



Response to the Brighton Main Line Route Utilisation Strategy consultation

December 2006

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1. Introduction

Passenger Focus is the independent champion for rail passengers in Great Britain and exists to represent and promote their interests. We welcome the opportunity to respond to this latest consultation on the Brighton Main Line Route Utilisation Strategy (BML RUS)¹.

In preparing this consultation response we have worked closely with colleagues at London TravelWatch. Our two submissions have much in common and we are in overall agreement about the issues that need to be addressed in implementing the BML RUS.

To inform our response we have had dialogue with a range of passengers, rail user groups and other stakeholders, including Local Authorities, the Regional Assembly and the Regional Development Agency. These views have assisted us in developing our thinking.

(Please note, however, that we have encouraged our contacts to submit their views on the consultation direct and that this response represents only the final position of Passenger Focus.)

2. Summary

The Brighton Main Line (BML) is a key route serving a large commuter market and high numbers of business, leisure and Gatwick Airport passengers. The pressures on the line, particularly the long-standing capacity problems, have been well documented and, as the consultation document on implementation recognises, '*doing nothing is not an option*'.

The Brighton Main Line Route Utilisation Strategy, published in February 2006, was underpinned by an analysis of the main features of the line. A key issue identified was overcrowding on both Southern and Thameslink services in comparison to low loadings on the Gatwick Express. The train loading data taken from the current consultation document (reproduced in **Appendix 2** below) illustrates the imbalance and demonstrates the need to deliver improvements for the majority of passengers on the route.

Now, after a series of consultations, it is imperative that an effective solution to the capacity pressures on the line is implemented at the earliest opportunity. Our response to the proposed options for implementation is set out below. Our clear preference is for the implementation of option 1 (Extra South Coast Trains option). We seek swift progress to a final decision and urge that all efforts be made to achieve implementation by December 2007.

¹ A summary of the consultation objectives and options for implementation is included in **Appendix 1**

3. Consultation Options

Option 1 – Extra South Coast Trains option

Passenger Focus has a clear preference for this option which we strongly support. Subject to some adjustments to address specific issues detailed below, we advocate this option should be adopted for implementation as soon as possible. Further details of our recommendations for implementation of option 1 can be found in section 4 of this document.

Passenger Focus supports option 1 because:

- it provides the greatest opportunity to reduce overcrowding and maximise carrying capacity on the line, thus delivering best of all the options on what the consultation document identifies as ‘the dominant issue for the BML’
- capacity benefits will accrue both south and north of Gatwick and, importantly, improve the connectivity of Gatwick Airport to coastal, orbital and an improved range of London destinations
- this option retains a high-quality airport service, increasing the frequency of services serving the station (five additional services in the peak and two per hour in the off-peak) and providing a choice of destinations and service configurations
- simplification of the operation of the route is expected to improve performance
- overall we believe that this option will provide the greatest benefit to the most passengers.

In advocating option 1 Passenger Focus notes three key considerations that underpin the need to make imminent and significant improvements to the capacity of the Brighton Main Line.

Firstly, there is the continuing incremental growth of rail passenger travel. Data from Southern Railway suggests that patronage of their services on the Brighton Main Line is increasing by 2 – 3% each year.

Secondly, the Regional Spatial Strategy for the South East will deliver substantial population growth along East and West Coastways and the Main Line corridor, and significant numbers in this growing population will rely on rail services for commuter and other journeys.

Thirdly, the growth of the Gatwick air passenger market and the marked shift towards low cost airline services needs to be reflected in the option chosen. It is this economy market, rather than transatlantic passenger growth, which is the hallmark of recent passenger increases at Gatwick. Our observations at Gatwick Airport station confirm that many air passengers transferring to rail services already choose to travel on the lower-cost and variously connected Southern services rather than Gatwick Express.

Enhancements to the main line’s capacity on both coastal and metro services have been delivered by Southern over a number of years, through a series of changes to rolling stock formations and timetable changes. However, further scope to adapt within the existing parameters is now severely constrained and there is now little more that can be delivered without implementation of the RUS principle that line capacity should be utilised to maximum benefit for all passengers using it.

For the reasons given above, Passenger Focus advocates rapid implementation of Option 1 as the most effective way to address the capacity issues on the Brighton Main Line.

Option 2 – Retention of a dedicated Airport Service option

Passenger Focus regards this option as entirely unsuitable and recommends that it, or any variation around its central premise, is dropped from any further consideration.

- it provides no improvement to capacity for stations south of Three Bridges
- it makes no improvement to capacity on services at East Croydon or Clapham Junction
- it degrades services on the Redhill corridor by requiring them to use the slow lines
- it provides no enhancement to connectivity to destinations other than central London for airport passengers.

It is relevant to note that the Stansted Express operates a successful and well-used rail service to the airport it serves through a combination of three different stopping patterns including a minimum of two intermediary stops. The loss of a non-stop service should not be seen to undermine the important concept of a quality rail service for air passengers.

Option 3 – Splitting and Joining at Gatwick Airport option

Passenger Focus does not support this option and believes it fails to adequately address the identified objectives for the BML RUS.

It results in:

- reduction of seats on services south of Gatwick airport when four 'airport' carriages are removed
- loss of direct links to Redhill, East Croydon and Clapham Junction on the Arun Valley (Mid Sussex) route or any other local service designated as the coastal portion of the Gatwick Express
- relocating the splitting and joining of trains to Gatwick Airport from Haywards Heath introduces a greater degree of performance risk as any problems could potentially impact services on both up and down lines.

Option 4 – Peak/off-peak option

Passenger Focus does not support option 4.

This option fails to deliver any capacity improvements outside the morning peak and is thus inadequate to address the crowding problems after 10.00 and specifically the pressures that occur in the afternoon peak. In addition, as the consultation document notes, it will introduce confusion for passengers who will need to comprehend the different service patterns according to the time of day. There would also be unnecessary complexity and a possible risk to performance for services in the transitional mid-morning phase of the timetable.

4. Recommendations for Implementation of Option 1

Passenger Focus recommends that the following issues are addressed as option 1 is taken forward to implementation²:

- ensuring that there is no reduction in service at significant stations at the southern end of the line, particularly Burgess Hill and Hassocks. Please see station usage figures and current off-peak stopping pattern shown in **Appendix 3**
- improvements to services along the Redhill corridor, including enhanced services for Coulsdon South and Horley
- retention of, and where possible, improvements to Tonbridge and Reigate services to London via Redhill
- inclusion of stops at East Croydon and Clapham Junction by the majority of services
- ensuring facilities for carrying luggage are appropriate for the needs of all passengers using BML services, especially those airline passengers with larger amounts of luggage
- provision of sufficient and suitable stock to ensure that services can run with appropriate car formations
- fare structures on the route should be simplified, with a majority being inter-available
- proposals to terminate the Watford service at Clapham Junction should be reviewed and the service should travel at least to East Croydon, if not to Gatwick Airport or Redhill, using the slow lines
- prompt introduction of the proposed half-hourly First Great Western service between Gatwick and Reading.

In addition we suggest that consideration be given to future branding of express services between London Victoria, Gatwick Airport and Brighton. We also urge early consideration of the way in which First Capital Connect services on the Brighton Mainline can be enhanced to provide improved services for passengers.

² Further detail on our desired service structure for the line can be found within the paper, The Brighton Main Line RUS - Making it work for passengers submitted jointly with London TravelWatch in response to publication of the final RUS in February 2006

Appendix 1

Summary of the consultation objectives and options for implementation

Main aims of the BML RUS

In this consultation on implementation of the strategy published in February 2006, the DfT affirms the guiding principles for the BML RUS and makes the following points in relation to each of the objectives:

- reducing overcrowding and maximising carrying capacity within the existing infrastructure constraints continues to be the dominant issue for the BML. Large commuter flows and the uneven spread of passenger loads across the Gatwick Express (with spare seating capacity) and other services which passengers are often unable to board during the morning peak means that “*do nothing*” is not considered to be a viable option
- continuing to improve operational performance is still an important objective as, despite encouraging improvements, there is still some evidence that the complex timetable is a significant contributor to “*reactionary*” delays
- maintaining a high quality London Victoria to Gatwick Airport service continues to be a key outcome sought but the only means to address the overcrowding and route capacity issues on the BML is to make changes to the existing dedicated service
- achieving sustainable value for money for both the passenger and the tax-payer is an ongoing concern for government. The current inefficient use of trains and network capacity on the BML route means that the cost of supporting franchised services is unnecessarily high.

Train service options

The consultation identifies four train service patterns on which stakeholder views were invited.

1. Extra South Coast trains option

This seeks to use all trains to ‘do more than one job’. Proposals include improving capacity by replacing the current 4 trains per hour (tph) running non-stop from Gatwick Airport to London Victoria with:

- 2 tph calling intermediately at Redhill, East Croydon and Clapham Junction, taking an additional 8 minutes; and
- 2 tph South Coast originated trains running via Arun Valley/Horsham that would stop at Gatwick Airport for five minutes and then run to Victoria with a stop only at East Croydon, with no changes to overall journey time.

In addition, there would be a further 6 tph from South Coast to Victoria calling at Gatwick Airport: operating 2 from East Coastway, 2 from West Coastway and 2 from Brighton.

No changes are currently proposed to the First Capital Connect services from Brighton via Gatwick Airport to London Bridge and Bedford.

This option creates anticipated performance improvements by reducing the slow to fast line crossings, elimination of splitting and joining at Haywards Heath and improving efficiency of platform occupation at Gatwick and Victoria.

2. Retention of dedicated airport service option

This retains most of the current service pattern, including the dedicated non-stop Gatwick Airport to London Victoria service of four tph. Some key changes include starting and terminating Gatwick Express trains at Three Bridges in the peak, reducing platform occupation at Gatwick Airport to ten out of every fifteen minutes and confining all Redhill trains to the slow lines to reduce crossing manoeuvres.

3. Splitting and joining at Gatwick Airport

This option, which is subject to further testing, seeks to preserve the 'non-stop' nature of the Gatwick Airport to London Victoria service, whilst still conveying significant numbers of people from further south. It would involve re-introduction of the practice of conveying 'airport carriages' on trains to Sussex coast by detaching and joining four cars to trains arriving and departing from Gatwick Airport. This imports a potential performance risk and would also mean the loss of direct links to East Croydon and Clapham Junction for passengers on trains from the Arun Valley.

4. Peak/off peak option

The initial RUS highlighted poor performance and overcrowding of services – this option is in response to the view that performance is now at an acceptable level and therefore the more significant issue to be resolved is overcrowding. The timetable would focus on the alleviation of overcrowding in the morning peak by operating a timetable similar to the proposal in option 1 but after around 10.00 then revert to today's pattern, with the dedicated Gatwick Express service and other features such as splitting and joining at Haywards Heath.

Appendix 2: Train loading data

Loading data in these tables refer to the busiest time of day and year. Southern data was captured on autumn weekdays and Gatwick Express on summer Fridays.

Comparison of Southern and Gatwick Express Service weekday peak period demand in/out of Victoria Station

= Key figures (Average AM Peak)
= Key figures (High Peak 8am-9am)
= Key figures (Average PM Peak)

			Southern			
Period	Direction	Time	Demand	Average Load	Maximum Load	Minimum Load
AM Peak	Arriving Victoria	7am-10am	15,583	125%	183%	78%
		7am-8am	2,979	135%	172%	86%
		8am-9am	8,423	136%	158%	98%
		9am-10am	4,181	104%	183%	78%
PM Peak	Departing Victoria	4pm-7pm	14,526	115%	191%	80%
		4pm-5pm	3,316	107%	191%	80%
		5pm-6pm	6,298	100%	139%	99%
		6pm-7pm	4,912	123%	160%	83%

			Gatwick Express			
Period	Direction	Time	Demand	Average Load	Maximum Load	Minimum Load
AM Peak	Arriving Victoria	7am-10am	1,773	43%	87%	8%
		7am-8am	315	23%	31%	8%
		8am-9am	746	55%	87%	36%
		9am-10am	713	52%	69%	43%
PM Peak	Departing Victoria	4pm-7pm	2,547	62%	85%	36%
		4pm-5pm	996	73%	85%	55%
		5pm-6pm	942	69%	75%	65%
		6pm-7pm	610	45%	56%	36%

Source: *Department of Transport Consultation Document (September 2006) - page 37*

Appendix 3:

Stopping patterns and usage at stations on southern end of Brighton Main Line

Morning off peak hour (11.00-12.00)

Station	Station usage	FCC	FCC	SN - coastway (east and West join at Haywards Heath)	FCC	FCC	SN - coast (east and West join at Haywards Heath)	SN (Watford service)	Total stops
Brighton	11,295,080	11.04	11.07		11.34	11.37		11.55	5
Hove	1,764,870			11.21			11.51		2
Preston Park	284,311		x			x		x	3
Hassocks	842,545		x			x		x	3
Burgess Hill	1,328,091		x			x		x	3
Wivelsfield	421,077		x	11.34		x		x	4
Haywards Heath	3,746,939	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	7
Balcombe	102,564		x						1
Three Bridges*	2,011,517		x			x		x	3
Gatwick	7,976,619	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	7

* Three Bridges also covered by Arun Valley line services

FCC = First Capital Connect

SN = Southern

Source: *National Rail Timetable (10 Dec – 19 May 2007)*

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