

KENT COUNTY COUNCIL 11th RAIL SUMMIT

TUESDAY, 15 OCTOBER 2019 AT COUNTY HALL

REPORT BY ROBIN OAKLEY REPRESENTING STAPLEHURST PARISH COUNCIL

INTRODUCTION

There were five presentations covering various aspects of railways in Kent. I will give a short synopsis of each presentation as shown below.

Southeastern Railway by David Statham, Managing Director

There are 640,000 journeys per day undertaken on Southeastern. After the 5-year programme of works at London Bridge Station and all the disruption caused by introduction of the new Thameslink programme, Southeastern are achieving their best ever reliability and punctuality. Passenger satisfaction is at 86% which is better than most other rail operators. HighSpeed 1 has now been operating for 10 years using the Javelin fleet but the fleet will have to be increased in size before any additional services are to be provided. The Southeastern Railway franchise has been extended and currently expires on 1st April, 2020; what happens after this date is not known. There are no plans to cease operating the HS1 service which runs at peak times from Strood to Maidstone West. It is intended that the same Southeastern timetable will operate after Brexit.

Network Rail by Mike Smith, Head of Strategic Planning, South East Region.

The Marsh line from Ashford to Hastings is now the only section of route operated in Southeastern's area using diesel trains and the aim is to eliminate this form of traction and replace it with more modern rolling stock, possibly with hydrogen powered propulsion which is currently the subject of experiment elsewhere in the country. Network Rail, East Sussex and Kent County Councils are also looking at the possibility of electrifying the Marsh Link so that High Speed 1 could be extended to Hastings, although this would require some expensive infrastructure work at Ashford International Station. There is to be more housing development on the Isle of Grain, to which there is currently no passenger rail service. This is being considered by Network Rail.

Eurostar by Renaud Thillaye, Head of Public Affairs at Eurostar

Eurostar is approaching its 25th Anniversary. Modifications to the infrastructure to allow the Eurostar e320 trains to call at Ashford International Station will be complete by the end of December, 2019 and the e320's will be calling at Ashford from January 2020. A third daily service to and from Paris will be introduced when the international timetable changes on 17 May 2020. Eurostar is ready for Brexit, deal or no-deal. The London - Rotterdam/Amsterdam service will be increased to 5 return journeys per day by 2021. Direct inbound services from Amsterdam are due to start in Spring 2020, avoiding the need to change trains and go through immigration and customs control at Brussels Midi. Work on improving and enlarging Paris Nord station to give greater capacity for Eurostar trains will be completed in 2024. The first plastic-free catering on a Eurostar train will come into being on 14th November. A merger of Eurostar and Thalys services is being considered and this would enable trains to serve more Benelux and German destinations.

Eurotunnel by John Keefe, Eurotunnel

Eurotunnel is a privately owned bi-national UK and French company which maintains and operates the tunnel and its terminals at Folkestone and Cocquelles and operates passenger and freight shuttle trains. Current traffic through the tunnel is 4 passenger shuttles each way and 8 freight shuttles per hour. There is unused freight capacity and more lorries could be handled. There was a very clear diagrammatic presentation of the way that freight lorries would be handled post-Brexit; Eurotunnel are confident that the preparations made in cooperation with UK HMRC and French Douane will work well provided that hauliers get their paperwork properly prepared beforehand.

Kent County Council by Stephen Gasche, Rail Project Manager, KCC Transport Strategy Team.

The team are aware that considerable time, effort and money has gone into work on road and rail in East Kent to the detriment of West Kent (Tunbridge Wells, Tonbridge and Sevenoaks), and they are looking to determine ways that the infrastructure and services in West Kent can be improved. It is hoped to provide more lifts and mobility improvements at more stations. KCC want the new South East railway franchisee, whoever that may be, to provide HS1 service to Hastings and Eastbourne, assuming of course that the Marsh line can be electrified. KCC want to see the Elizabeth Line (Crossrail) extended to Ebbsfleet by the mid-2030s, and provision of an Ashford-Tonbridge-Gatwick service. KCC now have a promise from the Department for Transport that a Minister will meet with KCC councillors to discuss the continuing delays in providing the promised Thameslink service to Maidstone East.

Summary

To sum up, this was a very interesting meeting, better than the two previous summits meetings which I have attended. None of the presentations included anything which would currently directly affect Staplehurst. All the speakers seemed very positive, particularly about Brexit.