

Response to the Department for Transport's 'Shaping the future' consultation on the 'Future of South Eastern rail services' from the Royal Borough of Greenwich Conservative Council Group

May 2017

1. Executive summary

The Greenwich Conservative Council Group welcomes this opportunity to comment on the future of South Eastern rail services, after years of campaigning to improve services for long-suffering commuters in our borough.

We believe the consultation contains some welcome aims for the specification of the new franchise, such as extra carriages, more standing room and closer co-operation between the operator and Network Rail, which we have provided comments on.

However, we are strongly opposed to the consultation's suggestion that the number of terminals served from local stations could be reduced – which would present unacceptable disruption to commuters' journeys on a network on which most local residents are wholly reliant for their travel to and from work. We believe the answer to South East London's transport problems is more connectivity, not less.

More fundamentally, we remain of the view that the management of the franchise should be fully transferred to Transport for London – a view which is now the subject of cross-party agreement at the London Assembly and across London.

While we accept that the Department for Transport would be more easily convinced of this case if they had more confidence in Transport for London's current business plan, we would urge that this option be reconsidered. Local commuters have suffered long enough under the current arrangements, and we believe it is time to take the more radical step of devolving commuter rail, in order to deliver the improvements that commuters urgently need.

Responses to individual questions in the consultation can be found in the following sections.

Any queries about this response should be directed to **Councillor Matt Hartley**, Leader of Greenwich Conservatives (matt.hartley@royalgreenwich.gov.uk) or **Councillor Matt Clare**, Conservative Spokesperson for Transport (matt.clare@royalgreenwich.gov.uk)

2. Do our priorities correctly reflect your views?

We welcome this opportunity to comment on the future of South Eastern rail services.

Our borough has suffered for decades due to insufficient transport infrastructure, and is poorly served in comparison with other boroughs. Many of our residents are wholly reliant on the South Eastern rail network to get into London. At the same time, the service provided by the current operator, Southeastern, is incredibly poor – with long-running problems with reliability, capacity, delays and poor customer service.

The priorities outlined in the consultation – making trains run on time, providing more space for passengers, improving passenger satisfaction, limiting the number of late-running or cancelled trains, improving communication when things go wrong, adding services, lengthening trains and reducing journey times where possible, and linking to the Elizabeth Line and Thameslink routes – are reasonable.

3. Do you agree that more space is needed for passengers at the busiest times of the day? What do you think of the options for providing more space on trains?

Yes, we strongly agree that more space is needed and should be a priority in the new franchise. This should include both longer 12-carriage trains, and better use of space inside carriages.

Reconfiguration of carriages must include better consideration of wheelchair users and passengers who are less able to stand. Due to overcrowding, many passengers are currently in effect excluded from the existing service and this must be rectified as a priority.

We also believe additional rolling stock is needed to cope with existing demand, and future demand which will be much higher due to the growing population. This should be given urgent consideration as part of a new franchise agreement.

4. Would you support removing First Class seating on the busiest routes to provide more space?

This question is not directly relevant to our residents but more broadly, yes, we would support this proposal. We do not believe First Class seating is appropriate or necessary on busy commuter services where passengers are forced to stand in packed carriages.

5. What comments, if any, do you have on our plans to improve customers service and the overall passenger experience?

While the consultation document identifies the correct challenges in improving customer service, we would like to see more detail on how these challenges will be addressed.

A particular problem that Southeastern passengers face is the extremely poor communication when things go wrong on the network, with staff at stations not having the information they need to inform passengers of alternative routes, and incorrect information displayed on travel boards. This must be addressed in the new franchise.

The same is true of on-board communication. For instance, trains often stop outside London Bridge for no apparent reason, with no announcement from the driver to explain why. This increases passenger frustration and makes it more difficult to mitigate the impact of those whose journeys are disrupted.

We welcome the consultation document's commitment to improve compensation when things go wrong, including a reduction in the criteria for Delay Repay from 30 minutes to 15 minutes, but would urge that consideration should also be given to improving access to his mechanism, which is currently under-utilised by passengers.

6. Do you have any other ideas or priorities for improving customer service?

We have previously raised the point that were drivers to automatically open all doors either at pre-determined stations and times over a long journey, or to even be 'encouraged to do so subject to their own judgement', vital minutes could be saved over a journey can snowball into significant delays over scores of train movements at key stations. The current operator has declined to implement this even though the practice is in place on the much busier Tube. We believe this should be considered as part of specifications for any new franchise.

In addition, a more proactive approach to getting passengers on trains in busy stations and to use the full length of the train would be beneficial.

7. What changes to the fares structure would be of benefit to you?

We would welcome improvements to the fares structure for people who work part time, have to commute for only part of the week, or travel irregularly, in particular. More flexible and cost-effective options for these commuters would enable the service to keep up with the changing workforce.

8. What else could be done to improve the way tickets are sold and provided?

We support better use of technology in the sale and provision of tickets, e.g. using smart devices instead of a paper ticket. However, all commuters must have quick and efficient access to tickets and this must include the continued availability of the option of using ticket machines and interactions with staff.

Refunds for cancelled services are currently cumbersome and should be reconsidered.

9. What further comments, if any, do you have on our plans to improve access and facilities at stations?

We welcome the intention to improve access and facilities at stations but would welcome more detail on this.

In particular, we welcome the consultation's recognition that stations need to be made more accessible. We would highlight Lewisham station as a particularly poor example, with incredibly wide gaps between the train doors and station platforms, on the bends in particular.

Provision of more cycle racks at stations should be a priority, as this would improve access to the network and reduce pressure on roads and buses.

On a related note, the operating company and Network Rail should be required to look at cooperating with Transport for London to facilitate an expansion of the cycle hire network to include New Cross, St Johns, Lewisham, Deptford, Greenwich and Maze Hill stations. This would significantly increase connectivity between lines and other modes (e.g. DLR, Overground, Tube) as well as resilience of the network during planned closures or disruption.

10. What more could be done to improve access and provide facilities for those with disabilities or additional needs?

See comments in response to question 9. We are concerned that many people with disabilities or additional needs are in effect excluded from the current service due to overcrowding, poor station facilities and lack of available staff to assist with their travel, and this must be rectified as a priority.

On the Tube there are permanent ramps on platforms to facilitate independent access for wheelchair users. This should be implemented at key stations on the South Eastern network, ideally at the same place on the train (e.g. X carriages from the front).

11. How far do you support, or oppose, the extension of High Speed services from London St. Pancras to Hastings, Bexhill and Rye, where this would represent value for money to the taxpayer?

This question is not relevant to our residents and so we offer no comment on this part of the consultation.

12. How far do you support, or oppose, reducing journey times to key destinations in Kent and East Sussex, by reducing stops at less well used intermediate stations to create hourly fast services?

We strongly oppose this option, which would be detrimental to 'nearer' commuters and would reduce the wider utility of the network. The priority instead should be to improve

services and reduce overcrowding, which at present is the cause of significant delays in trains leaving stations at peak times.

13. If you support this proposal, which services do you think would most benefit from this approach?

We strongly oppose this proposal – see response to question 12.

14. Which journeys do you take today which are difficult? A) By rail? B) By road, which would be easier by rail?

More use should be made of the ‘through London via Blackfriars, St Pancras etc.’ tracks from London Bridge to avoid the need to change to the Tube at London Bridge (the walk is significantly lengthened by the poor design of the new platforms 1-9 where ramps at the western end have been removed).

15. Which additional services would you wish to see provided in the next franchise?

Residents value the excellent connection between Greenwich Line services and the DLR at Greenwich station. We would urge consideration to be given to linking the network efficiently and effectively with the new Elizabeth Line.

16. How far do you support, or oppose, options to simplify the timetable?

We support the principle of simplifying the timetable where possible, but the priority should always be to deliver reliable services. Any changes to timetables must be subject to full consultation with passengers.

17. How far do you support, or oppose, options to reduce the choice of central London destinations served from individual stations with the aim of providing a more regular, evenly spaced timetable, and a more reliable service?

We strongly oppose any suggestion that the number of terminals served from local stations should be reduced. The removal of services to Charing Cross and Victoria would represent an unacceptable disruption to passengers’ journeys, would come with an economic cost, and would increase problems at Cannon Street, which is already subject to a bottleneck and overcrowding at the station.

Most local commuters are wholly dependent on the South Eastern network for their journeys to and from work, and the reduction in flexibility that this option would bring would create even greater risk of disruption.

As Conservative councillors we have been speaking to residents about this suggestion, and encouraging as many as possible to take part in the consultation so as to voice their concerns. It is clear to us, from thousands of conversations with local residents, that there is overwhelming opposition to this plan from users of the railway, and we would urge the Department to commit to maintaining the current terminals served as part of its response to the consultation.

18. How far do you support, or oppose, plans for the train operator and Network Rail to form a close alliance with the aim of reducing delays and improving performance?

We support this measure as a step in the right direction. Problems often arise from poor co-ordination between the current operator and Network Rail, and improved joint working between a future operator and Network Rail would be welcome. Crucially, this need not wait until a new franchise is awarded, as there is an urgent need for greater co-ordination in the shorter term.

19. What are your views on how this alliance should be incentivised and held to account for its performance?

At present, problems lead to a 'blame game' between Southeastern and Network Rail, with both able to attribute fault to each other. Whatever incentivisation mechanism should seek to prevent this from happening in the case of a future operator – for example, all financial penalties for non-performance should be jointly applied.

20. How would you prefer the next South Eastern operator to engage with you?

Instead of stakeholder meetings in central London, which are often during the working day there should be local forums (e.g. half the size of Greenwich borough) at a time agreed with passengers/their representatives approx. 4 times a year with a senior operational Manager present who is accountable and can make commitments.

There are examples of good engagement with stakeholders locally, which should continue. For instance, we have been very fortunate to benefit from strong engagement from the Group station manager on the Sidcup line to work with volunteers and deliver improvements to Mottingham station (planting, free book exchange, plants in the booking hall). This best practice should be maintained with the new operator.

21. What approaches to customer service in other companies could be adopted by the next South Eastern train operator?

We believe commuters would like to see more visible staff, located out of the ticket offices where appropriate (similarly to Transport for London).

22. Where do you think private sector investment would be of most benefit to the railway?

Unless they are expressly required for operating the railway land and buildings should be divested/leased as far as possible for the development of homes or commercial premises subject to local communities approval and through the democratic process. The profits can then be reinvested in much needed improvements to the South Eastern network.

23. Should we consider using the more lightly used sections of the railway in a different way?

This issue is not strictly relevant to southeast London and the residents we represent, as it is such a busy part of the network. However it would be beneficial if compatible carriages or rolling stock from more lightly used parts of the railway could be moved to busier sections. This could perhaps be achieved by drafting in additional rolling stock for more lightly used sections (e.g. D78 District line trains being refurbished by Vivarail but a more environmentally friendly and 3rd rail compatible rolling stock).

24. Looking to the future, beyond this franchise, what, if any, benefits do you consider there would be for passengers from a franchise with a different geographical boundary?

To provide an informed response it would be necessary to have data to hand. However through London traffic (Blackfriars, Farringdon, St Pancras) seems the highest priority. Connections to South West London and Gatwick Airport are very poor. Consideration to whether a wider franchise could improve this should take place.

25. Response to final question: In conclusion, is there anything else you wish to say about the South Eastern franchise?

There needs to be much more accountability on the part of the franchisee and Network Rail in the future. Senior executives of the current operator remain inaccessible to stakeholders, to the intense frustration of passengers and their elected representatives.

A much greater sense of urgency needs to be in evidence during disruption. Significantly more creativity also needs to be shown during disruption e.g. via an overriding principle that the new franchisee will always get passengers as far as possible down the line by putting in place shuttle train services as contingency plans.

More fundamentally, we would like to restate our view that a more radical approach is needed, with the management of the franchise fully transferred to Transport for London. We would urge this option to be reconsidered.

We would be happy to discuss this response further with officials.