

SUBMISSION BY BEXHILL RAIL ACTION GROUP (BRAG) IN RESPONSE TO THE DRAFT SUSSEX ROUTE UTILISATION STRATEGY (RUS), AUGUST 2009

1.0 ABOUT BEXHILL RAIL ACTION GROUP

1.1 Bexhill Rail Action Group (BRAG) is a non-party-political campaign group formed in 2005 to campaign for the safeguarding and improvement of rail services on the East Coastway line between Ore and Eastbourne, and beyond to Brighton, London and Ashford.

1.2 BRAG has close links with other local user groups, notably the Rye-based Marshlink Action Group (MLAG), and the Eastbourne-based East Coastway Commuter Group. BRAG also maintains a regular dialogue with other stakeholders including Network Rail, Southern Railway and Passenger Focus as well as local MPs and representatives of local government.

1.3 BRAG notes that the boundary between the Network Rail Kent and Sussex areas is actually at Bo-Peep Junction in St Leonards. This means that rail services from Bexhill, on the Marshlink and East Coastway, originate in or pass through both areas. BRAG therefore considers the current Kent and Sussex RUSs both to be within its terms of reference.

2.0 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

2.1 BRAG is concerned about the methodology of the draft Sussex RUS for the following reasons

- Network Rail's planning is artificially divided between two operating areas (Kent and Sussex) and there is no 'joined-up' view of the Marshlink and East Coastway as a strategic south coast link between Ashford and Brighton in either the Kent or the Sussex RUS. The priority for the Kent RUS is unambiguously the county of Kent, and specifically Ashford and the Thames Gateway. In turn, the Sussex RUS concentrates on Brighton and Hove to the detriment of East and West Sussex. Located as they are, Bexhill and Hastings appear peripheral to both strategies – despite the fact that they are considered to be priority regeneration areas by central government.
- Unlike the Kent RUS, the Sussex RUS does at least make some reference to the significant housing growth planned for Bexhill and Hastings over the next ten years; but does not appear to analyse or plan for the consequences of this growth. Additionally, current and planned developments in Hastings town centre – notably the development of a new College and University – and changes to the area's demographic profile, are likely to place considerable new demand on local rail services. It therefore follows that if the emerging strategy is based on inaccurate or incomplete information, emerging services and facilities may not be fit for purpose

2.2 BRAG also considers that the RUS replicates the mistake of the earlier Brighton Mainline (BML) RUS in focussing on Brighton, to the detriment of other destinations in East and West Sussex

2.3 BRAG therefore wishes the RUS to re-evaluate

- How to develop a strategy for the entire East Coastway between Brighton and Ashford, and its connectivity into other services at either end i.e. West Coastway services between Brighton and Southampton, and onward from Ashford into International, Highspeed 1 and Kent services at Ashford.
- How to maintain a through Brighton – Ashford service through timetabling, infrastructure and rolling stock solutions. Any truncation of the service at Eastbourne or Hastings is unacceptable
- Longer-term aspirations, including the extension of Javelin services beyond Ashford to Hastings, Bexhill and Eastbourne should be studied. Electrification and upgrade of the Marshlink could deliver this as well as enabling the operation of conventional electric rolling stock the whole way to Ashford on local services.
- How to deliver a more even peak hour service in the evening between Victoria and East Coastway destinations
- How to deliver faster journey times both peak and off-peak between the East Coastway and London through infrastructure upgrades, better pathing, and the end to division and attachment of trains at Haywards Heath.
- How to provide better operational flexibility between Lewes and Bo-Peep Junction through enhanced signalling systems
- Redressing the inequitable balance of pathway allocation on the BML between Brighton and other Coastway destinations
- Where and whether a premium Gatwick service fits, in light of enhancement of other services, and now that the service has now been integrated into the South Central franchise. If the service is retained, airport users travelling to and from central London must be encouraged to use the Gatwick Express, rather than put additional pressure on Southern commuter services. Otherwise, consideration should be considered to extending services south of Gatwick to East/West Coastway destinations, if necessary leasing additional rolling stock

3.0 HASTINGS AND BEXHILL

3.1 Hastings and Bexhill are adjacent but very different towns. By their nature, and the inadequate local road network linking them both, they have spent much of the 20th century with their backs to each other. Poor road links to the north, east and west also mean that they are relatively isolated, and economically they are relatively deprived compared to other towns in the south east. The government recognises both towns as regeneration areas.

3.2 In 2010, East Sussex County Council intends to begin construction of a new link road between the two towns. The Bexhill – Hastings Link Road (BHLR) will run to the north of the towns, linking central Bexhill and St Leonards. The road will unlock land for commercial and residential development. Approximately 5000 new houses will be built in the first phase and between now and 2026, the population of Bexhill is likely to expand from its current 45,000 to around 70,000. Virtually all the designated housing growth for the Rother District in the next 15 years will be in Bexhill. Hastings is also likely to see expansion both through the development of greenfield sites bordering the Bexhill/Rother District, as well as the redevelopment of brownfield sites within the town. These developments will take the combined population of the Bexhill/Hastings conurbation to nearly 150,000 by 2026.

3.3 As well as significant new commercial activity being planned alongside this residential growth, the demography of Bexhill is almost certain to change away from the current profile of a predominantly retired population, towards a younger more economically active population. Much of this workforce will commute to the Greater London area and/or the Thames Gateway and Ashford, Eastbourne or Brighton. There is also likely to be growth in demand for journeys from Bexhill to Hastings itself and vice versa.

3.4 The Sussex RUS fails to consider future growth in demand for travel to Hastings as a destination in its own right, on account of developments taking place in the centre of the town. The construction of a new Further Education College next to Hastings railway station is at an advanced stage, and the same institution will also be developing new facilities at a site next to Ore station. This combined with the expansion of the University Centre Hastings (UCH) is likely to generate significant extra flows to and within the Bexhill/Hastings/St Leonards area.

3.5 BRAG would again wish to highlight that the artificial division of Hastings and Bexhill between the two RUSs, is unhelpful because it is not co-terminus with service provision, and neither document contains a holistic analysis.

4.0 THE EAST-COASTWAY SERVICE TO VICTORIA AND BRIGHTON MAINLINE SERVICE ISSUES

4.1 The service between the East Coastway and London is qualitatively inferior to that on the Brighton mainline. The homebound peak service has deteriorated significantly through the introduction of a modified timetable in December 2008, and BRAG has jointly signed a submission with the Southern East Coastway Commuters Group relating to this specific issue. This joint submission deals in depth with this, and BRAG will not repeat all the details in this document.

4.2 The daytime service to and from London is also comparatively slow and overloaded due to the division and attachment of trains at Haywards Heath. This adds to journey times, is confusing to passengers, and on occasions leads to delays and cancellations when one of the portions goes awry. There is also anecdotal evidence of overcrowding as far south as Lewes, especially on shoulder-peak

services. This undermines attempts to promote incoming tourism by rail, both in itself, and as an alternative to using the inadequate local road network (A21/A22/A27/A259)

4.3 Despite the well publicised shortcomings of the service from London to/from the East and West Coastway, BRAG notes with some exasperation that on winning an extension of the Southcentral franchise, Southern has declared one as one of its earliest priorities to run a fourth off-peak service each hour between Victoria and Brighton. Combined with the four services every hour operated by First Capital Connect (Thameslink), this will take the number of services between Brighton and the London area to eight an hour – none of which attach or divide en route.

4.4 BRAG considers eight off-peak trains an hour between Brighton and London to be excessive. Historically, the optimum number is five or six. This contrasts with the East Coastway having just two, which are shared with the West Coastway. And whereas these combined trains are usually 12 cars north of Haywards Heath, many of the Brighton Mainline fast services are only eight or nine cars; while other Brighton services are regularly as few as four cars (both the Southern stopping service, and some FCC services). Furthermore, the FCC/Thameslink trains can only ever be a maximum of eight until the Thameslink upgrade is completed. On an hourly basis this adds up to significant loss of capacity, if the norm everywhere else is for 12 car services.

4.5 It therefore follows that the division of paths is inequitable. Trains on BML services are not optimum length, while the combined Coastway services, and indeed those via the Arun Valley, are at capacity and often overcrowded.

4.7 The situation is complicated by there being two operators between London and Brighton, and BRAG suspects there is an issue about division of fare revenue behind this situation. At a recent meeting, Southern indicated that the motivation behind the proposed eighth service is to provide additional trains from Victoria to intermediate stations such as Hassocks, Burgess Hill and Preston Park. BRAG would make the following observations

- Examination needs to be given as to demand from these intermediate stations [which should surely have been a function of this RUS if not the BML RUS]. If indeed demand from intermediate stations is more towards Victoria services instead of Thameslink destinations, then consideration should be given to reallocating some of the FCC paths, either as Victoria services, or diverting two of the FCC services each hour elsewhere – potentially to Horsham, Littlehampton and/or Eastbourne.
- Alternatively, the current Brighton – Victoria stopping service could be abandoned, and together with the path that would have been used for the eighth Victoria – Brighton service, the two paths could be used to recast the off-peak timetable to create a re-vamped Coastway service offering 4 trains per hour north of Haywards Heath. There would be two trains each per hour to/from Eastbourne (1 from Hastings) and Littlehampton. The Littlehampton services could call at intermediate stations from Preston Park to Haywards Heath

- At the very least, BRAG believes that the timetable on the BML needs to be seen as an integral service rather than two hermetic and competing ones, with FCC and Southern more explicitly providing connections into each other's services
- If there are capacity issues on off-peak BML services these should be dealt with through additional carriages and or station calls on existing services rather than extra trains.
- Services originating or terminating in Brighton which are less than 12 cars could also divide or attach carriages at a number of locations including Haywards Heath, Three Bridges or Redhill

4.8 There is widespread concern in Eastbourne that the town is starting to suffer economically because of its relatively poor train service, both peak and off-peak, and that some higher-earners are planning to relocate. Bexhill has had this experience for some years, with many of the remaining London commuters railheading to Polegate or Battle

5.0 EAST COASTWAY INFRASTRUCTURE ISSUES

Signalling

5.1 BRAG notes that the signalling between Berwick – Hampden Park, and Hampden Park to Bo-Peep Junction is antiquated, with long sections, and resulting in long headways. This prevents an increase in frequency of services, and hinders recovery in the event of late running.

5.2 An extreme example is the 17.36 Victoria to Ore, which waits at Eastbourne for 18 minutes from 18.01 to 18.19 to allow the Brighton – Ashford service to arrive behind it and leave first at 18.09. This delay is due to the long section between Normans Bay – Bexhill – Bo-Peep Junction. Were the signalling fit for purpose, the limited-stop Ashford service could continue to leave at the same time while the Ore service could leave instead at 18.11 or 18.12, calling as it does at intermediate stations and reducing the layover at Eastbourne.

5.3 BRAG understands that there are proposals to enhance signalling from 2014 onwards, but there is some confusion as to the nature of this enhancement, and whether it will involve renewal, or merely some modification and renovation of the existing infrastructure, a large proportion of which is old semaphore signals. BRAG believes that the two 'gaps' need to be comprehensively re-signalled with three or four aspect signalling, the creation of new and evenly spaced sections, to produce headways of 3-4 minutes.

Linespeeds

5.6 BRAG believes that there may be scope to improve line speeds between Hampden Park and Bexhill from 70mph to 90mph bringing this section of the East Coastway into line with other high-speed sections between Keymer Junction – Lewes – Polegate.

Lewes – Uckfield Re-opening

5.7 BRAG supports the re-opening of the Lewes – Uckfield line because of the additional capacity it could provide, and its use as a diversionary route.

5.8 BRAG further notes that one of the reasons for dismissing the viability of the project is that it would not be possible to run direct services to Brighton via this link due to its alignment into Lewes. Nonetheless, as has been highlighted elsewhere in this submission, Brighton uses the lion's-share of BML paths, and re-opening the Lewes – Uckfield line would allow many, if not all, East Coastway – London services to avoid the BML altogether. Secondary local services could continue to run to Haywards Heath and Gatwick Airport

Willingdon Chord

5.9 BRAG supports the re-opening of the Willingdon Chord, but not in a way that would be detrimental to Eastbourne. The re-opening of the Willingdon Chord would need to be seen in the context of a broader south-coast strategy with extra services running along the route. The Kent and Sussex RUSs lack such a holistic view.

5.10 It is possible that a future Willingdon Chord could have a freight function, both as a diversionary route for international freight, and transporting domestic waste to a new facility at Newhaven

6.0 GATWICK AIRPORT

6.1 BRAG wishes to highlight the confusion surrounding rail services between Central London and Gatwick Airport. The original Gatwick Express was introduced by British Rail in the mid-1980s to give airport travellers a better experience, and to remove them and their luggage from overcrowded commuter services. Indeed for many years ordinary outer-suburban services were advertised at the airport as running to 'Clapham Junction'.

6.2 At the time of privatisation in the mid-1990s, the service was re-structured so that Gatwick Express, Thameslink and the Southcentral franchisee each provided a competing service of four trains an hour. Moreover, over time a fare differential has opened up between the Gatwick Express and other services, to the point that it is now a chasm – an Anytime Single on Gatwick Express is currently £16.90, as opposed to just £11 on Southern. Yet, the introduction of new trains on Southern

outer suburban services in the last five years has meant a high-quality ambience on a par with the Gatwick Express, and minimal journey time difference.

6.3 In the run-up to privatisation, Southcentral services, operated at the time by Connex and subsequently by Southern, Coastway and Arun Valley services were timetabled to provide a competing quarter-hourly service from Victoria, leaving two minutes after the Gatwick Express, but offering significantly cheaper fares.

6.4 Currently, the Coastway and Arun Valley services continue to be operated and advertised as a cheaper, rival service to the Gatwick Express even though they are now both run by Southern/Govia. The situation is further complicated since December 2008 by the 'hybridisation' of the Gatwick Express to carry commuters beyond Gatwick to and from Brighton at peak-times.

6.5 Notwithstanding that loadings on the Gatwick Express are generally lighter than on other mainline services, there may still be an important national economic argument that airport users should be provided with a dedicated service to/from central London. This was the basis of submissions by BAA and others in the original BML RUS and remains a strong argument. However, this being the case, and given that the Gatwick Express uses up four valuable fast-line slots in each direction every hour, its use must be optimised and airport users travelling to and from central London should be discouraged from using Southern commuter services. This implies that the policy of premium pricing on the Gatwick Express should be revisited and reviewed. If the service is to be justified, airport users travelling to and from central London must be encouraged to use the Gatwick Express, rather than put additional pressure on Southern commuter services. Otherwise, consideration should be considered to extending services south of Gatwick to East/West Coastway destinations, if necessary leasing additional rolling stock

7.0 THE BRIGHTON – ASHFORD SERVICE

7.1 Although the Marshlink lies in the Kent RUS area, BRAG will restate the principal issues in this submission because the Brighton – Ashford service is an important inter-regional facility that transcends the two Network Rail operating areas.

7.2 Throughout the 1990s, the rail authorities, in the form of the Department for Transport (DfT), Railtrack and the Strategic Rail Authority (SRA) repeatedly dithered on the issue of electrification of the Marshlink between Ore and Ashford. The service 'gap' that needed to be filled was one of running a through Coastway service between Ashford and Brighton, ending the requirement to change to and from the diesel service onto an electric one at Hastings. Such a through service was seen as desirable due to poor parallel road links (the A259/A27), in keeping with regeneration objectives, and was one of the few tangible recommendations to be implemented from the 2002 *South Coast Multi-Modal Study (Socomms)*.

7.3 Electrification would also have had – and still would have - the advantage of eliminating a small pocket of diesel working [along with the Uckfield line] in an otherwise all-electric network. The decision not to electrify the line [or that to Uckfield] in 2002 was greeted with disappointment locally. The Department for Transport and SRA claimed at the time that the electrification option was seven times more expensive over the investment cycle than ordering new diesel trains, and that a through Ashford – Brighton service could be delivered more cheaply by ordering an additional two Class 171 Turbostar units to the three already in service between Ashford and Hastings.

7.4 The through service finally began in December 2005, but in many ways the community has been short-changed

- The original aspiration for a journey time between Ashford and Brighton of under 100 minutes has not been met because track and signalling improvements on the Marshlink have not been delivered. Between Ashford and Hastings the journey time is still over 40 minutes, instead of the hoped-for 30 minutes or less, and even this has only been achieved by withdrawing most stops at the smaller stations of Winchelsea, Doleham and Three Oaks, effectively leaving these communities with no usable train service. The end-to-end Ashford – Brighton journey takes around 110 minutes and once High Speed services commence later this year, similar journey times will be available from Brighton via London.
- While electrification would have made possible the extension of through services in the rush-hour between London terminals and Rye via Ashford, the current option only permits a rush-hour shuttle service between Rye and Ashford. This is operated with the 'spare' diesel unit, and in the event of a train failure on the core Brighton – Ashford service, the entire shuttle diagram is cancelled for a morning or evening (or both). This happens frequently and the service has acquired a reputation for unreliability. Its timings also have not hitherto optimised connections at Ashford.
- Electrification of the route could also have made possible the consideration of running high speed Javelin services on conventional track beyond Ashford to Hastings, Bexhill and even Eastbourne, on the same basis they will be running to Folkestone, Dover, Canterbury and Ramsgate later this year. Bexhill in particular could have benefitted significantly; journey times to Victoria via Haywards Heath are around 1 hour 52 minutes, and over 2 hours in the peak. A Javelin service from London to Bexhill could deliver a journey time of around 1 hour 15 minutes via High Speed 1 and an upgraded and electrified Marshlink. Hastings to St Pancras would be around one hour, saving at least 25 minutes on current journey times via Tunbridge Wells. This opportunity has therefore been lost at the present time but should be advanced up the agenda
- The effective downgrading of Ashford International by Eurostar in 2007 – which now stops most of its services at Ebbsfleet instead - along with a delay of nearly ten years from when the international station first opened to introducing any regular through Brighton – Ashford service, has all but

destroyed opportunities to build up significant international traffic on this route at the present time.

- Whereas Southeastern offers free travel to Ashford to international travellers, and First Capital Connect and Eurostar offer combined concessionary fares between BML stations and St Pancras, no such concession has been provided to East Coastway travellers to Ashford using the through service from Brighton, despite repeated suggestions by BRAG to the train operator. These have been made both directly, and through Passenger Focus.

7.5 The 'cheap' option of building a small dedicated pool of new diesel trains for the Brighton – Ashford service instead of electrification, has proved not to be like-for-like. The two car Turbostar units, while generally meeting demand between Ashford and Hastings, replaced a previous 4 car electric service between Hastings and Brighton. The predictable consequence has been significant overcrowding at the western end of the route on the Brighton – Ashford service. The recent South Central franchising competition has not resolved this issue in favour of extra carriages. Indeed, BRAG understands from an authoritative source that the DfT will shortly be launching a 'consultation' to consider 'options' to manage demand for the service. Such 'options' are understood to include splitting the service in two at Eastbourne, with a diesel service to/from Ashford connecting with an electric service to/from Brighton. Such an outcome would be a betrayal of the original promise not just for a through Kent – Brighton service, but also the connectivity it delivers at both ends, of what is actually a Southampton – Dover corridor. Such a perspective is missing from both the Kent and Sussex RUSs at present.

7.6 BRAG suspects also that the possibility of redeploying a unit on the Uckfield line, which suffers peak-hour overcrowding, is also un-electrified, and shares the Southern Turbostar fleet, may be driving any putative proposal to truncate the service at Eastbourne.

7.7 BRAG considers that for the original deal to be kept, the options of additional carriages or electrification must be reconsidered

7.8 In the short-term, BRAG would suggest the following specific actions to alleviate overcrowding on the Brighton – Ashford service

- Liaison with St Richard's Catholic College in Bexhill to consider changes to the start of their school day to alleviate pressure on the 07.30 Ashford to Brighton service between Hastings and Bexhill; and on the 07.32 Brighton to Ashford service between Eastbourne and Bexhill.
- Scheduling additional electric services to alleviate pressure on peak Brighton – Ashford services (and vice versa) between Hastings – Eastbourne – Brighton
- Consideration to be given to making some stops 'pick-up' or 'set-down' only on certain peak services.

7.9 The South Coast railway line between Ashford and Southampton, including the Marshlink is designated part of the Trans-European Network (TEN) and infrastructure upgrades could be eligible for European funding. Enquiries by BRAG to the European Commission indicate that, to date, no applications have been made for such funding by the UK rail authorities. NWR/DfT reviews of the potential funding possibilities should urgently include consideration for upgrades of the Marshlink

8.0 CONCLUSIONS

8.1 Improved rail services are vital to regeneration efforts in East Sussex, and it is regrettable that the fragmented nature of the RUS process, divided as it is between the Kent and Sussex areas, fails to provide a holistic assessment and blueprint to manage the Coastway route between Ashford and Brighton.

8.2 In conclusion, BRAG considers that the draft Sussex RUS is based on inaccurate and incomplete information about future population growth and travel patterns, which does not give a proper indication of future demand for services on lines in the Hastings and Bexhill area. This does not provide a firm basis to plan future services

8.3 BRAG would therefore wish for the finalised Sussex RUS to acknowledge explicitly the following issues

- Likely significant population growth in Hastings and Bexhill
- Changes in the demographic profile of the area towards a younger, more economically active population, and the likely impact this will have on travel patterns
- The effect of large new educational institutions in Hastings on travel patterns
- The effect on demand of significant commercial development in Bexhill, and possible further development of central Hastings.
- Changes in traffic flows to/from East Sussex via the Marshlink as a consequence of the development of Ashford and the Thames Gateway

8.4 The final Sussex RUS should therefore re-evaluate

- How to develop a strategy for the entire East Coastway between Brighton and Ashford, and its connectivity into other services at either end i.e. West Coastway services between Brighton and Southampton, and onward from Ashford into Highspeed 1 and Kent services at Ashford.
- How to maintain a through Brighton – Ashford service through timetabling, infrastructure and rolling stock solutions. Any truncation of the service at Eastbourne or Hastings is unacceptable
- Longer-term aspirations, including the extension of Javelin services beyond Ashford to Hastings, Bexhill and Eastbourne should be studied. Electrification and upgrade of the Marshlink could deliver this as well as

enabling the operation of conventional electric rolling stock the whole way to Ashford.

- How to deliver a more even evening peak hour service between Victoria and East Coastway destinations
- How to deliver faster journey times both peak and off-peak between the East Coastway and London through infrastructure upgrades, better pathing, and the end to division and attachment of trains at Haywards Heath.
- How to provide better operational flexibility between Lewes and Hastings through enhanced signalling systems
- Addressing the inequitable balance of pathways on the BML between London, Brighton and other Coastway destinations
- Where and whether a Premium Gatwick service fits in light of enhancement of other services, and now that the service has been integrated into the South Central franchise. If the service is retained, airport users travelling to and from central London must be encouraged to use the Gatwick Express, rather than put additional pressure on Southern commuter services. Otherwise, consideration should be considered to extending services south of Gatwick to East/West Coastway destinations, if necessary leasing additional rolling stock

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