
BEXHILL RAIL ACTION GROUP (BRAG)

NEWSLETTER SUMMER 2013

Summer is finally here. While the news that rail franchising is to move forward is welcome, some of the news below leads the Editor to conclude that there is an element of stagnation locally. Our station ticket office seems to be closing on a random basis, evening peak services are still not running satisfactorily and even Southern's renowned marketing of bargain off-peak fares seems to have been toned-down.

RAIL FRANCHISING

*After a suspension of the process last year, re-franchising of local rail services is moving forward once again. BRAG Committee member **Richard Tyler** outlines the state of play.*

The combined Thameslink, Southern and Great Northern franchise will bring together all of the services currently operated by two franchisees: First Capital Connect (FCC) and Southern (including Gatwick Express). In addition, some services will transfer from Southeastern, those that run through the central core to places like Sevenoaks and Ashford.

The franchise will be responsible for delivering rail services across Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire, Greater London, Hampshire, Hertfordshire, Kent, Norfolk, Surrey and Sussex. There will be a wide and diverse range of destinations served such as Ashford, Bedford, Brighton, Cambridge, Chichester, Eastbourne, East Croydon, Gatwick Airport, Hastings, Horsham, King's Lynn, Lewes, Littlehampton, Luton, Luton Airport, Peterborough, Portsmouth, St Albans, Stevenage and Welwyn Garden City.

In December 2011 the DfT invited organisations to express an interest in bidding for the franchise. Following their evaluation of the expressions of interest, they announced that the following companies had been shortlisted to bid for the franchise:

- Abellio Thameslink Limited (NV Nederlandse Spoorwegen);
- First Thameslink Limited (FirstGroup plc);
- Govia Thameslink Railway Limited (Go-Ahead Group plc and Keolis SA);
- MTR Corporation Thameslink Limited (MTR Corporation Limited); and
- Stagecoach Thameslink Trains Limited (Stagecoach Group plc).

The DfT went out to consultation with stakeholders, including BRAG, in May 2012 for return by the original deadline 23rd August 2012. We were asked to give our views on what we thought should be included in the 'Invitation to Tender' (ITT); such questions as 'what are your views on the practice of splitting trains at stations such as Haywards Heath?' This, together with others, BRAG complied with.

Having consulted in this way the Department expected to issue an ITT to shortlisted applicants in October 2012 expecting to announce the successful bidder in May 2013, with the new franchise

starting in September 2013. This would be for the Thameslink franchise only initially, but include the whole of the Southern Franchise in July 2015, when that franchise also became due for renewal.

However none of this happened. On 3rd October 2012 the debacle over the process for the Great Western franchise put everything on hold, including other franchise due for renewal, and investigations were inaugurated to ascertain what had gone wrong.

These investigations have now concluded and the refranchising process restarted. On March 26th the DfT published its new franchising programme. So the new date for TSGN franchise to start has moved on a year to September 2014, but the Southern Franchise being included at the same date as before, July 2015, when that franchise comes up for renewal. It is not clear if stakeholders will be asked to contribute again, but we hold ourselves in readiness. But in any case we are free to make our views known direct to the prospective bidders.

The South Eastern franchise in contrast, due to end in April 2014 will be extended until June 2018 as a 'Direct Award Contract' by the current franchise holder Govia. However if terms cannot be agreed between the DfT and Govia the DfT have the option to run it themselves, as a 'Directly Operated Railway', as is the East Coast franchise at present.

TRAIN PERFORMANCE

A meeting was held with Southern managers on 20th February to discuss poor performance, and concerns about structural deficiencies in the evening peak timetable. Southern agreed to look at BRAG's proposals, which centred around swapping over the destinations of the 17.23 London Bridge – Eastbourne and the 17.27 Victoria – Ore.

After a long wait, and following prompting from our MP, Southern subsequently informed us that they would not be taking any further action at the present time because (1) They believed that performance had 'improved' and (2) They wished to assess the impact on performance of the East Coastway re-signalling project, which is due to be completed this November.

BRAG is somewhat disappointed with this response. Our own reports indicate that performance of the 17.23 and 17.27 although having shown some improvement, continues to be patchy, with a resultant impact on the 18.32 Brighton – Ashford. BRAG is of the view that there is a structural problem with the timetable. It is therefore unfortunate that the present situation is likely to continue - given the long lead in time for change - for at least another 12 months.

BEXHILL STATION TICKET OFFICE

BRAG is increasingly concerned about staffing at Bexhill station. Until recently there was at least one member of staff on duty at the booking office, with a second at busy times. Additionally, there was also a cleaner on duty throughout the day, who was available for platform duties. BRAG understands that ticket office staffing has been reduced, so that there is now only one person at any

one time. Furthermore both of the cleaners now operate from elsewhere, visiting Bexhill in the morning only.

The remaining staff member in the booking office appears to have been given other duties, including servicing ticket machines, cleaning in the afternoons, and assisting with other platform duties. This, in combination with staff breaks, has meant the ticket office has been closed for significant periods of time during the day. On Friday 28th June, three random visits were made during the day and it was closed on every occasion. The ticket office also appears to be opening late and closing early. Yolanda Laybourne has been compiling a spreadsheet, and it would be appreciated if any other details of closure could be emailed to her via the BRAG email address: bexrag@yahoo.co.uk

This situation is unsatisfactory. The Chairman has recently contacted Southern for an explanation. Should this prove unsatisfactory, BRAG will escalate the matter.

TICKET MACHINES

There have been a number of instances of ticket machines at local stations not offering the full range of fares, and on some occasions passengers being overcharged significantly. The situation is worse at Southeastern stations. Any instances should be reported to Martin Woodfine at bexrag@yahoo.co.uk.

STREET LIGHTING

Many readers will be aware from local media that East Sussex County Council is rolling out a switch-off of street lights in many parts of Bexhill. Some streets will have their lights switched off completely between 12.30 – 5.30 am, while others will be dimmed, or alternate lights will be switched off. BRAG appreciates the tight financial situation that ESCC finds itself in, but has pointed out that public transport is still running during much of this period [last train arrives in at 12.40am, first one out is at 5.05am], and many rail passengers will find themselves walking to and from local stations in the dark. Doubtless, the full effect of this will be felt more fully later in the year once the nights start closing in. Readers who are concerned about this must make their views known to their divisional County Councillor.

INTERNATIONAL SERVICES

It has recently been announced that Deutsche Bahn has been given permission to run through services between London and Germany/The Netherlands. However, due to a shortage of rolling stock this is unlikely to be launched until 2016. BRAG, along with other rail user groups will lobby for the new services to call at Ashford International



BARGAIN CORNER

There is currently a lull in discounts and promotions. Indeed many prices have been heading in the wrong direction: Railcards, which give a third off travel with varying terms and conditions, have recently increased from £28 to £30. Southern Daysave – which gives unlimited travel for a day on Southern services - has increased from £12 to £14.

For ongoing local and network promotions, visit <http://www.southernrailway.com/offers/offers/>

MEMBERSHIP

New members are always welcome. Membership costs just £5 per year. The more members we have the greater our voice. For membership details please email Yolanda Laybourne, Treasurer and Membership Secretary at bexrag@yahoo.co.uk

FUTURE MEETINGS

Mon 8th July
Mon 12th Aug
Mon 9th Sep
Mon 14th Oct
Mon 11th Nov
Mon 9th Dec (Christmas Meal)

We meet at 7.30pm at the bar/restaurant of The Sackville on Bexhill Seafront.

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