



## **SOUTHEASTERN FRANCHISE RENEWAL – INITIAL POSITION PAPER BY THE EAST SUSSEX RAIL ALLIANCE (ESRA)**

### **1. ABOUT ESRA**

ESRA is an umbrella group comprising the four main rail user groups in East Sussex. These are:

- Bexhill Rail Action Group (BRAG)
- East Coastway Commuter Group (ECCG)
- MarshLink Action Group (MLAG)
- St Leonards and Hastings Rail Improvement Programme (SHRIMP)

### **2. FRANCHISE ANNOUNCEMENT**

ESRA notes the intention of the Department for Transport to re-let the Southeastern franchise in 2014

The purpose of this paper is to assist the DfT, prospective bidders and other stakeholders in identifying priorities for the Hastings Mainline.

### **3. SUMMARY**

ESRA believes that the current Integrated Kent Franchise (IKF) paid little attention to the needs of Hastings Line users at the time of its conception. Even the name of the franchise is indicative of this: Frant and stations south thereof are in the County of East Sussex.

Although many towns in east Kent received a qualitative upgrade in services from December 2009 in the form of High Speed ‘Javelin’ services, there was no parallel improvement in services between Hastings and London, despite a significant release of extra capacity north of Tonbridge following the migration of Eurostar and premier east Kent services to High Speed 1.

The off-peak timetable on the Hastings Line is particularly unsatisfactory, being effectively an extension of a quarter-hourly outer suburban London – Tunbridge Wells ‘metro’ service, which was designed principally around the needs of Orpington and Sevenoaks – two stations which have plenty of other trains. The result is a slow service for the Hastings Line, which is especially prone to overcrowding in the shoulder-peaks.

Furthermore, ESRA remains concerned that the peak hour service on the Hastings Line may deteriorate following the completion of the Thameslink project, and seeks an assurance that peak hour services will be maintained between Hastings Line stations



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south of Tunbridge Wells, and the City of London. This could be achieved either by retaining peak hour services to/from Cannon St, or extending proposed Thameslink services south of Tunbridge Wells in the peak.

Improved rail services are vital to Hastings, suffering as it does with a correspondingly poor road network, and significant economic deprivation. In the longer term ESRA wishes to see the extension of Javelin services from London to Eastbourne via Ashford, Rye and Hastings, but for the foreseeable future the existing mainline services need to be improved to level the playing field between Hastings/Bexhill/Rye and coastal towns in Kent.

#### **4. SERVICE PRIORITIES**

- In the next timetable re-cast, a faster service to Hastings must be prioritised.
- ESRA wishes to see a limited-stop off-peak service between Hastings and London calling at St Leonards Warrior Square, Battle and Tunbridge Wells only. ESRA's first preference would be for this to be in addition to the current two trains an hour. A less than ideal alternative would be to run a fast portion behind/in front of the all-stations service and attach/detach at Tunbridge Wells or Tonbridge.
- Of the existing two trains an hour off-peak, ESRA does not believe it is necessary for both to call at Orpington and Sevenoaks. The objective of the current timetable appears to be to provide these stations with fast services to and from London, rather than a direct country-bound connection. There also appears to be a low uptake for connecting services via these stations, as evidenced both by low numbers, and indeed, by trains not stopping there in the peak [when one would imagine demand to be at its highest].
- It is essential that a direct link is retained between Hastings Line stations and the City of London. The long-standing proposal to scrap the peak Cannon Street service is unacceptable unless there is a corresponding extension of the proposed Thameslink – Tunbridge Wells service. We do not accept the recommendations of the Kent RUS in this respect and will continue to campaign vigorously alongside MPs, local councils and other stakeholders. We note that Southeastern and Network Rail have recently worked to operate a number of 12 car diagrams south of Tunbridge Wells during the peak periods, and would tentatively suggest that these paths could be used in the future by fixed formation Thameslink services.
- ESRA wishes to see limited stop portions between Hastings and Tunbridge Wells in the peak periods and would not object to this aspect of the Kent RUS proposal to attach and divide Charing Cross Services, subject to an additional service to the City of London being maintained [either Thameslink or Cannon St].
- ESRA wishes to see services on Boxing Day on the Hastings Line in the new franchise.



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- ESRA also wishes for a re-write of the Sunday timetable to provide a service similar to Saturdays, with earlier first and later last services.

**5. ON-TRAIN EXPERIENCE**

- ESRA wishes to see the reinstatement of catering facilities on the Hastings Line.

**6. STATIONS**

- ESRA is concerned at the poor level of maintenance at many stations, especially St Leonards Warrior Square and Hastings. We would wish for the new franchise to emulate the approach of the neighbouring Southern franchise which is to carry out ongoing painting and maintenance on a regular basis, rather than continue the current long periods of neglect punctuated by occasional facelifts. By way of an example, the SHRIMP group has asked for pigeon netting at St Leonards Warrior Square to be reinstated for over a year. At the time of writing this is still awaited, despite the involvement of the local Member of Parliament.
- We think that management of St Leonards Warrior Square and Hastings stations should be transferred away from the Southeastern franchise to the management of the new Thameslink/Southern franchise to provide integrated station management on the East Coastway/Marshlink.

**7. CONNECTIONS**

- Late night connections between inbound Southeastern services and onward Southern services to Bexhill/Eastbourne at St Leonards Warrior Square are unreliable and rarely held in the event of the slightest late running. In view of the low frequency of services late at night, with gaps of up to an hour, timetables need to be more robust. More discretion should be given to holding trains for one or two minutes at St Leonards Warrior Square late at night if the connecting service is in the platform. This is a joint issue between the two operators. There is an unhappy history with the two franchise holders not co-operating [even though they have been owned by the same parent company for a number of years].



## 8. BUSINESS MODEL

- ESRA would deplore any move by a new franchise holder towards a high cost/low frequency business model which prices users off the railway by means of ticket restrictions.
- ESRA notes recent efforts by Southeastern to promote its off-peak services more widely, but would like the new franchise holder to go further. Again the Southern franchise offers a model, with low cost off-peak and advance tickets designed to price new customers on to the railway at times when demand is light. The Hastings line has significant unused off-peak and contra-flow peak capacity which could be used both for the benefit of the franchise holder in terms of additional revenue, and for the town of Hastings itself in terms of extra day visitors.

## 9. FARES AND TRAIN PERFORMANCE

- ESRA would insist that punctuality statistics are published for individual lines i.e. the Hastings Line, and not generic 'Mainline' and Metro routes. These should always be published at the time fare increases are announced.
- There should be a recognition that the Hastings Line has not benefitted from HS1 services or a 'Metro' service, and future fare increases should reflect this.

## 10. CUSTOMER SERVICES

- ESRA would wish to see current best-practice retained and enhanced. This includes retention of the Delay-Repay regime.
- Local knowledge is also an advantage e.g. no outsourcing of customer telephone services to Bristol or India.