

Email Correspondence between Michael Payne and Roger Johnson, Vice Chair of Sevenoaks Rail Travellers Association

From: GETPriorityEnquiries@kent.gov.uk <GETPriorityEnquiries@kent.gov.uk>

Sent: 22 January 2021 14:59

To:

Subject: RE: Our ref 18633993 Maidstone East Fast Rail service

[Sent on behalf of Michael Payne](#)

Dear Roger

Thank you for your letter of 18 December concerning the urgency surrounding the proposed Thameslink service between Maidstone East and the City. My colleagues and I completely support the need for this new service, which, as you know, has been the subject of numerous ministerial meetings and letters between members, officers and colleagues from other authorities for several years.

Firstly, I want to reassure you of the importance that Kent County Council (KCC) attributes to this new service in our new Kent Rail Strategy 2021, to which your own association has provided valuable input. In the section on 'Key Drivers of Demand for Rail Services in Kent', the strategy clearly supports the need for this new service:

"Thameslink to Maidstone East

4.14 The proposed Thameslink service to Maidstone East has now been postponed on four occasions. It was originally due to commence in January 2018, and has since been delayed to May 2018, then to December 2018, then to December 2019, and recently to an unspecified date in the future. KCC's Cabinet Member for Highways & Transport, and all his recent predecessors, have all written to the Rail Minister expressing the serious concerns of residents and businesses along the proposed route, many of whom have already made location decisions based on the proposed service.

4.15 This strategy therefore calls again on the Rail Minister to approve the operation of this last leg of the whole Thameslink service programme, with at the very least an all-day service between the county town and Blackfriars if there remains disquiet about operating the full 24 trains per hour (tph) service level through the central Thameslink core between Blackfriars and St Pancras. This would provide a regular Thameslink service every 30 minutes over its line of route."

It is perfectly true that the rail strategy states "service to be confirmed" in table 11 where the service proposals for Thameslink in Kent are set out, but that is only because this is the case at present. This does not in any way diminish KCC's commitment to its introduction.

Secondly, while the original proposal was indeed for two trains per hour (tph) all day on Monday to Saturday from Maidstone East to Cambridge via the central core stations of Blackfriars, City Thameslink, Farringdon and St Pancras, it does now appear that this objective – while still remaining the ultimate goal for this service - is

unlikely to be realised in the short term. Kent County Council's understanding, from our contacts within the rail industry, is that the service would initially operate via Bromley South, the Catford Loop and Elephant & Castle rather than via the faster route to London Bridge.

There are apparently two principal reasons for this disappointing but more likely outcome:

- there is concern about the capacity of the Mainline (Chislehurst Junction - London Bridge section) to accommodate an extra 2tph without affecting resilience;
- more significantly, there is greater concern about the capacity of the central core section of the Thameslink route to accommodate the original proposal for 24tph, which would mean the Maidstone East service terminating in the bay platforms at Blackfriars.

To further complicate matters, following the re-ordering of the track layout as part of the Thameslink project, these platforms (3 & 4) can only be accessed from the Elephant & Castle route and not from London Bridge. Therefore, for all these reasons, it does now appear that we are looking at an initial service operating between Maidstone East and Blackfriars.

While this is extremely disappointing when compared with the original proposal, KCC's view is that it would be better to support this interim proposal than to reject it so as to hold out for the full service, risking in the process losing the whole project and resulting in no additional service at all. It is, as I am sure you will agree, an incredibly complex and frustrating situation, but at least Blackfriars would give Maidstone and the other mid-Kent stations a direct service to the City once again, offering relief to Mainline stations such as Sevenoaks by reducing rail-heading from mid-Kent stations to access City trains.

Thirdly, I agree that the readiness of the new maintenance and stabling sidings at Ashford, and also of the rolling-stock, are essential elements in the provision of the new service. The facilities at Ashford are developing at pace, with the original Bombardier depot on Chart Road now demolished and in its place new sidings being provided for Southeastern's Mainline stock, adjacent to the Charing Cross route on which these trains operate. This will in turn release sufficient capacity on the north-eastern side of the station, adjacent to the separate Hitachi depot, for the new rolling-stock for the Thameslink service to be stabled overnight and to receive maintenance as required. This will work well operationally, providing a short run into Ashford station for commencement and termination of each day's service.

Of more worrying concern is indeed the availability of that rolling-stock, and it might be that the trains provided for the new service are just as new as the Thameslink stock but from a separate provider. The overriding issue is of course that there is sufficient stock for at least the provision of 2tph all day between Maidstone East and Blackfriars, with early up and late down workings to and from Ashford.

Fourthly, while you are quite right to raise concerns about proposals from other parties that the paths for the new service might be taken over by other routes from Brighton and Gatwick, I can reassure you that KCC has never supported such a proposal, and if there were ever to be such a suggested reallocation of paths there

would be unanimous objection from MPs and authorities across mid-Kent. In any event, there would be the same issue of reticence within the rail industry to go to the full 24tph through the central core between Blackfriars and St Pancras, regardless of the stations from which the additional trains had emanated.

In summary please be assured of KCC's total support for the new Thameslink service between Maidstone East and the City, even if there has to be compromise on the initial service, while holding the Government to account for the eventual extension of that service through the central core and on to Cambridge.

Thank you once again for writing to me about this important issue, and I hope that, although a very lengthy reply, I have at least assuaged you of your concerns about this Council's commitment to the Thameslink service linking Maidstone East to the City of London.

Yours sincerely

Michael Payne
Member for Tonbridge
Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport
Kent County Council

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From: Michael Payne - MEM <Michael.Payne@kent.gov.uk>

Sent: 18 December 2020 17:06

To: Roger Johnson

Cc: Roger Gough - MEM <Roger.Gough@kent.gov.uk>; GET Priority Enquiries - GT <GETPriorityEnquiries@kent.gov.uk>

Subject: FW: Maidstone East Fast Rail service

Dear Roger

Thank you for taking the time and trouble to both attend Monday's meeting and also to write to both Roger Gough and me. Despite the technical issues I think you will have seen the fact that Kent County Council and both the two MPs present, Tom Tugendhat and Laura Trott, support the reintroduction of a fast service to the city from Maidstone in the form of Thameslink. I had already had a previous meeting to that effect the week before with Helen Grant MP and the Minister. I will ask that the specific points you raise in your letters are investigated by officers for appropriate response in the New Year.

Yours sincerely
Michael

Michael.Payne@kent.gov.uk
County Member for Tonbridge
Cabinet Member for Highways & Transport

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From: Roger Johnson

Sent: 18 December 2020 16:41

To: Michael Payne - MEM <Michael.Payne@kent.gov.uk>

Subject: Maidstone East Fast Rail service

Dear Cllr Payne

I attach a letter to you on behalf of the Sevenoaks Rail Travellers Association following the public meeting with the Minister on Monday this week. We are very concerned that there is a serious risk that without vigorous intervention by all stakeholders this unique opportunity to increase peak capacity from west Kent will be lost. You will be aware that Network Rail's recent Kent Route Study said that the Maidstone East service offered the only option to expand services from west Kent. If this opportunity is lost there is no "Plan B".

WE therefore urge Kent County Council, in line with its recent Kent Rail Strategy 2021, campaign for the delivery of this long awaited service.

For your reference I also attach a letter we sent to Roger Gough following his participation in our virtual AGM in October.

With seasons greetings

Roger Johnson Vice Chair Sevenoaks RTA