

# **Maidstone Borough Council**

## **External Overview and Scrutiny Committee**

**Tuesday 14 July 2009**

### **Rail Services between Maidstone and London**

**Report of:** Overview and Scrutiny Officer

#### **1. Introduction**

- 1.1 At its last meeting the External OSC agreed to carry out a review of rail services to London, noting that these were being cut and residents would be 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.

#### **2. Keep Our Trains**

- 2.1 "Keep Our Trains" has been campaigning against the cessation of the fast service between Ashford and Cannon Street (via Maidstone East), which is due to take place from December 2009.

- 2.1 "Keep Our Trains" campaigns for the following:

That:

- Southeastern keeps the off-peak fast train service between Ashford and Cannon Street.
- Southeastern improves the off peak service with a regular fast service into east London.
- Southeastern guarantees early and proactive publicity of all changes to their timetables and engages in full commuter consultation well in advance of such changes.

#### **3. The Route Utilisation Strategy**

- 3.1 Network Rail has produced a Route Utilisation Strategy (RUS) which outlines the strategic vision for the future of the railway that serves Kent, parts of East Sussex and London. In particular, the RUS reflects changes which will result from the high speed services to and from St Pancras, which are to begin running in December 2009. This will be followed by the Thameslink Programme, which is to be introduced by 2015. The Route Utilisation Strategy covers a time period of 30 years (2009 – 2039). Consultation began in 2008 and will end on 23<sup>rd</sup> July 2009.

- 3.2 Capacity of existing rail services was considered in addition to the expected future demand. Despite the economic downturn it is expected that demand will grow. This is due to a growth in housing and employment opportunities and an increase in rail services as a result of High Speed One. The RUS focuses primarily on the main line to/from Victoria, Charing Cross and Cannon Street. Major towns affected include Maidstone, Canterbury, Medway, Ramsgate, Ashford, Folkestone, Dover, Sevenoaks, Tonbridge, Tunbridge Wells and Hastings.
- 3.3. The consultation reports that there are six downfalls of the existing rail service:
1. Capacity to and from London at peak times.
  2. The need to offer services earlier and later in the day.
  3. To improve services from Kent into and out of London.
  4. To improve services within Kent.
  5. To maintain and improve the punctuality of services.
  6. To ensure that the rail service is able to meet the future needs of the rail service.

#### **4. Passenger Demand.**

- 4.1 Within the RUS area, it is expected that passenger demand will increase by 32 percent between 2007 and 2019. This is due to the following:
- The High Speed One should stimulate growth and will enable East Kent to be within a reasonable travelling time from London, providing new job opportunities.
  - The impact of the planned major housing development in the Thames Gateway and around Ashford is likely to provide an increase in user demand.

#### **6. The RUS outlines the following concerns that have arisen as a result of the proposed changes:**

- 6.1 Southeastern will provide a two trains per hour, all day service to Victoria (as per today) but no services via London Bridge (due to the withdrawal of the off-peak one train per hour fast Cannon Street services, in the current off-peak timetable)
- 6.2 The Medway Valley line does not currently serve a sizeable settlement at either end of its route. At the northern end, journeys between the Medway conurbation and Maidstone require a change of train at Strood, whilst at the southern end passengers must in general change at Paddock Wood. The result is that, for example, a journey from Maidstone to Tunbridge Wells currently requires two changes of train and takes over an hour. Unsurprisingly, many people make these journeys by car.

- 6.3 From December 2009, there will be no direct trains between Maidstone and Canterbury. Those passengers making this journey will need to change at Ashford.
- 6.4 Journeys to Maidstone from London will, in many cases, take longer than the time taken to reach Ashford and east Kent on the High Speed line. This is due to the relatively low overall speed of the Otford/Bromley South route, together with no station having been provided on the High Speed line in the Maidstone area.
- 6.5 Concerns have also been raised with regard to the access of services from Ebbsfleet. The RUS states that; "the station is inaccessible by rail from the nearby county town of Maidstone, so many commuters on the High Speed domestic services from this town are expected to drive to Ebbsfleet."

## **7. Services into London**

- 7.1 From December 2009 Maidstone will have two services per hour which will run into London Victoria during off peak times and three services per hour during peak times. From 2015 onwards it is expected that services will increase to four trains per hour during peak times.
- 7.2 From December 2009 one train per hour during off peak times will run from Ashford to Blackfriars via Maidstone East. It is aimed that this will be increased by an additional train per hour in 2015.

## **8. Other Options Considered**

- 8.1 The consultation outlines that it may be possible for the peak only Ebbsfleet to St Pancras service to be extended back to include either Ashford or Maidstone West. If the service were to run from Maidstone West this would provide extra capacity for Gravesend and Strood, however, consultation suggests that it would be more beneficial to run the service from Ashford.

The RUS also considered increasing services between several locations in Kent, as well as services to London. This included Maidstone. Consideration of increasing these services was largely due to stakeholder request. However, increases will not be made at any of these locations as additional increase in operating costs can not be justified by the demand for the service. The RUS also considered services which would provide a link between Maidstone and Medway, however this was also considered not to be viable.

Many services via Maidstone East are currently limited to only six cars due to short platforms at Kemsing, Barming, Hollingbourne, Harrietsham and Charing. It may be possible to lengthen these trains to 8 or 12 cars. However, this will require the use of

Selective Door Opening (SDO), which is available only on Class 375 trains with SDO fitted.

## **9. Summary: Potential Impacts of the RUS on Maidstone**

Overall, the RUS highlights the following potential impacts for Maidstone, although not all have yet been committed to:

- All day service to Thameslink route from 2015, in addition to services to Victoria.
- Potential for peak services to St Pancras via the Medway Valley line and Gravesend, subject to further analysis.
- A direct route throughout the day to Tonbridge from 2009, not requiring a change at Paddock Wood.
- Consideration of a bus link to Ebbsfleet for international services.
- Consideration of line speed improvements west of Maidstone
- The possible extension of trains to eight or 12 cars.

- 10.** The relevant extracts of the RUS have been attached at the end of this report. Information compares passenger demand for rail services within the major towns affected by the changes. Additionally, service maps provide information regarding the current services that run and those that are proposed to begin in December 2009 and 2015.

## **11. Recommendation:**

- 11.1 The Committee should consider the proposed amendments to Maidstone's rail service and whether they wish to support the campaign against the removal of the Ashford to Cannon Street (via Maidstone East) fast service in December 2009.
- 11.2 The Committee is then recommended to instruct the Overview and Scrutiny Team to compile a response to the consultation, if Members believe this to be appropriate. It is recommended that the Chairman be given responsibility for approving the Committee's submission in order to ensure it is submitted before the deadline.