

SEVENOAKS RAIL TRAVELLERS' ASSOCIATION

Annual Report 2016-2017

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 pupils travelling south each day.

During the year we have engaged with 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, MP for Sevenoaks, and we have met Tom Tugendhat, MP for Tonbridge and Malling, on 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

At the time of the 2016 Annual General Meeting there was a good expectation that the Southeastern "Metro" services would be devolved to Transport for London. This would improve the quality of service on the Dunton Green line, brought Oyster to the Sevenoaks area, and introduced competitive pressures on mainline services. Indeed in January 2016 the Department for Transport and Transport for London published a joint 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. However in December 2016 the Secretary of State for Transport announced that devolution would not take place and that there would be a new Southeastern Franchise on the conventional model. He did not explain how his decision would achieve the benefits of devolution set out in his own Department's prospectus, and further developments since then – such as the introduction of a "smart card" ticketing system that does **not** allow integrated, end to end, pay as you go fare payment to all TfL destinations – have shown that the focus continues to be on purely national rail services and not the end-to-end travel needs of customers. The Secretary of State talked about the solution to Southeastern's problems as being closer working with Network Rail, but we are told that that already takes place (for instance in an integrated control room) and we regard that something that should happen in addition, rather than instead of, closer integration with TfL services (for instance Network Rail have no role in fares and ticketing).

The SRTA made a major submission to the consultation on the terms of the new Southeastern Franchise, including specific requests for many of the benefits that would have flowed from

devolution to Southeastern; these would be more difficult, though not necessarily impossible, to deliver by the Secretary of State's chosen method of franchising.

The SRTA has also made a submission to the Network Rail Kent Route Study. This Study looks at the demands for rail travel up to 2044 and how this could be met. Our major observation was that the Kent Route Study does not provide solutions to current and increasing pressures on mainline capacity into London Bridge and Victoria, especially after 2024. The challenge is real. Many peak-hour passengers between Sevenoaks and London Bridge already have to stand, contrary to the DfT's own "Passengers in Excess of Capacity" rules. For us, "capacity" means seats. And in future Network Rail's own Market Study shows that 12% more vehicles are required on London Bridge mainline services by 2024 and 39% more vehicles by 2044. The conclusions of the Market Study are supported by aggressive house building targets on key West Kent districts; indeed the housing targets set by central government are higher than historic rates of growth for Sevenoaks, Tonbridge and Tunbridge Wells. It is particularly disappointing to note that the issues of demand on the Kent mainline significantly exceeding planned capacity were identified in the 2011 Kent Utilisation Study. That study found that 44% of those boarding at Sevenoaks during the morning peak hour had to stand (and 8% were standing from Tonbridge).

While some small improvements are suggested to improve capacity up to 2024 – doing little more than keeping up with growing demand rather than tackling the current capacity issue – Network Rail simply say that beyond 2024 "a strategy for providing additional capacity for Kent [mainline] services is far more challenging" – and do not suggest what the strategy should be. With the multiple bottlenecks on the line – terminal capacity, 'flat' junctions and the two-track section between Orpington and Tonbridge – it is clear that a major, sustained, investment programme will be needed. This will need a bold plan with a convincing business case to gain the political backing for the funding required. MPs and local authorities needs to push back on the Government who are currently both demanding more housebuilding in Kent and failing to provide the rail infrastructure needed to get new residents to work in an efficient and environmentally-friendly way.

The rebuilding of London Bridge has continued, with disruption to many weekends of travel as well as "blockades" between Christmas and New Year, at Easter and in the final week in August – together with frequent "signal" or "points" problems in the London Bridge area. The draft timetable for May 2018, when the rebuilding is due to complete, shows that for all this work there is no increase in train services from Sevenoaks as a result of the investment – and that some of the changes introduced during the work have been made permanent (such as no fast services to Cannon Street between 0630 and 0715 and "padding" of the timetables with extra time for the final leg to enable performance targets to be met more easily).

However Thameslink have now published a second, more detailed, consultation on their future timetable. This confirms the new half-hourly fast service from Maidstone East via Borough Green, Otford and Swanley to London Bridge, Blackfriars, St Pancras and eventually Cambridge. So the £6.5 billion spent on the London Bridge and Blackfriars building has at least some benefit to the area!

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.

At Sevenoaks the main issue during the year has been car parking. The closure of the Bradbourne Park Road car park to enable decking to be constructed corresponded with a surge in demand as Southern passengers from Oxted and elsewhere used Sevenoaks to avoid disruption and strikes on their own services. This meant on occasions that season ticket holders could not find a space and that “day parkers” could not find a space either. We worked with Southeastern to tune the new system so that the right number of spaces were reserved for season ticket holders until 0830 and, in a number of cases, managed to get Southeastern to show leniency to regular Sevenoaks commuters who had not initially complied with the changing rules. We also worked with Sevenoaks District Council to give some publicity to the alternative arrangements that they had put in place for season ticket and day parking. The new Bradbourne Park Road car park, after some teething issues, seems to have been well received.

At Bat & Ball the leasing of the station building to Sevenoaks Town Council has finally been confirmed and there are some remedial works in progress so that it can be brought back into community use – although the station itself will be “unmanned”.

At Dunton Green we have continued to work with local passengers to highlight the continuing problems of maintaining working lighting and a working ticket machine. Although the Ryewood development has dramatically increased the number of people using this station it still has no amenities except a basic shelter and a single ticket machine.

Buses

We have continued to work with Sevenoaks Town Council and the local bus companies to promote local connecting bus services. Unfortunately at the end of the Section 106 support for the 452 service the commuter section between Ryewood via Chipstead and Bessels Green to the railway station was completely discontinued at the end of March. This was done despite us reminding Arriva that, before Ryewood and its Section 106 support, they had run a profitable 452 commuter service serving Chesterfield Drive, Chipstead Lane and Bessels Green for many years. For a short period during the summer of 2017 Arriva ran some 402 services through Chipstead for commuters, but this service has now been reduced to going only via Witches Lane and Bullfinch Lane.

At the same time both Arriva and Go-Coach are running competing day-time 452 services between the railway station, the town centre, Seal and Kemsing! It does seem to us that it would be a better public service (and more profitable for the bus companies) to serve all parts of the old route than to over-provide on one section and to provide nothing on the other.

We also objected, unsuccessfully, to Arriva’s decision to cease the section of the 402 route between Dunton Green and Bromley. This meant that Knockholt and Halstead had no public transport connection to Sevenoaks. With support from Kent County Council Go-Coach are now providing a 431 service between Sevenoaks and Orpington, but with only 4 trips each way a day instead of the 12 trips previously provided by Arriva. Sadly on a recent check a late morning 431 bus from Sevenoaks had no passengers (except our member), whereas the old 402 at around that time had typically had 15-20 passengers.

Fares

The 2017 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 1.8% from £3320 to £3380.

Season ticket prices and some other fares are regulated by the Government. Usually non-regulated fares on Southeastern have risen by roughly the same percentage and at the same time as regulated fares. However in 2017 Southeastern have imposed a second fare increase on unregulated fares, of around 3%. For Sevenoaks this affects off-peak tickets. Although Southeastern claimed that some of their unregulated fares had been frozen for several years we cannot see any Sevenoaks fares, certainly among the commonly used ones, that had not already been increased in January.

In December 2016 Southeastern introduced a new “smart card” ticket called the Key. This has extremely limited functionality – it can only hold Season Tickets and does not offer integrated Pay-As-You-Go travel, either on the Southeastern network itself or across the TfL network – or on local buses. In a scathing report the National Audit Office found that there was little to show for the £120 million paid to the transport operators for the “South East Flexible Ticketing” project (of which the Key is Southeastern’s component). Indeed even before Southeastern managed to introduce the Key the Department for Transport themselves had started to promote alternative methods for modernising payments.

We have also had a busy casebook of members who chose to put their season tickets onto the Key. Southeastern had failed to sort out the teething problems in the technology or to provide the training and system for ticket office and call centre staff to resolve issues that the customers encountered. In some cases customers who had paid over £3000 for a smart card season ticket that did not work were reportedly told to pay a further £3000 for a paper ticket!

Membership

At the end of June 2017 the Association’s membership was 95 Life Members and 17 current 2-year Members (2016: 84 and 12). There are over 200 people on our mailing list and we have over 1,100 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 2017 we had 23,484 visits to our website with a total of 38,231 page views (2016: 17,032 visits and 27,562 page views).

Committee

We are grateful to colleagues - Roger Johnson, Brian Houghton, Richard Parry, Gerry Dolby-Gray, John Ryan, Henry Dodd, James Crawley 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 19 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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