

SEVENOAKS RAIL TRAVELLERS ASSOCIATION

Submission to KCC Select Committee on CTRL Domestic Rail Services

1. **Sevenoaks Rail Travellers' Association (SRTA)** represents the interest of all those who use Sevenoaks, Dunton Green, Bat & Ball, Otford, Kemsing, Shoreham and Eynsford stations. In the year to March 2006, nearly **4.3 million train journeys** began or ended at Sevenoaks station alone and there are more than **3000 daily commuters** from the Sevenoaks area.

We are very grateful for the opportunity to comment on the impact of HS1 generally and especially on West Kent commuters.

HS1 - Opportunities and challenges

2. SRTA is **most grateful for the opportunity to make a written submission** to the Select Committee and will be happy to supply additional information or clarifications if asked.
3. **SRTA welcomes the introduction of HS1** and believes that it will have made a major contribution to the regeneration of a number of areas in north and east Kent. However, SRTA has a number of concerns about its real and supposed impact on existing commuters.
4. SRTA shares a **number of concerns** about HS1 with other stakeholders
 - HS1 has been promoted on the basis of **station to station** time savings whereas mature commuters calculate **front door to desk** times. Given the penalty for many of travelling via the **overcrowded St Pancras tube links** to places of work chosen with reference to the existing service patterns this advantage may disappear for many commuters
 - SRTA has long believed that Stratford, with its easy access to Docklands, is a much more attractive destination for commuters and welcomes SER's decision to stop all peak period HS1 trains there. The **absence of any transport connection from Stratford International station** until 2011 is likely to deter some potential commuters
 - HS1 will make **no long term difference to overcrowding on SEML services due to the growth in Kent's population** and the **severe constraints imposed by the railway infrastructure** on the local Train Operating Company (TOC).

Impact of HS1 on existing services

5. The commuter railway system today through West Kent (usually referred to as the South East Main Line - SEML) is the principle medium and long

distance commuter link from much of Kent and parts of Sussex into London. The two key routes are from East Kent via Ashford and Tonbridge and from Hastings via Tonbridge.

6. **The SEML is a line under the severest stress and suffers serious overcrowding both morning and evening.** The attached paper (Appendix 1) gives details in the section headed Supply v Demand of the very rapid growth in passengers over a short period. Network Rail's recent study *South London Route Utilisation Strategy* confirmed that substantial numbers of SEML peak trains to/from Sevenoaks are rated as breaching the official guideline for Passengers in Excess of Capacity (PIXC).
7. **HS1 has been promoted as a solution to many of these problems** by offering a superior service for travellers from Ashford and further east in Kent and consequently relieving existing services. **SRTA believes that HS1 will be no more than a temporary fix.** Specifically the peak period HS1 trains from East Kent will have a grand total of 3,000 seats. If it is assumed that the trains are $\frac{3}{4}$ full on leaving Ashford (they will call at Ebbsfleet so we presume there will be at least some seats for those passengers) then this will be 2,250 passengers who would otherwise have used the SEML.
8. Figures provided to SRTA by successive TOCs show that **since 2002 the number of seats on trains through Sevenoaks in the morning peak has dropped by about 7% from 15,130 to 14,050 while passenger numbers have risen by 19% from 12,840 to 15,280** according to figures supplied by successive TOCs to SRTA.

	2002	2007	% change
Seats	15,130	14,050	-7%
Passengers	12,840	15,280	+19%

9. Against this level of growth 2,000 fewer passengers from East Kent will at best provide remission for just a few years. Given the current levels of standing for up to 40 minutes, **HS1 will still leave passengers standing** on many SEML trains into London from Day 1.
10. The Select Committee is rightly asking about the impact of the premium fare on demand. If this acts as a major deterrent to passengers, and SER's interest are to pitch the fare as high as the market will bear, many commuters will continue to use SEML which will lead to even heavier overcrowding on the reduced train capacity from Ashford on the SEML. SRTA has been told by SER that they **have no freedom of action to change the timetable in this event.** For commuters from West Kent this is a potentially disastrous situation. The SER **December 2009 peak period**

timetables assume that HS1 will be a major success from Day 1. Senior SER executives have said publicly that **there is no Plan B.**

11. Anecdotal evidence suggests that HS1 will have little impact in West Kent. The risks of delays on the M25 combined with the cost of parking mean that it is unlikely that HS1 services from Ebbsfleet will be thought to provide a better option to existing more local services.

Summary

HS1 offers a unique opportunity to regenerate areas of east and north Kent. There has been no similar railway development in the UK in modern times.

Long suffering commuters, especially in west Kent, have had HS1 held up to them as offering relief from years of overcrowding. The reality is far short of this because of the very limited capacity of the HS1 peak services being provided from Ashford. Within five years the present unacceptable levels of overcrowding on SEML will return and SER has no plans to deal with it.

Any shortfall or delayed take-off in the use of HS1 will impose intolerable levels of overcrowding on peak services, especially between London, Sevenoaks and Tonbridge.

HS1 offers a far from perfect solution. Three key stations (St Pancras, Stratford International and Ebbsfleet) have serious inadequacies in their connection into the local transport network. Fare premiums will key to attracting commuters.

We wish HS1 well since it offers real benefits to some parts of Kent.

Finally, we would encourage the Select Committee, particularly in the light of the opportunity provided by Network Rail's current Kent Route Utilisation Strategy study, to hold a further inquiry to determine the strategic needs of the very large number of other commuters in Kent who will be largely untouched by the launch of HS1.

Appendix 1

Sevenoaks Rail Travellers Association (SRTA)

Preliminary Submission to Network Rail's Kent Route Utilisation Strategy Study

Destinations

Docklands

The development of **Docklands** has transformed passenger journey patterns from the Sevenoaks area. Access to Docklands from peak period SEML services is only possible via London Bridge which has regular closures due to overcrowding. The rebuilding between now and 2015 will only worsen the problem.

There are three potential links to Docklands from south-east London - via the DLR at either Lewisham or Woolwich Arsenal. In addition, the re-opened East London Line will give access via New Cross. None of these routes are accessible in the peak from SEML stations.

Access from SEML could be provided to ELLX (East London Line Extension) by re-instating the historic link at New Cross closed in the 1960s. The ELLX is being re-opened as a 4-car railway but we are informed that the new stations have at least 8-car platforms. Clearly a 4-car service would not be practical from SEML but an 8-car limited-stop Metro service from Orpington or Dartford could be extremely popular and would provide direct access to Docklands.

Another option is to **extend the DLR to Hither Green** with potential to go further south possibly to Bromley North. This would allow interchange with SEML services. Slow services already stop at Hither Green. A TOC representative has indicated that it could be feasible to stop some SEML trains at Hither Green possibly offset by not stopping at London Bridge.

Kings Cross area/St Pancras Eurostar

For the Sevenoaks rail traveller the demise of regular Eurostar services from Ashford has meant that joining Eurostar at St Pancras is often a much more attractive option than Ebbsfleet (although see below). In addition the major office developments in the Kings Cross area (encouraged by HS1 Domestic Services) will draw more Sevenoaks commuters through the overcrowded London Bridge and Northern Line. The service patterns for Thameslink when completed have not been settled, but a strategy of using **some of the enhanced Thameslink capacity for semi-fast through services from Sevenoaks** to Kings Cross/St Pancras (and beyond) would alleviate overcrowding on SEML trains to London Bridge and congestion at London Bridge.

Gatwick

Although Gatwick is the South East's second major airport and in many ways more attractive than Heathrow, there are no direct rail services from Kent to Gatwick. The

taxi drivers at Sevenoaks do very well out of this. The only options for Sevenoaks area travellers at the moment are to go to London Bridge or Victoria and then take a train from London to Gatwick, or to change at Tonbridge and again at Redhill. Consideration should be given to a frequent limited-stop service **from Ashford via Tonbridge to Gatwick**. This would also provide a useful link to Ashford from West Kent with its growing commercial activities as well as Eurostar services.

Ebbsfleet

Ebbsfleet Station has been built without connections to the classic railway. This could be improved by a direct interchange route from Northfleet (only 400m as the crow flies) or more radically by using the redundant line previously used to connect CTRL to the classic Rochester-Swanley line to form a **Swanley-Ebbsfleet-Dartford loop** with a stop at Ebbsfleet and joining the Dartford-Gravesend line at Swanscombe. This could also generate more feed to HS1 Domestic.

However, while such changes would assist many in North Kent, travellers from West Kent will be continue to face the unattractive choices of either going to St Pancras or travelling by road to Ebbsfleet.

Supply v Demand

SER's website shows that almost every morning rush hour train on the South East Main Line (SEML) has "High Usage". The South London RUS Fig 3.13 shows morning peak services from Sevenoaks include substantial numbers of PIXC (Passengers In Excess of Capacity) services. Since 2002 the number of seats passing Sevenoaks in the morning peak has dropped by about 7% from 15,130 to 14,050 while passenger numbers have risen from 12,840 to 15,280 according to figures supplied by successive TOCs to SRTA.

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In addition, West Kent continues to see substantial housing growth. Examples of particular relevance to Sevenoaks commuters are the recently approved redevelopment of the West Kent Cold Store with around 500 dwellings adjacent to Dunton Green station and proposed Fort Halstead redevelopment with 1100 dwellings using Chelsfield station.

Capacity is severely constrained by the twin tracks between Tonbridge and Orpington. This has a maximum capacity of 16 trains per hour, currently used by 13 SEML services and 3 Metro services starting from Sevenoaks running all stations to London. All the morning peak SEML services are of maximum length. Rolling stock rostering provides very close to the maximum numbers of seats. In contrast, the slow Metro service is largely unused by Sevenoaks commuters travelling to London and is understood to have no more than 200 passengers on arrival at Orpington. The reason is that the Metro service is run "all stations to London": it is overtaken by several fast services before reaching London, and some Dunton Green and Knockholt commuters prefer to change to the already crowded Tunbridge Wells to Charing Cross service at

Chelsfield to arrive earlier in London. **The result is that through this critical bottleneck on the SEML with severely overcrowded fast trains, up to 2000 empty seats are run every peak hour each morning.**

A further weakness of present operations is the **severe mismatch of supply and demand beyond Tonbridge**. It is clear from footfall figures on the Network Rail website that the three major SEML commuter stations are Sevenoaks, Tonbridge and Tunbridge Wells. Peak period trains can only be turned at Ashford and Tunbridge Wells. Consequently large numbers of empty seats are run from Tonbridge to Ashford. Further the opening of HS1 is likely to reduce demand from the Ashford area. The significant time needed to run these trains between Ashford and Tonbridge prevents most doing more than one peak period service each morning and evening. Given the cost of new rolling stock this must be a massive financial disincentive to acquiring additional carriages.

Tonbridge station is widely regarded as in need of rebuilding. This would offer an opportunity to provide platforms for the current through lines. The major operational benefit would be the **ability to turn trains at Tonbridge** and thus use stock much more intensively by eliminating unnecessary train miles between Tonbridge and Ashford.

This would enable the **SEML evening peak services to be operated at full length** in place of the current shorter formations which are caused by a lack of available rolling stock and result in universal “High usage” for SEML services on the SER website. This is in contrast to the Metro services which are mainly “Medium usage” since the shorter routes allow stock to be run back to London to strengthen later services.

The problem is exacerbated by the **location of major rolling stock depots** only in Outer London and East Kent. This is clearly sub-optimal given the pattern of demand.

A final general comment is that many smaller stations and also the whole Maidstone East line suffer from the **early reduction in frequencies in evening service levels**. This drives potential passengers away to large stations on the SEML which retain higher frequency services until the late evening. Passengers faced with only an hourly service leaving London after the early evening will choose to drive to a major station rather than use their local station even though it has an adequate morning peak service. We believe this is partly related to the imbalance of rolling stock capacity to passenger demand.

Increasing Capacity

Speeding up the slow Metro services from Sevenoaks would attract passengers from the SEML services and fill some of the current empty seats. Some services from Orpington run fast from Grove Park to London. Starting these trains from Sevenoaks and starting the “all stations” service at Orpington would at least partially achieve this objective.

A similar strategy could be usefully applied to the **Blackfriars service from Sevenoaks** via Bat & Ball which is another under-used asset because the service runs

“all stations” to London making it utterly unattractive as a service for London commuters from the Sevenoaks area. If this accelerated service became part of Thameslink this would provide a reasonable alternative for reaching St Pancras International.

In addition, the existence of **the line via Bat & Ball would if upgraded provide four lines to London north of Sevenoaks**, albeit longer than via Orpington. This could provide significant additional capacity.

Another opportunity would be to **upgrade services substantially on the London-Ashford service via Maidstone East**. Many passengers who live close to this line currently drive to stations on the SEML because of the unattractive nature of services going to Victoria and Blackfriars. Speeding up services on this line would improve utilisation. However, the lack of capacity at Charing Cross and Cannon Street mean that any improved services would still not be able to operate into the most popular London termini.

Consideration should be given to reducing the significant number of freight paths on the Maidstone East line which we understand to be reserved for Channel Tunnel freight services, where this policy interferes with the enhancement of commuter services.

The South London RUS commented on the **lack of spare capacity at the London termini**. Within the timescale of the Kent RUS at least one significant enhancement is likely to be needed to the present capacity. There appears to be very little opportunity for growth and a major project will be required. In view of the massive demand for ease of access to Docklands we would favour an enhancement into the City or directly into Docklands.

Seating capacity issues with rolling stock also need to be addressed – starting by ensuring that **all peak trains are run at maximum length** (the platform lengthening programme will create more possibilities for this, but some are already been missed).

Summary

The Sevenoaks Rail Travellers Association believes that there is substantial unmet demand for services to new destinations, specifically Docklands, St Pancras International, Ebbsfleet and Gatwick Airport.

Supply and demand for commuters from the Sevenoaks area is increasingly mismatched. The twin track section between Tonbridge and Orpington is acknowledged as one of the worst capacity bottlenecks on the SEML. Despite this, many thousands of empty peak time seats are run between Sevenoaks and Orpington every day. Reorganisation of stopping patterns for these services between Orpington and London could substantially reduce overcrowding on existing SEML services by filling some of these seats.

Evening peak service capacity could be improved if SEML trains could be turned at Tonbridge avoiding excess capacity being provided between Tonbridge and Ashford and thus enabling peak services to be strengthened to the maximum length.

Finally improving evening stopping patterns to selected smaller stations, especially on the Maidstone East line, would encourage more commuters to use their local station rather than using the more frequent SEML services.

Sevenoaks Rail Travellers Association
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