

External Overview & Scrutiny Committee

Maidstone Rail Services



Draft Report

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Recommendations

The committee recommends that:

- a) The Council begins lobbying immediately for the next rail franchise specification for Kent to include the provision of Thameslink services in Maidstone;
- b) The Council should continue to lobby for the reinstatement of the fast shoulder-peak services to Cannon Street from Maidstone East;
- c) The incidences of conflicting information on the National Rail website regarding accessibility issues at stations in the borough be reported to National Rail for amendment;
- d) The level of sheltered cycle storage available at railway stations is increased where rail users believe this to be required to encourage the use of cycling rather than cars to access rail services;
- e) Amendments to car parking charges should be consistent across the borough so as not to disadvantage some residents more than others; and
- f) The old coal yard at Bearsted be acquired by Network Rail and operated as a car park by Southeastern to reduce the level of parking by commuters on residential roads.

1. Terms of Reference

1.1 At the External Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting held on 11 August 2009, the committee agreed the following terms of reference for the review of rail services in the borough:

- Look at quality of rolling stock on Maidstone services.
- Look at the quality of stations and car parking facilities.
- Look into whether commuters travel out of Maidstone to access rail services from a location offering more efficient services, in particular rural stations in the Borough.
- Identify reasons for service cuts.
- Identify to what extent there are problems with the service, and to what extent there is an issue with perception.
- Provide evidence to support lobbying.

2. Methodology

- 2.1 Councillors conducted a range of select committee-style interviews with stakeholders to identify issues with and plans for rail services in the borough.
- 2.2 Councillor Robertson, the Council's Railways Champion, was invited by the Chairman to be involved in the review from an early stage due to his knowledge, interest and involvement in railways issues relevant to the borough. The Assistant Director of Development and Community Strategy, Brian Morgan, and the Public Transport Officer, Clive Cheeseman, also provided valuable assistance throughout the review.
- 2.3 Desktop research was also carried out by the Overview and Scrutiny Team to identify key issues with regard to rail services, for example the transport plans for the area.
- 2.4 Parish councils were contacted and asked to provide information on rail services for their parishes, including any problems with parking as a result of commuters travelling to these stations rather than the town centre stations to access better services.

3. Introduction and Background

- 3.1 At the External Overview and Scrutiny Meeting on 16 June 2009, Members agreed to carry out its major review into the provision of rail services within the Maidstone Borough. The relevant extract from the minutes of the meeting are as follows:

“The Committee agreed to carry out a review of rail services to London, noting that these were being cut and residents were being forced to use alternative train stations to access services. Additionally, Maidstone was a Growth Point and appropriate public transport for the growing population was therefore vital. It was agreed that parish councils should be consulted as part of this review.”

- 3.2 The Council had initially raised concern with regard to rail services during 2005. In particular it considered that there was a need for a fast link from Maidstone into Central London, along with improved services from rural areas into Maidstone; that the rail operator at the time lacked knowledge of the necessity of services; and the operator did not possess accurate usage records or consider the issue of latent demand fully.
- 3.3. Since 2005, public concern about service cuts had risen and in 2009 the Kent Messenger mounted a campaign against the cuts that received significant support from residents.

4. Rail Transport for Maidstone

4.1 South East Plan

4.1.1 The South East Plan is a planning document that sets out a vision for the future of the South East Region to 2026. It was produced in May 2009 and recognised Maidstone as a regional hub, major commercial centre and rail destination for business, shopping, education and leisure purposes. The South East Plan states that regional hubs will be:

- a focus for investment in multi-modal transport infrastructure both within and between hubs, supported by initiatives to re-balance travel patterns through behavioural change
- a focus for other new infrastructure, including health, education, social and green infrastructure, and public services
- a focus for new investment in economic activity and regeneration, including skills and training investment
- a focus for new market and affordable housing, to support the creation of higher density 'living centres'
- a focus for new major retail and employment development¹.

4.1.2 The South East Plan states that transport plans should support and develop the role of regional hubs by increasing the level of accessibility by public transport.

4.1.3 Prior to the South East Plan, in July 2004 the Regional Transport Strategy designated Maidstone as a Transport Hub. Transport Hubs were identified as larger urban areas of regional significance where there was potential to build on the existing transport infrastructure to achieve higher accessibility by non car modes. They were also the focus for regional economic development. The 2004 Transport Strategy was subsequently incorporated into the South East Plan 2009².

4.1.4 Maidstone was originally set a growth target of 10,080 new dwellings by 2026 this was increased to 11,080 new dwellings by 2026 in the final plan. This compares with 9,000 for Tonbridge and Malling as the next highest and only 300 new dwellings for Ashford³.

4.2 Integrated Transport Strategy

4.2.1 Kent County Council was, at the time of writing, consulting on its Integrated Transport Strategy, "Growth Without Gridlock". The stated objective of the strategy is to provide a 20 year vision for road, rail, bus, air, sea and sustainable transport systems to support the Regeneration Framework – Unlocking Kent's Potential. One of the five key elements of this strategy is "Making Public Transport Travel Easier – making public transport easier, simpler and cheaper to use through utilising new

¹ South East Plan – Regional Spatial Strategy p.19

² E-mail from Brian Morgan, Assistant Director of Development and Community Strategy, dated 29 March 2010.

³ South East Plan Policy AOSR6

technology, integrated ticketing and promoting better understanding of how to use it.⁴”

- 4.2.2 Cabinet responded to the consultation in February 2010 and raised concerns that the draft Integrated Transport Strategy did not refer to the Regional Spatial Strategy and as such the draft strategy did not recognise Maidstone as an economic hub or as a growth point. Cabinet welcomed Kent County Council’s support for the construction of a parkway station but asked for its support in campaigning with Maidstone for a raft of strategic and local rail improvements and lobbying for Maidstone’s inclusion in excellent rail links which improve the frequency and journey times from Maidstone to London⁵.

⁴ Kent County Council *Growth Without Gridlock: An Integrated Transport Strategy for Kent* p.3

⁵ <http://meetings.maidstone.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CIId=146&MIId=375&Ver=4> accessed 29 March 2010

5. Rail Services in Maidstone

5.1 Service Specification

5.1.1 The minimum level of service to be provided by any rail operator is set out in the franchise specification, which is set by the Department for Transport. This outlines which services must be provided, their frequency, times of operation and maximum journey times.

5.1.2 The current specification for Maidstone services is based on consultation that was carried out in 2003/04 and was taken over by Southeastern in 2006 after it had been taken away from Connex. The franchise specification for services via Maidstone East and Maidstone West is as follows:

Route	Maidstone East Line
Stakeholder Briefing Document Position	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1 tph Victoria – Canterbury West via Maidstone East and Ashford; • 1 tph Victoria – Maidstone East (with two of the three trains in each peak extended to/from Ashford); • 2 tppp Victoria – Ashford via Maidstone East; • 2 tppp Victoria – Maidstone East; and • 1 tppp Blackfriars – Ashford via Maidstone East.
Final Specification	<p>Change to stopping pattern: Victoria – Maidstone East, two peak trains diverted from Victoria to Blackfriars.</p> <p>Victoria – Canterbury West via Maidstone East service: off-peak calls added at Hollingbourne, Harrietsham, Lenham and Charing.</p>

Route	Maidstone West (Medway Valley Line)
Stakeholder Briefing Document Position	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1 tph Strood – Tonbridge (semi-fast between Strood and Maidstone West; and • 1 tph Strood – Maidstone West (all stations). <p>2 tph between Strood and Maidstone West across the normal working day. Outside these times, the Strood – Tonbridge 'leg' of the service to call at all stations, but terminate at Paddock Wood.</p>
Final Specification	As per Stakeholder Briefing Document.

tph = train/s per hour

tppp = train/s per peak period

Peak = When used in relation to trains to/from London, usually means trains arriving at their London terminal between 07:00 and 09:59, or departing London between 16:00 and 18:59.

5.1.3 The next franchise specification will be consulted on in late 2010/early 2011, and will be implemented in 2014.

5.2 Cannon Street Service

5.2.1 Although not included in the franchise specification, fast services from Maidstone to Charing Cross via Cannon Street and London Bridge were operated during the off-peak and 'shoulder-peak' times; these took 48 minutes from Maidstone to London Bridge and served City workers. Travelling via London Victoria (the other main route between Maidstone and London) increased the journey time between Maidstone and the City to over 90 minutes. Whilst services to Blackfriars were also available and gave better access to the City than Victoria, commuter groups did not consider this a suitable alternative as there was no underground service from Blackfriars, making onward travel problematic⁶. The committee also heard from commuters that they were likely to move out of the borough in order to access services to the City if the Cannon Street service was removed⁷.

5.2.2 When Southeastern took over the franchise from Connex, it carried out a demand validation survey to check whether the specification survey was correct. This demonstrated that while there was no commercial case for off-peak services to Cannon Street, this was not so clear for the shoulder-peak services.

5.2.3 The timetable introduced by Southeastern on 13 December 2009 included the removal of the fast services to Cannon Street. When the draft timetable was published, it was met with opposition from rail user groups, local authorities and Members of Parliament. The Council's Assistant Director of Development and Community Strategy accompanied Ann Widdecombe MP in June 2009 to visit the Minister for Transport to put forward the Council's case for the retention of services. In response to a request from the DfT, Southeastern had put together costings to show what funding was required to run the shoulder-peak services; the service was shown to cost £600,000 and Southeastern either needed additional subsidy or to cut other services. The request for additional subsidy was turned down by the DfT.

5.2.4 When questioned by the Committee, Mike Gibson, Public Affairs Manager for Southeastern confirmed that other options for saving money in order to maintain the shoulder-peak services to Cannon Street had not been considered. All other services provided by Southeastern in the 13 December 2009 timetable were predicated on commercial demand, and following redundancies in January 2009, there was little room for cuts in staff.

5.2.5 Mr Gibson, along with witnesses from Network Rail and the Council's Railways Champion, considered the Thameslink service to be the best opportunity for improving access from Maidstone to the City in the future (see section 8 – the future). This would increase the number of services

⁶ Minute № 29

⁷ Ibid

to Blackfriars, giving access to the City, though commuter group concerns about Blackfriars lack of underground service should be noted.

5.3 Journey Times and Frequency

5.3.1 The following table identifies peak time (arriving in London before 10:00, or leaving London between 16:00 and 18:59) direct services⁸ from major stations in the borough.

Origin	Destination	Number of services	Fastest service	Slowest service
Maidstone East	London Victoria	9 (earliest 5:49, latest 8:55)	56 minutes	1 hour 14 minutes
	London Blackfriars	2 (earliest 06:15, latest 06:54)	1 hour 7 minutes	1 hour 10 minutes
Bearsted	London Victoria	9 (earliest 5:43, latest 8:49)	1 hour 2 minutes	1 hour 20 minutes
	London St Pancras	1 (6:48)	1 hour 25 minutes	
	London Blackfriars	2 (earliest 6:09, latest 6.48)	1 hour 13 minutes	1 hour 16 minutes
Headcorn	London Cannon Street	4 (earliest 06:50, latest 7:50)	1 hour 6 minutes	1 hour 12 minutes
	London Charing Cross (calling at London Bridge 5 minutes earlier)	10 (earliest 5:25, latest 8:45)	1 hour 7 minutes	1 hour 11 minutes
Staplehurst	London Cannon Street	4 (earliest 06:55, latest 07:55)	1 hour 1 minute	1 hour 7 minutes
	London Charing Cross (calling at London Bridge 5 minutes earlier)	10 (earliest 5:30, latest 8:50)	1 hour 2 minutes	1 hour 6 minutes

⁸ Information from www.nationalrail.co.uk, based on journeys for 03/03/10

- 5.3.2 The committee heard from Network Rail that journey times on the Maidstone East line were likely to improve as line speeds and speed restrictions were being reconsidered, though it was highlighted that reducing a journey time by one minute could cost millions of pounds. It was also noted that the line had been built cheaply in the 1860s and it was prohibitively expensive to remove all of the bends in the track. This was reiterated by the council's Railways Champion who stated that due to the topography of the area, the line would never be fast. However, Network Rail would be reviewing speed limits along the line as some were historical and may no longer be necessary.
- 5.3.3 It was also noted that a compromise had to be reached between offering faster journey times that could be unreliable and frequently late or slower journeys that arrived on time and were dependable⁹.
- 5.3.4 High Speed 1 (HS1) services are already operating between Ebbsfleet and London St Pancras. There are opportunities to extend the Ebbsfleet shuttle to either Maidstone West or Ashford International to extend high speed services into Kent. The Kent Rail Utilisation Strategy, which sets out Network Rail's strategic vision for rail services in the area, recommends further consideration of extending the Ebbsfleet shuttle to Maidstone West via the Medway Valley Line until the necessary work has been undertaken to deliver HS1 services via Ashford International, which is the preferred long-term option. However, it is important to note that the section of the journey on the Medway Valley Line would need to be at normal speed, with high speed travel only taking place between Strood and London; therefore journey times would still be around an hour, which was not significantly faster than current journey times or the journey times that would be offered by the Thameslink service in the future.

5.4 Rolling Stock

- 5.4.1 Councillors raised concerns about the quality of the rolling stock used for Maidstone rail services and learnt that there were no plans to provide new rolling stock for the duration of the current franchise, however current rolling stock would be refurbished.
- 5.4.2 There were two types of rolling stock on Southeastern networks – Networkers, which were refurbished suburban trains, and Class 395s, which were more modern. Southeastern tried to use Class 395s for longer journeys, as they were more comfortable, however the Networkers had a larger capacity so were often used during peak periods¹⁰.
- 5.4.3 Following a passenger survey on the Medway Valley Line which highlighted concerns over the quality of the rolling stock, the rolling stock had been improved; previously, there had been 3-car trains without toilets but these had been replaced by 2-car trains with toilets¹¹.
- 5.4.4 The Kent RUS recommends lengthening all high peak services to 8-cars on the Maidstone East line, with longer term consideration being given to

⁹ Minute № 73

¹⁰ Minute № 99

¹¹ Minute № 72

using Selective Door Opening (SDO) to permit 9-car to 12-car operation on the Maidstone East line if demand requires. SDO would be required as lengthening the platform at Maidstone East to accommodate more cars would be prohibitively expensive. The use of SDO on the line would require the use of Class 395s on high peak services, rather than Networkers, as Networkers did not feature SDO technology.

5.4.5 At the time of the review, procurement for the rolling stock for Thameslink was underway. The committee heard that the contract would be awarded in Autumn 2010, however the stock would not be on the network until late 2013¹².

5.5 Integrated Transport

5.5.1 The draft Kent Integrated Transport Strategy, "Growth Without Gridlock", aims to promote and encourage a wide range of different transport modes and make alternatives to the private car more attractive, convenient, quicker and affordable in order to avoid gridlock across the county.

5.5.2 Throughout the review, members raised concerns that transport was not adequately integrated, for example with bus services not complementing train services, making travel by car preferable. Staplehurst Parish Council raised similar concerns; Staplehurst is the second-highest used station in the borough (behind Maidstone East) and the parish council highlighted:

"We believe that (subject to the general level of the economy) use of Staplehurst station by both Staplehurst residents and passengers living in communities along the A229 from south Maidstone to the Sussex border is likely to continue at its present level, and is indeed likely to increase if the additional housing envisaged on the north side of Staplehurst is built. This will continue to cause both congestion and accidents on the narrow and busy A229 road. We should like to see this problem addressed by road improvements, for example at the junction of Station Approach with the A229 and encouraging the use of public transport in connection with rail services. This might involve physical improvements to the bus rail interchange, and adjustments to bus timetables to promote integrated transport. There is a need for more and better cycle storage at Staplehurst station, and we hope that this will be put in hand once the works on the accessible footbridge are completed."

5.5.3 However, Mike Gibson of Southeastern stated that ensuring routes were integrated was a priority and Southeastern maintained a strong relationship with local bus companies with this in mind. Draft train timetables were always circulated to bus companies for their comments in order to help ensure coordinated services.

5.5.4 Cycle storage was raised as an issue by Staplehurst Parish Council which felt that more and better cycle storage at Staplehurst Station could help to address the issue of road congestion around the station. Cycle storage is provided at six stations in the borough with varying degrees of capacity:

¹² Minute No 100

Station ¹³	Cycle Storage?	Space for:
Bearsted	✓	9 bikes
East Farleigh	✗	N/A
Harrietsham	✗	N/A
Hollingbourne	✗	N/A
Lenham	✓ (not sheltered)	8 bikes
Maidstone Barracks	✗	N/A
Maidstone East	✓	12 bikes
Maidstone West	✓ (not sheltered)	6 bikes
Marden	✓	6 bikes
Staplehurst	✓	20 bikes

5.5.5 The draft Kent Integrated Transport Strategy outlines several objectives to be explored relating to integrating rail travel with other forms of transport:

- Smartcard technology to allow ticket-less integrated travel;
- Cycle hire and storage to encourage cycling to stations; and
- Establishing major transport interchange points at train stations so that a variety of bus services can be accessed at the train station (including inter-urban coach services, rural transport and local buses).

5.5.6 A cycle strategy is being produced by officers as part of the Transport Strategy. Given the relatively small number of cycle storage places available at each station and the objective to encourage cycling rather than driving to stations, the Committee recommend that more sheltered cycle storage spaces be introduced, subject to consultation.

5.6 Medway Valley Community Rail Partnership

5.6.1 The Medway Valley Community Rail Partnership was established in 2005 and partners included local authorities, rail companies and the communities along the Medway Valley Line. The Partnership existed to promote awareness and usage of the Medway Valley Line and to improve facilities. It also responded to consultations where appropriate.

5.6.2 Funding for the Partnership came from KCC, Tonbridge and Malling Borough Council, rail service providers and some parish councils, and it was hosted by Action with Communities in Rural Kent, which was a registered charity.

¹³ Phone call to National Rail Enquiries on 15 March 2010 to establish the number of spaces for cycle storage at each station.

- 5.6.3 The Partnership looked to engage the community, bring them back to the railway and reduce traffic congestion. Passenger figures had increased by 5-6% during 2009 which was better than comparable lines without a community rail partnership. Significant improvements had also been made to the quality of rolling stock on the line, the stations, and the services themselves, for example some journeys had been extended to Tonbridge rather than finishing in Paddock Wood.
- 5.6.4 When questioned by councillors, the Community Rail Partnership Project Officer, Ian Paterson, stated that the biggest problem for the Medway Valley Line in the medium term was that funding for the Partnership was on a year-on-year basis so medium- to long-term planning could not take place. Additionally, officer time was an issue as Mr Paterson's post was only part time and this made applying for grants, for example, difficult.

6. Demand for Services

6.1 Passenger Figures

6.1.1 The table below shows the entry and exit figures for 2006-07 and 2007-08 from and to the Maidstone areas obtained from Passenger Focus¹⁴:

Station	2006-07 Entries & Exits	2007-08 Entries & Exits	Change	
Maidstone East	1,877,269	1,978,463	5.4%	Growth
Staplehurst	886,971	933,658	5.3%	Growth
Headcorn	621,876	651,630	4.8%	Growth
Maidstone West	415,298	550,958	32.7%	Growth
Bearsted	371,664	421,414	13.4%	Growth

6.1.2 This clearly shows an increase in passenger numbers, which is consistent with information from the Medway Valley Community Rail Partnership which states that passenger figures on the Medway Valley Line had increased by 5-6% between 2008 and 2009¹⁵. The committee was of the opinion that this demonstrated the need for services to be at least maintained, if not improved.

6.1.3 Southeastern currently had the only official figures, however these were commercially sensitive and consequently not released to partners. Additionally, witnesses from Network Rail highlighted that station-by-station data was not very specific and required interpretation to obtain meaningful information¹⁶.

6.1.4 Gathering accurate passenger information is extremely difficult; the committee heard that there are over 125 million possible fares in the UK¹⁷, which made calculating passenger numbers from ticket sales difficult. A ticket to London, for example, could go to any station in the city. Smart ticketing, such as Oyster cards, would improve passenger data.

6.1.5 A variety of methods are currently used to establish passenger numbers. Representatives of Network Rail explained that in order to establish the proportion of a ticket sale that went to each relevant operator, train companies relied on some passengers keeping travel diaries¹⁸. Southeastern stated that passenger figures were calculated using two different methods: one involved people standing at stations and counting people, whilst the other used software that weighed train carriages and calculated the number of passengers in the train using an average weight per passenger¹⁹.

¹⁴ As cited in "Rail Usage Factual Evidence Report", Malling and District Rail Travellers Association and Maidstone Area Rail Users Group, 14 August 2009.

¹⁵ Minute No 72

¹⁶ Minute No 73

¹⁷ Minute No 73

¹⁸ Minute No 73

¹⁹ Minute No 99

- 6.1.6 Despite Southeastern assurances that passenger figures were accurate, rail user groups and other stakeholders maintained that this was not the case and also highlighted that figures did not take into account latent demand (see 6.2).
- 6.1.7 Network Rail identified that when closures had been proposed on the Maidstone-Ashford route several years ago, Kent County Council had disputed the Southeastern figures and carried out its own survey. This had produced different results to those obtained by Southeastern, highlighting the difficulties with establishing accurate passenger figures²⁰.
- 6.1.8 The Council's Railways Champion informed Members that Networker trains were used for many peak time services from Maidstone to London due to their higher capacity, however 70% of these did not have the software to weigh passengers. It was therefore suggested that Southeastern's figures on the usage of the Cannon Street shoulder-peak services were questionable²¹.
- 6.1.8 The Maidstone Area Rail User Group and the Malling and District Rail Travellers Association carried out a survey in July 2009 to identify the current demand for rail services between Maidstone and the City. Figures from a manual passenger count during July showed the mean amount of people travelling on a service to London from Maidstone East before 8:53 a.m. was 259 and travelling to Maidstone East from London after 16:14 p.m. was 205 passengers. The count also found that between 12 midday and 3 p.m. less than 100 passengers on average used the service to and from. Therefore, the survey demonstrated a clear increase in demand for services arriving in the City before 10 a.m. and leaving after 4 p.m.

6.2 Rail Heading and Concealed Demand

- 6.2.1 A key concern of members and stakeholders throughout the review was that residents were travelling out of Maidstone to access better rail services from other railway stations, a practice called "railheading". This was considered problematic for several reasons: it put pressure on limited car parking at rural stations; there was a negative impact on both the environment and the road network of residents driving to alternative stations; and it reduced apparent demand for services from Maidstone town stations, reducing the likelihood of service improvements.
- 6.2.2 Network Rail stated that it was the rail industry's obligation to persuade people to use the nearest station to their homes by making services more attractive.
- 6.2.3 When this issue was raised with Southeastern, it was stated that "Southeastern would look at increasing car parking capacity where necessary and would concentrate on ensuring that the Maidstone East to Victoria service was as attractive as possible. However, improving this

²⁰ Minute No 73

²¹ Minute No 100

service was difficult due to infrastructure and the pressure to stop at all of the smaller stations along the line.²²

- 6.2.4 The Maidstone Area Rail User Group and the Malling and District Rail Travellers Association carried out an online survey during the summer of 2009 which was completed by 496 commuters. Whilst not representative of all commuters and citizens, it provides useful evidence with regard to concealed demand.
- 6.2.5 The survey showed that 69% of respondents travelled from their nearest station, whilst 31% travelled to alternative stations. The most popular reasons given for travelling to alternative stations were "poor services into the City", "no direct trains into the City at peak times" and "the journey duration is too long".
- 6.2.6 A survey carried out on behalf of Staplehurst Parish Council in 2005 identified that around half of the users of Staplehurst station in the peak period lived more than three miles from the station. Users of the station came from areas served by stations on the Maidstone East line, as well as from Cranbrook, Sissinghurst and Hawkhurst, for example.

6.3 Future Demand

- 6.3.1 The Kent Rail Utilisation Strategy (RUS) includes information on expected passenger growth, though notes that much of this is due to improvements in services – most significantly the high speed rail link. The growth predictions also factor in information such as socio-economic and demographic changes. Councillors were assured that issues such as Growth Point Status were also taken into account; the South East Plan was used as a data source, so population and housing growth information captured in that would be reflected in growth forecasts²³.
- 6.3.2 Total passenger demand in the RUS area is expected to grow by 30% by 2022. Higher growth in demand is expected in Ashford and Medway due to the planned housing growth in those areas. Members queried why Maidstone was not expected to experience higher growth in demand, given the 11,080 additional homes due to be built by 2026.
- 6.3.4 When the committee spoke with a representative of Southeastern, it was indicated that growth figures for Maidstone provided by the Department for Transport had differed to those provided by local authorities. Members were extremely concerned about this, as the borough's Growth Point Status clearly specified the required level of housing growth, therefore population and housing growth projections for the borough should be consistent. Following the meeting, Southeastern were asked to provide further information regarding the growth figures used, but at the time of writing no response had been received to the several requests made.

²² Minute No 99

²³ Minute No 73

7. Stations

7.1 Car Parking

7.1.1 Car parking information for stations in the borough is as follows²⁴:

Station	Car Parking Spaces	Parking Cost (daily weekday/weekly/monthly)	Increase in parking cost from October 2009 ²⁵
Bearsted	62	£4/£18/£67.50	£1/£3.90/£14.70
East Farleigh	6	-	-
Harrietsham	24	£3/£13.50/£50	£1/£4.50/£16.30
Hollingbourne	10	-	-
Lenham	22	£2/£9.50/£35	60p/£3/£11.10
Maidstone Barracks	0 (use Maidstone East)	n/a	n/a
Maidstone East	493	£4.50/£21/£77.50 (prices are for rail users on production of valid ticket)	50p/£2.20/£7.10
Maidstone West	74	£4.50/£21/£77.50	50p/£2.20/£7.10
Marden	150	£4/£18.50/£69.50	[unavailable]
Staplehurst	438	£4/£17.50/£54.50	50p/£1.60/£5.10

The increase in parking costs at stations in the borough varies considerably: the charge for a monthly ticket in Staplehurst increased by £5.10, whilst in Harrietsham the increase was £16.30. This variation significantly disadvantages those in some parts of the borough more than others, and there should be some level of consistency in parking charges to ensure equality.

7.1.2 There is a Network Rail scheme in place to increase car parking spaces by 50 at Marden Station; this is planned for completion by Spring 2010²⁶. Additionally, East Farleigh station car park will shortly be expanded to 40 spaces following campaigning by the Medway Valley Community Rail Partnership²⁷.

7.1.3 Concerns were raised over commuters parking in residential areas rather than station car parks, either to avoid parking charges or due to insufficient space, particularly in rural areas. In Staplehurst, the parish council explained that "there is unlikely to be much possibility of expanding the area used for car parking in the immediate future, but it might be possible to reorganise the car parks to make better use of the existing space".

²⁴ <http://www.nationalrail.co.uk/stations/> [accessed 8 March 2010]

²⁵ Figures obtained from <http://www.nationalrail.co.uk/stations/> on 27 October 2009

²⁶ Ibid

²⁷ Minute No 72

7.1.4 In Bearsted, it was identified that yellow lines had been put in place along residential roads around the station, limiting on-street commuter parking, therefore additional car parking space would be welcome. Councillors highlighted that there was an old coal yard at the station that residents believed could be used for car parking, however this had not been utilised. Southeastern explained that any decisions to expand car parking or to build a new car park was a joint one between Southeastern and Network Rail, however Network Rail owned the rail infrastructure and it was therefore its responsibility to buy additional land. Network Rail confirmed that discussion were ongoing between its commercial property department, Southeastern and the parish council about car parking, however suggested contacting Southeastern for information as the scheme was not within the Network Rail portfolio²⁸. This apparent lack of clarity over responsibility for the provision of different aspects of rail services was of concern to members as it would clearly have an impact on the potential delivery of a scheme; clear ownership of a project was essential to ensure its eventual delivery.

Possible recommendation that responsibility and roles between Network Rail and Southeastern be clarified, particularly in relation to acquisition and identification of suitable land for car parking.

7.2 Accessibility

7.2.1 The following table highlights accessibility and mobility access at stations within the Borough. The information was obtained from the National Rail Enquiries website, www.nationalrail.co.uk, on 8 March 2010.

Station	Staff Help*	Accessible ticket machines	Induction Loop	Ramp for train access	National key toilets	Step free access coverage **	Disabled parking
Bearsted	✓	✓	✗	✓	✗	Partial (platform 1)	✓
East Farleigh	Unclear	✗	✗	✗	✗	Partial (platform 2)	Unclear
Harrietsham	Unclear	✗	✗	✓	✗	Partial	Unclear
Hollingbourne	Unclear	✗	✗	✗	✗	Partial	✓
Lenham	✓	✗	✗	✓	✗	Partial	✓

²⁸ E-mail from Murray Motley, Senior Commercial Schemes Sponsor – Kent, Network Rail

Station	Staff Help*	Accessible ticket machines	Induction Loop	Ramp for train access	National key toilets	Step free access coverage **	Disabled parking
Maidstone Barracks	Unclear	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	n/a
Maidstone East	✓	✓	✗	✓	✗	✓	✓
Maidstone West	✓	✓	✗	✓	✗	Partial	✓
Marden	✓	✗	✓	✓	✗	Partial	✓
Staplehurst	✓	✓	✗	✓	✗	Partial	✓

* Not 24/7 – website gives details of times available

** Where “partial”, website gives details of step free areas

7.2.2 The National Rail website offers a significant amount of information on accessibility and mobility access that is undoubtedly of great use to residents with disabilities. In particular, there is detailed information on which areas of stations are step-free, and where accessible ticket offices or machines are situated. However, there were several instances of conflicting information on the website which should be rectified to avoid any possible confusion:

Stations	Issue
Bearsted	<p>“Accessible ticket office counter: ✗ Yes”</p> <p>Unclear whether accessible ticket office counter is available.</p>
East Farleigh, Harrietsham, Hollingbourne and Maidstone Barracks	<p>“Staff Help: ✓ Yes</p> <p>Monday-Friday: Closed</p> <p>Saturday: Closed</p> <p>Sunday: Closed”</p> <p>Unclear whether staff help is available for passengers.</p>
East Farleigh and Harrietsham	<p>“Disabled Parking: ✗ No</p> <p>Disabled parking is free for disabled customers displaying a valid International Blue Badge”</p> <p>Unclear whether designated disabled parking is available.</p>

7.2.3 A Department for Transport-funded accessible footbridge, including lifts and staircases, has recently opened at Staplehurst station, allowing access to both platforms. Southeastern has also received matched funding from the DfT to provide power-operated doors and accessible toilets at Staplehurst²⁹.

7.3 Station Improvements

7.3.1 Network Rail is undertaking a programme of “dilapidation” works. This covers all stations and goes beyond routine painting and decorating to deal with structural repairs, re-surfacing of platforms and replacement of lighting. The level of investment depends on the station’s existing condition and usage. Significant work is being carried out in Lenham in particular, including the replacement of the life-expired footbridge.

7.3.2 The Medway Valley Community Rail Partnership had worked with Network Rail and Southeastern who had repainted and refurbished stations along the entire Medway Valley Line in 2009, including the installation of new seats, customer information screens, CCTV and shelters. The canopy at Maidstone West had also been replaced. The Partnership had also worked with the University College for the Creative Arts to produce murals for display in the ticket hall and platform at Maidstone West station.

7.3.3 Funding for station improvements along the Medway Valley Line was available from a range of small project funds, for example at Medway Council, the DfT and the Association of Community Rail Partnerships. Southeastern contributed £10,000 per year for small projects, and the Medway Valley Community Rail Partnership’s link to Action with Communities in Rural Kent allowed it access to some charity funding. The main problem, however, was in terms of officer time, as applying for these funds was very time-consuming³⁰.

²⁹ E-mail from Murray Motley, Senior Commercial Schemes Sponsor – Kent, Network Rail and submission from Staplehurst Parish Council

³⁰ Minute No 72

8. The Future

8.1 High Speed Rail

8.1.1 High Speed Domestic Services were introduced in December 2009 under the Integrated Kent Franchise. In the off peak there are four trains an hour – two on the North Kent line from Faversham, and two through Ashford - one from Dover and one from Canterbury. In the peak there are two or three additional trains an hour to/from St. Pancras. Two of these peak trains only currently operate between Ebbsfleet and St. Pancras.

8.1.2 During the committee's review, discussions were being held around the possibility of extending 2 of these peak time high speed services (HS1) from Ebbsfleet further into Kent, either on the existing high speed line to Ashford or via Strood to Maidstone West on the Medway Valley Line. This was in response to concerns about capacity on services to London.

8.1.3 The committee heard that Ashford offered significant benefits, including reducing overcrowding on services from Ashford currently running through Headcorn and Staplehurst (though Staplehurst Parish Council was uncertain that this would be the case), however services would need to use the international platform and building work would need to be carried out, making it a very expensive option³¹.

8.1.4 Network Rail was of the opinion that although running HS1 services to Maidstone offered fewer overall benefits than Ashford, it was a much cheaper option. It was noted that because the Strood-Maidstone section of the journey would need to be at normal speed, the overall journey time to London on the high speed service was unlikely to be significantly faster than the Thameslink service³². (see section 8.2).

8.1.5 The Kent RUS states that Ashford is the preferred choice in the long term for these services due to anticipated growth in the area; however, because of limited platform capacity at Ashford and the expense of building a new platform, this is currently ruled out.

8.1.6 Running the services to Maidstone is considered achievable provided trains are limited to six cars due to platform lengths. However, any extension of the service will require the DfT to purchase additional rolling stock, however none are currently spare or on order, meaning that any extension of the service will not take place in the immediate future³³.

8.2 Thameslink

8.2.1 Thameslink is a £4-5 million investment programme for rolling stock and improvements to Blackfriars and London Bridge stations. Construction is

³¹ Minute No 73

³² Ibid

³³ Information provided by the Public Transport Officer, March 2010

planned to begin after the London 2012 Olympics and be completed in 2015/16.

- 8.2.2 The Kent RUS states: "the completion of the Thameslink Programme works at London Bridge will trigger an extensive recast of train services across much of Kent, Sussex and South London...An all-day Thameslink service to/from the Maidstone East line via Bromley South is also anticipated.³⁴" Thameslink is therefore expected to connect Maidstone East to the City of London from 2015/16. However, as previously noted rail user groups raised concern about the lack of an underground service at Blackfriars, making it a less convenient option for the City than Cannon Street³⁵.
- 8.2.3 Whilst councillors were pleased to hear that Maidstone was likely to receive the Thameslink service, they were concerned over the six year gap between the cancellation of the Maidstone East to Cannon Street shoulder-peak services and the introduction of the Thameslink service. There was concern that by the time the Thameslink service was introduced, those residents that required direct, frequent services to the City would have moved out of the town to access better services.
- 8.2.4 When the committee queried why the Thameslink service would take so long to introduce, Murray Motley of Network Rail explained that the Thameslink service would be enabled by improving the track between London St Pancras and London Bridge. Just beyond London Bridge, Borough Market Junction connected Kent and most of East Sussex to the rest of the country and was consequently exceptionally busy, slowing journey times. The location of the junction also made it difficult to widen. In order to improve journey times, significant work was required on Borough Market Junction. Blackfriars station needed expanding and London Bridge station needed to be remodelled, all whilst maintaining services³⁶.
- 8.2.5 Mike Gibson, Public Affairs Manager for Southeastern, emphasised the importance of lobbying the DfT for Thameslink services to run to Maidstone, as this would form part of the new rail franchise specification and was not guaranteed. Consultation on the new specification would take place in late 2010 or early 2011³⁷.

8.3 Maidstone Parkway

- 8.3.1 The Kent RUS and the draft Kent Integrated Transport Strategy both refer to the potential of a "Maidstone Parkway" station which would be served by HS1 services. This would allow both Ashford and Maidstone to receive HS1 services and would significantly improve journey times to the county town.

³⁴ Network Rail *Kent Route Utilisation Strategy* January 2010

³⁵ Minute No 29

³⁶ Minute No 73

³⁷ Minute No 99

8.3.2 The draft Kent Integrated Transport Strategy also points out that such a station could be used to link Maidstone with European rail services.

8.3.3 It is currently unclear where a Parkway station would be situated, as it would need to have excellent road links and plenty of car parking space, however the RUS recommends Maidstone Parkway for further consideration subject to a business case. If the project does progress, it is unlikely to be before the end of Southeastern's current franchise in 2014³⁸.

8.4 Maidstone East Redevelopment

Murray Motley, a representative from Network Rail informed the committee in November 2009 that it was expected that new proposals for the station redevelopment were due to be put on the market in December 2009. He later updated the committee by email in March 2010 that little progress had been made, largely as a result of the current economic situation, noting that much of the influence was out of their control³⁹.

8.5 Other Issues for the Future

8.5.1 "Park and Rail" was an issue being investigated by officers in conjunction with Network Rail at the time of the committee's review, however discussions were in their early stages and therefore further details were not yet available.

WHAT DO MEMBERS THINK OF THIS? DOES THE COMMITTEE SUPPORT IT AS A LONG TERM OPTION?

³⁸ Minute No 99

³⁹ E-mail from Murray Motley, Senior Commercial Schemes Sponsor – Kent, Network Rail

9. Conclusion

- 9.1 Throughout the course of the review, the committee interviewed a variety of witnesses and identified that there was a genuine problem with rail services in the borough, particularly in relation to journeys to and from London, and that this clearly was not just a perception. Integrated transport is essential, and better integration was required to avoid people using cars to get to train stations and in turn this required an increase in the level of sheltered cycle storage at stations. A number of witnesses also highlighted issues of parking problems at rural stations and the Committee suggested a possible expansion site at Bearsted. In putting forward this suggestion, the Committee inadvertently identified a significant issue of concern regarding the lack of clarity regarding the roles and responsibilities between Southeastern and Network Rail. Furthermore, in considering parking issues, the Committee noted the inconsistency across the borough in amendments to charges without any apparent justification and felt that consistency should be maintained in order to ensure equality for residents.

Members continue to be concerned regarding the Department for Transport's submission of differing growth figures for Maidstone to Southeastern in comparison to that agreed in the South East Plan. Maidstone had achieved Growth Point Status and is therefore required to build an additional 11,080 new dwellings by 2026. The Committee feel that the cut in rail services does not reflect anticipated population increases given the level of planned housing growth. Members therefore felt it was integral that Maidstone continues to fight for improved rail services through the town centre by lobbying for the next rail franchise specifications to include the provision of Thameslink services to Maidstone and for the reinstatement of the fast shoulder-peak services to Cannon Street from Maidstone East.