

Marshlink Action Group

Report of a meeting held on 23rd September, 2009

This meeting was sparsely attended there being only four including myself attending. The others were Stuart Harland (Chairman), Kenneth Bird (Conservation Society) and Paul Gammon (newly co-opted and representing Doleham). Several apologies were received. Because of the lack of representation SH decided just to discuss the Route Utilisation Strategy Document (RUS) which was produced by Network Rail this spring. SH said that the document was "total rubbish" for several reasons with the facts having been poorly researched. It said the Marshlink line was 20% unutilised despite reports from many sources that there was frequent overcrowding! Dr Keith Taylor had said on his return journey from Ashford that evening prior to the meeting the train was full. No allowance was made of the fact that the line is greatly used by tourists. Passenger Focus is currently conducting its own survey by having members counting the passengers alighting and departing at each station on the route both at peak hour and off peak travel. This ought to reveal a more accurate picture. There is a new Group known as the Bexhill Rail Action Group (BRAG). It is interested in having an additional "Javelin" high speed service similar to that which currently runs between Folkstone, Dover, Broadstairs, Ashford and St Pancras, to connect London to Hastings and Bexhill. Such a service would reduce the journey time for those coming from Bexhill from 1hr 52mins (via Haywards Heath) to 1hr 15mins. It would of course mean additional dual tracking and electrification of the Marshlink line, although diesels could be used to pull the carriages in the short term. Interestingly there was a mischievous comment apparently made at a meeting SH had with BRAG that such service need not stop at Rye! SH intends to respond to this suggestion as MLAG would insist that Rye be included.

Anyone wishing to learn more about BRAG can view their web site
www.bexhillrailaction.org.uk

There is to be a full committee meeting in late October.

MARSHLINK ACTION GROUP

working for the improvement of the rail service
between Ashford and Hastings

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To: (1) Kent RUS Consultation Response

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(2) Sharon Hedges, Passenger Link Manager, Passenger Focus

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(3) Tim Sparrow, Sussex Community Rail Partnership

(tim.sparrow@tiscali.co.uk)

re: Kent RUS consultation

Date: 23 July 2009

Dear Sirs,

Firstly, our apologies that our response to the invitation to comment on the draft Kent RUS is only being sent to you on the last day for comment.

By way of background on the MarshLink Action Group ("MLAG"), MLAG was formed in 2002 to represent the interests of users of the railway service between Ashford and Hastings ("the MarshLink"). MLAG, based in Rye (half way along the MarshLink), has over 100 members: it is represented on the board of the Sussex Community Rail Partnership and has representation on its committee from stations along the MarshLink and from Rye Town Council. MLAG seeks to work constructively with Network Rail, the train operating companies, Passenger Focus and other rail groups in the south east. MLAG's website can be seen at:
<http://www.mlag.org.uk/>

Setting the scene

The MarshLink is used for ("Uses"):

- local travel along the line;
- services to London;
- access to the international Eurostar services; and
- access to the high-speed rail service to London ("the Javelin").

Passengers are therefore ("Passenger Groups"):

- local users for work and leisure purposes;
- children travelling to schools in Ashford, Rye and Bexhill;

- students travelling to colleges in Hastings, Ore (a new campus due to open in September 2009) and Ashford;
- commuter and leisure travellers to London;
- tourists using the national and international rail links.

MLAG's response to the Kent RUS Consultation - Summary

MLAG believes the conclusion in the RUS that there is insufficient demand for 2tph is ill-founded:

- MLAG argues that the RUS's characterization of the seat utilisation of the line (Figure 3.10 - average passenger volume to seat ratio – am 3hr peak) of “less than 20%” is a gross mis-calculation and questions its validity;
- MLAG further argues that there is additional current/ imminent additional capacity from recently completed and in construction developments and new projects are in process which will increase seat demand further
- MLAG further argues that the demonstrated demand for services on the MarshLink should support the investment of relatively modest infrastructure changes to facilitate 2tph

MLAG proposes that the MarshLink line should be subject to two phases of improved infrastructure during Control Period 4:

- immediately, there are existing fettling up works along the MarshLink which are well known to Network Rail, necessary to eradicate the current speed restrictions (e.g. the bank just outside Ashford Station)
- the extension of the dual track in Rye Station to Winchelsea (a distance of approximately 3 miles) which would enable a 2tph service throughout the day between Ashford and Brighton (as contemplated by Steer Davies Gleave in a recent study)
- in a later period, the inclusion of the MarshLink in the south-east electrification system. This requires the infilling of the section from Ore to Ashford and we suggest these works are within the intent of the recent White Paper on electrification.

MLAG response to the Kent RUS – Detail

1. Use of the MarshLink – current and imminent future

The MLAG Committee had difficulty reconciling their experience of the seat utilisation of the MarshLink with that given in Figure 3.10 of less than 20% in the 3 hour morning peak period. MLAG asked Network Rail for the supporting data and have been advised that this figure was determined by a “judgment call” by Network Rail (i.e. it was not statistically assessed) because weighing equipment for assessing passenger numbers is unable to be used on the diesel Turbostar trains.

The MarshLink is used over a range of time throughout the day and seasons. There are early morning commuters to London, then local workers and school children; then

tourists, particularly in the summer months and at weekends in the winter. Looking at the current and imminent future passenger volumes for each of the Passenger Groups:

Passenger Groups	Increase in passengers compared with Network Rail assessment
Local users for work and leisure purposes	<p>The MarshLink franchisee, Southern Railway, recently said there “has been an unprecedented increase in passenger numbers [on the MarshLink] in recent years.” The Sussex RUS also refers to overcrowding on the western end of the Brighton to Ashford line but the line is one and the same as is described as being less than 20% used in the Kent RUS. As explained below this table, MLAG believes the current passenger numbers should be properly assessed.</p> <p>From this higher starting point, new developments need to be factored into the projections of future passenger numbers. Looking at two towns along the line, by way of example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - significant housing development is taking place in Ashford with 700 of the planned 3,000 new houses having been built and with residents who will look as far as Hastings for employment; - in Bexhill, the current population of 45,000 is expected to increase by 55% by 2020. <p>In addition, a new major road from Bexhill has been approved with the primary objective of bringing investment into the Bexhill/ St. Leonards area.</p>
School children	<p>There are children along the line travelling to schools in Ashford, Rye and Bexhill. There are particular problems for children living near Winchelsea, Three Oaks and Doleham (“the Small Stations”) where the train service has, effectively, been withdrawn. The use of the line would be increased with a 2tph frequency and a reliable service; stopping at the Smaller Stations, immediately possible when line speed increases permit, would provide additional passenger numbers (see 2. below).</p>
College students travelling to colleges along the MarshLink	<p>Two new higher education facilities are due to open in September 2009:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Station Plaza Site (Hastings College’s new building in central Hastings immediately next to

	<p>Hastings Station is expected to have 2,500 students attending each day (i.e. the total registered will be in excess of this number) and 500 evening students. There would also be 500 staff;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ore Valley (Hastings College's new building immediately adjacent to Ore Station) is expected to have 800 students daily and 300 evening students. There would also be 200 staff. It should be noted that the MarshLink train doesn't stop at Ore Station (in practical terms) at the moment and a very significant passenger demand is not expected to be satisfied. <p>These educational facilities will generate students from along the MarshLink and therefore additional passengers.</p> <p>In addition there is a new Primary Care Centre next to Hastings College with an unknown (to MLAG), but probably very substantial, throughput of patients and staff.</p>
Commuters and other travellers to London	<p>The Javelin service from Ashford to London will generate additional passengers on the MarshLink as the catchment area for trains from Ashford spreads:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - beyond Rye to Bexhill; and - because passengers who currently railhead (a current practice of many commuters living along the MarshLink line) find it no longer proves to be the quicker option. <p>One of the additional factors of concern for travellers to and from London has been connectivity at Ashford. The issue was put to the DfT when consulting on the new franchise terms and the new franchise includes a requirement of the franchisee in this regard. We therefore expect this improved connectivity to reduce railheading of commuters and therefore an increase in passenger numbers on the MarshLink.</p>
Tourists using the national and international rail links	<p>The MarshLink area has been a tourist attraction for many years. Tourists tend to travel outside the 3 hour morning peak and are therefore not recognised in the RUS's seat utilisation studies but are, nonetheless, significant in number: they are also seasonal and therefore would only be able to be counted at the right time of year. There are also tourists wishing to visit the</p>

	<p>Smaller Stations throughout the year for cycling, walking and bird watching. With current exchange rates and the Javelin service from London to Ashford, the area is likely to be even more attractive to UK and non-UK tourists. Recent additions to the tourist scene in the MarshLink area include the De la Warr Pavilion in Bexhill; the Eastbourne tennis tournament (now open to men); the newly opened Towner Gallery in Eastbourne; the designation of the South Downs as a national park and the recently announced Jerwood Gallery in Hastings. All can be projected to increase passenger numbers significantly.</p>
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MLAG does not believe that the current seat ratio categorisation is accurate and the current utilisation should be properly assessed. The figure should then be adjusted for the immediately imminent and substantial changes in passenger numbers identified from the Passenger Groups in the above table. When these figures are assessed, it should be noted that these are achieved with:

- only one train per hour plus a shuttle between Ashford and Rye during the peak hours (but a service which is not considered by users to be reliable because it is often cancelled); and
- services which do not operate late at night.

Further significant increases in passenger numbers would result from an extension of these services over a greater period of time and with 2tph.

2. Infrastructure requirements

In the context of an existing high demand for rail services along the MarshLink and a projected increase in demand (as argued in 1. above), the MarshLink line should:

- immediately, be repaired where necessary to increase the speed of the existing line. Necessary repairs include the bank just outside Ashford station and other fettling up and signal improvements to enable the current speed restrictions on the line to be eradicated. This should then permit 2tph and the trains to stop at the Smaller Stations on the MarshLink;
- within the timeframe of the current Control Period 4 (2009 – 2014), be capable of two trains per hour in each direction throughout the day; and
- in the future, as part of the Second Generation RUS, be fully integrated into the south-east's electrical system.

3. Ashford Station platform requirements

MLAG notes the argument put forward in the RUS relating to platform restrictions at Ashford to enable 2tph. MLAG has difficulty understanding the problem described since, at the moment, there are 2tph during peak hours.

4. **Finally**, the critical stretch of single track between Rye and Ore lies at the edges of both the Kent RUS and the Sussex RUS. MLAG believes because of this, the potential for a rail corridor linking the main coastal towns to high speed domestic and international services at Ashford, and to east Kent generally, has never been properly evaluated. It also believes that the present limitation of an hourly service between Hastings and Ashford keeps rail travel below a threshold that makes it uncompetitive even with the very poor local road system. With such a low frequency this position is unlikely to change significantly. In a different context, MLAG believes that the benefit to the whole south-east railway system of investing in this cross-country route rather than radial routes, to and from London, has not been fully evaluated.

Members of MLAG would welcome the opportunity to discuss or enlarge on any of the issues raised. Please do not hesitate to contact us.

Yours sincerely,

Stuart Harland
Chairman
MarshLink Action Group