

**COUNTY COUNCIL**

**Thursday 15 March 2018**

**Question by Ian Chittenden to Paul Carter,  
Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Traded Services & Health Reform**

In November, the Secretary of State for Transport authorised a further one-year delay to the introduction of the long-awaited Thameslink rail service to Maidstone. He is now threatening to reduce the number of high-speed trains from Maidstone to London St Pancras or possibly replace them altogether with a stopping service to Abbey Wood. Does the Leader agree that the Department for Transport is failing to recognise that good rail links are vital for Maidstone's residents and businesses and what steps is he taking to ensure that the Secretary of State puts Kent's County Town back on the rail map?

**Answer**

I can assure Mr Chittenden that we have expressed our very strong concerns about the proposed change to the delivery of the Thameslink services in Kent. We have made clear that it is unacceptable that a "double-whammy" has been dealt to rail passengers in mid-Kent, with the new Maidstone East Thameslink service deferred by one year from December 2018 to December 2019 at the same time that the existing Thameslink service via Bat & Ball is being curtailed at Blackfriars for one year from May 2018 to May 2019. I wrote to the Minister with responsibility for rail on 14 December expressing Kent County Council's grave concern about the proposal to delay the introduction of Thameslink services to Maidstone until December 2019, and emphasised that this decision would blight businesses and residents throughout mid-Kent.

Mike Whiting and our officers have also made it clear, both to the Department for Transport and to the companies bidding for the new South Eastern franchise, that the proposed option to replace the High Speed service between Maidstone West and London St Pancras with a much slower service to Abbey Wood (where it could connect with the new Elizabeth Line service) is completely unacceptable. Such a proposal, which is considered in the options in the Train Service Requirement for the new franchise published by the Department for Transport, would result in a much slower and circuitous journey for Maidstone's rail passengers, and as such it should be rejected as an option for the new franchise.

Kent County Council will continue to work with the Department for Transport, and with the new franchise bidder when the award is announced later this year, to ensure that both rail routes serving Maidstone continue to provide the highest level of service, retaining High Speed from the West station and introducing Thameslink from the East station as soon as operationally possible.