

Maidstone Joint Transportation Board



**16
October
2019**

Thameslink Rail Service Delay

Decision Making Authority	Kent County Council
Lead Director	Katie Stewart
Lead Head of Service	Tom Marchant
Lead Officer and Report Author	Stephen Gasche
Wards and County Divisions affected	All Maidstone Wards and County Divisions
Which Member(s) requested this report?	Mr Ian Chittenden

This report makes the following recommendation:

That the report be noted.

Timetable

<i>Meeting</i>	<i>Date</i>
Maidstone Joint Transportation Board	16 October 2019

Thameslink Rail Service Delay

1. ORIGIN OF REPORT

- 1.1 This original report was requested by Mr Ian Chittenden on 24 August 2019 in response to concerns of a further delay to the new Thameslink service between Maidstone East, London and Cambridge, and was taken to the Maidstone Business Forum prior to being updated to this report for the Maidstone Joint Transportation Board.

2. PURPOSE OF REPORT AND EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 2.1 This report sets out the latest developments relating to the further deferral of the introduction of the new Thameslink service between Maidstone East, London and Cambridge.

3. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

- 3.1 There have been persistent delays to the introduction of this service since the Department for Transport (DfT) agreed to Kent County Council's (KCC) request in 2014 to have the Kent terminus for this branch of the new Thameslink network transferred from its original terminus of Tunbridge Wells to Maidstone East.
- 3.2 The original date proposed for its introduction was January 2018, although this was initially to have been a peak-only service. This date was then deferred to May 2018, but with the benefit of an all-day service on Monday to Saturday, and so was widely welcomed. We then had a further deferral to December 2018, and then last year the latest deferral to December 2019 as part of a scaling back of the delivery schedule for the whole Thameslink programme following the debacle of the introduction of the May 2018 timetable across the wider Thameslink network.
- 3.3 Kent County Council wrote to Mr Jo Johnson MP, who was then the Minister of State responsible for rail services at the DfT, urging him to consider the adverse impact on Kent's rail passengers and the local economy of any further deferral of the Thameslink programme in Kent.
- 3.4 While Mr Johnson's reply was non-committal, County Councillor Mr Rob Bird subsequently received a more positive response to his letter to the then Transport Secretary, Mr Chris Grayling, which confirmed that:

"... from December 2019, new Thameslink services between Maidstone East and Cambridge will also provide an extra two trains per hour in each direction all day".
- 3.5 Despite this reassurance from the former Transport Secretary last year, however, there have been persistent fears within the rail industry of a further delay to the Maidstone East service. These fears have arisen from the overall delay to the introduction of each branch of the wider Thameslink network across south-east England.

- 3.6 These fears have now proved to be well founded, as a joint letter from Govia Thameslink Railway (GTR) and Network Rail (NR) to affected MPs and local authorities dated 19 September 2019 stated:

“...Guaranteeing the stability and reliability of services is now at the heart of all major improvement projects. We are united in our belief that we can never subject passengers to the same level of disruption ever again, and this has had a considerable effect on all subsequent timetable changes. Despite all our efforts, this means that we have had to take the regrettable decision that the Maidstone East Thameslink services cannot start operation in December 2019 as previously advised without seriously compromising reliability”.

- 3.7 While recognising the “immense disappointment” that this decision will cause to rail passengers throughout the route to be served, the letter remains non-committal in respect of any definite start date for the new service:

“...We want to state our full commitment to finding a reliable and sustainable solution that will work for the people of Kent and this work has been and will continue to be given our highest priority. We want to thank you for your continued understanding and want to keep working with you, and the rest of the industry, to find a way through this.

We will keep you updated on any further developments and would be happy to explain the situation in more detail, so please don't hesitate to contact us if it would be helpful to have a wider discussion about this”.

- 3.8 In response, Mr Mike Whiting, KCC Cabinet Member for Planning, Highways, Transport & Waste, wrote on behalf of all affected County Members to Mr Chris Heaton-Harris, the Minister of State at the DfT with responsibility for rail policy. This letter expressed the grave concern felt by local partners and communities at the further deferral of the new Thameslink service to Maidstone East and reminded the Minister that this was actually the fourth such deferral and was completely unacceptable. An urgent meeting with the Minister has therefore been requested, to which other members and representatives from GTR and NR would also be invited. We await an early reply.

- 3.9 Both Kent County Council and Maidstone Borough Council have continuously reiterated the fact that any further delay to the delivery of the promised Thameslink service to Maidstone East beyond December 2019 would be completely unacceptable, as many residents and businesses have made location decisions based on earlier information about the planned date of the Thameslink service on this route. It is to be hoped that the new rail minister will realise this and act accordingly.

4. AVAILABLE OPTIONS

- 4.1 The Cabinet Member for Planning, Highways, Transport & Waste has requested to meet with the new Minister of State responsible for rail policy, and to invite other members, together with representatives from the appropriate rail industry organisations.

5. PREFERRED OPTION AND REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATION

- 5.1 This is the only viable option at present and is recommended as the next course of action so as to resolve the current impasse.

6. REPORT APPENDICES

- 6.1 Appendix 1 – Letter from GTR and NR to MPs and Members dated 19 September 2019.
- 6.2 Appendix 2 – Letter from Mr Mike Whiting (KCC) to Mr Chris Heaton-Harris (Minister of State at DfT) dated 27 September 2019.

7. BACKGROUND PAPERS

- 7.1 None.
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