

# Sevenoaks Rail Travellers Association

## Report on Activities 2019-2020

Our activities have been curtailed for much of this year by the Coronavirus pandemic.

Since March the previous business model of the privatized train operating companies has been unviable - during the Spring lockdown there was practically no fare revenue to cover the largely fixed operating costs of the railway, and even at the end of September 2020 Car Park 4 was only 21% occupied on a late weekday morning. In March the Government moved the train operators to temporary 'concession' contracts where the Government pays the train operating companies to operate services with a management fee, and the Government keeps any fares that can be collected.

Before that the competition for the Southeastern franchise had been abandoned in August 2019 and the existing operator had been given repeated extensions of the previous contract up to 31 March 2020. On 30 March 2020 a further extension, on a concession basis, was agreed that could extend to 31 March 2022. It is unclear how, if ever, the promised improvements for the new franchise are to be delivered or what, if anything, is going to be done to review the new timetable, with reductions in Sevenoaks-Tunbridge Wells services, that was due to be introduced in 2022 under the new franchise.

In September 2020 government announced the conversion of all existing franchises to concessions for at least 18 months. This is a service model which SRTA has long advocated, based on its success in TfL. In theory it enables public authorities to hold train operators delivering a publicly specified service with defined quality and reliability targets. However it depends on a sophisticated buyer, able to define contracts with close understanding of rail operations, to ruthlessly manage the performance of the concession holder and penalise them if they under-perform, and to provide democratic transparency and accountability to local users. DfT, given its track record in managing franchises, is not well qualified to do this and, outside London and the major cities, local authorities do not currently have the expertise or the staffing to do this task. We support the arguments of Sir Michael Holden, former South Eastern Director, that the new model will not work until this lack of capability is fixed.

Before the arrival of the coronavirus, in November 2019, SRTA made efforts to engage with GTR on the fast service from Maidstone East to London Bridge, Blackfriars and beyond which should have been delivered starting December 2018. It became clear that GTR as a company is losing interest in operations south of the Thames. However this was a key issue when we met the new MP for Sevenoaks in February, and we helped draft a joint approach with the MP for Tonbridge & Malling pressing for progress. The Maidstone East service is the only viable option for increasing capacity from our part of Kent to London and would be more convenient for some of the local residents who currently have to drive to Sevenoaks; so it is strategically important for main line users as well.

We also pressed GTR to deliver the 'passenger benefit' projects to compensate travellers in the Darenth Valley for the 2018 meltdown in Thameslink services. SRTA coordinated bids for improvement from the stations from Sevenoaks to Swanley supporting the Darenth Valley Community Rail Partnership, This has still not occurred, although all improvements for GTR stations have been announced. GTR are still waiting for DfT approval for schemes at South Eastern stations, a year after announcements were originally promised.

We made representations on behalf of Sevenoaks station traders who lost all income as rail travellers vanished, but were pursued by South Eastern at the request of government for full payment of rent. This attracted support from local politicians, and some relief

South Eastern kept us posted on operating methods to operate trains safely, with enhanced cleaning and decontamination, and strong passenger management in stations. However peak hour traffic to London only recovered to about 20% of normal levels in September, before stalling. It is clear that a permanent shift in working patterns has occurred and many commuters in Sevenoaks now work part of the week from home. But the need for train capacity to accommodate distanced travellers in safety remains.

Also in September Kent County Council published a Rail Strategy for consultation. It gives SRTA credit for points it contains, and recommends some of our key policies:

- integration of Kent metro services with TfL as far as Dunton Green and Sevenoaks
- properly integrated fare systems with London
- delivering the Maidstone East Thameslink service
- a service from Kent to Gatwick, and a 'south orbital' service from Ashford to Reading

And last week, government announced plans for flexible season tickets, to make rail travel more convenient and efficient for changed work patterns. We await the details.

Tony Clayton, Chairman  
Andrew Stott, Secretary

September 2020