

South Eastern Franchise Replacement Sponsor
Department for Transport Zone 3/15
Great Minster House
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email to: southeastern@dft.gsi.gov.uk

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Dear Sir or Madam

Southeastern Franchise Replacement – Submission by Bexhill Rail Action Group

I am writing on behalf of Bexhill Rail Action Group (BRAG). BRAG is a member of the East Sussex Rail Alliance(ESRA). BRAG welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this consultation.

Although the Bexhill stations are not directly served by Southeastern services, BRAG has a significant interest in this franchise: Both the Hastings Line and High Speed 1 services offer important connections for our local rail users, changing at St Leonards Warrior Square and Ashford International respectively.

I refer to the matrix of questions in Appendix 2 of the consultation document, answering those that are directly relevant:

Q.3 Are consultees aware of any other rail or non-rail development schemes that might affect the new franchise?

A new link road is likely to be constructed between Bexhill and Hastings during the currency of the franchise, which may lead to a significant expansion in housebuilding and other commercial developments. This may make a station at Wilting Farm [on the outskirts of St Leonards] more viable and/or may create additional demand at Crowhurst.

Q.4 What increments or decrements to the specification would stakeholders wish to see and how would these be funded?

It is essential that a new faster and limited-stop service is introduced on the Hastings Line in the off-peak. The current service is extremely unsatisfactory, being as it is a twice hourly 'bolt-on' to the outer suburban London – Tunbridge Wells 'metro' service. This is principally designed to provide a regular fast service between Sevenoaks/Orpington and London. The needs of Hastings Line passengers are something of an afterthought. The service is slow and especially prone to overcrowding in the shoulder-peaks.

There should continue to be at least 2 trains an hour between Hastings and London. One of these should run fast between London and Tonbridge or Tunbridge Wells.

A further factor in favour of such a service is that Hastings and Bexhill form a regeneration area with high deprivation indices, and poor parallel road links compared to other coastal towns within the Southeastern franchise area, placing the area at even greater disadvantage.

Q.5 Which aspects of the specification, other than those services operating on the HS1 network, would stakeholders wish to see mandated and which aspects of the specification could be left to the discretion of the operator?

BRAG would wish to see a high level of mandatory service specification. The off-peak service is addressed in Q.4. BRAG would also highlight the economic importance to the Hastings and Rother area of maintaining a through service in the peak hours to/from the City of London, preferably Cannon Street.

Q.6 What changes to services would stakeholders propose, why and would these provide economic benefit?

See Q.4 & 5. The current off-peak service on the Hastings Line is unfit for purpose. At least one service an hour should be fast from Tunbridge Wells or Tonbridge to London terminals. The road network in East Sussex is poor, Hastings and Bexhill are regeneration areas and therefore a faster service to the capital is essential.

Q.7 Do respondents feel that there are other destinations that domestic high speed services could serve that would support regional and national economic growth?

BRAG, in common with other members of the East Sussex Rail Alliance wishes to see the extension of High-Speed 'Javelin' services to Eastbourne via Rye and Hastings. This would require the electrification and upgrading of the Marshlink line between Ashford and Ore, as well as some track and signalling alterations at Ashford.

This development would reduce the journey time from London to Hastings to just over one hour; and to Bexhill in approximately 75 minutes (as opposed to nearly 2 hours via Haywards Heath).

It would link the regeneration areas on the East Sussex coast with Ashford and the Thames Gateway, which are both likely to be significant growth areas in the next 20 years.

BRAG also wishes to see work undertaken during the next franchise to develop and deliver a 'Transmanche Metro' service running at least hourly between London St Pancras and Lille, calling at Stratford International, Ebbsfleet, Ashford and Calais-Frethun.

Q.9 What steps might bidders be expected to take to meet passenger demand and what might be the most appropriate mechanisms for managing demand?

BRAG would like to see a positive growth model to price new business on to the railway at times of low demand, rather than off the railway at busy times. BRAG would deplore any developments that restrict off-peak tickets later in the morning or in the evening peak.

There is significant off-peak and contraflow capacity on the Hastings Line which could be used to boost tourism to the town. This could be harnessed through a similar strategy to that used by the neighbouring Southern franchise, which offers various 'Advance' and 'Daysave' products.

Q.11 What improvements would respondents like to see made to other South Eastern services, what is the rationale for them and would these provide economic benefit?

This has been addressed in 5/6/9 above

Q.17 What do stakeholders see as the most important factors in improving security (actual or perceived) and addressing any gap between the two?

St Leonards Warrior Square is perceived as being an insecure station, especially late at night when it is unstaffed. It is not a pleasant interchange for Bexhill passengers. The lack of enclosure or ticket gates makes fare evasion rife. BRAG would like to see the station fenced, staffed in the evening, and for ticket gates to be installed.

Q.18 What is important to stakeholders in the future use and improvements in stations?

It is important that maintenance and cleaning is ongoing at Ashford International, Hastings and St Leonards Warrior Square, rather than as has been the case, periods of long neglect punctuated by renovation.

Q.20 What sort of ticketing products and services would you expect to see delivered through 'smart' technology on this franchise?

It is likely that there will be an expansion of 'smart' technology during the next franchise period. For Bexhill and Hastings, which are on the interface of two franchises, it is important that the two systems are compatible. Currently the Southern 'Key' only operates from Bexhill westwards, even though the majority of passengers from Bexhill stations are travelling eastwards [and indeed, the line from Hastings to Ashford is operated by Southern].

I hope that these comments are helpful.

Yours faithfully

Hugh Sharp
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