

SEVENOAKS RAIL TRAVELLERS' ASSOCIATION

We regret that this newsletter is late and offer our apologies to members. We hope that in the meantime you will have kept up to date with our activities by reading the Secretary's monthly column in the Sevenoaks Chronicle, usually published on the second Thursday of each month. Please don't be like some members to whom Committee colleagues have spoken earlier this year, who said that they read the Sevenoaks Chronicle, but had never seen any of his articles!

The delay in producing this newsletter has been due to having to respond to the consultation documents put out by the Strategic Rail Authority (SRA) relating to the proposed Integrated Kent Franchise (IKF). This rail franchise will replace the one that Connex lost last year with this difference, that it will include domestic services to be run on the CTRL (Channel Tunnel Rail Link) from St. Pancras, from 2007 or 2008, as well as the 'classical' services on the existing rail lines. The franchise is currently being operated by South Eastern Trains (SET), a subsidiary company of the SRA.

When we wrote in the autumn, before the AGM, we were finishing a major paper on the rail needs of West Kent, which we were writing jointly with Tonbridge RTA. We sent this paper to the SRA, together with our brief response to the first SRA consultative document, in November 2003. Some of the ideas in the 'West Kent' paper may have borne fruit in SRA thinking.

In February this year, the SRA sent out a more detailed specification for the services it expected to be operated, inviting comments by late April. It was this second consultative document which provoked such a lot of negative comments in the media, as the Secretary reported in his February and March articles in the Sevenoaks Chronicle.

In its overall plan, the SRA attempted to simplify the timetable by proposing a basic service pattern that would run all day to which extra peak period services would be added. They also attempted to simplify the pattern of train services with main line services tending to be concentrated on Charing Cross offset by more suburban services, especially from Dartford, running to Cannon Street. The congestion at London Bridge that would result from many more passengers having to change platforms there was heavily criticised.

Another serious aspect of the SRA's proposals was the elimination of stops at lesser used stations. In our area, stations so targeted were Dunton Green and Knockholt. The effect on these stations was to severely restrict peak period services (to what extent is still somewhat obscure), but hourly fairly fast off peak services to Charing Cross were maintained. The elimination of stops at smaller stations was widespread throughout Kent and led to a furore at all levels of local government, with resulting strongly worded communications to the SRA.

The main reason for their erroneous judgment was that the SRA based their ideas on an unreliable sales revenue database that purported to show how much revenue was attributable to each station. Unfortunately there is a large 'sink' of unallocated revenue, mainly consisting of sales from stations with no ticket offices, such as Dunton Green. The SRA also had over-optimistic expectations of the numbers of commuters from North Kent, who would wish to use CTRL services from Ebbsfleet, a station just east of Bluewater. As a result, the

SRA's specification provided few City services on the Maidstone East line and severely cut back the number of 'classical' services on the Chatham main line.

The chief corrections to the SRA proposals, needed in our area were:

- to provide an adequate peak period service at Dunton Green and Knockholt
- To increase the number of Cannon Street services, and
- To provide an adequate City service on the Maidstone East line (to serve Otford and to reduce the need for commuters from further east driving to Sevenoaks).

These and other subjects were covered in a substantial response, which we sent to the SRA in mid-April. Our M.P., Michael Fallon, visited the SRA in mid-May. From his visit, we know that the SRA was impressed by the responses from the rail users' groups. We also know that by then they planned to increase the number of services to Cannon Street and may have improved the frequency of peak services at Knockholt.

We had expected by now (July) that the SRA would have told us of the results of their last consultation. This and the invitation to the four potential franchisees to tender are both now delayed to the autumn. As a result, the new franchisee will probably take over South Eastern operations sometime during the second half of 2005. We have, however, received an invitation from the SRA, as a 'valued Stakeholder', to have a one-to-one meeting for them to brief us on their final service specification, which we hope will take place before our Annual Meeting on October 28.

These potential franchisees are:

- The Go-Ahead Group, who now run the ex-Connex South Central area
- First Group - used to run suburban services out of Liverpool Street
- GNER, who run the main line services out of Kings Cross.
- Danish State Railways/Stagecoach; the latter run the SWT services out of Waterloo.

We have held a meeting with the Go-Ahead Group and have been in contact with the First Group and GNER, sending them copies of our papers. At the time of writing, Stagecoach has not been in touch with any rail user group, not even with KCC. It is our opinion that we should now wait until the SRA issues the terms for the franchisees to tender and then point out to the SRA and/or the potential franchisees the remaining defects in the document.

Apart from the IKF, another important matter that has concerned us is the seating capacity of future commuter services. We have written enough in the past of the relative seating capacities of the old (slam door) and new (sliding door) stock for members to be aware that the new stock replacing the 3+2 seating old stock, extensively used on our line, has fewer seats than their slam-door predecessors. The latest service to be affected by the introduction of the new 375 trains with 3+2 seating is the 7.29 at Sevenoaks to Cannon Street. This service, which was frequently fully loaded when run with old slam door stock, now has 8% fewer seats. SET has acknowledged the validity of our concern and is examining various ways of increasing seating in the 2005 morning peak period. Michael Holden, Managing Director of SET, has agreed to come to our AGM on October 28, when, among other subjects, he will talk about the ways in which he proposes to reduce overcrowding.

The time scale of much railway decision-making means that we have to be looking up to four years ahead and this is difficult to 'sell' to members in an essentially short-term environment. Nevertheless, we have had some clear quick gains: that Otford now has two evening services from Cannon Street is due to one concerned Otford commuter telling the

Secretary of his problems – and SET responding to our request. More recently, SET has lengthened two off-peak services to Charing Cross soon after we had told SET that they were overloaded. The connection between our intervention and SET's response cannot be directly causally linked. As the Secretary once read in an ICI Annual Report, 'the nature of influence is such that you can never prove that you have had it'. An illustration of the truth of this is the welcome introduction of High Density Electrostars (375 units with 3+2 seating) on the two most heavily-loaded morning peak Tunbridge Wells-Charing Cross services, for which we asked Michael Holden when he visited us for the AGM last October.

The Association's Committee is divided into two sub-groups, one of which deals with these longer-term train service matters. The other sub-group tries to improve the stations in our 'patch'. It meets the Sevenoaks Station Manager, Clive Gray, four to five times a year and sometimes also the Area Manager, who is based at Orpington. These meetings give the Association the opportunity to raise the many defects of the stations with these officers and hear of their intended remedies. The station has been repainted and additional platform staff have been recruited. In the near future, changes will be made in the manning of the ticket barriers. A related issue under discussion is the closure of the Kippington side entrance at weekends, due to limited staff availability at that time.

The problems of the unmanned Bat & Ball and Dunton Green stations relate to the ills of our society – vandalism, graffiti, non-payment of fares, dropping litter, etc. SET is addressing these issues, but there have been numerous set-backs caused by vandalism. The low usage of these stations would not justify the provision of all-day staff. The non-availability of local ticket purchasing facilities has reduced the 'revenue profile' of these stations and therefore the SRA's assessment of their importance as commuter stations. We have already referred to our efforts to improve the SRA's planned peak services for Dunton Green. Our response to the IKF proposals also included a full statement of schoolchildren's travel needs.

At our AGM last October, Michael Holden (then just appointed Managing Director elect of SET), set out his targets for the first six months of SET operation. These included improved punctuality, steady introduction of new trains, improved rolling stock reliability to eliminate short trains and cancellations, attention to train cleaning and toilet maintenance and improved passenger information. Since SET took over operations from Connex in November 2003, we believe that management has been more focussed. This has resulted in improvements in most target areas, with the exception of travel information when the service is disrupted. SET is aware of this problem and further progress is promised. We would welcome your views on these (and any other rail) subjects.

At the time of last year's AGM we had one vacancy on the Committee, for which we received no nomination. It is useful for the Committee to include some recently retired people – it enables the Association to be represented at daytime meetings to learn of current developments from senior railway management. Nevertheless, the Committee needs commuters who use a spread of services to inform its discussions. We have currently only three commuters on the Committee and would like more to join us. Please contact the Secretary (see below).

We would like someone to join the Committee, who would be willing to help us with managing the membership list, chasing up membership renewal, maintaining the e-mail address list to minimise postage costs and helping to write a letter to members with e-mail addresses every 2 months or so. The fact that the Secretary and Chairman have to perform these functions is part of the reason for the lateness of this newsletter. The role we have in

mind is not demanding, but will require some IT experience. Again, please contact the Secretary.

We are grateful for your support, which has enabled the Association to exist and develop a profile of constructive representation. This seems to have been well received by the rail operators, local government and the SRA. We have also appreciated your e-mail and other correspondence expressing useful comments on your travel experiences, observations and good ideas. The invitation of the editor of the Sevenoaks Chronicle for the Secretary to write a monthly column in his paper has given us the opportunity to communicate news and explain issues to a wider number of commuters and other rail users. It appears to have been well received, but is not a replacement for direct communication with our members. We are hoping this letter will encourage someone to offer to help us.

New members have joined as a result of the monthly column in the Sevenoaks Chronicle. We therefore regret that a number of members who paid a £5 (two year) subscription to the Association in the last quarter of 2001 have not yet renewed their subscription. We don't run the Association expensively: your officers travel to quite frequent meetings at their own expense and every effort is made to contain costs. You can help us in this: if this report has come in the post, could you send us an e-mail telling us of your address (ours is below). We would appreciate your support. Subscriptions remain £5 for 2 years or £20 for 'life'. To make it worthwhile, we plan to function for at least another 8 years!

We have twice referred to the 2004 AGM, which we have just arranged for Thursday October 28th at 8pm in the hall of Christchurch URC in London Road, just below Sevenoaks station. Please book this date in your diary. We look forward to seeing you there.

Dr. Brian Houghton (Chairman)

Peter Benford (Secretary) 56, Britains Lane, Sevenoaks, Kent TN13 2JP.

Association e-mail address: sevenoaksrta@hotmail.com

