

Govia Thameslink Railway: 2018 Timetable Consultation Phase 2

West Sussex County Council response

July 2017

West Sussex County Council welcomes the opportunity to respond to Govia Thameslink Railway's 2018 Timetable Consultation Phase 2. This response has been prepared by officers on behalf of the County Council. It builds up on the issues highlighted in our response to Phase 1 of the consultation during autumn 2016.

The Thameslink Programme and the need for additional future investment

We welcome the significant investment in the Thameslink Programme, the additional capacity and new journey opportunities this will provide between many stations in West Sussex, particularly Gatwick Airport, and destinations north and south of London. However, we remain concerned that consultation information still gives the impression that the timetable changes in association with the completion of the Thameslink Programme will solve the problem of growing demand. Page 7 of the consultation document refers to the timetable changes accommodating '...growing demand and providing a step change in service provision and meeting the needs of passengers and this demand throughout the regions we service for decades beyond'. Network Rail's Sussex Area Route Study implies significant additional investment beyond the Thameslink Programme is required for the Brighton Main Line throughout Control Periods 6 (2019-2024) and 7 (2024-2029) to meet predicted growth in demand. It is vital that GTR work closely with Network Rail to plan and invest to meet expected population and demand growth on the Brighton Main Line.

Gatwick Airport and London Bridge connectivity

The County Council welcomes the new direct connections to be provided between Arun Valley Line and West Coastway stations and Gatwick Airport to address current long gaps between services at peak times. We also welcome the improved direct connectivity between Arun Valley Line stations and London Bridge at peak times.

Early/late morning services

We note the recommendations of the Gibb report published in June 2017 regarding the ongoing performance issues on the Southern Rail network. In particular we note the recommendation to reduce the number of overnight train services and operate these services under the Thameslink brand only. Whilst we support improvements to track maintenance arrangements so that this can improve the resilience of the network operation, we are concerned about the impact that this will have on stakeholder aspirations for greater access to the network late at night and early in the morning to support the leisure economy and particularly access for staff and passengers accessing Gatwick Airport.

The proposed timetable suggests that there is a slight deterioration in early morning connectivity to Gatwick Airport from the Arun Valley Line and West Coastway and little change in late evening connectivity. We understand that GTR are planning further consultation on services departing between 23:30 and 05:00 and the County Council would like to see this issue addressed as part of this consultation. In particular we would like to see that all efforts are being made to use technological innovations that can improve the efficiency of rail maintenance such as bi-directional running and electrical power supply isolation enhancements. The provision of high quality rail replacement coach services should be provided when maintenance is required.

Potential for disruption

We note the intention through the timetable changes to simplify the operation of services to minimise disruption, with train units dedicated to specific routes to reduce the impacts of disruption, and also to ensure that service timings are more realistic. However, we remain concerned that operating 24 trains per hour through the Thameslink core will lack sufficient resilience to operate reliably.

The County Council remain concerned about the longer travel distances and times involved and the potential impact of newly created inter-dependencies; for example a broken down train near Cambridge could directly delay services to Brighton and have knock-on impacts on services much further afield than with the current service pattern. Therefore, it is imperative that through its phased introduction in 2018 reliability of the timetable is closely monitored and amended if it cannot be operated reliably.

Connections between routes

A key issue for parts of West Sussex is the need for good connections between different routes, for example between the Brighton Main Line, West and East Coastway, and North Downs Line routes. We request that GTR closely monitors feedback from stakeholders regarding the proposed changes and closely monitors changes to understand their impacts and look to amend services if necessary to respond to any unintended consequences.

Thameslink services

Setting aside comments about reliability concerns, we think there is a case for considering connectivity of Thameslink services to and from East Grinstead as well as Littlehampton via Worthing beyond the peak time only services proposed in order to support the local economy for example, by enabling new business trips and would like this to be reconsidered.

Sunday service changes to Arun Valley Line

We note the intention to alter the operation of Arun Valley Line services on Sunday so that they operate in a similar pattern to that on Mondays to Saturday. In principle we support this, subject to a suitable balance of services being provided for the West Coastway to the east of Barnham. We await further details of these proposals through the additional consultation on Sunday services that we understand is proposed in due course.

Horsham-Dorking Line

We welcome the additional evening services proposed for this line to address the gap in services during the evening. We also support the provision of services on Sunday to grow passenger demand on this route, and we hope that this is being considered and await further details on the proposed Sunday services.

West Coastway and Arun Valley Line journey times

We note that there are no significant changes proposed that will improve journey times along the West Coastway between Brighton and Portsmouth/Southampton and on the Arun Valley Line between Portsmouth/Southampton, Chichester and London Victoria. There are longstanding stakeholder aspirations to reduce journey times on the West Coastway route, as well as improve the quality of rolling stock, increase capacity, and provide direct services to Southampton Airport, in order to support economic growth and raise the performance of the West Sussex coastal economy to bring it into line with the regional average. The West Sussex Economic Strategy 2012-2020 identifies east-west connections along the A27 corridor as a barrier to business growth. Whilst opportunities to improve journey times are constrained, the Network Rail Sussex Area Route Study (September 2015) outlined some of the opportunities that may exist around changing stopping patterns of existing services, and improving infrastructure. It is disappointing that opportunities to improve journey times along the West Sussex Coast between Southampton/Portsmouth and Hove/Brighton have not been included in the proposed 2018 timetable.

West Sussex County Council

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