



CPRE Tunbridge Wells District response to

SOUTH EASTERN RAIL FRANCHISE PUBLIC CONSULTATION 2017

Introduction

1. The Kent Branch of the Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE) campaigns for a beautiful and living countryside. Within Tunbridge Wells Borough we work to protect, promote and enhance our towns and countryside to make them better places to live, work and enjoy, for current and future generations.
2. There are two mainline railways within Tunbridge Wells Borough, both of which are used as major commuting routes to London and other destinations:
 - The Hastings to Tonbridge line, on which Royal Tunbridge Wells mainline station and High Brooms station, which serves the north of the town, provide a 55 minute journey to central London with frequent peak and off peak services
 - the Ashford to Tonbridge line, on which Paddock Wood station is within the Borough; Marden and Staplehurst stations serve residents in the eastern part of the Borough although these stations lie outside the Borough's boundary. All of these stations provide frequent peak and off-peak services to London (50 minutes from Paddock Wood to central London; 60 minutes from Staplehurst).

The Kent Branch of the Campaign to Protect Rural England exists to promote the beauty, tranquillity and diversity of rural England by encouraging the sustainable use of land and other natural resources in town and country.

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The Kent Branch of the Campaign to Protect Rural England is a registered charity (number 1092012), and is also a company limited by guarantee, registered in England (number 4335730).

3. In addition, the Medway Valley line from Paddock Wood to Maidstone West has trains that run approximately once per hour.
4. Fourteen per cent of the Borough's working population travel to work by train, which is double the average in the South East. Many school and college students from the Borough travel daily by train and the train services are the only practical public transport option for residents in many parts of the Borough to make use of the shopping, leisure and other facilities of, in particular, Tunbridge Wells, Tonbridge, Hastings and London. Therefore **the train services in the Borough are exceptionally important to the Borough's residents.**
5. The borough is undergoing considerable expansion: current Government policy requires some 13,000 additional homes to be built in the borough as a whole up to 2033 (building twice the number of homes per year as were required under previous planning policy). Districts whose residents use the same stations and services as Tunbridge Wells, such as Maidstone, Tonbridge, Wealden and Ashford, are also subject to massive expansion with thousands of new homes being planned. The same is true of communities further up and down the lines. This growth will put pressure on the existing rail services as well as roads and parking. Since many peak hour trains are already 12 carriages long and overcrowded at times, and platforms unable to accommodate longer trains (indeed on journeys from London passengers in the last carriage arriving at Paddock Wood already sometimes have to walk through to the next carriage in order to disembark), this planned housing expansion both within and outside the Borough is likely to lead to more overcrowding on the railways and greatly increased congestion on the roads unless train frequency and station parking facilities within the Borough can be increased.
6. It seems likely that driverless cars will start to come into use on roads within the region during the period covered by this franchise, and if the railways are to continue to compete successfully with road transport they will need to provide comfort and convenience as well as speed.

7. With those considerations in mind, our answers to the Consultation questions are as follows.

Q1. Do our priorities correctly reflect your views?

Yes, broadly, though two of your priorities appear to be the same thing: “Making trains run on time” and “Limiting the number of late-running or cancelled services”. However, to the listed priorities should be added

- “No reduction in the frequency of existing services and an increase in frequency where possible”.

Frequency is more important than shaving time off journey times. If you miss a train or a connection it is better to know there will be another train along soon than to know that after a long wait (during which you may perhaps find nowhere to sit) the last leg of your journey will be a few minutes shorter, because in the latter case your total journey time will be longer and your arrival time later. For a daily commuter, whether to work or to school or college, frequency, as well as reliability can have a major impact on quality of life. Any train service with fewer than 2 trains per hour will fail to provide sufficient choice and flexibility in travel times for passengers and consequently will not encourage the shift away from road traffic that CPRE would wish to see.

Q2. Do you agree that more space is needed for passengers at the busiest times of the day?

Yes. However this should not be confined to the Metro and High Speed services: major housing development is planned along both the main lines that run through Tunbridge Wells borough. This is likely to result in an increased demand for rail travel particularly at peak times in future, which will need to be accommodated.

Q3. What comments, if any, do you have on options for providing more space through:

- a) Longer trains;

We agree that longer trains could help, although many peak time trains from the Borough’s stations are already 12 carriages long and overcrowded at times, with platforms unable to accommodate longer trains.

- b) Metro style carriages with larger entrances and more standing room and handholds?

Such carriages are only appropriate for journeys of 20 minutes or less. Seating is very important for passengers on journeys of 55 minutes (Tunbridge Wells to central London) or 50 minutes (Paddock Wood to central London) and Metro style carriages would be very unwelcome on these lines. The Borough's population is already older than the average for the South East and in the period 2013-2033 the population over 60 years old in the Borough is forecast to grow by 27,200 (54%). Seating on trains is particularly important for this demographic (many of whom will still be working and commuting).

Q4. Would you support removing First Class seating on the busiest routes to provide more space?

Only if this will ensure that all passengers on routes from the Borough's stations can be comfortably seated, so that those needing to work on the train can do so. We seriously doubt, however, whether removing First Class seats will provide sufficient extra space to address the capacity issues that already exist on the main line routes during peak hours and that will be exacerbated during the period of the franchise by the massive planned increase in housing within the borough and "down the lines" outside the borough.

We understand that about £5m extra revenue a year is gained from first class season ticket holders. We would not support withdrawal of First Class if it would result in higher fares for Standard Class passengers to recoup this lost revenue.

The aim should be to provide seating for all customers travelling for over 20 minutes, whatever class they are using.

Meanwhile there should be more flexibility in allowing unused First Class seats to be used by the standing passengers who most need them, for example pregnant women and those with priority needs. Also, in order to reduce the anger and frustration that is caused when First Class seats remain empty while many Standard Class passengers are standing, we recommend that First Class seats vacant on a segment between London Bridge and the first country stop in each direction should automatically be available to others after departure. In this way First Class ticket holders could take their seats and then any spare seats could be used by standing passengers.

Q5. What comments, if any, do you have on our plans to improve customer service and the overall passenger experience?

We appreciate the improvements in communication that have been made in recent years and we fully support these plans for further improvement in communication and other aspects of the service. However,

- The operation of the franchise should be based on the principle that customers come first. Incentives and penalties need to relate to the customer experience. Perverse incentives to improve measured performance by seriously inconveniencing a minority of customers (such as “station skipping” to reduce knock-on delay effects on Public Performance Measure scores) need to be eliminated.
- there is a danger that an over emphasis on online and smartphone purchasing could create an impersonal environment and that sections of the population, such as older passengers (see Q 3b above) for whom rail travel is a vital service, could be deterred from travelling. Moreover, many people in the rural parts of the Borough still have very poor mobile reception and a poor or non-existent broadband service.
- We would not support ticketing proposals that reduce or remove staff from ticket offices at the main stations such as Tunbridge Wells, or the on-train guard. The ability to purchase tickets on the train is a valued service particularly when the journey commences from smaller and unmanned stations.
- At stations that are unmanned (as Paddock Wood station is at times) there needs to be a better and clearly signed means of communication provided for passengers to use to communicate with railway staff and the British Transport police at times of difficulty or danger.
- Better provision should if possible be made on trains for the storage of bulkier items such as folding bicycles, folded pushchairs, bags and suitcases, close to where their owners are sitting, rather than near the doors where passengers may feel insecure about leaving them and where these items can clog the exits.

Q6. Do you have any other ideas or priorities for improving customer service?

- Ticket vending machines need to be designed and sited so that they do not become difficult to read when the sun shines: the ticket machine at Paddock Wood station is almost impossible to read in the afternoon on a sunny day.
- There need to be at least two ticket machines at each station, preferably with one of them accepting cash payments.
- There should be a standard for fault-fixing at stations, and this should be within 24 hours for problems with lighting, toilets, doors, lifts, ticket vending machines and electronic noticeboards.
- Car parking and connecting bus service convenience, price, comfort and security are important factors in the overall experience of travelling by rail. The expense of the current car park at Paddock Wood, together with the lack of frequency of trains, make the otherwise very attractive Medway Valley line a poor substitute for travelling to Maidstone by car from Paddock Wood and its surrounding villages, especially for trips of only a few hours.

Q7. What changes to the fares structure would be of benefit to you?

Fares on the mainline routes through the borough are significantly higher than comparable services on other London commuter franchises and ticket pricing from Tunbridge Wells is among the highest per mile in the region.

We would support a complete review of ticket pricing, to include the removal of the HS1 element of fares on the mainline routes: now that HS1 is built and customers using HS1 are charged a premium for doing so, charging customers on the mainline routes for HS1 costs is unnecessary and unfair.

The high cost of rail travel forces people into their cars as a cheaper option even when taking into account the cost of fuel and parking. High fares directly contribute to congestion on all the access roads to Tunbridge Wells at peak times.

Q8. What else could be done to improve the way tickets are sold and provided?

Barcode solutions enabling passengers to book, download and print the full range of tickets at home, including with discounts for railcards, and have the ticket to display on a smartphone, similarly to airline boarding passes, would be very welcome, though this should not be at the expense of other methods of buying a ticket (see Q5).

The recent introduction of the facility for passengers to pre-pay station parking online is welcome.

The new franchisee should be under a contract commitment and penalties to ensure that Ticket Vending Machine users are sold the cheapest ticket for their journey.

There should be a fare system and enforcement model designed to help customers to pay the right fare (as on Transport for London) rather than penalising them.

Q9. What further comments, if any, do you have on our plans to improve access and facilities at stations?

Car Parking

As already stated, on-street parking is at capacity in Royal Tunbridge Wells and CPRE Tunbridge Wells are concerned that the rail franchise holder should not implement measures that will increase demand for parking at this mainline station. Therefore we would also support:

- increased parking for cars, cycles and motor cycles at stations 'down the line' to Hastings to encourage passengers to travel from these stations rather driving to and from Tunbridge Wells at peak times and contributing to congestion in the town.
- increased car park capacity at High Brooms by double decking.

At Paddock Wood station the 1000 new homes currently planned for the town, together with those being built in the surrounding villages and rural area, and the massive further increase in housing in the Borough which is now required to take place before 2033, a proportion of which is likely to be at Paddock Wood and its surrounding area, mean that car parking needs to be increased, probably by building a multi-storey car park or possibly even two. If care is taken with the design, this could also provide the opportunity for an improvement to the public realm along Station Road together with a much-needed footway and cycleway on the western side of Station Approach and more turning and waiting space for cars and taxis (and rail replacement buses when

these are needed). The provision of car waiting spaces may become more important with the advent of driverless vehicles.

The high parking charges at Paddock Wood's station car parks, the lack of short-term parking and the minimal discount which is given for parking after 2:30pm seriously detract from the attractiveness of using the railway car parks. Consequently many people currently use other car parks in the town when travelling by rail, especially in the afternoons or evenings or for shorter journeys. This currently relieves the pressure for spaces in the station car parks. However, two of these other car parks in the town are scheduled for redevelopment just when demand is bound to increase because of new housing. Increased capacity will therefore be needed very soon at the station car parks and a better car park pricing system needs to be introduced. The recently introduced much cheaper price after 18:00 is welcome but more could be done.

Similar considerations apply as regards car parking at Marden and Staplehurst, inconveniencing or deterring customers who wish to travel after the rush hour. The situation at Staplehurst, where a suitable car park site lies unused, is particularly frustrating.

Marden Station is used by many who live within the Tunbridge Wells Borough. The car park is routinely full on week days by 07:30hrs, which leads to illegal parking within the village. Consideration should be given to a double storey parking (as has been carried out at Tonbridge Station), to the lower, west section of the car park to increase capacity.

Cycle parking

CPRE Tunbridge Wells supports the strategic policy ambitions of the Tunbridge Wells Borough Council to encourage cycling and walking within 2 miles of the town centre (including the railway station). CPRE Tunbridge Wells would support more cycle parking at both Tunbridge Wells and High Brooms stations. The recently increased cycle parking facilities at Tunbridge Wells are well used. The Borough Council's plan to encourage more cycling will create more demand for cycle parking.

The recently improved cycle parking facilities at Paddock Wood are good but they will presumably need to be increased further in order to accommodate demand associated with the new housing.

Marden Station has a handful of bicycle lockers. Bicycles are routinely secured to the metal fencing alongside the pavement within the car park causing some obstruction for pedestrians. Better and more bicycle parking should be provided in a specifically designated location.

Q10. What more could be done to improve access and provide facilities for those with disabilities or additional needs?

The new franchisee should offer a 'turn up and go' assisted travel service at all staffed stations and at all stations served by trains with on-board supervisors. The required 12 hours notice (and 24 hours recommended) for assisted travel disadvantages people with disabilities.

Access for elderly and disabled travellers is difficult at both Royal Tunbridge Wells and High Brooms stations. CPRE Tunbridge Wells would support:

- the installation of a second lift at Tunbridge Wells Station to provide access from platform 1 to the existing pedestrian bridge and thence to platform 2 via the existing lift.
- a fully accessible replacement for the unpleasant tunnel and access steps that currently links platforms 1 and 2 at High Brooms station.

The new footbridge and lifts at Paddock Wood station are a great improvement for passengers with mobility problems, pushchairs or heavy luggage.

Improved toilet facilities both on trains and at stations will be very welcome and certainly needed by an ageing population. Much greater efforts also need to be made to ensure that toilet facilities are clean and not closed or out of order. Toilets at stations should not be closed at night while there are still trains stopping at the station.

Q11. 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?

And

Q12. 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?

The introduction of high speed services from St Pancras to Hastings, Bexhill and Rye via Ashford could be welcome, as it would provide a faster route to London than currently available to those communities. However, people have bought their homes, taken up employment and chosen their children's schools, and Councils have allocated new sites for major housing development, on the basis of the existing train services, so the provision of this new service must not be to the detriment of existing passengers at "less well used" mainline stations.

CPRE Tunbridge Wells would **strongly oppose any reduction of service frequency at 'less well used' stations**, not only because it would betray passengers in the more rural areas of the Borough but also because it would lead to a massive increase in road traffic congestion, rat running on rural lanes and parking demand at the larger stations. As customers travelling from Ashford and beyond already have the option of high speed services to St Pancras, there is minimal scope to reduce journey times to London for those using the Ashford-Tonbridge line by reducing frequency to hourly at any station along that part of the line. None of the stations on that line which serve the Borough, namely Paddock Wood, Marden and Staplehurst, could in any case reasonably be described as "less well used".

There are many people who live in smaller communities where house prices are affordable but who work or go to school in larger towns such as Tunbridge Wells where house prices are high. Less choice at "less well used" intermediary stations, particularly at peak times, will mean more passengers reverting to the roads to travel to work, and contributing to road congestion, air pollution and parking issues.

If anything, there needs to be an increase in frequency of trains at these "less well used" stations, to accommodate the increased housing growth that is planned, and CPRE Tunbridge Wells would wish to see passengers **encouraged to use intermediate stations** through increased parking for cars, motorbikes and cycles at intermediate stations and through a review of fares structures.

Q13. If you support this proposal, which services do you think would most benefit from this approach?

Not applicable as we strongly oppose this proposal.

Q14. Which journeys do you make today which are difficult? a) By rail? b) By road, which would be easier by rail?

And Q15. Which additional services would you wish to see provided in the next franchise?

The recent abolition of the number 6 bus service between Paddock Wood and Maidstone, the planned introduction of high speed services to Ebbsfleet International and St Pancras from Maidstone West and the new housing planned for Paddock Wood and the surrounding area mean that demand for use of the Medway Valley line could increase considerably if it had more frequent trains. A service of one train per hour is insufficient to encourage a shift from road to rail.

CPRE Tunbridge Wells believes that there is unmet demand for new services both north and south from Tunbridge Wells main station, and to the east. The current rail infrastructure does not easily enable an east/west travel from RTW.

CPRE Tunbridge Wells would like to see direct and frequent services from Tunbridge Wells and from the stations on the Ashford-Tonbridge line to Gatwick Airport

The introduction of a fast and frequent orbital service on the Ashford – Tonbridge line to Redhill and Reading as an alternative to the M25 and M20 (para 6.14) would be very welcome, provided it did not result in a reduction in services to London for passengers from Staplehurst, Marden and Paddock Wood.

The suggested improvements to the Brighton - Hastings – Ashford service (paras 6.15 and 6.16) to improve access east/west to other south coast destinations from Tunbridge Wells would also be welcome.

Proposals to develop an alternative route from Brighton to London Canary Wharf via the Uckfield line, Croydon and Lewisham, together with a re-opened route from Tunbridge Wells via Groombridge to London and Brighton, would also be welcomed. Brighton Main Line 2 would provide a faster route to the south coast for leisure and commuter traffic, and an alternative to travelling by car for people living to the south of Royal Tunbridge Wells (in East Sussex towns such as Crowborough and Uckfield) to work in or commute from Tunbridge Wells. This is a long term

project but could well fall within the scope of this franchise and could involve co-operation and investment with other bodies. As such it should be included in consideration of future plans.

Q16. How far do you support, or oppose, options to simplify the timetable?

CPRE Tunbridge Wells supports this proposal, provided that as stated there will be no knock-on impact on services for residents of the Borough.

Q17. 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?

CPRE Tunbridge Wells would strongly oppose a change or reduction in the choice of main line stations served by trains from Tunbridge Wells, High Brooms, Paddock Wood, Marden or Staplehurst, or fewer 'through' services to these stations. Direct services to Cannon Street at peak times are vital for City workers, and the current works at London Bridge, and between London Bridge and Waterloo East, should facilitate an improvement, not a restriction, in choice of services. Moreover any reduction in the choice of mainline stations which requires passengers to change trains in order to reach their destination would particularly disadvantage elderly passengers and those with mobility difficulties.

However, we welcome the additional travel options which will be provided via Thameslink from Sevenoaks and The Elizabeth Line (Crossrail) in future, provided that they do not result in a reduction in existing services on the lines serving the Borough .

Q18. 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?

This appears a sensible proposal

Q19. What are your views on how this alliance should be incentivised and held to account for its performance?

The perverse incentives for station skipping should be removed.

We understand that compensation (in the form of Schedule 8 payments) received by Southeastern in 2015-16 was £18.3m whereas the amount of compensation they paid to customers was only £2.3m. It seems wrong that Southeastern, rather than passengers, are the prime beneficiary of Network Rail compensation.

Compensation to passengers should be at a level that makes it cheaper for the franchisee to deliver the service correctly than to compensate the affected passengers. Currently the Delay-Repay system does not provide a strong enough economic incentive on the operators.

Q20. How would you prefer the next South Eastern operator to engage with you: a) As an individual? b) As an organisation (if appropriate)?

By email through the head office of CPRE Kent:

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We also recommend that you should collaborate with Tunbridge Wells Borough Council concerning its future development plans, which could possibly include a New Town requiring a new railway station.

Q21. What approaches to customer service in other companies could be adopted by the next South Eastern train operator?

The service could adopt online downloadable, printable and smartphone barcode ticketing as used for boarding passes in the airline industry.

Q22. Where do you think private sector investment would be of most benefit to the railway?

It will be important to avoid the pitfalls of PFI-type contracts that have left other public sector services with unsustainable debts and poor levels of service.

Private sector involvement in a scheme to reopen the link between Tunbridge Wells Central and the old Tunbridge Wells West station as part of a major redevelopment scheme in the southern part of the town could be of benefit to the railway, to residents of Tunbridge Wells and areas to the south of Tunbridge Wells, and to the businesses involved.

In station car parks there could perhaps be opportunities for co-operative ventures with electricity companies (solar panels, electric vehicle charging points) and with car clubs.

Q23. Should we consider using the more lightly used sections of the railway in a different way? If so, how should this be done?

Not if it means reducing frequency on these more lightly used sections. Indeed if frequency was increased use might increase, since an infrequent service will always fail to compete effectively against travel by car.

Q24. Looking to future, beyond this franchise, what, if any, benefits do you consider there would be for passengers from a franchise with a different geographical boundary?

We would not wish to see the franchise cover a smaller area overall: we see little advantage for customers in further fragmentation of the rail service as passengers want to see a joined-up service and to know who to complain to when things go wrong. However, if the Southeastern franchisee fails to increase use of the Medway Valley line or to work towards reopening the line between Tunbridge Wells Central and Tunbridge Wells West, it could perhaps be worth exploring the potential for new, smaller, nimbler franchises to carry forward these projects.