franchise should be treated differently, so we can only conclude that the South Eastern competition simply fell victim to the Department's repeated inability to run a successful bidding process.

The major loss to passengers is the lack of any of the improvements promised under the new franchise. The most significant of these was a new timetable, which would have included fast services between Tonbridge and London, faster and more trains between Tonbridge and Ashford and a doubling of the Sunday service at Hildenborough. These enhancements will now not be delivered. The new franchise would also most likely have seen the replacement of many of the old and fault-prone trains currently in service, most notably the "Networker" trains that operate between Tunbridge Wells and Charing Cross. Instead, passengers will continue to travel on overcrowded and unreliable trains running (or failing to run) to a timetable that does not provide the speed or capacity we need.

We wrote an open letter to Grant Shapps, Secretary of State for Transport, to express our concerns. You can read the letter – and the anodyne reply from an unnamed official – in full on our website, but we asked Mr Shapps to set out a detailed timeline showing when the benefits envisaged as part of franchise will now be delivered. The Government cannot simply sit on its hands and fail to deliver what it has promised. Dither and delay, with repeated extensions to preserve the status quo, is not a sustainable strategy. It is time that the Department sets out how it will provide Kent with the modern, reliable and high capacity rail service it deserves. Unfortunately, the Government's current thinking appears to be very short term and there is little indication that it is able or willing to prioritise the needs of passengers and bring proper investment to our railway. **JM**

Delay Repay 15: Better late than never

September finally saw the introduction of 'Delay Repay 15' on Southeastern, having previously been announced in June 2019. Although new for Southeastern's passengers, it has been commonplace on other operators for some time.

Previously, to be eligible for any compensation, passengers needed to be delayed by at least 30 minutes, with the level of compensation gradually increasing in line with the length of delay. However, 30 minutes is a significant amount of time – in many cases a delay of 30 minutes results in a near doubling of journey duration for passengers in our area, and significant disruption to work, leisure and childcare arrangements. Despite this, up until now no recourse was available for the impact this had on passengers.

With Delay Repay 15, the initial delay threshold is, as the name implies, reduced to 15 minutes. This new threshold also has a reduced level of compensation associated with it – with delays of 15 to 29 minutes eligible for a 25% refund of a single ticket, or 12.5% refund of a return ticket. This seems like a fair compromise – compensation for longer delays is the same as before, but those

delays which are shorter, but still impactful, now at least receive some compensation.

As part of the introduction of Delay Repay 15, Southeastern have also overhauled their online Delay Repay claims process. Compared to the previous process, it has been streamlined – remembering details such as commonly used services and bank account details.

We still think Southeastern can go further though and automatically refund passengers where possible. For passengers using Advanced (fixed-train) tickets, or The Key smartcard, Southeastern can determine which train a passenger was using – and then match that against delay data and issue compensation automatically rather than relying on passengers to claim. This isn't something new or radical – again it is something that other operators have offered for some time now!

Overall though, the introduction of Delay Repay 15 and improvements to the claims process is to be welcomed, even if it is long overdue and imperfect! **KJ**

Hildenborough issues

It brings us no pleasure to provide a further update on the state of the infrastructure at Hildenborough station. Our regular followers on social media will know that we have been campaigning to ensure that a drain in the car park is kept clean. Whilst this may sound like a mundane issue, the drain has routinely been spilling sewage, which is then transferred to shoes and ultimately on to trains. Southeastern outsourced this to a contractor, who seem to benefit from a rather laissez-faire relationship with the people that pay their bills. Eventually we got to the root cause, and the blame was duly shifted to Network Rail.

Network Rail have said they are keeping the drain clear and we have not received any further complaints. This is the drain behind the bike racks/taxi office and so if you spot liquid oozing from the drain, please let us know and we will follow up.

As if the drain was not enough of a problem, Hildenborough faced a power outage in August, resulting in no lights, no ticket machine and no information boards. This went on for a few days,

with seemingly no action and so we reported it to Southeastern. As if by magic, UK Power Networks were on the site the same day to effect repairs. Whilst we applaud Southeastern's response, we think they should have been more proactive and not required us to alert them to a potentially dangerous situation.

Perhaps the lack of staffing has been an issue at the station? We noticed that a closed ticket office was an all too frequent occurrence. We accept that, with a single member of staff, there are going to be odd periods where the ticket office may go unmanned. People are allowed leave, be it for holiday or illness. What we do not find acceptable is for Southeastern to fail to provide cover. For whatever reason, lots of people buy their tickets on the day, and with only one ticket machine, the queues can become quite intolerable. There is a feeling that Southeastern are going through the motions as this franchise comes to an end, and we will continue to hold them to account.

RM

How fares are set: a right Index stitch up?

2019 has seen the Government change tack on a number of issues, but sadly a more reasonable approach to ticket prices has failed to make the cut. The Government has updated its approach to inflation for some of its borrowing (e.g. Index Linked Gilts) yet the same tired old policy of forcing Retail Price Index (RPI) increases on passengers persists.

Whilst there is a plan to harmonise the two inflation measures from 2025-2030, the devil is always in the detail. There are future provisions that will allow the statisticians will be able to change the method for calculating RPI without needing approval from the chancellor and you can bet that rail passengers will not be at the forefront of mandarins' groupthink. Meanwhile, there will potentially be another 6-11 years of inflation busting increases. Many of us will not be fortunate enough to receive pay increases that will allow these increases to be off set.

We have long advocated a switch to a (generally) lower rate of inflation, namely the Consumer Price Index (CPI). This is perfectly logical because the Government have switched benefit calculations to CPI. It seems to be a sneaky way to push the cost of the railway onto the passengers.

We fear that our members are being milked as a result of living in a supposed affluent area. Whilst some leafier parts of the region are wealthy, this approach to pricing is not sustainable for the masses. We think there is a real limit as to how much people will be willing to pay before they conclude that it's not worth the bother and look for work locally instead.

With the never-ending story of awarding a new franchise (see elsewhere in *Travel Topics*), improvements are being pushed further and further down the track, so what are we paying for? More train faults, more time standing, more emergency leaf timetables and more confusion over precisely which stars need to align so that a guard may feel the need to declassify first class (see elsewhere).

The exact prices for season and peak daily tickets from January 2020 have not yet been confirmed but are expected to rise by 2.8% in line with the RPI figure for July 2019. Had the rise been based on CPI it would have only been 2.1%. We will continue to fight for the fairer measure of inflation to be used. The current system of fare rises is simply making travel more unaffordable year after year.

RM

Hildenborough – a bridge too far

In the last *Travel Topics*, we reported our disappointment that our high impact, low cost, low maintenance plan to construct a ramp next to the platform from London at Hildenborough had been turned down. We decided to launch a Freedom of Information request to see what we could find out.

We were delighted that Hildenborough got 211 nominations and so thank you to all those who nominated the station. This equates to about 10% of the daily users of the station.

The body governing the scheme decided that Hildenborough does not currently have enough disabled people trying to use the station. One would argue that this is fairly logical given that it would be impossible for many disabled to use the station without incurring significant inconvenience, and why would you bother? You

would just head to Sevenoaks or Tonbridge and skip the hassle. This is very short sighted.

However, the biggest bombshell was that Southeastern in their infinite wisdom, did not apply for the ramp! They requested a bridge and two lifts. We already have a bridge but apparently it needs replacing. We also specifically did NOT request a lift as we have had numerous incidents reported to us of lifts being out of action at Tonbridge and Paddock Wood. Einstein's definition of madness is to keep doing the same thing and expecting a different outcome! Not to mention that this proposed plan would have been significantly more expensive than our ramp and so we have to conclude that our bid was damaged by the Train Operators' copy and paste approach. We are exploring our options on how we can proceed.

RM

A classified mystery

One issue that we are getting lots of feedback on at the moment is the inconsistency of approach taken on declassifying first class on busy services. There are numerous reasons as to why this might be needed; a train fault may deprive passengers of the usual number of seats, a previous train may have been cancelled, there may be disruption or just some unknown reason. However, execution of the practice is variable.

We have raised this with Southeastern. They always repeat the line that they give their guards guidelines but it is up to their discretion as to whether to declassify first class or not. The volume of feedback that we have had on this issue suggests that many of you agree that this policy is clearly not working.

With the franchise coming to a (never ending) conclusion, there seems to be a very end of term feel from Southeastern where going through the motions is more important than working to improve the service. Some responses from Southeastern's Twitter account have even been to suggest that passengers go and find the guard in order to ask why the service hasn't been declassified! This is neither helpful, nor 'customer service'.

At TLC we are calling for clear, published, guidelines from Southeastern on when first class should be declassified. A simple three rule guideline could be as follows:

- 1) If a train is so busy that the guard cannot easily walk through the train
- 2) If a train is short-formed train and where more than a handful of people are standing
- 3) If a train is subject to disruption (either this train or adjacent services) that results in people standing (previous train cancelled etc)

This will not cover all situations, and guards should rightly retain some discretion. However, we feel that clearer guidelines will support guards; and also make Southeastern more accountable to you, the paying passenger. We do not support Southeastern's approach of passing the buck on to the guards themselves.

It was expected that first class would be removed in the new franchise, but that process has now been abandoned. First class will therefore be most likely be retained for now, but there is still a risk that if planned additional stops at Orpington were to be introduced the frequency of services needing declassification (example 1) will increase drastically, possibly even every day. This will especially affect our members in the evening, with many boarding at London Bridge or Waterloo East already struggling to find a seat now.

We recognise that first class is a contentious issue and receive much feedback from members who purchase a first class ticket in order to try and guarantee a seat. While some may prefer first class for various reasons, we believe that it should not be necessary to purchase first class just to sit down. We know that capacity is limited and is unlikely to get better in the near term (Network Rail has said capacity beyond 2024 is a significant challenge). We believe that in paying £4,000+ for your season ticket you should reasonably expect a seat on a journey that is upwards of half an hour.

Reluctantly, we therefore support the removal of first class from our services. In an ideal world, where everyone gets a seat, we'd welcome the provision of both standard and first class. If someone wants to pay more money for a slightly better experience, that's entirely their choice and we'd support that. We think it is morally wrong that people feel they have no choice but to overpay in the hope of gaining a seat. **RM**

Tunbridge Wells Local Plan: our concerns

Normally, as a community group primarily focussed on rail travel and associated issues such as access to stations, parking, local bus services etc, we would only have a peripheral interest in such long-term planning matters. However, in the case of Tunbridge Wells Borough Council's recently-published plans for some 4,000 of houses on Green Belt land around Paddock Wood and

Tudeley, we are extremely alarmed at the potentially catastrophic effect the draft plan will have on our train services, especially at peak times. We have expressed these concerns strongly in response to the public consultation, which runs to 15th November. Details will be found on our website and we will follow up on this matter in the next issue of *Travel Topics*. **LS**

International services

At a KCC Rail Summit on 15th October, Renaud Thillaye of Eurostar stated that the Ashford Spurs project was set to be complete by the end of December, and the Ashford–Paris service should revert to three trains per day from 17th May. He spoke in glowing terms about the success and good management of the project (translation: only 18 months late). He also indicated that direct services from Amsterdam to London would start in the spring of 2020 (currently there are only direct services in the London to Amsterdam direction). Alas, he gave no cause for hope that trains on that route would call at Ashford.

Meanwhile, according to the September 2019 edition of *Modern Railways*, SNCF raised the

prospect of passenger flows being heavily disrupted in the event of a No-Deal Brexit. In any event there is an increased possibility of passengers having to queue longer in order to clear customs and immigration control.

Tonbridge Line Commuters hold very firmly to the view that the main purpose of train services is to move people and/or goods with maximum possible convenience to travellers, and it is important that everyone works towards that aim wherever the political situation leads us. We would like the Ashford–Paris service to be increased to five trains daily and the Ashford–Brussels service reinstated with four daily return journeys. **JR**

Annual General Meeting

Our 61st Annual General Meeting was held at the Angel Centre in central Tonbridge on 9th May. Attendance may have been a little dampened due to heavy rain, but as usual the meeting provided a valuable opportunity for members to hear about the association's work and to question our rail industry speakers.

In his Chairman's Address, John Reynolds reported on the Department for Transport's decision to delay the award of the new South Eastern franchise, and problems on the Tonbridge to Redhill line, with widespread cancellations on several days. TLC had responded to consultations on the Williams Rail Review and the proposed extension of Pay-As-You-Go ticketing.

Steve Terry told the meeting that membership had been reasonably healthy over the past year, there being 136 members at the time of the meeting (this has since increased with renewals and new sign ups). The members of the committee were re-elected in their existing roles (see next page).

George Paterson from Southeastern highlighted a recent improvement in "on time" punctuality and that the company had had its best autumn performance for two years running. However, the reliability of the fleet remained a problem and some trains had been damaged in poor weather conditions. Southeastern had become the first operator to give details of the length of each train service on its website. The roll out of on-board Wifi was now complete.

Greg Thomson from Network Rail noted that considerable work had been carried out in the Lewisham area and additional work would be completed in the Hither Green area in 2020. There were some 35 temporary speed restrictions across the Southeastern network, with the damp track bed at Hither Green an ongoing problem. Remote monitoring systems had been put in place to try to prevent landslips at other locations. Network Rail had been unable to cope with the icy conditions on 4th April because icing trains had been sent into maintenance.

Questions from the floor focussed on performance and how train companies are incentivised. It was noted that operators do not pay a penalty for short formed trains and that there continued to be "padding" in timetables despite the new "on time" performance theoretically disincentivising this practice. There were several questions on station matters, including the sewage leak at Hildenborough that was ongoing at the time. Turning to the issue of on-board capacity, it was highlighted that Orpington stops on some services were leading to significant overcrowding.

The meeting concluded with refreshments and a chance for members to continue conversations in an informal setting. We do warmly encourage members to attend the AGM. Those who do attend tell us they enjoy the experience of meeting other members and putting their questions directly to senior managers from the rail industry. **JM**

New Year, Shorter Trains?

With 2019 fast coming to a close, Southeastern has a potential problem on their hands with train accessibility compliance regulations to be applied from 1st January 2020. The new requirements are set out in the “Persons with Reduced Mobility Technical Specification for Interoperability” (PRM-TSI) Act which covers a wide range of areas – such as visually-contrasting grab poles, audio and visual passenger information systems, tactile/audible door controls and accessible toilets.

Strict compliance is recognised to be infeasible on a large and ageing fleet of trains, with minor non-compliance on existing trains allowed, such as on Southeastern’s Electrostar fleet, which have door controls very slightly higher than permitted.

Unfortunately, Southeastern’s older Networker fleet is significantly non-compliant in many areas. While most carriages have undergone extensive refurbishment with modifications such as new information displays and replacement of the small cubicle toilets, this is not the case with the 2-car Networkers. However, this will not prevent them from running in service post-2020, provided they are attached to carriages which do comply. In other words, for a train to run in service only some of the carriages must meet the requirements, not all.

This does not sound insurmountable. Indeed, our services between Tunbridge Wells and London make regular use of a non-compliant 2-car Networker in formation with two compliant 4-car Networkers. However, both the Bromley North and Sheerness-on-Sea branches make significant use of 2-car Networkers running on their own – this will not be permissible from 1st January!

With very little time left in the year, it would be impossible to perform the modifications on these trains and bring them into compliance. Therefore, for these lines to continue with a service in 2020 alternative rolling stock must be used. The next smallest trains that Southeastern has are the 3 carriage Electrostars – commonly used on the Maidstone West line, and for peak-time lengthening of some of our services. If these are used elsewhere, then we could experience persistent short formations on already overcrowded services – all while fresh air is moved up and down minor branch lines!

When challenged on this issue at their recent Stakeholder forum, Southeastern admitted that there is no easy solution. Currently, their planners are advising them that there ‘may’ be a ‘slight impact’ on capacity through short formations, and are expected to release further details as to what exactly this will entail in the next few months.

It may seem odd that this issue has suddenly crept up on Southeastern, especially given that these regulations and the 2020 deadline have been known about for over a decade. However, a string of unrelated failures has meant that the trains are needed in service for longer than they should have been. These include the abandonment of a replacement franchise, the lack of Thameslink services to Maidstone East, and delays to Crossrail. Alas, all these schemes should have either released capacity, allowing compliant units to be used without loss of capacity elsewhere, or brought in new rolling stock.

We shall continue to press Southeastern, and other stakeholders, on this issue. **KJ**

Your Committee elected at the AGM

Chairman: John Reynolds
Hon. Secretary: John Morton
Membership Secretary: Steve Terry

Vice Chairman: Robert Mansfield
Hon. Treasurer: Lionel Shields
Committee: Kingsley Jarrett

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