

Deal Town Council Transport & Infrastructure Committee comments on KCC Rail Strategy

November 2020

Thanks for the opportunity to comment on the KCC's Draft Rail Strategy 2021. We are writing on behalf of Deal Town Council's Transport and Infrastructure Committee with comments, observations and some suggestions.

Overview

Before we make some specific comments on specific paragraphs in the report we would like to present a reaction and some thoughts about the thrust of the strategy.

The draft strategy kicks off with good intentions and aspirational words but then retreats into business as usual. There's still a presumptive thread that runs through the strategy that train travel is about getting to and from London. The world has changed.

The days when London Commuters financed the railways in Kent are over. Few if any organisations or corporations wants to go back to full time offices. The savings and convenience have been too great for everyone. The Mayor of London's office is researching what the new future of Greater London will be. They know that this hiatus will change the way we work for good. It is wholly unrealistic to expect that commuting will be back to pre-pandemic levels by 2025. So, the strategy has got to think of train travel in new ways, which is tough for a hard fixed infrastructure.

The strategy is doesn't appear to be considering those every day journeys we want people to take by train and not by car. Again, with train travel at record lows, a re-nationalised operation, a desperate need to move away from road usage, now is the time to re-imagine our rail services, resolve the decades long problems of unbelievable dis-connectivity on and off the rails, poor safety & security, uncompetitive pricing, extreme peaks and troughs.

At a hyper local level, what would happen if we made the train journey between Walmer and Deal stations free which would make good use of excess capacity at particular times of the day? It would enable everyone living within a few minutes walk of Walmer station (a rapidly increasing population!), get to Deal in 3 minutes without any concerns over traffic or parking. And if they want to shop at Sainsbury or Aldi, it's really convenient! That's the sort of journey we want people to make, because that's an everyday journey. That's one simple journey that if we got 100 people doing by train instead of by car every day, it would have a massively positive impact on our town, on our environment, on our air and on our climate.

So starting with this concept, what does the strategy need to address? Pricing, convenience and accessibility. All of which are overlooked in this strategy because they're nuts and bolts issues, not high profile self-publicity initiatives.

We need a radical shake up of the ticketing system. The current system is a hangover from the old BR days and it's wrapped up in complex legalities and railway regulations. However, TfL have done it with the Oyster card for their 9m+ population and countless ticketing points, so there's no reason why an electronic carnet system cannot operate across transport choices for the 1.7m people of Kent. Indeed Kent needs to be levelled up to TfL standards of service and fares as the services are currently inferior and the fares higher.

If we are looking at feedback loops, electronic ticketing can be seen as a catalyst for significant modal shift as it...

- gives access to both bus and train travel

- improving connectivity
- improving convenience
- increasing the logic of stations as transport hubs
- changing the roles of station staff from ticket sellers to travel ambassadors
- improving communication
- improving stations
- Increasing users

Another key area for improvement though is the urgent need for better Kent wide bus services. This would make the smart ticketing oyster style inter modal much more effective, attractive and represents a much needed integrated approach to public transport.

One final disappointment with the strategy arises from the assumption that railways should not be a burden on the tax payer and should operate commercially. And yet the same fiscal logic is not applied to the road network. Consequently train travel and rail freight are immediately put at a disadvantage to the private car and lorry haulage. This is exactly the point in time when this should be challenged.

So with our overview in mind we make the following comments on the draft strategy. Our comments follow the order of the sections contained within the draft strategy.

General Policy etc

We acknowledge the challenges posed by the impact of the Covid pandemic but recognise that economic and societal changes that will flow from this provide a real opportunity for the railways to step up to meet the challenge of attracting more passengers getting more people off out of cars and off the roads and transporting more freight on the rail network.

This will make a positive and tangible contribution to tackling the adverse impact of climate change and the damage to the environment.

Investment in infrastructure stations as well as rolling stock is necessary as it is essential if we are to achieve this ambition.

Fares

We should press hard for an extension to the use of the Oyster card to the whole of Kent rather than just that bit of Kent that is covered in the area administered by the Southeastern on behalf of Transport for London. The existing TFL boundary currently runs down to Dartford, Swanley and Knockholt etc - all in Kent. It is an absurdity that one can travel to Dover by bus from Deal but the last bus times do not allow for an evening out without having to pay again for a train or taxi home. Although this seems a quaint prospect during the Covid pandemic restrictions but we hope we will eventually be able to return to some vestige of normality and encourage people to come and enjoy Dover's night time economy and to support local businesses.

It is both environmentally and economically advantageous to have a better ticketing arrangement akin to the integrated approach they have say in the Netherlands.

Radical reform of the ticketing infrastructure is needed and the introduction of smart cards and an oyster style system for Kent is of paramount importance and should be placed firmly at the heart of this strategy. There have been discussions about a White Cliffs card to include bus and rail travel in east Kent but there is a strong case for such an approach across the whole of Kent.

We would also advocate the piloting of a free rail use scheme between Deal and Walmer at off-peak times and weekends to encourage more people to use the rail between two towns. Whilst accepting that there are many challenges to overcome with this idea we believe it be worth trying. This would greatly incentivise and encourage people to leave their cars at home, avoid congestion reduce the problems of air pollution. Developing this idea is definitely worth considering as a pilot if you are serious about making an impact on tackling climate change. If successful it could be expanded to include trips to Sandwich and Martin Mill.

The Impact of Covid will also change peoples travel patterns and shift things away from the reliance on commuting to London and this needs to be recognised and encouraged in the strategy.

There is also need to emphasise the need to integrate train services with buses, taxis and cycling links etc. The Kent Local Transport plan 5 on page 16 provides an ideal opportunity to press the glaring omission of the lack of proposals to integrate transport services and to argue for better integration of bus services at the Kent end of the network.

At the moment people are very happy to leave their cars at a local station as they enter the rail system and then use public transport at the other London end thanks to the development and availability of good integrated transport links. This should become our aim at the Kent end of the network.

We should be aiming for local people to be able to go to London easily but also for people arrive in Deal and to walk out and find and access buses to the next stage of their journey.

There are exciting proposals in places like Oxford etc which include the proposition of trial on demand bus services. We are also seeing a trial on demand bus service being developed in Ayelsham This should be the focus of a local campaign in Kent for a similar service as this would help out of town locations as well as the more rural villages.

We see the railways as a vital driver in the economic recovery but as part of an integrated transport system which also links up with buses, taxis, cycling routes we need to develop a holistic approach to transport and catch up with a European counterparts.

We agree that the impact of HS1 has been good for Kent and that and it's economy, however the loss of high-speed train services through Deal along the East Kent coast line would be a major disaster. It has improved and strengthened tourism and business and we strongly recommend that the high-speed direct trains to London to be retained.

We also like to see an improvement in local trains as the local economy is likely to be even more important post Covid.

Infrastructure Improvements

We welcome the extension of platforms at Sandwich station and work done to accommodate the large crowds anticipated for the Open in 2021. However we would also like to ensure that the smaller stations along the line in East Kent have similar improvements made particularly for those people struggling with mobility. We need to facilitate longer train sets and more inclusivity of use by all members of society.

The decision to approve Thanet Parkway rail station presents us with some challenges. We are concerned that passengers will be encouraged to drive to the station and park over at Thanet Parkway station rather than utilise other forms of transport to connect to Thanet either via rail or using local bus services. It is essential that the opening of Thanet Parkway is not used as an excuse to reduce, curtail or otherwise denigrate the high-speed services that serve Deal.

We welcome the proposed rail line development at Dollonds Moor which should enhance journey times from Dover Priory by accessing the high-speed line after leaving Folkestone West on the up service thus by passing Sandling and Westenhanger stations and consequently speeding up the journey.

Obviously it was also welcome when major investment was committed to repairing the major sea wall near the tunnels complex between Dover and Folkestone which had been neglected for so long. But having made that investment it is now vital that we continue to utilise the East Kent coast line and we would wish to see further investment made in upgrading signalling and improvements in station facilities and information for passengers.

One of our most pressing local concerns is delivering the work from the successful Access for All funding that we achieved working alongside our local partners Network Rail Southeastern KCC and DDC. We welcome an opportunity to influence the outcome of this investment and have made some funding available to support this. It is vital that we improve facilities for people with disabilities or mobility issues but it doesn't just end there. We need to ensure that our station becomes an integrated transport hub linking well with buses, taxis, cycling routes and encouraging pedestrians. In addition developing station facilities for community and business use as well as providing a good safe, well lit, environment with aesthetically and environmentally pleasing planting and a green natural habitat for many endangered species of flora and fauna.

We enclose Deal Town Council's Transport and Infrastructure Committee's vision for Deal station improvements which builds upon the bid we made under the Access for All funding stream. We hope this can be seen as an innovative approach and one that can be shared with other stations along the East Kent line and beyond.

Rolling stock

We welcome the envisaged improvements in provision of new rolling stock to cope with the anticipated increase demand and strain on train capacity but also as an incentive for passenger to make more journeys by rail.

Rail Service and Timetable

We are concerned by the frequency and extent of train services that serve Deal both to London and to Thanet and Canterbury. We have been campaigning for the maintaining of the HS1 services direct from Deal and for an improvement in off peak services to Charing Cross. We need to improve connections and facilitate transfers between Kent towns and not just on the line to London. This will make the interchanges at Dover and Ramsgate more effective and avoid those exasperating long waits because of trains that have just been missed.

The provision of Dover to Faversham train services might make this easier as well as facilitating better transfers to the high-speed services which commence in Faversham.

We agree with the suggestion in the strategy that GOVIA Thameslink should be split up into smaller operating units as Southeastern has performed far better than Southern and Southern is in need of a great deal of reform and improvement.

CRP

We thoroughly welcome the creation of the White Cliffs Community Rail Partnership (WCCRP) and will be seeking to influence that body and making improvements to stations and to links with cycling. This will

hopefully encourage greater role use, more exercise to promote health and well being in the community as well as tourism thus stimulating the economy which will be much needed post Covid.

It is essential that we retain the direct London Deal and Deal London high-speed train service but would also like to see an increase in off-peak services with greater connectivity locally to reflect emerging travel patterns.

We are a strong supporter of the recently established WCCRP it is important that these new CRPs are fully supported by rail partners as well as becoming an integral part of local rail delivery service development and delivery. We are working hard to build community involvement.

We also support the development of the WCCRP and believe it essential for it to include the stations on the line from Dover Priory to Canterbury and to link up with other CRPs like the Thanet CRP.

Freight

It is essential that more freight is put onto the railways and any impediments to this must be overcome. The likelihood of lorry chaos in Dover and the surrounding areas is looming large as Brexit bites on the 1st January 2021 so the more lorries we can get off the roads will be a great help and benefit to people's health both mental and physical (combating the adverse side effects of parked lorries causing strain, stress, sleep deprivation, noise and poor air quality) and for the environment.

International

We would welcome the return of international rail services to Ashford as this makes a vast improvement to journey times for people in East Kent avoiding the need to go up to London and boosts the local economy. The addition of direct trains to Amsterdam alongside those to Brussels and Paris would be a great improvement too. We may have left the EU but we wish to remain close partners with EU rail services and stay close economic partners.

We hope that you will see fit to make some amendments and additions to your recommended actions for example:-

- Introduce a Kent wide Oyster style inter modal card system
- Support innovation in fare concessions to improve rail use and take up excess capacity
- Work to better integrate and improve Bus Services across Kent
- Work relentlessly to tackle climate change via increased rail capacity and usage
- Enhance station facilities at smaller rural stations
- Facilitate stations as the hub of local integrated transport networks linking with cycling routes and walkways etc
- Retain High Speed services along East Kent coastal line and improve local and connecting services
- Support and expand CRPs
- Increase freight on rail system to alleviate adverse and damaging environmental impact of lorry congestion in Kent post Brexit

Yours sincerely

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Chair and Vice- Chair Transport & Infrastructure Committee

Deal Town Council