

RAIL STUDIES A 'MIXED BAG' – USER GROUPS

Local Rail User Groups have responded to two studies published by rail infrastructure operator Network Rail.

The two reports for the Kent and Sussex areas, and known as Route Utilisation Strategies (RUSs) were published at the end of January, and seek to outline service patterns and priorities for investment in the local rail network over the next ten years.

The draft documents were published last year and drew local criticism for not acknowledging projected population growth Hastings, Bexhill and Eastbourne

With the final blueprint now published, the groups expressed concern that controversial plans to axe through services between Hastings and Cannon Street are set to go ahead in 2014.

More positively however, Network Rail has promised to invest in track and signalling upgrades on the Coastway route between Lewes and Ashford which should enable higher speeds and shorter journey times.

Ray Chapman of St Leonards and Hastings Rail Improvement Project (1066shrimprail.org.uk) said

“The withdrawal of the Cannon Street service, our direct service to the City of London is very bad news for the whole Hastings and Rother District. This link is vital for the local economy.

“Essentially this is coming about because of the Thameslink programme, which will run new longer trains from north of the Thames as far as Tunbridge Wells. The trains will not be able to run on to Hastings because the power systems have not been upgraded.

“This follows on from an earlier announcement that Thameslink trains would also not be running to Eastbourne.

“We are not going to accept this, and will continue to lobby the Department for Transport. As we see it, the rail authorities need to operate the Thameslink trains to Hastings in the peak hours, this will offer a much improved link into the heart of the city for local commuters to Blackfriars, City Thameslink Station at Holborn, Farringdon and King Cross/St Pancras.

Hugh Sharp Chairman of Bexhill Rail Action Group (BRAG) said

“The proposals to upgrade track and signalling on the Coastway and Marshlink lines are very welcome. BRAG’s only concern about this is the long lead-in time – seemingly not until 2014 and beyond. Some of the speed limits on the Marshlink

have been in place for more than 15 years. Nobody knows what the economic outlook will be over the next few years and what excuses will be made to cancel or defer investment.

He added

“We are also disappointed that other more immediate possibilities to improve journey times to London, such as ending the practice of attaching and dividing trains at Haywards Heath are ruled-out in the near future.

Belinda Fordham, Chair of the East Coastway Commuter Group concluded

“There is nothing new or substantial in any of these studies. Commuters travelling from East Sussex to London get a raw deal. Other than a bit of tweaking with the timetable there is nothing new for us. We need more trains, faster trains and longer trains. The Sussex RUS is too focussed on Brighton and Gatwick - to the detriment of everywhere else - while the Kent RUS doesn't look beyond Tunbridge Wells or Ashford.”

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