



Travel Topics

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



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Southeastern Enters Public Ownership

On 27 September, unexpected by many, the Government announced that Govia was to be stripped of the Southeastern franchise following “a serious breach of the franchise agreement’s “good faith” obligation in relation to financial matters”. Instead, Southeastern services were to be run by the Government’s Operator of Last Resort which already runs LNER and Northern services. The actual transition into public ownership took place just 3 weeks later – at 2AM on Sunday 17 October. By most standards, this is an exceptionally fast handover for what is a complex operation that requires a huge amount of behind the scenes work to ensure that things such as staff contracts, regulatory safety cases, supplier contracts etc all transfer over. The messaging from Southeastern and the Government has very much been focused on reassuring passengers – that train services would continue to run as currently, branding would remain the same, existing tickets would still be valid and so on. Indeed, on the ground the handover on Sunday 17 October was barely noticeable.

In terms of the future however, this does raise some significant questions – in particular, how the future development of Southeastern services may be affected. The Operator of Last Resort (OLR) process is typically intended to be temporary until a new suitable operator can be found – although this can last for many years, with LNER having now been run by the OLR for 3 years and counting. There is a risk, however, that time spent under the OLR can lead to stagnation – the focus is predominately around completing existing projects (e.g., previously planned replacement of rolling stock) and ‘keeping the lights on’. Introducing significant new projects can be a risky proposition for the OLR as it attempts to ‘shop around’ for a new operator. On Southeastern, a significant proportion of the Networker fleet of trains is

approaching life expiry, with no replacement lined up for those that serve our area. It is now possible that any project to replace these trains will be not even get started for several years, let alone bear fruit. This prospect is concerning, to say the least.

However, all may not be lost. One of the changes announced in the Williams-Shapps Plan for Rail was to replace franchises with new “Passenger Service Contracts”. Much like the concession model used successfully by Transport for London to run the DLR and London Overground, the Government finely specifies the service specification (staffing levels, long term projects and service patterns etc) and contracts out operations to a private company. Since the Government is setting the standard to which the service will operate, doing more than just ‘keeping the lights on’, being under the OLR may not be as harmful to Southeastern as it would under the historical franchise model.

Those who have been using local train services for some years may recall that franchise stripping and public operation has happened here before. When Connex were stripped of the franchise in 2003, it was publicly run for several years until a new operator was found in 2006 – Govia. There is a small amount of irony that Govia’s tenure over the Southeastern franchise ends as it had begun, with public ownership.

With the transfer having taken place so quickly, there is much uncertainty as to what the future holds for Southeastern. We hope that Southeastern’s move under the OLR does not result in stagnation, and instead accelerates the benefits to passengers that the Williams-Shapps Plan for Rail was touted to bring. Now more than ever, we will continue to work with Southeastern and the Government to fight for improvements to our services. **KJ**

Southeastern's Timetable: More Trains Still Needed

Since the start of the pandemic there have been many timetable changes. Southeastern's current timetable started on Sunday 12 September. We had made a strong case for an increase in service levels at the earliest opportunity, and a fair amount of our feedback was taken on board. However, demand has definitely increased since then, and Southeastern is refusing to contemplate any further improvements in its timetable starting on 11 December. It is citing the need to seek approval from the Department for Transport before making changes. Passengers do not appear to matter a great deal in this new process.

There are now two trains an hour between Ashford and Charing Cross via Paddock Wood throughout the day on weekdays, which is something we campaigned for. However, the service on that line remains at only one train an hour on Saturday afternoons and one train an hour all day on Sundays. Combined with the Hastings line services, this gives an uneven service of three trains an hour between Tonbridge and Charing Cross at those times. This is both frustrating and illogical, given that demand for leisure travel is generally much greater at weekends than on weekdays. We have asked for weekend services to be stepped up to match the off-peak weekday service, but Southeastern refuses to contemplate this until May 2022 at the earliest.

The September change introduced more direct Cannon Street services, with four trains from Tonbridge to Cannon Street between 07:00 and 08:30 and four trains back from Cannon Street to Tonbridge between 17:00 and 18:30. While Paddock Wood is fairly well served, there is only one train in each direction calling at Hildenborough. We think that Cannon Street services from Hildenborough need to be improved given the number city slickers who live in the area, but Southeastern claims that there is not enough demand to justify this.

Late evening services have become very busy. There are four trains an hour from Charing Cross to Tonbridge on weekdays in the late evening, compared to five an hour pre-pandemic. While this does not sound too bad, the trains are poorly spaced. Late evening demand has clearly returned and probably exceeds that before the pandemic. It is ironic that social distancing would have been easier back in the old days, when it was neither heard of nor necessary. Southeastern says it is aware of the problem, but again refuses to do anything timely to address it. The only change in the December timetable will be the restoration of the 00:15 service from Charing Cross on weekdays (serving Hildenborough and Tonbridge). The late evening service is also particularly poor at the weekend, with only three trains an hour from Charing Cross to Tonbridge on Saturdays and just two an hour on Sundays.

Passenger behaviour has gradually shifted over time, with mask wearing on trains becoming less and less prevalent. People will have different views on this, but it is worth remembering that for some passengers a busy train with few people wearing masks will be a somewhat discombobulating experience, especially for those who have not travelled by train for a long time. It is difficult to predict how behaviour will change over the winter months, or indeed how many people will start or stop working more regularly in the office.

We will continue to make the case for a further uplift in services despite Southeastern's initial rebuttal of our suggestions. There is a clear need for more services at weekends and in the evenings, and there is emerging evidence that rush hour services will have to be increased as well. Of course, the pandemic has taught that nothing is certain, but we are pleased to see the railway coming back to life and hope that penny pinching does not compromise its recovery.

JM

London Charing Cross	CHX	d	2210	2215	2240	2245	2310	2315	2340	2345
London Waterloo (East)	WAE	d	2213	2219	2243	2248	2313	2318	2343	2348
London Cannon Street	CST	d	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
London Bridge	LBG	d	2219	2224	2249	2254	2319	2324	2349	2354
Orpington	ORP	d	-	2240	-	2310	-	2341	-	0010
Chelsfield	CLD	d	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Sevenoaks	SEV	d	2243	2250	2313	2320	2343	2353	0013	0020
Hildenborough	HLB	d	-	2256	-	-	-	2359	-	0026 ^{ss}
Tonbridge	TON	a	2251	2300	2321	2328	2351	0003	0021	0030

Southeastern's SeatFinder tool shows that some late-night trains are becoming very busy

Annual General Meeting 2021

Our 63rd Annual General Meeting on 20 May 2021 was held online due to coronavirus restrictions. In contrast to the truncated 2020 AGM, also held online, this was a full meeting featuring rail industry speakers. Some 23 members joined the meeting on Zoom – a healthy turnout given the unavoidable lack of refreshments at the end of the evening.

The Chairman's Address noted the impact that coronavirus had had on both our association and the railway itself. The pandemic had seen schedules cut, and the summer timetable looked insufficient for the likely demand (a prediction later borne out). Meanwhile, the Williams-Shapps Plan for Rail had just been published and trumpeted the creation of Great British Railways.

Lionel Shields (Treasurer) noted that there was an overall loss of £70 for the financial year, explained by the decision to extend memberships for free. Robert Mansfield (Membership Secretary) reported that the membership had risen from 165 to 170 members. The committee was re-elected, but with some changes of roles. John Morton would remain Chairman but additionally take on the role of Membership Secretary, while Robert Mansfield would become Honorary Secretary.

Rail industry speakers then took the virtual stage. George Paterson from Southeastern highlighted Southeastern's response to the pandemic. A SeatFinder tool had been launched to help people identify services where social distancing was easier. Mr Paterson announced some wins for TLC

including the restoration of some Cannon Street services and a promise (subsequently fulfilled) to improve the spacing of late evening services from Charing Cross. Questions to Mr Paterson focused on the 1st class provision and fares.

Paul Codd from GTR (Southern) noted that a benefit fund had seen improvements to stations on the Tonbridge to Redhill line. Presenting statistics on usage, Mr Codd noted that leisure travel was becoming be a much bigger factor. In responding to questions, Mr Codd promised that issues with staff absence and the lapse of qualifications due to delayed training would be addressed.

Greg Thomson and James Craig from Network Rail explained that lower passenger numbers had allowed some larger scale preventative work to be undertaken. Trespassing on the railway continued to be an issue. Questions to the Network Rail included a plea for advice on how to make the case for a ramp to the down platform at Hildenborough station.

Finally, Tom Tugendhat MP thanked the rail industry for its resilience in a difficult year. He was interested in assisting the association with any efforts to extend its reach to Leigh and Penshurst.

We hope to return to an in person meeting next year, since we know that many members enjoy the opportunity to meet us and our rail industry speakers in person, particularly over drinks after the meeting. However, we may retain an option to join online, for those who prefer it. **JM**

Kent's Link to the Continent Still Missing

Recent reports indicate that Eurostar trains will not serve Ashford until 2023 at the earliest. This is very short-sighted.

Ashford International is the last foot-passenger station before the Channel Tunnel mouth and has regular direct train services to and from large swathes of East and South Kent as well as much of East Sussex. It makes sense that Eurostar trains should call there so that people from its catchment area might avoid having to travel via London and double-back on themselves, wasting time unnecessarily and adding pressure on busy trains used by commuters, shoppers and those who must go to London for various other reasons such as medical appointments. Reopening the station

should even take priority over reopening Ebbsfleet International for continental traffic.

At the very least, four daily Paris and four daily Brussels trains should serve Ashford in each direction: early morning (mainly for business travellers and those making connections for further destinations); mid-morning (mainly leisure); mid-afternoon (mainly leisure) and evening (mainly business and long-distance connections). A more frequent service would be even better. The Department for Transport should also give more financial support to the service as the most eco-friendly way of reaching the European mainland. We shall continue pressing for a better service to this important transport hub. **JR**

Hildenborough: A Lack of Buses Leads Passengers Down Dark Roads

People are tentatively starting to commute again. I have been going into the office twice a week for some time now and it is clear that numbers are ticking up as the weeks go by. Thursdays in particular seem to be very popular. I am getting lots of enquiries from local residents about the 200 bus and whether it has returned. At this stage there seems to be no possibility of this bus returning. We have speculated before that we doubt it was commercially viable, and there seems to be no appetite from Kent County Council to fund the service. I have contacted Go Coach to specifically ask about the future status of 200 bus and 235 bus (that used to serve Leigh) and they have said there are no plans for timetabled bus services and that the on-demand Go service will remain. The rail industry is emphasising the need to convince people to travel again but reality makes the words seem hollow. Hildenborough residents without a car are therefore left with the inferior 'on demand' Go service, walking or catching a bus to Sackville school and walking the rest. Personally, I am mostly walking and on occasion get a lift.

One of the big downsides of walking to and from the station in the winter months is the bridge out of the station towards the village. It is a very narrow path, without street lights and it is often pitch black in the evenings. With the road next to you being at the national speed limit, it can be a bit intimidating and disorientating. I use the flashlight on my phone to light the path and I know many others do too.



The pavement is narrow on the bridge out of the station

Hildenborough's Parish Council update in this month's Keys Magazine reads that Network Rail have agreed to allow KCC to look into providing lighting. It would be optimistic to think that it will be in place for the end of this winter, but I heartily endorse the principle of lighting up that stretch of pavement. Of course, we would prefer a complete revamp of this area and a ramp up from the station but for the time being a couple of lamp posts seem to be our lot!

RM

We regularly publish additional articles on our website, don't forget to head over to the [News section on tonbridgecommuters.org.uk](https://www.tonbridgecommuters.org.uk)!

TONBRIDGE LINE COMMUTERS

As elected at the AGM your Committee are:

Chair & Membership Sec.: John Morton

Hon. Secretary: Robert Mansfield

Committee: Kingsley Jarrett

Vice Chairman:

Hon. Treasurer:

Committee:

John Reynolds

Lionel Shields

Steve Terry

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

There is again no subscription needed this year. However, we still welcome renewals and will simply extend your membership by the number of years paid for (£4 per year). To renew simply [visit our website](#) and pay 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, 13 Streamside, Tonbridge, TN10 3PU