



Travel Topics

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

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All Change for Franchising in the age of COVID-19

On 16th March the Government announced that everyone should work from home wherever possible to help curb the spread of COVID-19. This has had a profound effect on rail services in the short-term, and an effect on the rail industry itself that may prove to be much longer lasting. The short-term element is that from Monday 23rd March special timetables were introduced across the UK, drastically reducing the number train services. Our stations have retained a reasonable level of service, with four trains an hour from Tonbridge to London on weekdays. Elsewhere in this issue you can read about some tweaks to services we requested to better support connections with trains on the Redhill line. We also continue to keep an eye on weekend services, which have tended to be reduced even more than the weekday services. Meanwhile, ticket office opening hours have been cut and Hildenborough ticket office has closed entirely.

In the midst of all this, the South Eastern franchise was up for renewal. Since 2006, Govia (a joint venture between Go-Ahead and Kelios) has operated the franchise. Over the past few years, instead of the franchise being re-let a succession of short Direct Awards have been granted due to various reasons – such as the rebuilding of London Bridge or problems with the Department for Transport led franchise bidding process. The current direct award was due to end on 31st March 2020 and it was anyone's guess as to what would come next – the Williams Rail Review is supposed to set out the future of franchising (or lack thereof), but it has been delayed several months past its original due date. Contractual agreements do not care for delays however, and the end of the

current Direct Award was fast approaching.

With just 2 days to go, the Department for Transport announced that Govia had been awarded a new Direct Award to run the South Eastern franchise through to 16th October 2021 with an optional extension through to 1st April 2022. There is somewhat of a twist, however. Previous Direct Awards have been let based on a franchise premium being paid - effectively, in return for operating the South Eastern franchise and absorbing all the costs and revenue, a payment was made to the Government. The exact payment is quite a complicated calculation, but it attempts to incentivise the franchise operator to perform well, whilst also passing some revenue to the Government. The financial risks were mostly held by the operator - so if revenue declined due to external reasons for example, then the operator and not the Government would be on the hook for that.

Understandably, the recent and very sharp decline in ticket revenue due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has caused a significant issue for all franchise operators across the country - whilst operators are able to absorb smaller shocks (e.g. due to economic downturns), the current 90% or more drop in travel without also being able to drop costs by the same factor is problematic. Without intervention, every franchise would ultimately become insolvent because of this. However, the railway performs a vital role in helping key workers get to and from work and moving large quantities of freight around quickly. The abrupt failure of franchises would be a disaster - both now and for when lockdown measures start to ease, and travel picks up again.

Recognising this, the Department for Transport stepped in towards the end of March to announce that all franchise operators were being offered the chance to move on to temporary Management Contracts for a period of 6 months. These work a little differently to a typical franchise - all staff are still, as before, part of a private company. However, this private company now receives a payment for operating a service to the Department for Transport's specification. Fare revenue from this service is not kept by the company and is instead passed to the Department for Transport. In effect, the Government takes on the risk of fare revenue declining, or indeed the benefits of fare revenue climbing. This isn't a new model - the GTR franchise (Thameslink, Southern and Great Northern) and parts of London's transport network (the DLR, Overground and TfL Rail) operate on a similar model.

Although this new model does help ensure stability, it does nothing to address the issues faced by Southeastern's passengers. Previous promises of improved frequencies and faster services have evaporated. Worst of all however is the implications for Southeastern's trains themselves. The 'Networker' fleet, which predominantly runs Metro-area services as well as the Tunbridge Wells services, have been showing their age for some time - and fault frequencies continue to rise. A wholesale replacement of the fleet is the only solution to this, but this often takes several years. Given this, even with a short Direct Award we had hoped to see some announcement regarding a

Department for Transport-led replacement. Alas, the most we're being promised is that Southeastern will be "exploring options to boost capacity as additional rolling stock becomes available".

Not only does this not guarantee that additional rolling stock will be brought in, but any that is brought in will be second-hand hand-me-downs. Although this stock would be an improvement of sorts, it brings additional risks. From the perspective of a train operator, having multiple variations in rolling stock is a nightmare - each requires different maintenance regimes, spare part inventories and staff training. This nightmare may very well become a reality for Southeastern however, as within the last few days it has been confirmed that South Western Railway's soon to be surplus Class 707 trains will be coming to Southeastern. They are similar to Thameslink's class 700s with a high-density seating layout, albeit with no toilets or 1st Class. Given their suitability to the Metro only, we do not expect them to venture any further than this.

The longer-term impact on train travel arising from COVID-19 however may be a silver lining for Southeastern's rolling stock situation. With passenger numbers severely suppressed, and likely to remain significantly so for a while, a bit of breathing space has been found – it is important, however, that this isn't wasted. Cascading existing stock is an imperfect short-term solution but failing to start procurement of new rolling stock now would be a disaster.

KJ

Membership Extension

Even though far fewer people are using trains and buses at the moment, your committee continues to work on your behalf to ensure that the railway operators continue to properly serve the needs of those who have to travel. We are also keeping alive our longer-term campaigning work so that when things begin to return to normal, promised improvements are not forgotten.

In recognition that commuting may not be uppermost in everyone's mind at the moment, and many are in reduced circumstances, we have decided to give an extra year of membership to everyone who was a member as at 31st March 2020. This means that that if your membership was due to expire this year, it will not now expire

until 2021. If it wasn't due to expire, you will now have an extra year (including those who have already renewed for this year). Updated expiry dates are in the covering email received with the electronic edition of *Travel Topics* or on the address label for those receiving copies by post

We still welcome renewals this year and will simply add extra years to your record if you do send us a renewal subscription – simply go to Membership Renewals on our website. We are, of course, happy to accept new memberships, and anyone joining now will get the extra year as well, so please encourage your friends to join!

ST

Annual General Meeting

Our association holds an Annual General Meeting every spring and normally invites speakers from the rail industry to give presentations and field questions from our members. This event generally takes place at a venue in central Tonbridge, with a chance for members to socialise with each other after the meeting. Your committee has taken the sad but inevitable decision that due to the COVID-19 epidemic we cannot proceed with our AGM in the usual way this year. However, our constitution still requires us to hold an AGM, so will go ahead with the meeting in a slimmed down form via the well-known Zoom videoconference system.

This meeting will only cover the essential domestic business of the association as required by the constitution and rail industry speakers will not be present. It will be held on **14th May at 19:30**, as previously advised to members, and we anticipate that it will only last for about 20 minutes. We appreciate that such a meeting may be of limited interest to members, but we do need to ensure that we have a quorum of at least 8 members joining the meeting. We will therefore ask members to RVSP when we send out the formal meeting papers by email closer to the time, and those who can attend will be given details of how to join the Zoom meeting (which can be via a computer or phone). Any member without access to email may request details of how to join the meeting by phoning the Secretary on 01732 359308 from 7th May onwards.

We know that members appreciate the opportunity to hear from our rail industry speakers and ask them questions, so we hope to hold an additional General Meeting later in the year at which representatives from train operating companies and Network Rail will be present. If it possible to hold such as General Meeting, potentially in the autumn, we also intend to present a resolution on extending the reach of the association to include Leigh and Penshurst stations. With us doing a considerable amount of work relating to the Tonbridge-Redhill line, we feel that it is time to recognise what we do informally by formally adopting those stations. While we could have decided to present this resolution at the slimmed down AGM, on balance we felt that would be better for the decision to be taken a General Meeting when a greater number of members may be present.

I would like to thank all members for their understanding and to assure you that we will miss seeing you in person at the AGM this year. The work of the Association carries on during these difficult times, and your committee continues to convene via the wonders of modern technology. We are grateful to those keeping the railway running in these trying circumstances. Key workers still need to travel, and ensuring they have a rail service they can rely on makes their life a little easier.

JM

Season Ticket refunds leave Commuters out of pocket

With the recent lockdown measures requiring people to work from home wherever possible, many of our members are no longer commuting. For those who buy daily or weekly tickets, this can amount to quite a cost saving. However, those who have previously bought annual season tickets to save on the cost of their commuting are now finding that they've paid for a ticket that they can no longer use. Although it's possible to obtain refunds on season tickets, due to the way in which they are calculated many are getting back less of a refund than they would expect, or none at all.

The principle behind annual season tickets is that in return for a large up-front payment, a discount is

offered on the ticket compared to buying multiple shorter ones. As such, an annual season ticket is priced at exactly 40 times a weekly ticket – granting 12 weeks travel for free by comparison.

To prevent abuse of this discounted rate, a refund on an annual season ticket is instead calculated based on the cost of equivalent monthly and weekly tickets that would have been bought instead. For example, if an annual season ticket holder requested a refund after 6 months, the refund they would receive would be the cost of their annual ticket minus the cost of 6 monthly tickets.

This gives a completely different, lower, refund amount than if the calculation had been done pro-rata.

Ordinarily, this refund calculation would make sense – most people buying an annual would expect to be using it for the entire duration. However, these are not ordinary times – commuters could not have foreseen travel restrictions being imposed and many are facing a reduction in income. Pro-rata refunds would make absolute sense in this scenario and is something we've been campaigning for the Government to implement through Tom Tugendhat, our MP for Tonbridge and Malling.

The initial response from the Government rejects our requests for refunds on a pro-rata basis or 'pausing' season ticket validity. It essentially suggests that changing the existing system would be too difficult and states that doing so would have "significant additional cost implications for the rail industry". The latter point is not entirely accurate,

since the cost would be borne by the Government given that franchises are now management contracts with the Government taking the revenue risk. We continue to engage constructively and push for a rethink, as well as suggesting alternatives such as a freeze on regulated fares in 2021.

In the meantime, with lockdown measures likely to continue to be in place for some time, members who have more than 3 months validity left on their season tickets may want to consider a refund. For those holding a paper season ticket, Southeastern now no longer require this to be done in person and instead accept photographic evidence of a destroyed ticket. Additionally, claims can be backdated to 17th March, or when the ticket was last used, whichever is later. If you previously surrendered your ticket after this date, contact Southeastern again to backdate your claim further and receive the rest of the refund that you're entitled to.

KJ

Will a new platform at Reigate bring hope for the Tonbridge-Redhill line?

Network Rail recently launched a consultation on plans to provide a new platform at Reigate station with a capacity to take 12 coach Thameslink trains. At present the platforms at Reigate can only take 4 coach trains, which means Thameslink trains cannot run there. Consequently, London services from Reigate consist solely of four coach Southern trains.

You might think this matter is of little relevance to us, but in fact the ability of Reigate to take Thameslink services has potential to benefit the line between Tonbridge and Redhill. Back in May 2018 the train operating company GTR, which runs both Southern and Thameslink services, removed through services to London on Tonbridge-Redhill line. This reduced the service to an hourly shuttle between Tonbridge and Redhill (half hourly in the morning and evening rush hours). When we expressed our concerns to GTR at the time, it told us that the new Thameslink services would take up most of the capacity and therefore it was no longer possible for all Southern services to continue run through to London. Given that Thameslink trains couldn't run to Reigate, the choice was either to run the Reigate trains or the Tonbridge trains through to

Victoria, but not both. It decided give preference to the Reigate trains, leaving Tonbridge-Redhill as a shuttle service. However, it said that providing a lengthened platform at Reigate would potentially allow Thameslink services to serve Reigate, permitting Tonbridge trains to resume running through to Victoria.

Unfortunately, looking at the latest consultation materials from Network Rail we suspect that this promise may not be fulfilled. The information provided by Network Rail includes a diagram depicting the "possible service pattern" should the extended platform be built. This appears to suggest that Salfords and Earlsfield (on the line to Gatwick Airport) would receive new direct trains to Victoria rather than stations on the Tonbridge-Redhill line. Of course, it would be possible for Tonbridge trains to attach with these services at Redhill, but GTR has refused to countenance such joining and detaching of services since the May 2018 timetable.

In our response to the latest consultation, we have made it clear that our support for the new platform at Reigate is entirely contingent on whether it will lead to improved through services on the

Tonbridge-Redhill line. Our priority would in fact be a return of direct trains from Tonbridge to Gatwick Airport, with our next priority the restoration of through trains from Tonbridge to London Victoria via Redhill. Preferably, both services should operate – as they did before December 2008. We have urged Network Rail to commit to delivering improved direct services from Tonbridge as part of its plans. When the May 2018 timetable change was in prospect, we were promised that restoring through services

would be considered at the earliest opportunity, with a longer platform at Reigate being a prerequisite to doing this. We were concerned at the time that this promise would all too easily be forgotten, and that reductions in the level of service on the Tonbridge-Redhill line would continue in a self-perpetuating a spiral of decline. Now that Network Rail is looking to address the capacity constraints at Reigate, we will fight to ensure that our line is not forgotten. **JM**

Timetable wins for TLC on the Redhill line

The Redhill line has been beset with woes since 22nd December when there was a large landslip between Edenbridge and Godstone at a point which was extremely difficult for workmen to reach. An embankment had largely been washed away by heavy rainfall exacerbated by other factors such as rabbit burrows. After some weeks, the site was finally made accessible and work commenced.

For some time after Christmas, shuttle buses ran the length of the line until, following pressure from several organisations including Tonbridge Line Commuters, a train shuttle between Tonbridge and Edenbridge was reinstated. Southern had stated that there were not enough staff. However, some of the information on their web pages was misleading and incomplete, and it took more pressure from us to persuade them to adjust schedules to benefit, for example, students travelling to and from Tonbridge. The line was fully repaired by late March and the line reopened.

Then came COVID-19. The service has again been reduced and, although the service this time is at least by train, once again, little regard is given to passengers who might need to go further afield either as essential staff in London or to attend, for example, hospital appointments. Some of the connections at Tonbridge have been unsatisfactory. For example, an off-peak arrival from Redhill at Tonbridge at xx37 connected with a departure for London at xx37, leaving you zero seconds to cross the platform (to avoid a 24-minute wait). After pressure from TLC, Southeastern agreed to alter the Tonbridge departure to xx41 (allowing 4 minutes to cross the line, easily enough when the trains are on time).

We remain convinced that GTR (Southern) regards the line as a nuisance to be tolerated reluctantly. For that reason, we shall continue to campaign for the line to be transferred to a South-Eastern company at franchise renewal so that passengers' interests are rightly put first. **JR**

Network Rail: Don't believe the hype - Tell it as it is

At TLC we believe in being honest and straight forward with people. We therefore expect others to do the same.

There have been several landslips in the South East over the past year. The biggest one to affect us is of course the Godstone landslip, affecting the Tonbridge to Redhill line, but there have been many others.

Regardless of your personal views, the Extinction Rebellion protests and Greta Thunberg have been successful in getting people thinking and talking more about climate change. Network Rail have jumped on the bandwagon to blame climate

change on the reason that so many of their fixtures have failed. We think this is dangerous as it could be an attempt for Network Rail to wash their hands of insufficient maintenance and poor forward planning.

We think the real reason that this equipment has failed is a combination of a lack of funding from central Government and a failure (by Network Rail) to adequately manage their costs. This leads to corners being cut, for example, maintenance being skipped (Hildenborough drains), false economy cost saving (shorter life equipment being installed and then 'sweating' it for far longer than it should last) and having to cherry-pick projects,

which are often political rather than being based on true passenger or even freight needs.

Network Rail themselves admit they have problems locally:

“Our railway was the among the first in the world and some of our busiest lines were built as early as the 1830s. This includes the Redhill-Tonbridge line, where the Edenbridge landslip happened on 22 December 2019. Work began here in 1836.

To save money, railway builders kept their land purchases to a minimum, which meant embankments and cuttings were very narrow and steep-sided. This makes them vulnerable to extreme weather. In addition, they employed contractors of varying quality. Notably, the tunnels on the Tonbridge to Hastings line were built without enough brick layers and had to be strengthened later on, making the tunnels narrow and single track.

In addition, knowledge of “soil mechanics” was not advanced in those days and embankments were made of whatever material was extracted as spoil from cuttings. In some cases, such as Edenbridge and previous landslips in places such as Stonegate, different layers of material were dumped on top of each other and the railway built on top. This is a particular problem when chalk

and clay are mixed – which is often the case in the south. Water permeates the chalk and then hits the clay and runs off it. As the different materials absorb water at different rates, eventually one layer will slide off the other and a landslip develops.

The geology of the south is mixed and railways will often be built of very different materials in a short distance”

Now whilst we are sure this is all true, climate change has not just suddenly appeared. It has been on the agenda for decades. The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change was in 1992, and so what is clear is that Network Rail know that they have weak spots on the network, but they have done nothing about it. Considering the poor construction standards used, it is actually quite incredible that these have survived for so long.

Network Rail, we call on you to be a little bit more honest. You dropped the ball on this, but we will be kind enough to consider that it is only partly your fault as the nation has been poor at investing in infrastructure for a long time now. Jumping on the latest bandwagon helps nobody. Let us therefore call it what it is; Network Rail does not have the funding to give the country the rail network it deserves. **RM**

TONBRIDGE LINE COMMUTERS

Your Committee currently are:

Chairman:	John Reynolds	Vice Chairman:	Robert Mansfield
Hon. Secretary:	John Morton	Hon. Treasurer:	Lionel Shields
Membership Secretary:	Steve Terry	Committee:	Kingsley Jarrett

You may contact us at any time using the e-mail address: enquiry@tonbridgecommuters.co.uk

As mentioned above there is no subscription needed this year. However, if you wish to make a payment to the Association in respect of future years (£4 p.a.) you may still use our website, paying by **PayPal**, **BACS** or **cheque**.

Our BACS details are: **Bank:** Santander **Sort code:** 09-07-21 **Acc. No:** 90919302

Cheques payable to **Tonbridge Line Commuters** should be sent to:

Hon. Treasurer, Lionel Shields, at 13 Streamside, Tonbridge, TN10 3PU.