

The 6th Rail Summit

Held at County Hall, Maidstone on Wednesday April 30th

Alan Sencicle

This Maidstone meeting commenced with KCC's Steven Gasche presenting an update on the April 2011 Rail Action Plan for Kent.

There is now a commitment from the Department for Transport (DfT) to support an all-day high speed service for Deal and Sandwich from January 2015. This will be at the expense of the loss of one service per hour between Ashford and Ramsgate. This should maintain a degree of fiscal neutrality. It is expected that the problem of Westenhamer and Sandling will be solved by extending the Victoria to Ashford services via Maidstone East to compensate for the loss of this service.

Thameslink services in Kent are due to commence in May 2018. This will provide a direct service from Maidstone East to Blackfriars, Farringdon and St Pancras to link into London Crossrail services. This will be a peak and part off-peak service only.

Stephen then went on to outline the problem of the Ashford Spur that facilitates the calling of Eurostar Trains at the International station. For the next generation of Siemens Eurostar and German DBB trains, if the latter come, the signalling at Ashford has to be upgraded to European Track Control Level 1. Funding of £520,000 for phase 2 of this upgrade is now in place.

Charles Horton (Managing Director of Southeastern Railway) the first guest speaker, outlined the success of the high

speed service with 25 million passengers using St Pancras annually. He stressed that he had previously been told that nobody wanted to go there. More on that later.

If Southeastern is awarded the Direct Award contract this will run from October 2014 to July 2018. If they continue to provide rail services, their biggest challenge will be the rebuilding of the station at London Bridge. Platform 6 is the busiest platform in Europe. During the upgrade this platform will not be available for 18 months!

John MacQuarrie (DfT Lead Negotiator for Direct Awards) the second guest speaker, outlined the criteria to be satisfied for the Direct Award. The emphasis was on both sustainability and affordability, the latter for both the taxpayer and passengers. There is a requirement for reducing the railway's carbon footprint that is driving future electrification projects. Nationally, only 6% of journeys are made by rail. The DfT wish to see a significant increase in that figure. Switching more traffic from road to rail can only decrease carbon emissions and pollution levels.

The planned Garden City at Ebbsfleet was mentioned in connection with the need for more rolling stock to cope with the increased demand for travel into London. He expects new trains to become available in 2017-18.

John also mentioned that with the introduction of the high speed loop service serving Deal and Sandwich, there would be

a fast service via Ashford and a slower service via Faversham. The slower option would be charged at the same price as a journey to Charing Cross. There was a warning that the continuation of this loop service would very much depend on the degree of use.

Pierre Delalande (Eurostar Service Development Manager) was the third guest. His address was most interesting. Currently 27 Eurostar trains call at Kent stations (Ashford or Ebbsfleet) each day. Last year the company carried 10.1 million passengers. The high cost of using the channel tunnel was mentioned and he claimed Eurostar receives no rail subsidy. That being the case it is surprising that they are able to compete with the low-cost airlines. Pierre showed a slide illustrating that their share of the markets to Brussels and Paris was continuing to increase year on year.

Previous Eurostar trains running direct to Avignon and the seasonal ski trains were mentioned along with future plans to run direct trains to Orleans, Marseille and Aix-en-Provence in 2015. It is also intended to run trains direct to Amsterdam via Brussels from January 2016.

The existing Eurostar trains are now 20 years old and are being refurbished. New Siemens trains will be delivered to allow the service extensions mentioned above.

Question Time:

Derek Smyth, KCC member for Ashford South, mentioned the loss of two fast trains each hour from Ashford to Charing Cross, stressing that many passengers wish to travel to the West End or the South Bank. He called for the return of at least one fast train per hour, citing the extra time taken for an onward connection from St Pancras diminished the time saved.

In reply Charles Horton proudly announced that well over 70% of passengers travelling between Ashford and London were using the St Pancras option. He said "the journey time of 37 minutes compares to well over an hour on the discontinued fast service to Charing Cross".

I take issue with this and have already written to Derek Smyth. I will be writing to Charles Horton, pointing out that following electrification of the Ashford line in 1961 the fast train leaving Charing Cross on the hour arrived at Ashford 60 minutes later with just one call at Waterloo East. The journey time to and from the South Bank was only 57 minutes some 53 years ago! There is a simple answer as to why St Pancras is being used to the extent it is. The current journey time to both Charing Cross and Victoria from Ashford is very close to 1½ hours. It is not unfair to accuse Southeastern of ensuring the success of their high speed service as a result of these appalling timings. This 56-mile journey is typically completed at an average speed of no more than 37 mph.

Tom Rowland, representing Trains for Deal, pointed out that it is expensive for residents in our area to travel to London. In reply Charles Horton said "we will be looking at other ideas to give people attractive offers to allow more passengers to use (loop service) trains." This could of course include off-peak advance fares and I have previously suggested far cheaper weekend tickets such as those available in the 1960's for travel out of London after 7pm on a Friday evening. The present Southeastern Weekender ticket puzzles me greatly, as there is very little difference in price between this and a monthly return ticket.

Martin Wybrow, KCC member for Hythe, asked a question with regard to train

capacity as the 6 carriage high speed trains are often full. This produced a very interesting response from Richard Dean, Southeastern's Train Services Manager.

The high speed Javelin trains are fitted with 'Passenger Load Determination' that effectively weighs the passenger load! The company are monitoring train usage and using this system to determine the need for 12 carriage trains where appropriate. It is likely that some trains to and from Dover Priory will be lengthened in future. This could easily apply to the first high speed off-peak service departing at 09:45. There are currently 29 Javelin trains available, each consisting of 6 carriages.

Richard went on to mention the peak services that currently join and divide at Ashford. In order to increase both capacity and reduce journey times, it is possible that a 12 carriage London bound train could leave Ashford very closely followed by a 6 carriage train, though it was not specified whether the Dover or the Margate connection would be the longer train. Southeastern has already trailed this option.

I have been fortunate to gain an insight into the duplicated computer train control system used on HS1 that does not use conventional colour light signalling. I assume it is the European Train Control Level 1 referred to at the Maidstone meeting. In the driving cab I was shown this system that uses the speed and distance of the train ahead to display to the driver the maximum permitted speed at all times. If the driver fails to take the necessary corrective action, the brakes are applied.

With the extra 200 car parking places at Folkestone West, there have been rumours that Folkestone Central might close.

Richard Dean said there was no truth in this rumour though there is an intention to close Folkestone Harbour and the connection to the main line.

I was able once more to highlight the fact that Southeastern is one of the few train operating companies that fail to offer advance fares within their network on journeys of equal to or greater than 50 miles. Faversham at 50 miles and Ashford at 56 miles, plus all stations beyond fall within the DfT definition of a long rail journey. I reminded Charles Horton that advance fares from Dover, Deal and Sandwich to Manchester are cheaper than a monthly off-peak return to St Pancras. Since the end of the their 25% off-peak discount offer the advance cost of travel to Birmingham is once again only 60% of the cost of travel to St Pancras. The latter fares are usually available at little more than 7 days' notice. Before asking Charles whether they will be offering advance fares from October, assuming they continue with the franchise, I pointed out the £1.1 billion of advance tickets sold in the year to April 2013 represented some 22% of all ticket revenue from 44 million advance tickets sold. I also asked whether a future Revenue Support Arrangement with the DfT would influence their ability to offer advance fares. I had also pointed out that the recent 25% discount offers were only available online and not advertised on stations or on trains. London Midland advertised a similar offer in both these places.

In response Charles failed to answer the questions, claimed the 25% discount offers had been well supported and reiterated the off-peak offers that the company have in place all year round that are available at ticket booking offices in addition to the website option.

An interesting meeting.