



East Coastway December 2010 timetable
consultation:
Passenger Focus response to Southern

February 2010

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1. Introduction

Passenger Focus welcomes the opportunity to comment on Southern proposals for timetable changes on the East Coastway and the potential release of a diesel train to strengthen capacity on the Uckfield line.

Passenger Focus notes these proposals were brought forward within the 2009 bidding round for the South Central franchise. This required operators to commit to deliver highly specified timetables for the network as a basic condition of a compliant bid. We understand that the initial proposals within the bid necessarily had to suggest a discrete solution for the East Coastway.

The broader context of passenger demand for Southern rail services, however, is of significance to the future timetable. Passenger Focus believes that the current Mainline/Coastway timetable patterns are sub-optimal and has commented on this in both our submission on passenger requirements for the new franchise¹ and in our response to the draft Sussex Route Utilisation Strategy (RUS)².

There are various inconsistencies and weaknesses in the December 2010 timetable proposals for the East Coastway. In comparison to changes on the West Coastway in December 2007, where a more radical overhaul based on a clearly assessed hierarchy of passenger demand achieved benefits on London-bound services as well as an improved, more frequent Coastway service, the benefits from the East Coastway proposals appear to be spread quite thinly.

Overall, Passenger Focus is disappointed by the limited scope of the changes proposed. It appears that little has been done to adapt the pathing and priority of services along the Coastway and towards the Mainline. We believe the opportunity should have been taken to address the problems of crowding and journey length for the major passenger markets from Eastbourne/Lewes to London and to provide more regular services to cater for/foster the principal travel patterns along the Coastway.

However, given the starting point for this consultation and the particular objectives for the East Coastway and Uckfield line, we recognise that rail industry processes for finalising timetables for December 2010 require swift decisions. Within this context Passenger Focus offers qualified support for the timetable proposals for the East Coastway for December 2010. There are certain issues and passenger concerns with the consultation proposals that we believe need to be addressed and we expect some enhancements to the original proposals will be made before the timetable changes are finalised. We realise, though, that

¹ A passenger focused franchise? What passengers want from South Central, April 2008

² Passenger Focus' response to Network Rail's Sussex Route Utilisation Strategy Draft for Consultation, August 2009

substantial revision of the Coastway and mainline timetable will not be achieved as a direct result of these proposals.

Looking ahead, Passenger Focus seeks commitments from both Southern and the DfT to keep all aspects of the Southern timetable under review and to prioritise steps to address identified concerns with crowding and length of journey; on East Coastway services, including those via the Mainline to London, and also on other routes.

Passenger Focus also notes with concern that any revisions to these proposals as a result of this consultation are unlikely to be subject to meaningful further consultation because of the timescales involved. In general terms, we regard this as poor practice and would request that future consultations are scheduled to allow sufficient time for adequate input from stakeholders at various stages of iteration. The imposition of an un-consulted hybrid option as taken forward in the Implementation of the Brighton Mainline RUS should not become the precedent that is repeated!

2. Comments on the consultation objectives

Passenger Focus notes the five objectives that the proposed timetable changes seek to address and agrees that these are important from a passenger and stakeholder perspective. At a high level the proposals appear to address the objectives identified. However, there remain questions about how much further the service pattern might be revised in order to achieve a more coherent, demand-responsive and passenger friendly timetable.

2.1 Diesel train for Uckfield line

The potential to release a diesel train to alleviate crowding on the Uckfield line is a positive and welcome outcome from the proposals. The scale of pressure on this line, particularly looking ahead to the remodelling of London Bridge, means every possible opportunity to increase capacity on peak services must be taken.

2.2 More seats on busy trains between Brighton and Eastbourne

Passenger Focus supports the proposal to introduce four-car trains to alleviate overcrowding on the busiest section of the East Coastway route.

2.3 Meeting demand for Hastings/Ore college campus sites

The increased provision and improved links at Ore, particularly reinstatement of direct services to Ashford is welcomed.

2.4 Services for Three Oaks and Winchelsea

The proposal to reinstate regular services at Three Oaks and Winchelsea is welcome. Whilst a two-hourly interval would seem broadly appropriate to likely levels of demand, Passenger Focus considers that the actual timing of services should be subject to discussion with local communities to establish the critical needs. For example, there are likely to be common requirements for travel to and from work or school and early and late journey

requirements. If possible, provision should be made for first and last trains and the key peak services to stop at both stations.

2.5 Better Connections at Ashford International with Southeastern services

There have been long-standing aspirations for improved connections at Ashford International and the move to deliver this through the timetable changes is cautiously welcomed. However, the 17 and 20 minute wait for St Pancras services still seems far from convenient, whilst some passengers have commented that a six minute allowance to catch Charing Cross services is rather tight. We urge further work to seek connection times of around 8-10 minutes to and from both London- bound services.

Passenger groups have identified a number of 'gaps' both in the morning peak services to Ashford and in evening services between Eastbourne and Ashford. Concerns have also been raised about starting the Ashford service from Rye on Sundays. Passenger Focus believes that these gaps need to be addressed to ensure services are adequate to meet passenger demand and expectation.

A further benefit from the timetable change would be a clear commitment that, where possible, Southern will apply increased flexibility in departure times from Ashford to facilitate connections should delays in services from London mean missing a train departing on the Marshlink by just a few minutes.

3. Additional comments

3.1 Journey opportunities, connections and timings

The lack of a regular, well balanced service pattern across the timetable is regretted. The only services apparently on a standard pattern are Victoria to Eastbourne/Ore and Brighton to Seaford.

Passenger Focus comments in section 1 on the apparently limited scale of change to the pathing and priority of various East Coastway services. We believe that some of the objectives for this consultation are achieved at the expense of the frequency and timeliness of services between principal destinations and intermediate stations where passenger demand is higher and could be expected to grow if journey opportunities were improved rather than curtailed. We urge a more comprehensive review of travel patterns and the further development of the timetable to introduce improvements to meet the needs of the entire constituency of passengers and potential travellers on East Coastway rail services.

One of the negative impacts of the proposals is the apparent increase in the already lengthy journey times for London passengers from the East Coastway. Passengers will expect steps to be taken to reverse this unwelcome development, preferably before the December 2010 proposals are finalised and certainly at every available opportunity thereafter.

Passenger Focus has no objection, in principle, to splitting the Brighton to Ashford service in order to achieve other important objectives, especially in view of the low numbers of passengers making end-to end journeys. However, the lengthy connection times for

passengers wishing to travel from west of Eastbourne to east of Hastings and vice versa are of concern and should be reviewed in future timetable developments.

Our understanding is that connections made at Hampden Park will enable passengers to shorten their journeys. However this station has relatively few passenger comforts and connections will require crossing the lines via either the footbridge or the road. Passenger Focus urges Southern to develop plans for significant improvements to facilities at Hampden Park and to consider options to facilitate access between platforms.

3.2 Publicity and promotion of services and connections

The East Coastway, and particularly the Marshlink, represents a real opportunity to increase patronage on services, especially in the off-peak. Central to achieving passenger growth will be promotion of the access the rail service affords and the timetable offer. Passenger Focus recommends that Southern works closely with the Community Rail Partnership, local councils and tourist offices and attractions to ensure wide and effective publicity, as well as with Southeastern and Eurostar in relation to the onward connection opportunities. Further work to integrate bus connections with train services at key stations will also be required.

The long-called for introduction of joint/discounted ticketing arrangements with Eurostar should also be introduced at the earliest opportunity and certainly in advance of December 2010.

3.3 Rolling stock

Whilst Passenger Focus recognises and welcomes efforts by Southern to procure additional trains for the fleet and deliver increased capacity to meet passenger demand, there can be no doubt that passengers will deplore the substitution of old – and initially un-refurbished – class 313 stock for the comfortable, popular, modern class 377s that have been a major driver in improvements in passenger satisfaction. The lack of toilets and air conditioning represents a substantial decline in facilities that passengers have come to expect and without any means of addressing this, even after refurbishment has improved more general comfort and environment, Southern must expect a genuine and legitimate outcry.

3.4 Consultation and engagement

Passenger Focus commends Southern for acting on suggestions for an enhanced and informative consultation document. We believe our proposals for inclusion of information about the main journey patterns on the East Coastway and setting out not just the benefits of the proposed changes but also indicating where certain passengers may experience detriment has improved clarity about the proposals being consulted upon.

The stakeholder meeting held in Eastbourne also provided a valuable opportunity for a range of stakeholders to hear directly about the proposals, raise questions and engage in discussion and debate about the potential implications of the consultation. We know this was appreciated by attendees and would advocate a similar approach to future timetable changes.



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