

# SEVENOAKS RAIL TRAVELLERS' ASSOCIATION

## Annual Report 2015-2016

**Sevenoaks Rail Travellers' Association** (SRTA) represents the interests of all those who use Sevenoaks, Dunton Green, Bat & Ball, Otford, Kemsing, Borough Green, Shoreham and Eynsford stations. According to the latest available annual statistics, more than 4.8 million train journeys began or ended at our stations. There are more than **3000 daily commuters** from the Sevenoaks area to London, and hundreds of school children who travel south every day.

During the year we have engaged with the Department for Transport, Southeastern, Thameslink, Network Rail, Kent County Council, Transport for London, the Greater London Assembly, London Travelwatch, Sevenoaks District Council and Sevenoaks Town Council. We have regularly briefed Michael Fallon, the MP for Sevenoaks, on rail issues and helped him take up issues with the Department for Transport and the rail operators. We have also met Tom Tugendhat, MP for Tonbridge and Malling, to discuss Borough Green and Maidstone East line issues.

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' - we have introduced online payment of subscriptions through our website at <http://srta.org.uk/wp/srta-membership>, but alternatively cheques can be sent to the Secretary whose address is at the end of this report.)

### Events since the last Annual General Meeting

#### Trains Group

The rebuilding of London Bridge has continued to be a major issue for Sevenoaks area passengers. The over-crowding of some peak hour services has meant that some of our members are paying over £3000 a year to stand all the way to London. In addition there have been frequent incidents of disruption due to "signal problems" or "track problems" in the London Bridge area, often on Mondays after weekend engineering work. The promises made earlier by Network Rail to have engineers on the spot to quickly fix any problems do not seem to have had the effect passengers were led to expect.

August 28 marked the switch-over from Phase 1 of the London Bridge work to Phase 2; Charing Cross trains now stop at London Bridge and Cannon Street trains do not. The switch-over has led to a prolonged period of service unreliability, often attributed to "signalling problems". There's a lack of transparency about what is going on, and why reasonable steps were not taken to ensure that the infrastructure worked beforehand – after all, the Charing Cross trains had been running past the part-finished platforms for months before the switch-over. We do however know that, unbelievably, Network Rail picked the same switch-over weekend to transfer signalling from the London Bridge signal box to the new Three Bridges signalling centre.

When measured by the so-called “Public Performance Measure”, the rail industry’s preferred measure of its performance, Southeastern’s performance however been surprisingly high – before the London Bridge switch-over the company has been claiming over 85% trains arriving within 5 minutes in each four-week period, and in some months higher than the 90% target. However PPM measures trains and not passenger experience – so a crowded peak hour train is no more important than a nearly empty train at another time of day; and once a train is 5 minutes late it doesn’t matter if it is any later (by contrast TfL use a “Lost Customer Hours” measure – which gives more weight to more heavily used trains, and which gives more weight to longer delays). In addition there are suspicions that Southeastern have worked out how to “game” the PPM system, for instance by station skipping or by only running part of its route. Preventing a knock-on delay to the next service is being given over-riding priority whatever the added inconvenience to the passengers on the current late train. That’s may be why we’ve seen trains cancelled mid-route, the passengers thrown off, and then the train run fast and empty to its destination; why slow trains to Sevenoaks often terminate unexpectedly at Orpington, sentencing Dunton Green passengers to a long wait; and why we’ve seen strange operational practices such as starting a Sevenoaks to Cannon Street train at New Cross – missing over 80% of its pickup stops! We are pressing for more transparency about how these decisions are taken, and about whether station skipping is properly taken into account in the published figures.

This sort of train-centric practice may explain why, at a time when the published performance figures show improvement, independently measured customer satisfaction scores continue at rock-bottom levels. In the Spring National Rail Passenger Survey Southeastern were once again at the bottom of the national league table with a meagre 69% satisfaction score.

During the year we have continued to work with other local and London stakeholders to press for the transfer of Southeastern Metro services to Transport for London in the next franchise period from 2018. This would improve the quality of service on the Dunton Green line, bring Oyster to the Sevenoaks area, and introduce competitive pressures on mainline services. Earlier in the year the Department for Transport and Transport for London published a prospectus showing not only the benefits of this to London but also how greater local government engagement in Kent and Sussex could improve mainline services as well. This prospectus has been generally welcomed, and Transport for London have already given the assurances on protecting mainline services sought by Kent County Council. However at the time of writing final decisions have not been announced and there is growing concern that time is running out to make changes by the end of the Southeastern franchise in 2018.

On the other lines in our area, we welcomed the new plans by Thameslink to run twice-hourly fast services all day from Maidstone East, West Malling, Borough Green, Otford and Swanley fast to London Bridge, Blackfriars, City Thameslink, Farringdon and St Pancras. This will greatly improve services to the City from the eastern part of our area. In addition the Bat & Ball service is preserved, although at certain times of the day it is proposed that it does not go further north than Blackfriars, which would break the slow but convenient direct service to St Pancras for Eurostar and the North. The detailed plans are currently out for consultation, and Thameslink will be speaking about these at our Annual General Meeting. It will be important for all relevant Kent stakeholders to campaign strongly in support of the proposals and to make representations for further improvements (such as a twice-hourly service to Maidstone East in the evenings, protecting the stops at Swanley that are now only an option, and connecting Sevenoaks directly with St Pancras via Bat & Ball all day as it is now.

Network Rail are conducting a strategic “Kent Route Study”. It had been hoped that this would be available by the time of the AGM, but it appears to have been delayed. We have made contributions during the consultation phase about the significant increase in demand from current and planned housing growth and about the need for investment in increasing capacity, for instance by the use of the latest signalling technology. The previous “Kent Route Utilisation Study” failed to take proper account of the need for investment to meet rising demand from new housing and economic growth, and we hope that the latest study takes a more strategic view and recognises the importance of increasing capacity to meet increasing demand.

## **Stations Group**

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

We are pleased that, after a long campaign by the Association, a second ticket machine has been installed on the “Kippington” side of the stations – and the existing machine moved to reduce the queuing on the stairs.

The replacement cycle racks installed in Summer 2015 as a result of our campaigning have proved more suitable, although we continue to be concerned about the failure to detail with abandoned bicycles.

We were however less successful in our campaign to improve car parking at Sevenoaks by double-decking the Network Rail owned Car Park 4 to the North West of the road bridge instead of the Bradbourne Park Road site owned by Sevenoaks District Council. We regret that it seemed impossible to get the Council and the railway companies together to develop a more cost-effective and locally acceptable scheme.

At Bat & Ball the Association has built on its engagement in the Friends of Bat & Ball group<sup>1</sup> to promote the plans for restoring the station and allowing community use of the station building.

At Dunton Green, Bat & Ball and Shoreham we have maintained pressure on Southeastern to speed up the installation of new ticket machines after the removal of the permit-to-travel machines in March, and taken up a number of cases where passengers reported “being hassled” for not having the ticket that they were unable to buy (even though the National Conditions of Carriage were very much on their side).

## **Passenger Information issues**

The Association continues to press Southeastern to comply with the legislation introduced over two years ago on the use of potentially expensive 0845 numbers. While as a result of our pressure both Network Rail and most recently National Rail Enquiries changed their policy nationally and opened an 0345 number equivalent (charged at standard geographical rates), and Southeastern finally switched to a 0345 number for customers services we are still

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<sup>1</sup> <http://srta.org.uk/wp/posts/912>

finding signs on our local stations that quote the old, expensive, number. This lack of attention to compliance by Southeastern continues to raise wider issues.

## **Buses**

We have continued to work with Sevenoaks Town Council and the local bus companies to promote local connecting bus services. After a long campaign the bus companies and Southeastern have finally introduced a display board within the station showing details of local buses, and we are working with Go Coach and the Town Council to promote the Town Circular Bus (No. 8), including designing a new diagram of its route. There is however still work to be done to improve connectivity between bus and train, particularly in the evening when services to the east of the town and Seal end before the main rail commuting rush arrives.

## **Fares**

The 2016 fare increase was once again limited by Government policy to the increase in the Retail Price Index. The benchmark annual season ticket from Sevenoaks to London Terminals rose by 1% from £3288 to £3320.

However the moderation in headline fare increases masks continuing underlying issues with our fares:

- For five years (2007 to 2011 inclusive) Southeastern fares were raised by an extra 2% each year to pay for HS1. That HS1 increase has never been reversed, so in a 2016 annual season ticket Sevenoaks travellers are still paying around £300 a year for trains they cannot use and that bring little benefit to West Kent.
- For a number of years Southeastern used the flexibility provisions in the annual increase to disproportionately inflate Sevenoaks fares. This provisions were supposed to allow the sorting out of fare anomalies, but Southeastern used them to increase the anomaly in the cost per mile, where Sevenoaks to London is now 20% more expensive than Woking to London on South West Trains and 15% more expensive than Northfleet to London elsewhere on Southeastern.
- The rail industry has failed to address the chronic issues with its cost base – where the 2011 McNulty report found that passenger fares and government subsidy were per passenger-kilometre were both around 30% higher than on comparable EU railways, and that this was due to the costs being around 30% higher than they should be.
- Rail travel has doubled since privatisation – but the rail industry has not doubled the length of track, the number of carriages, the number of stations or other elements of capacity. With more people crammed onto the same trains, prices should be going down not up.

We have also been concerned about the way that it can be difficult for passengers to get the cheapest fare for their journey:

- We have reports of ticket offices at Sevenoaks and Otford disputing the availability of Annual Season Ticket Gold Card discounts.
- We continue to campaign for Ticket Machines to make the lowest price most prominent, and to make that the default.

- We have found continuing issues from time to time with rail industry websites not offering the best prices – both the National Rail Enquiries site and Southeastern’s own new ticket-selling website. At times different websites give different results. We’ve repeatedly reported errors to Southeastern and to others, and while the immediate problem is usually fixed in a few days, there is no effort to reimburse purchasers who do not know that they have been overcharged nor any visible effort to make the systems more reliable in the first place.

The problems with getting the right fare from Southeastern and other parts of the rail industry is one of the reasons why we continue to press for the extension of the TfL Oyster/Contactless system to Sevenoaks, Dunton Green and the Darenth Valley line between Sevenoaks and Swanley. The TfL system is a payment system, not a ticket system, and it automatically ensures that one pays the cheapest price for the journey one actually made.

## **Membership**

At the end of June 2016 the Association’s membership was 84 Life Members and 12 current 2-year Members (2015: 74 and 16). There are over 200 people on our mailing list and we have nearly 1000 followers on Twitter.

Membership subscriptions can now be paid online, and this is proving to be a popular choice both for renewals and for new members. The website and the mailing list are now integrated so that we have been able to send periodic emails to members highlighting new content on the website; we have had good feedback about these.

## **Website**

During the year ending 31 August 2016 we had 17,032 visits to our website with a total of 27,562 page views (2015 18,031 visits and 31,123 page views).

## **Committee**

We are grateful to colleagues - Roger Johnson, Brian Houghton, Richard Parry, Gerry Dolby-Gray, John Ryan, Henry Dodd and Marilyn Canet - who serve on the committee for their continuing time and support which is essential to our work. We are also grateful to help from other members and supporters who contribute information and views, including sharing experience and comments on the website. Keith Alderman (Bat & Ball), Paul Malyon (Dunton Green) and Karen Harding (Borough Green) deserve special thanks for their contributions throughout the year.

We would particularly like to hear from regular commuters who would be prepared to join the Committee; the duties are not onerous – and we do make a difference! We would also be interested to hear from people who could contribute in other ways to the work of the Association without joining the Committee itself.

## **Annual Meeting**

The Association’s Annual Meeting is on Thursday 20 October at 7.30pm in the hall of Christ Church URC on the corner of London Road and Kippington Road. 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.

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