

MARSH LINK ACTION GROUP

working for the improvement of the rail service
between Ashford and Hastings
Knellstone House, Udimore, Rye, TN31 6AR
info@mlag.org.uk www.mlag.org.uk
Tel: 01797-222410

East Coastway Timetable Consultation
Southern
G0-Ahead House
26-28 Addinscombe Road
Croydon
CR9 5GA

Email: info@mlag.org.uk

11 January 2010

Dear Sirs,

re: East Coastway Consultation re December 2010 Timetable

I refer to your Consultation Document dated October 2009 regarding the December 2010 Timetable and other changes contemplated on the East Coastway ("the Line") with effect from that date.

The Committee of the MarshLink Action Group ("MLAG") has considered the proposals put forward in the Consultation Document and would like to register some comments, proposals and concerns:

1. Historical perspective

MLAG was, generally, very pleased when the Ashford – Brighton direct service was introduced in December 2005 because it provided:

- a direct service between these two major towns and the towns between: from the point of view of Rye, this enhanced its rail links for business and also, very importantly, for tourism; and
- more direct access from West Sussex to international rail services from Ashford International station.

At the same time as introducing these improvements to the rail service, there was a substantial reduction in services to/ from small stations, in particular Winchelsea, Three Oaks and Doleham ("the Small Stations"): we have assumed this curtailment of service was to try to achieve a quicker travelling time between Ashford and Brighton.

Since those changes were introduced, we have made many representations to Southern about the overall service including the need for:

- improved reliability of the service (since unreliability results in passengers finding alternative routes)
- improved connection times at Ashford onto London trains;
- improved passenger capacity on the line;
- a useful train service at the Smaller Stations;
- improvements to the track itself. It is understood that infrastructure is the primary responsibility of Network Rail but, we believe, it is also the responsibility of Southern to promote discussion with Network Rail for infrastructure changes to improve its own

services and performance. In this regard we have consistently targeted track enhancement in two distinct phases, either consecutively or concurrently:

- implementing recommendations of a report by consulting engineers Steer Davies Gleave by fettling up track (and other minor works) to raise line speeds and extend the Rye loop westwards by about 2 ½ miles. This would make two services an hour each way operationally feasible along the Line, something that is particularly important to establish connections with regular twice-hourly services west of Eastbourne and to London from Ashford - the lack of this connection with alternate trains has been the cause of much irritation among passengers;
- electrification of the Line (full dualling could be considered part of strategic rather than local planning).

Representations were also made during the re-franchise process which Govia eventually won and we believed the re-appointment of the previous franchisee would enable some of the proposals we had made to be taken on board under the new franchise.

2. The proposals in the Discussion Document

Looking at each of the proposals that, we believe, directly impinge on the Line:

A. Reduction in operating equipment from 5 to 4 diesel units

One of the continuing issues that passengers have with the MarshLink service is reliability: too often a unit breaks down and the service is replaced by coaches. This concern results in reduced passenger numbers (some railheading to other services) or avoiding the Rye Shuttle (which is particularly prone to such substitutions).

The current service is operated by five units but the proposal in the Consultation Document reduces the equipment to four units (Para. 2.5). To a certain extent, we understand the argument for reduced equipment is supported by the reduced length of the journey by turning around at Eastbourne rather than Brighton (and, we note, the purported improved reliability of the diesel units). Nonetheless, the concern remains that the service proposed cannot be properly and fully supported by a reduction in units and passengers will have a continuing inclination to avoid the Rye Shuttle. It also goes against our aspiration for the Line to be operated on a 2tph basis.

Proposals:

- *MLAG will monitor the continuing reliability of the diesel units and may wish to return to you on this matter over the period up to December 2010;*
- *we would certainly not wish to see the demise of the Rye Shuttle and, in fact, have argued previously for 2tph throughout the day. In the event that the Uckfield line is electrified, we would wish to return to you to argue for the return of the 5th unit to be made available to the Line.*

B. Cutting of the direct express service at Eastbourne

We understand that Southern is bound by the terms of the new franchise to improve connections at Ashford to London trains. However, we also understand you have problems in doing this when you are constrained by platform availability at Brighton. By splitting the route into two parts you are released from the constraints at Brighton and can therefore improve connection times at Ashford to both the High Speed service to St.Pancras International and regular service

to Charing Cross (although we appear to have lost the semi-fast service to London Charing Cross).

Proposals:

- *although we feel we can understand the advantage the proposed change will have on your timetabling issues, cutting the service at Eastbourne will clearly have an impact on passengers who travel across this divide in different ways:*
- *for regular passengers who travel across Eastbourne, we would wish to see their journey interrupted as little as possible by reducing the connection time to as short a period as possible in both directions. We would also prefer to see adjacent platforms being used to minimize the disturbance of changing trains:*
- *tourism is a very important industry to Rye and to the Small Stations. We believe it is very important for the publicity department of Southern to work with the tourism offices of Rye and the Smaller Stations to publicise the area to tourists and the ease of the whole journey (which we trust it will be).*

C. A 2-hourly service to Winchelsea and Three Oaks

The new proposed service includes stops at Winchelsea and Three Oaks on an alternate train basis (i.e. a 2-hourly service to each station); there is effectively no useful service being proposed for Doleham. These three stations are the focal point for a large number of villages and the three stations are (or should be) centres for tourism in their areas. We feel the proposed rail service from December 2010, being more of a local service than an express service, should accommodate all these stations. The turn-around times at Ashford and Eastbourne would appear to be able to accommodate the ability to stop at all three stations and we feel this should be included in the new schedule.

Proposals:

- *all trains should stop at all three stations therefore providing an hourly service;*
- *the (effectively) new service at the Small Stations and the renewed tourist potential for the area covered by the Small Stations should be publicized in your own brochures (see also 2.B. above).*

D. Connection times at Ashford

We are concerned that some of the connection times at Ashford from the MarshLink train to the Charing Cross train is not sufficient to take account of slightly late-running trains, particularly for any physically impaired passengers: for example:

- the regular connection arriving Ashford at xx.56 and departing at xx.02;
- the early morning service arriving Ashford at 07.00 and departing at 07.02.

Prior to the introduction of the Brighton – Ashford service there was an arrangement in place that trains would be delayed for up to five minutes for incoming connecting trains: however, it was our experience that communication between Southern Railways and South-Eastern Railways staff at Ashford was poor and this arrangement was difficult to bring into effect within the short time available.

Proposal, either:

- *the previous delayed connection arrangement should be re-introduced (but with staff authorized to put the delay into effect so that it worked, practically); or*

- the connection time should be a minimum of 10 minutes.

E. Overcrowding of trains

We have frequently complained about the overcrowding on the Line and note your proposal for the service to the west of Eastbourne, to introduce longer 313 units between Eastbourne and Brighton. There is no proposal to alleviate the overcrowding on the Line to the east of Eastbourne.

Concern – we feel the introduction of 313 units (without toilets or air conditioning) is a degradation of the service and wonder if any alternative equipment is available in the foreseeable future.

Proposal – with regard to the Line to the east of Eastbourne, we propose that the first class compartment should be removed to make a one-class train.

F. Dualling and electrification of the rail line

We have argued over a long period of time for improvements to the infrastructure of the Line to be able to enjoy the benefits of flexibility that dualling and electrification provide (see also I. above). We feel that the effective downgrading of the service on the Line from an express service to a local service reduces the likelihood of these improvements being put into effect without the added impetus that Southern can bring to negotiations with Network Rail.

Proposal - Southern should engage in discussion with Network Rail about infrastructure improvements on the Line to enable you to improve the service. If Southern has any doubts about the benefits to the Line that can be achieved through dualling and electrification, MLAG would like a meeting with Southern to discuss the benefits we envisage.

G. Gaps in services

We note there are some gaps in the services as follows:

- there is no train from Rye to Ashford between the 20.34 and the 21.58;
- for passengers from Ashford to stations west of Hastings, there is no train between the 20.10 and the 21.34.

Proposal - the scheduling of these services should be reviewed.

We would welcome the opportunity to discuss any of the comments, proposals or concerns with you.

Yours sincerely,

Stuart Harland
Chairman
MarshLink Action Group