

SEVENOAKS RAIL TRAVELLERS' ASSOCIATION

Annual Report for Annual General Meeting 2011

1. Annual Meeting

The Association's Annual Meeting is on Tuesday 18 October at 8pm in the hall of Christ Church URC on the corner of London Road and Kippington Road. Our guests will include Mike Gibson (Southeastern Railway), Mike Smith (Network Rail), Sevenoaks District Council have also been invited. The meeting will include a special discussion about the state of the station and the surrounding area. There will also be an opportunity to ask the transport operating companies about issues about current services, about the preparations being made for this winter in the light of the two periods of major disruption due to snow last winter and the changes being made to bus and train services to accommodate the Dunton Green development. It promises to be a very interesting meeting.

We do not intend to hand out leaflets at Sevenoaks (and other) stations this year before the Annual Meeting. Instead we will rely on notices at the stations, emails to members and other contacts, and some coverage in the Sevenoaks Chronicle.

2. How do we see ourselves?

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 2010 (the latest figures available) nearly **3.8 million train journeys** began or ended at Sevenoaks station alone and there are more than **3000 daily commuters** from the Sevenoaks area.

During the year we have had meetings with Southeastern, with Network Rail, and with Kent County Council, Sevenoaks District Council and Sevenoaks Town Council, and have had regular correspondence with all of these including commenting in detail on the Kent Rail Action Plan. SRTA representatives spoke at all KCC Rail Summits. We have also been in touch with Otford, Kemsing, Shoreham and Eynsford Parish Councils regarding the threat to the Bat & Ball services. We have regularly briefed Michael Fallon, the MP for Sevenoaks, on rail issues and helped him take up issues with the Department for Transport.

The Association meets regularly with the Sevenoaks Society and the Sevenoaks Cycling Forum on local transport and environment issues.

Our comments on rail issues have been regularly sought and printed by the Sevenoaks Chronicle, and we have worked with the newspaper on their fares campaign. Our website www.srta.org.uk has been regularly updated with news about rail issues, and we have issued periodic email updates to our members and supporters. We have also developed a presence on Twitter at @sevenoaksrailta.

The benefits of our lobbying cannot, of course, be limited to our members who support us financially. We are grateful to the members who help defray our limited expenses. (This report also goes to other supporters, who have given us their e-mail addresses in order to receive our reports. We would be glad if you, too, supported us financially. Our subscriptions

remain £5 for two years and £20 for 'life', and these should be sent to the Secretary whose address is at the end of this report.)

3. Events since the last Annual General Meeting

Trains Group

Although the Kent Route Utilisation Strategy has been completed the future of its proposals now seems uncertain, and overall the Kent RUS failed to find an answer to the fundamental issues of constraints on capacity which in some cases are the legacy of the Victorian infrastructure. However the threat to Cannon Street services from 2016 still remains, and the fact that by this time there would be a new franchise creates uncertainty about who would actually take the decision. The SRTA has made strong representations about the lack of public engagement on this, and on the service plans during the scheduled London Bridge rebuilding 2012-2015.

Despite poor operational performance the Government extended Southeastern Railway's franchise for a further two years to April 2014. Beyond this it is the Government's intention to tender a 5-year franchise to cover the period until the completion of Thameslink Phase 2 and the London Bridge rebuilding when there will be considerable disruption.

SRTA welcomes the KCC intervention into the forthcoming franchising process on behalf of all Kent rail users – especially as the Government plans to change the franchising process to reduce the opportunity for community groups such as SRTA and individuals to comment.

KCC have started championing of Kent rail users interests generally and we welcome this. SRTA supports the support the large majority of recommendations in the KCC Rail Action Plan. However we fundamentally disagree with KCC's proposal to transfer half of all Sevenoaks via Bat & Ball services to Maidstone East (Peak & off peak) in the short term. An hourly service would produce excessive waiting times so long they would effectively sever the service and no alternative public transport links exist between Sevenoaks and county town of Maidstone (no bus link) giving access to County Hall, hospitals etc. Many commuters travel between London and Darent Valley stations via Sevenoaks (7 trains leave Sevenoaks via Bat & Ball between 6PM and 8PM and missed connections between these services are already SRTA's biggest source of complaint.) School children using the line to get to Sevenoaks and Tonbridge would suffer too. A diversion of services from Bat & Ball to Maidstone appears more attractive to those in County Hall than to real travellers – the journey time would be over 80 minutes whereas there are already 3 trains an hour from Maidstone to London taking under an hour (including the new HS1 service).

Rail travellers from the Sevenoaks area were again badly affected by major service disruptions caused by the snowfalls starting on 30 November 2010. Once again the operational resilience of the railway was found to be lacking, and measures agreed after the problems the previous winter had not been fully implemented. In addition the passenger information services were again completely inadequate, with the website failing to give reliable, up to date, information and the passenger information displays at stations often claiming that a completely normal service was being run. With the help of its members emailing and texting what was actually happening at stations SRTA managed to provide a basic information service by email and Twitter including several updates each day to our members. We have since held meetings with the Managing Director of Southeastern

Railways and with the Route Director of Network Rail to explore the problems our members faced and to hear what corrective action is being planned for the coming winter.

Some members successfully managed to claim compensation on the strength of individual cases of hardship, but the deficiencies of the existing season ticket compensation scheme were highlighted by the fact that even a practically non-existent service for two weeks failed to trigger season ticket discounts. Partly as a result of this the train company have introduced a “Delay – Repay” scheme for any ticketholder delayed over 30 minutes – although it would not compensate those who did not attempt to travel.

Stations Group

The Stations Group has continued to press issues of ticket queues, ticket vending machines, graffiti and station information and announcements with SER.

The Association has continued to discuss the refurbishment of Sevenoaks station with Network Rail, and we understand that plans for this are now progressing including the provision of more cycle parking spaces on both sides of the station. The early action to refurbish the toilets was welcome, although the fact that the Gents was quickly out of action for around 2 months demonstrated the importance of good maintenance services as well as capital investment. We hope to hear more about the plans for station refurbishment at the Annual General Meeting.

Fares

The increase in the Retail Price Index in the year to July was 5%. This means that, overall, regulated fares on Southeastern including season tickets can be increased by 8% from January next year.

The overall “RPI+3%” is Government policy to shift more of the cost of the railway from the taxpayer to the farepayer. However the train company have flexibility in setting individual ticket prices, and in the past few years there has been an above-average increase in ticket prices from Sevenoaks.

Therefore the Sevenoaks Rail Travellers Association has been working with the Sevenoaks Chronicle on their Fare Deal campaign to call for ticket prices from West Kent to rise by no more than the average this year. It seems unrealistic to expect the Government to back-track on the overall increase, but it is within the discretion of the train company to increase all ticket prices by the same percentage and so give us all at least “equality of misery”.

At a more detailed level we are continuing to try and discover how the formula for permitted increase actually works. The details are not transparent, but when we looked at ticket price changes for stations across Kent last year we could not find many that had increased by less than RPI+3%. We are also concerned that, while overall Southeastern can increase fares by RPI+3%, for travellers in the Greater London area the increase is capped at RPI+2% so increasingly Kent users of Southeastern are cross subsidising London users. (The increasing number of people driving to Knockholt station, which is in the TFL area, is also a symptom of this growing difference.)

Membership

At the end of September 2011 the Association's membership had risen to 55 Life Members and 23 current 2-year Members.

We are grateful to colleagues who serve on the committee for their continuing time and support which is essential to our work. We are particularly grateful to Ray Gulliver who has represented the interests of Otford travellers for many years and who is not standing for re-election for reasons of health. Since both the Chairman and the Secretary have retired from full-time work this year we would particularly like to hear from regular commuters who would be prepared to join the Committee; the duties are not onerous!

Dr. R. G. Johnson (Chairman)
9, Stanhope Way,
Riverhead,
Sevenoaks TN13 2DZ

A C Stott (Secretary)
PO Box 191
Sevenoaks,
Kent, TN13 2AW