

JOINT TRANSPORTATION BOARD – 8TH DECEMBER 2009

AGENDA ITEM 5 – RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE TRANSPORT FORUM IN RELATION TO SOUTHERN TRAINS TIMETABLE CONSULTATION – PROPOSED WITHDRAWAL OF DIRECT ASHFORD TO BRIGHTON SERVICE

As you will see from the previous item on the Agenda, the Transport Forum received a presentation from Southern Railways at its meeting on the 20th November. For ease of reference the details of the discussion are set out below: -

Discussion on Proposed Southern Railway Timetable Changes

- 4.1 Mr Read of Southern gave a presentation detailing the proposals out to consultation on the East Coastway Timetable. He explained that during the franchise bidding process it had become clear from feedback from stakeholders that there was a desire for changes to the East Coastway service on the Ashford to Brighton line, chiefly because of the severe overcrowding on the Hastings to Brighton part of the route. The need for good connections with Southeastern's new High Speed service to St Pancras had also come through. There had been a clear steer from the Department for Transport (DfT) that there would be no new rolling stock available in this franchise (2009-2015) so they had had to look at other ways to ease the overcrowding problems. Therefore a re-structuring of the timetable had been considered to meet stakeholder aspirations. The Ashford to Brighton service had been brought in during the last Southern franchise and whilst it had been a successful route and provided good links to towns on the East Coastway including Rye, Hastings, St Leonards, Bexhill, Eastbourne and Lewes, very few passengers travelled the entire distance from Ashford to Brighton and vice versa.
- 4.2 Mr Read explained that the alternative timetable was currently out for consultation. The key changes were to effectively operate the service in two sections, replacing the hourly Brighton to Ashford and Brighton to Hastings (all stations) services with: - hourly Brighton to Hastings and Ore (limited stop) services; hourly Brighton to Eastbourne (all stations) services; and hourly Eastbourne to Ashford stopping services. The frequency of the service would be the same as now but just running in different sections. The result of the proposed changes would give: - the flexibility for reasonable connections at Ashford with the High Speed services; more seats and capacity on trains between Brighton, Lewes and Eastbourne and around Bexhill and Hastings; more cross Hastings services; a regular service for smaller stations which were currently under served such as Winchelsea and Three Oaks; and more seats and capacity on peak Uckfield line services. The proposals would mean it would be possible to extend the current two car diesel units to four car electric units for the section of the journey where the worst congestion currently occurred (the Hastings to Brighton stretch). The

key compromise would be that a change of train would be necessary for certain passengers who currently had a direct service. Inevitably as with any timetable there was an element of compromise but looking at the numbers it did appear to be a relatively small number of people who would be affected (those who would have to change when they currently had a direct service).

- 4.3 In terms of the consultation process, Mr Read explained that meetings and presentations were currently underway with stakeholders and the proposals had been provided on Southern's website for passengers to view. Responses were welcomed up to the final closing date of 11th January 2010. Recommendations would then be made to the DfT and the Secretary of State would make the final decision in spring 2010.
- 4.4 The Chairman said he was very disappointed by the proposals as passengers from the Ashford end of the line seemed to be losing out. Surely if Southern were looking for better connectivity with High Speed 1 they should be looking at increasing services this end of the line. The current service was direct from Brighton to Ashford in 1 hour and 50 minutes with no need to change, whereas the proposed new service would take 2 hours and 9 minutes plus the time needed to change train at Eastbourne, which was a substantial addition. There was already chronic overcrowding on the trains after Hastings and Bexhill and the proposals advocated stopping at an extra five stations which would add to the problem. It would become a stopping train rather than a fast one. Mr Read explained that diesel stock had to be used between Ashford and Hastings because the line there was not electrified. As said, the overcrowding occurred between Hastings and Brighton which would be alleviated with a four car electric service for that stretch. Some people would lose their direct service but the number of people affected would be very small compared to local journeys. Ashford to Eastbourne would be a slower service due to the extra stops but there was only so much that could be done. He understood it was not ideal for everyone but the nature of the route made it difficult to make changes to the timetable in any other way to alleviate overcrowding. In terms of the better connectivity with High Speed 1 this was true, but they would not be looking to attract anyone much beyond Hastings and Rye for this purpose. Rye to St Pancras in 1 hour 10 minutes for example would be attractive but anything longer than this and it would not be worth passengers travelling via Ashford.
- 4.5 A Member asked about the Secretary of State making a final decision in spring 2010 and asked if it would not be better to wait until after the General Election if possible. Any new Government could throw plans into disarray. He said the extra carriage provision for the services into Brighton was welcomed as overcrowding here was a longstanding problem that should have been addressed much earlier. He was still not sure this would guarantee a seat for every paying customer though which was frustrating when fares kept increasing. If there was still overcrowding could there be an assurance that extra coaches would be

put on? He also asked about provision for the disabled. Mr Reed explained that the timescale for implementation of the proposals was set down by the DfT. The Election point was something that could be raised during the consultation but ultimately it was for the DfT to decide whether or not to delay making a decision. Ultimately the proposals represented an increase in coaches but there was only a finite number of rolling stock available. There was no new diesel stock available in the industry but there was some electric stock which would cascade down to increase capacity. There would be no change for arrangements for the disabled as there was a cross platform interchange at Eastbourne.

- 4.6 In response to a question about how overcrowding was monitored, Mr Reed explained that the trains had a system which weighed the coaches and could give pretty accurate numbers (within five people). That information was downloaded daily and they had a good database going back several years. The projected growth for Ashford over the next 20 years had been built into the franchise bid and would be kept under constant review. There may be a need for alternative proposals as that progressed but that was some years down the line.
- 4.7 The Chairman concluded the debate by saying that there would be representations from individual Members as well as perhaps from the Council as a whole and they may not be favourable. The Forum would also recommend that the Joint Transportation Board respond to the consultation on behalf of both Ashford Borough and Kent County Councils asking that the direct Ashford to Brighton service be retained as part of the new proposals.**