

Gatwick Express – Revised Proposals for the Brighton Main Line Route Utilisation Strategy

1. Consultation

The three month formal consultation on the Strategic Rail Authority's (SRA's) proposal for the Brighton Main Line, the Route Utilisation Strategy, closed at the start of December 2004.

Since then, the SRA has had a series of further discussions with BAA – who had made clear their discomfort with the proposals – and with representatives of the aviation industry at Gatwick and with other key stakeholders. Further options, some of them suggestions from these stakeholders, have been developed and assessed. The SRA would like to record its appreciation of the contribution of these stakeholders to the exercise.

Prior to the completion of the process and the release of the Strategy (which requires the authorisation of the Secretary of State for Transport), the SRA decided to make this short report available to interested parties. It sets out a modification to the draft Strategy designed to overcome the concerns raised in respect of the Gatwick air passenger market while retaining the very substantial benefits of the draft strategy.

2. The Issue Summarised

Demand for rail services is growing. The Brighton Main Line carries a major growing commuting flow, as well as a number of other important markets, in particular providing excellent access to Gatwick Airport. Performance – measured as train punctuality – for all services is poor: only 81% of Southern services arrive within 5 minutes of schedule, 83% of Gatwick Express services and 83% of Thameslink services.

Services are overcrowded. In the peak half hour, approaching central London, the fast line Southern services are 130% loaded (passengers/seats). This is in distinct contrast to the Gatwick Express services which have only 53% of their seats taken.

Gatwick Express trains were designed for checked-in airline baggage at Victoria. This facility was withdrawn some years ago. The trains have most of one coach set aside for passengers' baggage which is unused. The passenger space in a Gatwick Express train has 363 seats, about half the number available on a 12-coach Southern 'express' train.

Gatwick Express trains are half size, and only half used, even in peak periods. Moreover, 38% of its peak period users are commuters, not airline passengers. The trains take up a third of fast line capacity but carry many fewer than one third of passengers. This is a level of inefficiency that would be inconceivable in the aviation sector for example.

In addition Gatwick Express poses a relentless operating problem, because of the crossing moves it entails across the 4-track railway north of Gatwick and at the approaches to Victoria. These train moves contribute to the poor reliability of all train services in the corridor.

The challenge in the Route Utilisation Strategy has been to overcome this costly and inefficient arrangement, reduce overcrowding and improve service reliability and, at the

same time, to recognise the important characteristics for airline passengers that Gatwick Express offers and find a way to retain this facility for now and the years ahead.

3. The Draft Strategy and Reactions to it

The draft Strategy envisaged an end to the separate Gatwick Express train service, which currently operates through the day with a 15 minute interval non-stop, 30 minute timing between Victoria and Gatwick Airport. In its place, it proposed that Gatwick station is served by an expanded set of express services operating between Victoria and a number of key destinations in Sussex (Brighton and elsewhere). These services would offer a 10 minute (or better) service frequency, and while making intermediate station calls at East Croydon (and in some cases Clapham Junction *en route* to Gatwick) would still offer a fast 30 minute journey time (actually, 28 and 29 minutes is achievable). These services would be operated by the Southern franchise, using the Class 377 trains which are similar to Gatwick Express trains, but newer, and capable of operating in 12-car formation to offer much more overall capacity. In place of the complex set of fares on offer currently at Gatwick, which some passengers find confusing, a single London fare would be introduced, available on all services. The Gatwick Express brand would be retained, to be managed by the Southern franchise holder.

The draft Strategy set out the parameters that would be required of the franchise holder in respect of meeting the specific needs of airport passengers, but did not contain any details of the response of the train operator concerned (because at that stage, the necessary discussions had not taken place).

The concerns apparent to BAA with this approach were set out in a document called 'Murder of the Gatwick Express' released in early December 2004. These concerns merit serious attention and they have been given it.

The crucial issues, as the SRA sees it, raised by BAA are:

- the practicability of accommodating airline passengers on busy commuter trains;
- the adequacy of the arrangements at Gatwick Station, where services will switch platforms;
- the specific quality service features needed for airline passengers, especially those arriving in Britain (and therefore in unfamiliar surroundings) and those travelling with heavy baggage.

In discussion with airline industry leaders and representatives, it was made clear to the SRA that the first of these issues was seen as being a particular problem in the morning peak period where, at Gatwick, there is an overlap in the commuter peak and the flow of passengers arriving from overnight (especially trans-Atlantic) flights.

The SRA acknowledges that these are legitimate concerns and has modified its Strategy accordingly.

It has examined a number of ideas put forward by BAA. There are, in practice, only a limited number of options:

- **retain Gatwick Express as it is today.** This cannot be achieved (i.e. it's simply not practicable in train movement/track occupation terms) without losing the very substantial benefits the draft Strategy brings (see panel);
- **introduce a revised Gatwick Express.** This proposition centres on the idea of operating Gatwick Express over the Redhill route. This would avoid the conflict of train moves at the north end of Gatwick station and allow the service still to operate to/from the favoured platforms 1-3. Journey times would be slower (in the order of 40 minutes) and frequency at best would be half hourly;
- **extend Gatwick Express to destinations further south.** This could add useful capacity that would relieve overcrowding on the other services, but loses the advantage of having a train starting from Gatwick Airport station. To achieve a 4 trains/hour service, it would be necessary to replace some of the Southern express services and this would require a significant extension southwards to be effective. In effect, this would create a similar position for Gatwick customers as the draft Strategy but with lesser service frequency;
- **inject intermediate station calls into Gatwick Express.** This would help address the overcrowding problem, but like the first option, it can only be introduced at the price of losing the key benefits of the draft Strategy.

In the past there have been ideas around building flyovers or new platforms to remove the train conflicts inherent in the current Gatwick Express operation, but these schemes have not been progressed, would take many years to introduce and there is no provision to fund them.

The conclusions summarised above have been reached based on analysis carried out in December/January. Also during this period, the SRA engaged in discussion with GoVia, the operator of the Southern franchise, to establish the practical arrangements for meeting the needs of Gatwick Airport customers. Based on these parallel streams of work, the SRA has developed a revised Strategy that retains the benefits shown in the panel, while seeking to meet the three crucial issues for Gatwick passengers identified earlier.

Key Benefits: Less Overcrowding – more reliable and faster trains – less cost to taxpayer

A reduction in the peak hour loading from 119% on the existing Southern express services to 97%

Faster trains between principal Sussex towns and Victoria. Examples of journey times from Victoria are: Chichester 90 minutes (reduced from 100), Lewes 60 minutes (reduced from 70) and Worthing 70 minutes (reduced from 78)

A significant punctuality improvement for fast line services, that could be of the order of 4-5% improvement in PPM.

Annual savings in franchise payments of the order of £10m.

4. The Revised Strategy

The changes to the draft Strategy are fivefold:

1. the provision of reserved coaches on the high frequency Southern 'express' service for Gatwick Airport passengers;
2. the introduction of extra peak period trains, starting at Gatwick Airport using existing (Class 460) Gatwick Express trains, to address the peak period problem;
3. outline plans for improvements to Gatwick station and passenger handling at the station;
4. detailed commitments on airline passenger customer service issues;
5. a development path, which identifies how services can be expanded as Gatwick Airport usage develops and grows in the years ahead.

In essence, Gatwick Express will continue as a service and a brand, not a train. Gatwick Express will be a service provided exclusively to Gatwick Airport station customers on the 10 minute interval (or better) Victoria–Gatwick service, in reserved coaches for the Gatwick-Victoria journey. It will also be provided for the peak period trains that have been added to the timetable.

Reserved Coaches

Throughout the day, all of the northbound Southern express services will have the leading coach reserved for Gatwick Express passengers. This coach will be provided with floor to ceiling luggage racks, adjacent to each entrance and will include a first class section.

The Class 377 trains are:

- air conditioned;
- DDA compliant;
- fitted with CCTV systems which are securing an exceptionally high level of internal cleanliness and freedom from vandalism to date.

Extra Peak Hour Trains

These are provisionally scheduled at 07h05, 07h45 and 08h15 to match the peak airline passenger flows. These trains will be formed of the shorter Class 460 train sets. They will start from Gatwick Airport station (probably platform 1) and will be available for boarding for as long as is practicable prior to departure. Journey times to London will be approximately 33 minutes, with intermediate calls at Horley and Clapham Junction. While these services will entail the undesirable crossing moves at Gatwick station, at this time of day, in this direction, there is a conflict only with contra-peak flows on the slow lines. These trains will be especially suitable for passengers travelling with heavy baggage.

They will be, like the reserved coach services, marketed under the Gatwick Express brand.

Gatwick Airport Station

The complex and confusing ticket hall will be radically simplified, and there will be a common fare introduced for London passengers, replacing the current position where new arrivals to Britain are confronted with a choice of three train operators and a range of non-interavailable types of ticket to take them to Central London.

Gatwick Express trains will generally depart from platform 4. There will be staff on the platform to assist passengers to find their seats, and direct them to the covered waiting area for the reserved coach. At off peak times, passengers will be readily able to find seats throughout the train, although it is intended to retain the reserved coach. Even in the peak periods, our analysis shows that overall loadings of these services will not exceed 80% on departure from Gatwick, and 97% after leaving East Croydon.

Minor changes to the arrangements of platform 4 will be made to reflect the revised passenger flows.

Trains calling at Gatwick Airport station will have an extended dwell time of two minutes, which is ample for the numbers of passengers involved.

For the medium term, there will be merit in looking at further improvements at this station, with additional escalator and lift capacity. Funding such work will be a matter for discussion between the various parties. Network Rail has indicated its support for examining (with BAA as appropriate) the options that lie ahead.

Airline Passenger Customer Service

The Gatwick Express brand will be retained and promoted. The franchisee will be expected:

- To appoint a Brand Manager, responsible for all matters relating to presentation and service both at Gatwick and Victoria and on board the trains;
- To deploy sufficient staff on the platforms at Gatwick to assist and direct both arriving and departing passengers;
- To deploy sufficient staff on the platforms at Victoria to meet passengers at the barrier and assist them to the next train;
- To deploy sufficient on-train staff to provide information and assistance;
- To install wide-aisle ticket barriers at Victoria adjacent to platforms 13 & 14, from which access will be available to all the express platforms, and to invest in the required additional on-train luggage racks.

Development Path for an Expanding Gatwick

The SRA expects that the improved services that should flow from adoption of this Strategy (as revised) will lead to further demand increases in commuter and other travel on the route. Forecasts suggest that passenger volumes at Gatwick Airport will continue to rise.

As airline passenger volumes rise, the SRA would expect an increasing proportion of rail users to the airport, both from central London and other places. The Strategy provides for much improved services to destinations south of Gatwick, as well as an enhanced frequency and reliability express service to central and south London.

As and when air passenger demand grows, there are three avenues available to increase Gatwick passenger capacity.

The first is to expand the capacity of the additional peak services. The possibility of lengthening the Class 460 sets would need to be considered. Secondly, extra services can be created through the day, by extending/adapting other train services which will be operating via, and calling at, Redhill on a 30 minute interval, but operating with longer journey times. Clearly the cost/revenue implications would need to be considered at the time, but in principle all such services could have the enhanced airline passenger customer service described above.

The third is to consider increasing the proportion of reserved space in the Southern express services for Gatwick users. The feasibility of this approach will depend on the way in which the different travel markets in the corridor develop.

Looking further ahead, to the 2010-2015 period, the SRA would expect to see the introduction of the Thameslink 2000 train service plan, with four trains/hour operated with 12-car train sets between Brighton, Gatwick, Croydon, London Bridge, Blackfriars, Farringdon, St Pancras (Midland Road) and beyond. This will provide a further very substantial capacity increase, remembering that it is not possible today to operate Thameslink services via London Bridge in the commuting peaks.

5. Conclusion and Next Steps

The revised Strategy incorporates the features for Gatwick passengers described above – and retains the wider benefits, including the uplift in performance for all train services in the corridor.

Gatwick Airport users can expect to see:

- more frequent services;
- Gatwick Express retained, not as a train, but as a service;
- the benefits of the Gatwick Express brand extended to many destinations south of Gatwick, as well as Clapham Junction and East Croydon;
- an end to a confusing choice of train operators at Gatwick station;
- all Gatwick Express services provided by the new, high quality Class 377 of Class 460 units;
- easy to use ticket machines at Victoria and Gatwick;
- easy to use ticket registering gates, especially designed for passengers travelling with baggage;
- a service plan that is capable of responding to growth in passenger numbers over the years ahead.

The virtues of the Strategy – especially in getting a more reliable train service – will also of course apply to Gatwick users just as much as to others. The planned train service for

central London (Victoria), we are confident will be seen as being better than today's. The 'Airport Express' concept remains intact.

The railway industry will welcome discussion with the aviation sector and others to ensure the benefits of this approach are maximised.

Much remains to be done to implement the Strategy, and the SRA is reliant on a continuation of the goodwill and support of key players in the railway industry to see this Strategy implemented.