



Executive summary of our response to Network Rail's Kent Route Utilisation Strategy Draft for Consultation

July 2009

Executive summary

The number of people travelling by rail has been increasing, with further substantial growth predicted. Performance on the railways is steadily improving and passenger satisfaction is rising. Passenger Focus expects the programme of Route Utilisation Strategies (RUSes) across the rail network to build on this; to allow for continued passenger growth, to further improve performance and to improve passenger satisfaction.

The RUS objective is defined as “*the effective and efficient use and development of the capacity available, consistent with funding that is, or is reasonably likely to become, available.*”¹

Passengers will want to know what the RUS offers to those who use the railway – and who will pay for it. Do the options provide benefits? Do they offer solutions to difficulties or shortcomings in the present service? Will they match passengers’ priorities and:

- improve journey times?
- improve punctuality?
- improve stations?
- increase connectivity?
- increase frequencies?
- increase reliability?
- increase the number of seats?

Passenger Focus has a wealth of research material regarding what passengers want, and adds to this as the RUS programme rolls out across the network. This evidence informs our input to specific RUS consultations at route level. Drivers of passenger satisfaction change over time, but punctuality and reliability have been the main drivers of passenger satisfaction since the National Passenger Survey (NPS) began in 1999. The ability to get a seat is an important driver of passenger perceptions of value for money², and issues such as facilities for car parking, frequency of train services and connections with other train services have also been clear factors in overall satisfaction ratings. Passenger Focus expects RUSes to address the link between passenger satisfaction and the development of capacity.

Our response draws on an extensive research base, including a detailed study of the needs of over 4,900 passengers using Southeastern services, looking from the passenger viewpoint at the options proposed for inclusion in the final RUS, as well as generic issues regarding the passenger viewpoint on fares, satisfaction and wider rail issues. It also uses National Passenger Survey satisfaction scores for Kent routes.

Passenger Focus believes that the draft RUS clearly recognises the existing and future pressures on Kent routes and sets out a strategy that, if fully implemented, will go some way towards addressing many of the significant challenges that must be tackled in the period to 2019. However, there are a number of areas that we highlight for additional consideration, as we believe that some aspects of the draft RUS require further development if the key passenger needs from the rail network are to be adequately addressed.

¹ Extract from ORR Guidelines on Route Utilisation Strategies (April 2009)

² Fares and Ticketing Study Final report, Passenger Focus (February 2009)

Priority Issues

On the basis of the evidence and feedback from passengers, Passenger Focus considers the key factors that the RUS must address are:

- **the punctuality and reliability of the trains**
- **the delivery of sufficient capacity, particularly sufficient seats and minimal overcrowding**
- **an adequate frequency of trains to meet passenger needs, including during the later evening and at weekends**
- **journey time improvements.**

Some of the towns and villages covered within the geographic scope of this RUS suffer from high levels of social and rural deprivation. Improvements to rail services in such areas are expected to play a key role in facilitating the regeneration required.

High Speed service

Kent passengers will want to know that they are not being presented with additional capacity on the high speed services as a solution to overcrowding which they cannot afford to use – thereby causing even greater overcrowding on the existing and more affordable classic services. Revising the current fares levels to more affordable levels will therefore be a crucial aspect of the option to extend high speed services.

Our evidence shows that over 50% of passengers would be willing to use high speed services if the premium fare is set at up to 10% of existing fares. The number drops very sharply to an average of just under 30% passengers willing to use high speed services if the increase is between 10 and 20%. Only 6% are willing to pay increases of 30% and fewer than 4% would be willing to use the service if the premium charged is 40%.

Passenger Focus sees this as strong evidence that the success of the high speed service is inextricably linked to applying a fair pricing policy which recognises the socio-economic circumstances faced by passengers living in Kent.

Recommendations

Our key recommendations for inclusion in the final RUS are:

- **options that provide the maximum amount of capacity to address both current and future growth forecasts**
- **options that drive a real step-change in improved passenger services in terms of journey times**
- **options that will ensure the new High Speed Domestic services provide benefits for as many passengers as possible**
- **options that meet passengers' aspirations and requirements for greater frequency and more reliable evening and weekend services**
- **options that maintain existing connections within Kent such as Maidstone to the City**
- **options to improve access to, and facilities at, stations.**

Passenger Focus is aware that recent global financial turmoil and the impact of the downturn in Britain inevitably place pressures on the funding available for rail. However, we make no apologies for having an aspirational vision of the future of the rail network in Kent and emphasise that, as the draft RUS itself recognises, increases in passenger demand will undoubtedly continue. Any short-term falling off in rates of growth provides a real opportunity to catch up with demand that has outstripped provision over recent years, by investing in infrastructure that will assist with a fuller, faster recovery. This is particularly significant on this network which plays a major role sustaining the economic powerhouse that is London and the South East.



Copies of our full response to Network Rail's Kent RUS Draft for Consultation (and this executive summary version) are available from the Passenger Focus web site at: <http://www.passengerfocus.org.uk>

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