

On behalf of Railfuture, I attended a meeting in Croydon on Tuesday 14 April to update Southern stakeholders on the proposed changes to the new peak hour timetable to be introduced from 17 May. The off-peak time-table will be largely unaffected.

The two main speakers were David Scorey, Deputy Managing Director of Southern, and Howard Read, Head of Train Specification and Planning at Southern.

The problems following the Christmas blockade at London Bridge had been widely reported in the media. David Scorey identified three problems:

- (i) the indicators in the concourse of the Southern part of the station were on the right hand side and not easy to see,
- (ii) some of the new points installed had proved difficult to set up and had had to be re-calibrated and
- (iii) some of the new track circuits had had problems with the power supply.

Real efforts were made by Network Rail to address all of these issues.

Howard Read outlined the intricacies of the time-tabling process which involved twenty two trains an hour entering and leaving the terminal platforms. This is very tight and unforgiving if something goes wrong. As a result of the problems a number of West Croydon services had been cancelled (as there were alternative services using London Overground) and there were weekly improvements in the timetable up to March 16. Much of this involved changing stopping patterns so that faster trains did not get held up by late running stopping trains.

Rather as the modelling had predicted there was a serious deterioration in performance after the August blockade. This was unacceptable. This had continued until December but there had been an improvement in the past couple of months. The modelling techniques used had not taken account of the fact that trains need to slow down at buffers (!) and at junctions. Indeed, that morning a train from Eastbourne was running four minutes late although it only arrived two minutes late at Victoria. However, because it was late occupying some points other trains were delayed by up to eight minutes.

On a good day the timetable will work but it only requires one small delay which can rapidly lead to chaos. The usage of the Brighton Main Line is over capacity and the decision has been taken to withdraw the present 0656 service from Brighton and start it from Gatwick at 0734 and terminate the 1842 from Victoria at Gatwick in the new timetable. This has freed a train path. In switching stops between trains a few have been transferred to Thameslink. In all of this account has been taken of loading patterns on individual services.

Changing the timings and turn-round times of the Victoria to Peckham Rye services has been crucial in improving reliability. Another factor leading to problems is the reduction of lines into London Bridge from four to three.

It needs to be said that this is entirely concerned with rush hour services where it is accepted that many commuters are on "auto-pilot" and steps are being taken to educate the staff about the changes. Agents will be handing out leaflets at major stations and there will be more on-

board announcements as well as posters and announcements on the web-site. It is the intention that when there is station skipping every station will have at least one train per hour.

The proposed changes, which had been shared with those attending, were still provisional although acceptance by Network Rail was hopefully imminent. As the changes were not yet in the public domain the question was raised about customers who might have bought an advance ticket (for a long distance service) where the local connecting service was re-timed. It was agreed that Southern would endeavour to send messages to remind people to check the times and ask other ticket providers to do likewise.

One of the audience pointed out that proper tests need to be made with the new rolling stock to ensure that the 45 seconds allowed for Thameslink stops at stations in the central core are sufficient.

Other items of interest were:

- (i) it is hoped that Platform 10 at London Bridge will be extended to twelve coaches by the end of the year,
- (ii) it is expected that it will be May 2018 before Thameslink is full operation through London Bridge,
- (iii) there will be a blockade at Redhill over Christmas 2015 and
- (iv) if a signaller attempts to resolve a late running issue and fails Network Rail is deemed to be at fault which on occasions simply leads to caution.

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