



Kent Route Utilisation Strategy – consultation by Network Rail

A response from London TravelWatch

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Introduction

1. The Kent RUS is largely concerned with train services which originate outside the London TravelWatch area. It is therefore unnecessary for us to comment on much of the document's detail.
2. The key point for London is that most trains in Kent run to and from central London, and most of the passengers travel in the commuting peaks. The trains share the tracks with London metro services. It is the interaction in the peaks between the latter – a strategy for which for was published in the South London RUS in 2008 – and the Kent services which gives rise to present day capacity problems, and to the additional future problems which the draft RUS identifies from Kent's planned population increases.
3. This response therefore concentrates on the solutions for London peak commuting proposed in the draft RUS.

Proposals up to 2019

4. The most important feature of the draft RUS is that it respects the need – as per the South London RUS - to increase the capacity of metro services. It resists the temptation to go for a cheap and easy option of cutting back on metro services to release capacity for longer distance commuting. London TravelWatch strongly endorses this approach.
5. The consequence is that by 2015 – even with lengthening of some trains and some extra track capacity from the Thameslink programme – crowding conditions on Kent trains when they reach London TravelWatch area stations such as Sevenoaks and Bromley South will be little different from now. Many passengers from these stations will therefore face the same choice as now – stand on a fast train or get a seat on a metro stopping train.

6. To deal with growth beyond 2015, the draft RUS proposes running more and longer trains on High Speed 1 into St. Pancras. It is clearly sensible to maximise use of this new asset, and London TravelWatch welcomes the recommendations in the draft RUS to help achieve this, viz.
 - Ensuring an appropriate pricing policy for 2015 and beyond, to ensure loading levels are balanced between HS1 and other services. (This is presumably code for querying the level – or perhaps even the principle - of the present HS1 surcharge policy.)
 - Maximising the accessibility of Ebbsfleet station from the local area – including bus links from “hub” stations on other routes. (Ebbsfleet is fundamentally a park-and-ride station, with very limited public transport access at present.)
 - Improving connections between Stratford’s International and Regional stations, to ensure that passengers using this station can access the major office developments around Liverpool Street and Canary Wharf by changing at Stratford rather than at London Bridge. (Current plans are for a link by DLR train, or a walk through the new shopping centre.)
7. We note with interest that the draft RUS suggests some use of differential fares to alleviate crowding by encouraging spreading of passengers’ travel times. London TravelWatch does not object to the principle of differential pricing, provided it is done by reducing shoulder-peak fares rather than increasing high-peak fares.
8. However we do not think that great reliance should be placed on this as a means of controlling crowding, as the ability of passengers to take advantage of it depends on the extent to which their employer – and their domestic commitments - enables them to change their working times. Although some firms allow flexible working times for all their staff, by and large we believe that those who have most choice are those on higher incomes who would be less motivated by price, whilst lower income passengers who would welcome the ability to save some money are less likely to be able to do so.
9. This view is borne out by the results of various experiments with differential peak / shoulder peak fares and by research carried out by Passenger Focus. The indications are that:
 - a) passengers are not likely to shift their travel times by more than 30 mins.
 - b) will only shift at all if the improvement in travelling conditions is substantial.

10. The consequence of a) is that b) is unlikely to be achieved. Therefore, unless the price differential is made very large, this solution won't work. Also, a large differential is unlikely to be sustainable. Either the high-peak fare will be politically unacceptable, or the low fare will be unaffordable to government – and could be self-defeating by simply encouraging more and longer-distance commuting

Beyond 2019

11. We welcome the boldness of the draft RUS in declaring that, for expected growth after 2019 (or thereabouts), the potential for both upgrading the basically Victorian south-east London network and for maximising use of HS1 will have been exhausted.
12. The proposed remedy is to take one of the metro area lines through Lewisham (it suggests the Hayes line, but the choice is not important at this stage), link it to an alternative route into central London, and thus release capacity through London Bridge for use by additional metro and Tonbridge / Sevenoaks line trains.
13. This is of course not a new idea. It was at the heart of railway planning north of the Thames in the 1930s and 40s, when central London tube lines were extended into the suburbs by taking over selected main line routes. It can be argued that failure to do likewise in south-east London is the root cause of the capacity problems which have plagued the London Bridge / Charing Cross / Cannon Street lines ever since the 1940s.
14. It would of course be important to get the detail right, and in particular choose a route into central London which has ample capacity to carry the traffic and is not too circuitous and therefore too slow. The Docklands Light Railway idea suggested as one of the options in the draft RUS seems to fail on both counts.
15. The proposal for a Bakerloo line extension, however, would merit serious consideration. It would satisfy long-standing aspirations for getting the tube to Camberwell and Peckham (which would provide good all-day traffic to help justify the cost), give a direct route to the heart of the West End, and need just a single interchange (at Elephant & Castle) for the City.
16. However building new railways in tunnel under London to modern standards is very expensive. Even if it could be justified on cost-benefit criteria, finding the money would be a huge issue – both in competition with other big ideas (such as High Speed 2, Crossrail 2 and suggestions in the draft Sussex RUS for tunneling from Croydon into central London) and in light of the long term public finance issues which the UK now faces.

17. For these reasons – and because major London transport investments are best looked at on a London-wide basis – London TravelWatch suggests that the time is now right for Transport for London to develop a long term rail plan (beyond their current Rail 2025 strategy) to recommend priorities to follow the construction of Crossrail 1.

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