

Sevenoaks Rail Travellers Association Chairmans's Review of 2021-22

At the time of our last AGM in October 2021, passenger use on our lines was back to around 70% of 'normal'. Little has changed since then, and it looks as if the shift in working patterns is permanent. Many more commuters are travelling two or three days a week, and more travelling off peak. This means that peak commuter demand is lower.

In 2021 government announced that it had effectively renationalised our services. Government already owns the track and stations, and it now sets the timetable, determines service standards, sets fares and takes all the money. It pays the train operators to run the trains and stations, and to interface with rail travellers on its behalf.

Train services are at a reasonable capacity and frequency - 20 trains to London Bridge between 6.30 and 8.35 including a half hourly semi-fast service stopping at Dunton Green and Knockholt. South Eastern services have run pretty well this year. Reports of GTR are less favourable. Cancelled and late trains seem to have been more common.

Opportunities to interact with the rail system have been limited. the Department for Transport, which now runs railways, are not keen on talking to rail user groups like ours.

South Eastern was willing to talk to us in October in advance of announcing the new timetable starting December the 11th. They naturally focused on the 'good news':

- service frequencies for West Kent mainline services maintained
- a new hourly 'fast' service from Maidstone East via Borough Green, Otford, Swanley to London Bridge and Charing Cross

The 'new' service is in place of a half hourly direct service through London Bridge, Blackfriars, Farringdon and St Pancras International promised for the 2018 timetable as a Thameslink service, linking directly to Crossrail. It will allow commuters from Bat & Ball to get to London Bridge in 44 minutes. changing at Otford. and better connections from Darent Valley. However the value of an hourly service which doesn't link directly to Crossrail will be less. It remains to be seen how far this will help Borough Green / Kings Hill commuters now using the fast Sevenoaks service. We have asked South Eastern / DfT to use the new service to establish the reliability standard required to run through Crossrail.

Hidden in the small print of the timetable was bad news that the connections for the slow service from Dunton Green and Knockholt to the fast at Chelsfield will be broken, by retiming the slow trains after the fast. Journey times will be longer and the service less convenient. We have yet to discover why DfT have done this - the timetable is specified by them. We have asked for a further meeting.

The 'passenger benefit' schemes at Darent Valley stations, funded by fines on GTR after the 2018 timetable collapse, have been partly implemented. Additional platform shelters and some access improvements have been done. The Darent Valley Community Rail Partnership has played a leading role in coordinating this, as well as commissioning very impressive artwork posters for each station between Sevenoaks and Swanley.

Tony Clayton, November 2022