

CONCERN AT TIMETABLE CONSULTATION – BRAG

Rail Campaigners Bexhill Rail Action Group (BRAG) have expressed concern at plans by the Department for Transport and train operator Southern to re-structure local rail services from December 2010, and believe that a lot more work is required if they are to be acceptable.

A final decision will be taken by Secretary of State for Transport Lord Adonis early next year.

BRAG says that the plans involve some improvements, but other changes might leave local rail users worse off.

The proposals, which are currently at the Consultation stage, involve splitting the Brighton to Ashford service in two at Eastbourne, replacing it with a longer electric train calling at all stations between Brighton and Eastbourne, and a diesel stopping service between Eastbourne and Ashford.

Under the plans Cooden Beach and Collington would gain a through service to Rye and Ashford, but would lose through services to Brighton during the day. Bexhill station would have one through train an hour to Brighton instead of the current two, and two trains to Lewes and Polegate instead of three. On the plus side there would be three trains an hour between Bexhill, St Leonards, Hastings and Ore, and there would also continue to be three trains an hour running between Bexhill and Eastbourne. Three Oaks and Winchelsea, which lost daytime services in 2005 would have a two-hourly service restored.

However, the draft timings would lead to slower services on the Victoria and Ashford routes, and fewer trains to Brighton - and BRAG is concerned that the latter route could also be operated with older rolling stock in the future, as part of a re-deployment of trains across the Southern network.

In 2002 the Department for Transport decided not to electrify the line between Ashford and Hastings, and just four years ago, extended the service through to Brighton using new diesel trains instead. However, there is a limited number of these trains available, which also have less seats than the electric trains used in the area, and this has resulted in overcrowding in the rush hour. The diesel trains are also needed to operate the busy commuter route between Uckfield and London Bridge, which is also un-electrified. BRAG is worried that at some point in the future, commercial pressures could see Bexhill lose its through service to Ashford altogether, with the Marshlink service cut back just to a Hastings – Ashford shuttle, as used to operate until 2005.

Under the plans there would continue to be an hourly service from local stations to Victoria via Haywards Heath, but this would be re-timed, and BRAG says that some journey times are increased in the draft timetable.

Furthermore, BRAG highlights that the Consultation document reveals plans to re-deploy some of the modern rolling stock introduced just six years ago on local Coastway services between Brighton and Eastbourne, and to replace it with refurbished trains first used on lines in North London in the 1970s. BRAG says this would lead to a qualitative deterioration in service as these trains lack toilets, air conditioning and first class accommodation. Although there are currently no plans to run these trains beyond Eastbourne to Bexhill and Hastings, BRAG does not believe that the rail authorities are in a position to guarantee that this will not happen in the future

BRAG Chairman Hugh Sharp said

“We are extremely concerned about some of the proposals in this Consultation document, and it is difficult to digest everything at once.

“On the positive side, there would be three trains an hour across Hastings between Bexhill and Ore, while some of the rural stations on the Marshlink regain an all-day service.

“Cooden Beach and Collington would also gain a new hourly through service to Ashford, but this is at the expense of through services to Brighton.

“However, the bigger picture is that this potentially represents a downgrading of the Coastway and Marshlink lines from a through regional route between Ashford and Brighton, with all the onward connections available at those two important stations, back to the status of local lines. BRAG fears that this could potentially be used as an excuse to defer remedial work on track and signalling, and possibly to cut the service back still further in the future.

“BRAG would want to be assured that were the changes to go through, the new services would be vigorously promoted, and that local passengers travelling on Eurostar would receive free or concessionary travel to Ashford, as is already the case with Southeastern trains.

“For us a through service between Bexhill and Ashford will always be non-negotiable, to connect with Eurostar, onward services to Kent, and the new high-speed Javelin services.

“We are also very concerned that the draft timetable sees journey times to London creeping back upwards, and will be very clear about our opposition to this when we make our formal submission. At the launch of the new Southern franchise on 30th September, the Secretary of State for Transport Lord Adonis was very explicit in his view that Southern and track operator Network Rail must work together to reduce journey times.

“Moreover, the proposal to replace new trains with older and less comfortable ones on some services, is hardly a cause for celebration.

Mr Sharp concluded

“BRAG, along with a number of other local user groups and stakeholders attended a Stakeholder Briefing on Wednesday 21st October. We made clear our reservations, and detailed a large number of specific changes that would need to be made before we would deem the proposals to be acceptable. BRAG hopes that rail users and local residents will also respond to the Consultation in large numbers and make clear their views.”

Details of the proposed changes are posted on the Southern website www.southernrailway.com

The deadline to respond is 11th January 2010.

Responses should be sent to

East Coastway Timetable Consultation
Southern
Go-Ahead House
26-28 Addiscombe Road
Croydon CR9 5GA
Or by email to: eastcoastwaytimetable@southernrailway.com

For further information about Bexhill Rail Action Group, please visit www.bexhillrailaction.org.uk or email bexrag@yahoo.co.uk

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MARSHLINK UPGRADE COULD SLASH JOURNEY TIMES TO LONDON – BRAG

Bexhill Rail Action Group has called for the upgrading and electrification of the Marshlink between Hastings and Ashford, and outlined a vision of High Speed *Javelin* trains connecting Bexhill with the capital in just 1 hour and 15 minutes, instead of the current 1 hour 52 minutes via Haywards Heath.

For Hastings rail travellers, the journey time to and from London could be reduced to just over an hour

BRAG Chairman Hugh Sharp explained

“Contrary to popular belief, this would not require construction of a new line, just the long overdue electrification of the Marshlink line between Ore and Ashford, as well as some double-tracking and upgrading of signalling systems on the route. This plan would also enable the Brighton - Ashford service to be operated with standard four car electric trains, solving the problem of overcrowding on the 2 car diesel units currently used to operate the service.

“Javelin trains would run on the High Speed 1 route from the new St Pancras station in London to Ashford. At Ashford they would run on to Hastings, Bexhill and Eastbourne via an electrified and upgraded Marshlink route in the same way that they are already running beyond Ashford on conventional lines to Ramsgate, Canterbury and Dover.

“BRAG will be advocating this strategy both to Lord Adonis the Secretary of State for Transport, and to the Shadow Secretary of State Theresa Villiers.”

A delegation of local rail user groups, led by Eastbourne MP Nigel Waterson, and including the Conservative PPC for Hastings Amber Rudd, is due to meet with Mrs Villiers at the House of Commons on Wednesday 28th October.

Mr Sharp concluded

“This is a practical way to upgrade local transport links to make them fit for the 21st century, assist re-generation, and secure the future of the Marshlink line between Hastings and Ashford.”

For further information please visit www.bexhillrailaction.org.uk or email bexrag@yahoo.co.uk

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