

CHARLIE ELPHICKE MP



HOUSE OF COMMONS

LONDON SW1A 0AA

Paul Maynard MP
House of Commons
London
SW1A 0AA

29 June 2017

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Dear Paul,".

Response to consultation over South Eastern franchise

We are writing this response as MPs representing constituencies covered by the South Eastern franchise.

The quality of service offered to our constituents by Govia's South Eastern over the past four years has declined in quality – from 84% of customers satisfied or very satisfied in 2012 to the 77% announced by Transport Focus on 24th January 2017. In Spring 2016, this had fallen as low as 69%. This time period has also seen a fall in train performance from 92% to around 86%. Though of course a significant amount of this is due to Network Rail and infrastructure issues. In addition, passenger numbers have continued to rise, as Kent delivers more of the UK's housing needs. Passengers are dissatisfied. With insufficient room to stand at times and with some season tickets at more than £6,000 they feel they are not getting value for money.

The parts of South East London covered by the franchise are quintessential commuter-territory, with a very high percentage of its population travelling to and from central London every day for work. With no local Underground provision as an alternative, passengers are entirely dependent on what the consultation acknowledges has been an 'unacceptably poor [service] for far too long.'

Taken together with the rising cost of travel, it comes as little surprise that very few customers have confidence in the operator being able to deliver the improvements that are needed, as demonstrated in consecutive Transport Focus passenger surveys. By association, the ongoing, well-documented problems across the network have also tarnished the reputation of the DfT. It has therefore become clear that a major rethink is required with regards to both the management and organisation of the franchise.

Overcrowding and Capacity

With no additional rolling stock having been procured since 2009 – which consisted of high-speed Javelin trains for HS1 lines – overcrowding on the South Eastern network is very severe.

Member of Parliament for Dover & Deal



Additional rolling stock is needed on South Eastern Metro lines, and given the public assurances passengers have received, it is unacceptable that this problem is yet to be resolved.

Significant housing development in North Kent and the London suburbs will increase demand throughout the duration of the next franchise period. This issue will therefore only worsen unless action is taken now. Already, the situation is dangerous, with passengers frequently witnessing fellow customers fainting due to overcrowding on carriages. For those who are pregnant, elderly, or disabled, travelling at peak times is often unbearable, and for many, out of the question altogether. That is simply not good enough. Securing additional rolling stock, and identifying suitable stabling facilities, must therefore be a priority for any future service operator.

The next franchise from 2018 to 2027 will need to add significant new capacity to meet passenger needs and provide for the circa 19,000 new homes in Kent planned by 2031, with work needed to ensure up-to-date housing estimates are used. For example, the Draft Kent Route study contains old projections for Tunbridge Wells and underestimates housing growth by more than half. Meanwhile the number of jobs in Kent is set to grow by 20%. The number of daily commuters from Kent to London is expected to grow by 30-50%.

We look forward to the Thameslink services due to start in 2018, especially for the Medway towns and the Maidstone connections to the city. These are much needed, will be warmly welcomed and much used. With this in mind we believe that the DfT should require South Eastern bidders to take account of these services in their access to stations and car park plans, as the Thameslink operator will receive the passenger income at the South Eastern stations but the latter will be required to provide the car parking.

We also welcome the opportunity the new class 700 series trains could bring to strengthen services on other parts of the network, especially in West Kent, and we urge the DfT to include this proposal in the new franchise specification. Here we also need the Network Rail Kent Route Study outcomes to deliver significant improvements on the routes to Sevenoaks, Tonbridge, Tunbridge Wells and Hastings to enable growth to continue on parts of the network with outdated infrastructure. The additional capacity in 2017, as previously discussed, would have allowed growth in capacity and a network where the infrastructure is capable of 12 car trains – but there are insufficient trains to make use of it. That must be put right.

We support other proposals put forward by the consultation to alleviate overcrowding, including the introduction of high capacity carriages, with wider doors and quicker access, on Metro services, as well as plans to reconsider the feasibility of twelve carriage trains and extending platforms to accommodate these. Metro-style carriages, however, would not be appropriate for Mainline services due to the longer journey times. It would also be wise to assess whether station staff can do more to oversee and manage the problems caused by overcrowding, both to maintain passenger safety and to ensure on-board space is maximised. The new franchise must also provide for disabled access and pushchairs.



Our current work with our constituents has suggested that the following requirements are essential for the next South Eastern franchise:

- Additional capacity on overcrowded services during peak hours to be delivered through additional high speed rolling-stock, and during off-peak hours through more frequent high speed services;
- Cascaded capacity on mainline services to allow for the growth expected, with the additional stabling facilities required for maintenance of cascaded rolling-stock;
- Faster services to East Kent – in particular to Dover in an hour (Dover in 60), two trains to Deal and Sandwich every hour and a one hour service from London to Thanet;
- The realisation of the Thanet Parkway station project and the modernisation of Herne Bay station, and the provision of disabled access to all platforms. Disabled access must also be a priority at High Brooms station;
- The modernisation of the points and signalling on the Kent Fast line to facilitate overtaking and faster services;
- New trains for the metro and inner Kent areas to accommodate the expected growth in demand, and to replace trains that will be approaching 40 years old by the end of the next franchise;
- A significant improvement in train performance, to a level better than 2012;
- Improved provision of access to stations to enable the expected growth;
- Review extending the Oyster network where there is demand in Kent;
- An operator who can realise the benefits afforded by smart ticketing as well as the introduction of flexible season tickets for part-time commuters;
- Better connections with Gatwick Airport, in particular the restoration of direct services from Tunbridge Wells & Tonbridge.

Providing the passenger with travel options in London

Customers rightfully expect a responsive, flexible timetable that allows them to easily travel around the network for employment and recreational purposes, as well as adapt when delays occur and different routes are needed. We therefore oppose the consultation's proposal (Question 17) to reduce the number of London destinations served by Metro routes, restricting each line to one terminal – London Victoria, Charing Cross or Cannon Street – except in areas such as Sevenoaks where the reduced number of London destinations may provide a more regular and reliable service. While we understand the complexity of the network, and the problems these junctions can cause, Metro services to a number of termini is one of the few strengths of the franchise. Similarly, we would oppose any reduction in services on the Mainline Ashford and



Hastings to London routes. Simplifying the services on offer may, from a logistical and operational standpoint, appear attractive, but will inevitably only shift this pressure elsewhere on the network, forcing passengers to travel across the capital. It would represent a serious diminishment of service for commuters in London and inner Kent.

We would urge for more services to stop at Lewisham – so that the City and Canary Wharf can be easily accessed – and for the Train Operating Company (TOC) to make better use of existing infrastructure such as the Bromley North Branch Line. Passengers continue to suffer from poor connections due to rigid and poorly integrated timetabling when changing at Grove Park station, and we therefore welcome the consultation's suggestion that timetables should be more regularly reviewed, with the operator taking steps to engage further with the communities it serves to ascertain local priorities for the network.

It is vital that the franchise increasingly operates as part of an integrated travel package, which includes Thameslink, the Elizabeth Line, Crossrail 2, and a potential extension of the Bakerloo Line. Working in tandem, these would deliver significant journey time improvements and increase access to employment opportunities across the city for people living in the suburbs.

We therefore support the campaign for the rollout of smarter ticketing systems, such as the extension of Oyster or an Oyster-style network to stations in Sevenoaks, which will help achieve more joined-up travel so that a constituent's commute to work feels like one journey rather than two or three separate journeys. There is local precedent for this at stations such as Swanley, and local support is strong due in part to the limitations of the SEFT Key card system. We urge the DfT to publish their assessment of this proposal.

Customer services

Staff at South Eastern stations are, generally, very helpful, dealing with enquiries as best as they can during times of disruption. They are clearly often caught between a rock and a hard place, fielding questions with little information or support from the control room. Although we are told South Eastern have issued station staff with tablet computers to help them better disseminate advice when things go wrong, we have seen no evidence of this at the coalface.

Improving communication during disruption must be a priority for the future TOC. Indeed, as *Transport Focus*' report – 'South Eastern rail franchise: what passengers want' – recently highlighted:

'Passengers highly value staff presence and visibility, and they would like to see this enhanced. Helpful, informed staff on stations and on trains would help to improve satisfaction with handling disruption and perceptions of personal security, which are both seen as important areas for improvement.'

We would encourage the future operator to strengthen lines of communication with the passengers it serves, making the most of social media and other digital platforms to provide customers with real-time updates and advice for multiple routes. Passengers need to be informed



in a sufficiently timely and acceptable manner, through innovative means such as journey-planning applications and on-train screen updates. We are aware that Network Rail is currently trialling the use of infographic updates to keep passengers in the loop, and it would make sense if the TOC worked with Network Rail staff to expand the reach of this. To improve passenger confidence in the industry, both organisations should seek opportunities to further engage with their customers, as well as making their decision-making process more transparent, especially on issues of timetabling and fare increases.

This is particularly pertinent given the recent media attention South Eastern have received for their stealth fare rise. The future franchise should include a commitment to transparency of fares, including a requirement for clear advance notice of any fare increases.

With regards to compensation, we welcome that the new franchise will be committed to Delay-Repay 15, a vast improvement on the current 30 minute threshold, which patently fails suburban passengers. This should be accompanied by measures to ensure that the claiming of compensation is made easier, again through digital platforms, rather than relying on the archaic, individual forms disgruntled passengers are often forced to submit. In light of our constituents' numerous complaints about poor service caused by delayed or ghost trains, we would welcome the roll-out of this new scheme prior to December 2018 and should be grateful to hear if the DfT believes this is possible. The future operator should also consider other options to make the system fairer and increasingly hassle-free, in particular exploring whether the use of smart-ticketing can be used to automatically identify passengers entitled to compensation.

Passenger facilities

Step-free access at all local stations should be a key aim of the future franchise. This is especially important in areas with a high proportion of pensioners.

Where, for spatial reasons, step-free access may not be possible, efforts should be taken to improve existing staircases and tickets halls with handrails and anti-slip tread. Other initiatives, including the Assisted Travel service, should be better publicised so that passengers with mobility issues are aware of the support available to them.

The upkeep of stations ensures a more positive travel experience, and we are aware that some passengers would like to see more seating available, especially at large stations and interchanges. On-board, customers should be able to easily access an adequate Wi-Fi network.

Improvements are needed to the current rolling stock – particularly the 456/466 units – to better ventilate air in warm weather, a frequent cause of frustration during the summer. On newer trains, drivers should have the ability to manually control air conditioning.

Requirements for Network Rail

Greater integration between the TOC and Network Rail is needed. The new franchise should include a clear requirement for closer operational alignment with TfL's tube, bus and tram services on fare levels, ease of interchange, timetabling, systems of ticketing for all modes of transport, as well as passenger information systems.



The renewal of the South Eastern franchise provides an excellent opportunity to rethink how rail services in London and the South East are operated, and we would urge Ministers to consider whether more of Network Rail's responsibilities can be brought in-house by the future TOC. Given that the next franchise will run until at least 2025, we would also encourage the DfT to assess what measures and safeguards should be introduced to ensure the future operator delivers the terms of the franchise agreement.

In addition, the following are essential requirements for Network Rail:

- Significant improvement in its contribution to train performance;
- A plan to further reduce journey times;
- Improvements to the Tonbridge to Hastings infrastructure for Kent and East Sussex;
- Capacity improvements at Ashford including connecting the high-speed line to the line at Rye and Hastings;
- Sufficient capacity at major stations to cope with the forecast growth in demand;
- Improvements in signalling on the route from Ashford to Folkestone, Dover, Deal, Sandwich and Ramsgate, and completion of the East Kent re-signalling scheme between Canterbury West and Ramsgate.

Crossrail

We believe that it is essential for Crossrail to be extended to Ebbsfleet and see this as a litmus test for Department of Transport commitment to transport investment that will prevent overcrowding for Kent rail users and deliver the essential uplift in capacity required for Ebbsfleet Garden City and north-west Kent.

We will encourage our constituents to take part in this important matter, as well as local authorities and business groups. It is vital that a clear voice is heard about the improvements needed now and to provide for future growth.

Best wishes

Charlie Elphicke MP

&

Damian Collins MP

Gareth Johnson MP

Kelly Tolhurst MP

Sir Roger Gale MP

Gordon Henderson MP

Tracey Crouch MP

Helen Whately MP

Helen Grant MP

Greg Clark MP

Bob Neill MP

Sir Michael Fallon MP