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To: Environment, Highways & Waste Policy Overview and Scrutiny
Committee 25 May 2010

Subject: Passenger Rail Services

Classification Unrestricted

Summary: This report updates Members on passenger rail services following the extensive timetable changes in December 2009

Introduction

1. Following the completion of the Channel Tunnel Rail Link (HS1) in 2007, full domestic services between Kent and Stratford/St. Pancras using the high speed line were introduced from 13 December 2009. At the same time Southeastern completely revised the timetable for all its services in Kent, South London and Sussex.

History

2. The Strategic Rail Authority (SRA), at the time the non-departmental public body set up by Government to provide strategic direction for the railway industry, consulted on a draft train specification for the Integrated Kent Franchise (IKF) in February 2004. The specification outlined the proposed number of trains per hour between stations in the peak and off-peak periods. The County Council responded to the draft, objecting in particular on proposals for the:

- Loss of the Maidstone to Cannon Street service
- Loss of off-peak services at many smaller rural stations
- Reduction of services on the North Kent Line (NKL) to London termini other than St. Pancras
- HS1 services extending only as far as Folkestone Central station

3. The IKF was awarded by Government to Southeastern in April 2006 and between the February 2004 consultation and the major timetable change last December, pressure from the County Council and others resulted in improvements to the specification with HS1 services extended to Dover, at least one train per hour stopping at all Kent's stations in both directions and increased trains on the NKL as far as the Medway Towns. However, despite intense lobbying from MPs, Maidstone and Tonbridge and Malling Borough Councils as well as the County Council, the Maidstone – Cannon Street services were cut from December. There are also fewer

services from stations east of the Medway Towns on the NKL to Victoria and Charing Cross/Cannon Street and the journey times are now longer compared to the pre-13 December situation as more intermediate stops are made.

Current Situation

4. Since the high speed services have started, it is realised that because the trains are usually stabled overnight at Ramsgate and some have to travel to and from Dover at the start and finish of the day, they pass through Sandwich and Deal. There is strong pressure to get these trains to stop at these stations to enable passengers to access the high speed services directly.

5. Kent County Council held a Rail Summit on 25 March which involved Southeastern, Network Rail, Passenger Focus and rail user groups. This gave the opportunity for rail passengers to voice their concerns about the current rail services and to receive responses from the rail industry representatives. Follow up meetings between the County Council and individual rail user groups are planned.

6. In the timetable changes introduced on 23 May 2010, Southeastern has made relatively minor adjustments to lengthen some trains to match passenger demand, has retimed and added stops to improve schoolchildren's journeys, and made some minor changes to train timings to enable better connections between train services. Timetable changes are made either in May or December.

Mechanism for future major timetable changes

7. The Government sets the minimum train specification as part of a rail franchise and this governs the level of subsidy it will grant the incoming franchisee. If a Train Operating Company wants to introduce an increase to the minimum specification, it must do so at its own financial risk – ie it will only do so if the increase in cost is relatively minor, or it considers it can make a profit through increased ticket sales.

8. At the Stakeholder meeting on 5 May, Southeastern discounted the likelihood of any significant changes being made in the current franchise which runs until 2012, with a possible extension to 2014 if performance targets are met by the train operator. Southeastern explained that they could not afford to introduce new services involving additional rolling stock as the subsidy they are receiving from Government continues to decline significantly and they are expected to pay a small premium to the Government in 2014. Southeastern's revenues have not increased as forecast in the franchise agreement due to the recession and the delays in housing and employment development - particularly at Ebbsfleet and Stratford. Indeed, Government has had to grant Southeastern additional subsidy recently to compensate for this loss in revenue.

Next Steps

9. As the last Government and Southeastern have refused to reintroduce the Maidstone to Cannon Street services and to enable the High Speed services to stop at Deal, it is necessary to lobby the new Government.

10. Failing that, it is imperative that very strong representations are made to the Government to influence the train specification for the next franchise starting in 2014 to ensure that the current deficiencies in rail services are corrected. Specifically for services to and from Maidstone, options for improved services include reinstatement of the Cannon Street service: an all-day service to Blackfriars, City Thameslink, Farringdon and St. Pancras before or after the Thameslink scheme is completed; or the extension of high speed services to Maidstone West, via Strood.

Recommendation

Members are asked to note the contents of the report

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