

KENT RAIL STRATEGY 2021

RESPONSE TO CALL-IN FOR SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

There are two principal points raised by Mr Bird in support of the decision to call-in the decision of Cabinet to approve and adopt the Kent Rail Strategy 2021 as Kent County Council policy:

(1) Call-in under clause 17.72 (a) - The decision is not in line with the Council's Policy Framework.

The Thameslink service was to provide frequent and fast train services which would take less than 60 minutes to travel from Maidstone East to London City.

When the Cabinet approved the Kent Rail Strategy 2021, it agreed to a slow service to London Blackfriars instead of the fast Thameslink services to London City, which is the priority set out in the Local Transport Plan. Accordingly, the Strategy does not deliver the policy aims of the County Council's Local Transport Plan.

RESPONSE

The long-standing aim of the Council's rail policy in respect of a through service from Maidstone to the City has indeed been the delivery of a fast service to London Blackfriars, continuing via the central-core stations of City Thameslink, Farringdon and St Pancras and on to Cambridge.

Following information received from a number of sources within the rail industry, it has become evident that this ambition would need to be delivered in two stages: an initial service to London Blackfriars, with an eventual extension via St Pancras to Cambridge. It has also become clear that there are several constraints to the operation of the original service, which will result in its routing via Bromley South and the Catford loop line rather than via London Bridge:

- (i) There is concern that the operation of the full 24tph service through the central-core (which would be realised with the addition of 2tph to/from Maidstone) would result in service disruption affecting all branches of the Thameslink network. This is partly due to the fact that the signalling technology required to support 24tph has not proved as resilient as was presumed when the full Thameslink programme was planned, and partly due to the delayed deployment of a new Traffic Management System known as 'Digital Railway';
- (ii) There is no crossover from the tracks which link London Bridge with Blackfriars to the bay platforms (3 & 4) at Blackfriars, which means that trains required to terminate at Blackfriars must be routed via Elephant & Castle;

- (iii) There is also doubt that an additional 2tph could be accommodated on the fast route from Chislehurst Junction to London Bridge without causing performance delays with other services.

All of these factors have led to the conclusion that the new service would need initially to be operated via the Catford loop line into the bay platforms at Blackfriars. This would restore a direct link between the Maidstone East line stations and the City, but would not provide the additional through connectivity to the other stations in the central Thameslink core.

It is however not true to state that this would be a slow service, in the sense that the Sevenoaks via Bat & Ball to Blackfriars is a slow stopping service calling at all stations on its route. The new service to/from Maidstone East would more accurately be described as semi-fast and would be expected to take an average of about 65 or 66 minutes to/from Blackfriars. This would represent an increase in journey time of 20% when compared with the original proposal, and not 33% as has been reported.

The stopping pattern of the new service is yet to be agreed by the Department for Transport, which now controls all aspects of the train operating companies, but it would be expected to call at West Malling, Borough Green & Wrotham, Otford, Swanley, Bromley South, Denmark Hill and Elephant & Castle only before terminating at Blackfriars. Unlike the slow Bat & Ball service, it would not call at all the intermediate stations on the Catford loop line.

This is far from ideal and does fall short of the original goal as set out in LTP4, and which remains Kent County Council's ultimate goal for this service, but it is the only realistic option for the new service at present.

(2) It is understood that the trains to Blackfriars are being re-routed onto the slower Catford Loop line. This significant drawback was not made clear in the Rail Strategy and the associated documentation, nor during the 25 January 2021 Cabinet meeting.

The decision also warrants Scrutiny Call-in under clause 17.72 (c) as the decision process fails to satisfy clauses 8.5 (d) A presumption in favour of openness, 8.5 (e) Clarity of aims and desired outcomes, and 8.5 (f) Explanation of the options considered and giving reasons for decisions.

RESPONSE

The Council's Rail Project Manager set out these details in response to a question from a Member at the Environment & Transport Cabinet Committee (E&TCC) meeting on 15 September 2020, when the draft Kent Rail Strategy 2021 was considered and approved in principle before starting its public consultation.

At the Cabinet meeting on 25 January 2021, the same officer did highlight the importance of the new City service for Maidstone, although without setting out all the details of the network constraints as these had already been explained at the E&TCC meeting. He did emphasise however that the service would need to be

introduced in two stages: Maidstone East to Blackfriars, with the ambition of a future extension via the central-core stations to St Pancras and on to Cambridge.

There was certainly never any intention to withhold detailed information about the new service or to be unclear about its likely operating route. The new Kent Rail Strategy 2021 has consistently supported the new service linking Maidstone with the City throughout its many iterations and consultation process, and will continue to advocate its delivery as an essential outcome of the Council's adopted rail policy.

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