

MAIDSTONE BOROUGH COUNCIL

RECORD OF DECISION OF THE CABINET MEMBER FOR ENVIRONMENT

Decision Made: 17July 2009

Report of the Assistant Director of Development and Community Strategy - Network Rail - Kent Route Utilisation Strategy

Issue for Decision

To consider the response of Maidstone Borough Council to the consultation by Network Rail on its draft Kent Route Utilisation strategy.

Decision Made

1. That the response to the Network Rail consultation on its draft Kent Route Utilisation strategy as shown in Appendix A to the Report of the Assistant Director of Development and Community Services be approved.
2. That the Assistant Director of Development and Community Services continues to monitor the consultation process and press Network Rail and the Department for Transport for the early introduction of improved services between Maidstone East and city destinations.

Reasons for Decision

Background

The Integrated Kent Franchise

Proposals for the Integrated Kent Franchise were put forward by the Strategic Rail Authority during 2004 and 2005. In its responses to these, Maidstone Borough Council put forward a case that;-

- the level of service provision was inadequate on both the Maidstone East and Medway valley lines and also failed to take account of Maidstone being a major rail destination.
- there was a clear demand for fast services between Maidstone and city destinations which was a major concern for local employers.
- the proposals were clearly based on incorrect and incomplete passenger information and a total lack of understanding of

the latent demand which was already resulting in significant rail heading to stations on other lines.

The response by the Strategic Rail Authority to these points was poor with no real improvements in service being offered.

Since that time Maidstone has been designated as a regional transport hub in the South East Plan, and by Government as a Growth Point for the period between 2006 and 2026, which will result in the provision of 11,080 houses and 5,000 jobs the effect of which on the local rail network also needs to be catered for.

The Kent Route Utilisation Strategy – Outline and Consideration

The Kent Route Utilisation Strategy (RUS) – draft for consultation – was issued by Network Rail (NR) on the 28 April. Comments are invited before a deadline of 23 July, with an intended publication of the final document in early 2010. It is intended to consider demand for the period to 2029 and beyond.

An extended summary of the consultation document is given in Appendix B to the Report of the Assistant Director of Development and Community Services.

The full consultation document can be accessed on the Network Rail website at;-

www.networkrail.co.uk/browse%20documents/rus%20documents/route%20utilisation%20strategies/kent/kent%20rus%20draft.pdf

Consideration of the Kent Route Utilisation Strategy

From the proposals contained in the draft strategy it does not appear that Network Rail (who took over responsibility from the Strategic Rail Authority), have taken any significant action to address the points previously made. It offers little or no improvement to local rail services and where it does, this is on the basis of "jam tomorrow", which does nothing to address current concerns or medium and longer term needs and demands.

The main issues considered in the strategy which concern Maidstone are;-

- Issue

The current and future capacity of the network and the proposals to cater for expected future growth in demand.

Proposed

The strategy concentrates on expected future demand for travel to London, particularly in the peak. There is no scope to operate more trains on services to Charing Cross or Victoria, and little for increasing their length, so it is primarily proposed to use available

capacity on the High Speed line. The main beneficiaries of this would be areas in East Kent particularly Ashford.

Comment

No account appears to have been taken of Maidstone's allocation as a Growth Point and the level of development that is identified to accommodate 11,030 houses and 5,000 jobs or the likely overall effect that this will have on the future demand for rail services to and from Maidstone.

Whilst the strategy recognises that the current poor service and choice of destinations has resulted in significant levels of rail heading to other stations such as Headcorn, Staplehurst, Paddock Wood, Sevenoaks etc, insufficient account is taken of the effect this has on traffic and congestion on the local road network and the M20, and pollution. Improved services from Maidstone stations would help to discourage this.

- Issue

Introduction of Thameslink services on the Maidstone East line, and a reduction in journey times and platform extensions to permit the operation of longer trains.

Proposed

Maidstone East is recommended as a future Thameslink destination in the, already approved, South London Route Utilisation Strategy, which would see an additional two trains per hour, including during the peak period. To permit the new network to be introduced in 2015 it will be necessary for part of London Bridge to be closed from 2012 whilst re-building takes place.

Comment

Whilst there may be a need for the number of trains to be reduced during the construction work services there can be no justification for reducing services between Maidstone East and the City from December 2009.

Proposed

The strategy recognises that reducing the length of journey times has an economic benefit. Detailed work on several specific potential schemes is being undertaken during the consultation period, including sections of the Maidstone East line, particularly between Eynsford and Swanley, with the intention of announcing proposals in the final published RUS.

Comment

Under the current proposals a number of towns further away from London will gain the benefit of journey times to London that are shorter than from Maidstone. This could be a disincentive to businesses to locate in this area or those considering a move.

Proposed

It is recommended that all peak trains should operate to the maximum length that each line permits – 8 cars on the Maidstone East line (with a longer term possibility of 12 cars on some journeys). It is not however considered economically practical to extend Maidstone East station to permit full operation of 12 car trains. It is hoped to lengthen platforms at some other stations on the line to accommodate 8 car trains, but this is not possible at all locations.

Comment

These improvements are welcomed and we would encourage Network Rail to progress these as soon as possible

- Issue

Possibility of High Speed services on the Medway Valley line to Maidstone West

Proposed

It is recommended that in the peak two high speed services per hour are extended from Ebbsfleet to either Ashford International or Maidstone West (via Gravesend and Strood). Ashford is considered to have the better economic case for this service, but they are unable to be accommodated on the "domestic service" platforms. A detailed operational evaluation of the potential for them to operate to Maidstone West instead is therefore being undertaken by Network Rail.

Comment

Maidstone has a better business case to be the destination of this service. This proposed service should operate all day, and not just in the peak. Apart from Kings Cross such a service would be able to offer good services to Stratford (with connections for London Docklands), and at Ebbsfleet for both Kent Thames Gateway area and access to continental services.

A suggested bus link between Maidstone East and Ebbsfleet is ridiculous due to the congestion on the M2.

- ISSUE

Better links to other transport and economic hubs in Kent

Proposed

The strategy does not consider that there is currently an economic case for improving rail services to Canterbury, Medway or Tonbridge.

Comment

It is however important for future economic development that improved rail services are provided to these key transport hubs and commercial centre. This is clearly recognised in the South East Plan and will become increasingly important as development proposals (economic and housing) come forward through the emerging Local Development Framework (LDF).

Some sections of the rail network could be far more effectively used to help reduce traffic movements on local roads. This is particularly the case on the section of the M20 between Ashford and West Malling where the Maidstone East line runs parallel to it. This could offer the possibility of "rail and ride" services to both Maidstone and West Malling (for Kings Hill), using services that do not conflict with peak London commuting times. Similar opportunities could also be available on the Medway Valley line where station car parks are underutilised, and it is not possible to provide bus priority lane.

- Issue

Improved services and links for the Medway valley line.

Proposed

Suggested improvements to increase the frequency of trains to Tonbridge, extend services on to Gatwick Airport and in the other direction to Rochester and/or Sheerness were evaluated but are not considered to be operationally or economically viable.

Comment

This is disappointing and in the light of the 2001 Travel to Work patterns, and subsequent growth, it is important that these options are reviewed at an early date, particularly as development takes place in the Thames Gateway areas.

- Issue

Freight via Redhill

Proposed

The primary freight route for traffic to and from the Midlands and the North, and the Channel Tunnel is via the South London and Maidstone East lines. The diversionary route via Redhill is currently unable to be used by electric locomotives due to signalling immunization problems, and this can cause disruption and delay if an

electric locomotive breaks down. A business case for these works is to be undertaken is therefore welcomed.

Whilst there has been a reduction in freight traffic in recent years it is expected that this will return to its previous levels. To provide for future growth, thirty five train paths have been protected from the Channel tunnel up until 2052. However with the international market increasingly using unitized containers gauge issues may become a limiting factor. It is recognised that it may be necessary to increase the gauge of the Maidstone East line, and diversionary routes, to W12, but this is considered to be a national matter rather than something for the Kent RUS to deal with.

Comment

Action to provide a diversionary route for electric freight trains via Redhill is welcomed and we would encourage Network Rail to deliver these as soon as practicable.

The recommended response to Network Rail in respect of the draft Route Utilisation Strategy is shown in Appendix A to the Report of the Assistant Director of Development and Community Services.

Alternatives considered and why rejected

To fail to respond to the consultation may result in the views of Maidstone Borough Council not being adequately taken into account in the development of the Kent Route Utilisation Strategy.

Background Papers

Network Rail Kent Utilisation Strategy - Draft for Consultation (April 2009). Accessible at the Network Rail Website - www.networkrail.co.uk/browse%20documents/rus%20documents/route%20utilisation%20strategies/kent/kent%20rus%20draft.pdf

Should you be concerned about this decision and wish to call it in, please submit a call in form signed by any two Non-Executive Members to the Scrutiny Manager by: 24 July 2009.
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