

The Real Gatwick Express - Time to Solve Capacity Issues by Ending the Fiction of the Gatwick Express

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Author: Charlie King – Published 22 October 2025



Lightly loaded Gatwick Express at Victoria August 2025 - photo by Charlie King for Railfuture

In Summary

We would like to see the following two changes happen now:

1. **Gatwick Express being abolished as a dedicated service and operator** and instead becoming an integral part of Southern's services to the airport – all Victoria services to be operated by Southern, and branded Gatwick Express.
2. **Fares rationalised and there being a single fare to/from Central London stations with direct services to/from Gatwick.** We envisage that this fare would be more than the current cheapest (Thameslink) and less than the fare for using Southern services and lead to a growth in overall revenue.

These changes will deliver a better service to current passengers “now” and will help grow rail's share of current surface transport (and also make it easier to get from many parts of south and west London to / from Brighton). We see no need to wait for work on how to meet the increase in demand once runway two is in use at Gatwick to conclude on this decision – the business case exists for change now.

A ridiculous reality

The ridiculous reality of express services from London Victoria to Gatwick Airport is that for 50 minutes in the hour they are already provided by Southern trains and not by Gatwick Express.

Gatwick Express trains leave Victoria at 29 minutes and 59 minutes past the hour. If you turn up at Victoria Station at some point in any given hour (let's say between 9am and 10am) then only between 09:24 and 09:29, and between 09:54 and 09:59, is the next Gatwick Express service the quickest way to the airport. For the remaining 50 minutes in the hour, a Southern service gets there quicker and cheaper. **The real 'Gatwick Express' is the combination of Southern services which leave six times per hour and take just fractionally longer to reach Gatwick Airport and the two Gatwick Express services per hour. And to confuse the issue further, the four fastest services per hour from central London are the Thameslink services from London Bridge.**

This matters as the Brighton Main Line has severe capacity issues. For maximum profitability each train needs to run as close to capacity as possible to justify its path. The 100% plus premium price for the Gatwick Express (see Appendix 2 and below for a price comparison) means they are used only by the uninformed resulting in lightly loaded trains. **Lightly loaded trains do not make money – nor will they meaningfully help Gatwick Airport achieve its public transport share targets.**

Gatwick Airport has now been given permission to expand by opening a second runway which it hopes will increase passenger numbers from 43m in 2025 to 75m by the late 2030s, with the second runway coming into use by the “turn of the decade”. Permission for this expansion is linked to achieving 54% of air passengers using public transport to access the airport. However, usage of Gatwick Express services has now dropped to 25% of journeys to Victoria and only 12% of journeys to London Zone 1.

It is clear that “Gatwick Express” has become a problem, not a solution. There are a number of solutions to the Brighton Main Line capacity problem, some long term such as infrastructure improvements at key junctions.

However a quick and relatively cost free way to improve capacity, and importantly to make more money, is to end the fiction of the current Gatwick Express.

The current situation

Today, Gatwick, London's second airport, is the busiest single runway airport in Europe with 43m passengers projected for this year. Over time there has been a major change in usage and low-cost airlines are now the major carriers. Gatwick use is still expanding and recently granted permission to create a second runway is hoped to increase the usage to 75m by the late-2030s.

Gatwick Airport needs to increase the portion of passengers using public transport to access it to 54%. It needs to do this without a commitment for delivering the “further package of enhancements” identified as necessary for the Brighton Main Line in the 2015 Airport Commission's report on London Airport capacity. Programmes to address this include CARS – the Croydon Area Remodelling Scheme (CARS) – that was expected to meet both airport and background growth in demand.

Gatwick Airport station has **direct services** to 120 stations and to another 700 with one change of which over 200 can be reached by changing at Clapham Junction.

Train service: At inception the Gatwick Express was a dedicated airport service with 4 trains per hour non-stop between the airport and London Victoria. In 2022, post covid, this changed to 2 trains per hour which are extended to/from Brighton.

Southern also provides services between Victoria and Gatwick Airport comprising 6 trains per hour that take fractionally longer to reach Gatwick than the Gatwick Express. Thameslink provides an alternative route to Gatwick Airport, operating 8 trains per hour running to London Bridge, stations to St. Pancras International (including Farringdon for the Elizabeth Line) and beyond (4 fast and 4 semi-fast)¹. In 2018 the all-night service was transferred from Victoria to a Thameslink service to Luton Airport via Blackfriars and St Pancras International except Sunday mornings.

Usage of Gatwick Express services has now dropped to 25% of journeys to Victoria, and since the increase in Thameslink services only 12% of journeys to London Zone 1, while Southern trains account for 75% journeys to Victoria, stopping at Clapham Junction, only taking 2 minutes longer and at a much lower cost to passengers. Appendix 1 sets out the detail supporting our conclusions above.

Gatwick Airport station was deregulated in 1996 and now has a multitude of separate fares to each London station and by each operator. The Gatwick Express premium is no longer small.

The Railfuture View and Proposals

Gatwick Express should continue as a brand, but not in its present form. It should be integrated into the Southern services, all stopping at Clapham Junction. An additional all-night service should run to Victoria all week calling at East Croydon and Clapham Junction. Victoria has better onward connections than at Blackfriars during the night.

Fares should be simplified: the Gatwick Express premium should be withdrawn, and the same fares should be applied for Southern (including ex Gatwick Express) and Thameslink services for any central London station with direct services to/from Gatwick. This would be a combination of “London Terminals” and “London Thameslink”². A London Zone 1 fare would also be available for TfL stations in Zone 1. The Oyster and Contactless fares would be identical. Travelcards should have one peak and one off-peak fare. The loss of premium revenue should be regained by the new fare being a small increase from the current Thameslink fare, causing a consequent increase in passenger numbers.

¹ Sunday: 5 Southern services and 3 Thameslink services

² <https://www.nationalrail.co.uk/travel-information/travelling-in-london/>

Written information on ticketing should be available in the booking hall on all fares including Family Travelcards and Group tickets. TVMs should also have Italian and Spanish.

Rolling Stock: Gatwick Express stock is often used on Southern services, and this should be regularised and all Southern trains calling at Gatwick should have a branded Gatwick Express stock portion, so services can be easily identified by passengers. We are of the view that these changes will increase the usage of rail to help the target of 54% use of public transport to be reached.

Make the change now – don't wait for the inevitable when runway 2 is in use: Our view is that this change delivers net benefit now, by making the rail offer more appealing for surface travel. So make the change now, rather than wait for it to be identified as essential as travel to the airport and generally increases – both in the near and medium terms.

Future Service increases: The two paths created by the post covid reduction in Gatwick Express services from 4 to 2 per hour creates needed capacity for other services to Gatwick, which could comprise additional services from London Victoria to Gatwick calling at Clapham Junction, and/or additional local services to the airport, for local passengers and airport employees. Capacity for a through service to Kent and a third train to Reading could also be found.

Is the current Gatwick Express the right solution for an expanded Gatwick Airport?

Background: Today, Gatwick Airport, London's second airport, is the busiest single runway airport in Europe with 43m passengers this year. Gatwick is well served by public transport with many local bus routes serving both the north and south terminal and adjacent to Gatwick Airport south terminal is Gatwick Airport National Rail station. This station is served by direct trains from 120 stations from many parts of London, Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire, Hampshire, Hertfordshire, Surrey, Sussex, the South Coast and Reading, and another 700 with one change of which over 200 can be reached by changing at Clapham Junction. According to the ORR 2024 usage statistics 19,489,656 passengers entered and exited Gatwick Airport Station and 987,254 interchanged there between trains.

Train service: At its inception the Gatwick Express was a dedicated airport service with 4 trains per hour non-stop between Gatwick Airport and London Victoria using dedicated rolling stock. After a full suspension during covid, this changed, reducing to 2 trains per hour which are extended to/from Brighton calling at Haywards Heath. As a result, the direct trains between Clapham Junction (with 22,858,198 passenger entries and exits and 20,383,396 interchanges) and Brighton (with 14,547,650 entries and exits, the busiest station on the south coast) were withdrawn.

Southern also provides services between Victoria and Gatwick Airport comprising six trains per hour that take fractionally longer to reach Gatwick than the Gatwick Express. Thameslink provides an alternative route to Gatwick Airport, operating 4 fast trains per hour running via London Bridge and St. Pancras International.

The all-night service: This was initially a Southern service to Victoria calling at Horley, Purley, East Croydon and Clapham Junction. In 2018 this was transferred from Victoria to Thameslink and routed via Tulse Hill except Saturday night/Sunday mornings where it remains a Victoria service. The advantages are that it provides a direct service to central and north London via St Pancras International and the same trains can serve both Gatwick and Luton airports.

Fares and ticketing: On privatisation of the railways Gatwick Airport station was the only station in Britain to be completely deregulated and to introduce competitive ticket pricing to individual London stations and by individual operators. This has resulted in a multitude of fares with many different fares to London by operator and/or payment option:

Consider the choice a traveller at Gatwick has to make if Euston is their destination:

1. Travel via Victoria
 - a. Gatwick Express with a Zone 1 destination ticket £35.00
 - b. Gatwick Express with a ticket then contactless on the Underground:
£24.10 + £2.90 £27.00
 - c. Gatwick Express with contactless throughout: £24.00 + £2.90 £26.90
 - d. With a “Not Gatwick Express” ticket ~ ie Southern with a ticket then contactless on the Underground: £21.30 + £2.90 £24.20
 - e. With a “Not Gatwick Express” ticket ~ ie Southern with contactless throughout:
 - Starting between 06:30 and 09:30 Mon/Fri £22.10
 - Starting at other times £13.50
 - f. With a “Not Gatwick Express” ticket & Zone 1 destination ticket:
 - Starting between 04:30 and 09:16 Mon/Fri £24.30
 - Otherwise (note: an off-peak, non Gatwick Express Travelcard) £23.20
2. Travel via Farringdon [Thameslink] (to Euston Square or Euston via Tottenham Court Road)
 - a. With a ticket then contactless on the Underground:
 - Monday to Friday: £15.10 + £2.90 £18.00
 - Weekends: £14.50 + £2.90 £17.40
 - b. With contactless throughout:
 - Starting between 06:30 and 09:30 Mon/Fri £22.10
 - Starting at other times £13.50
 - c. With a “Not Gatwick Express” ticket & Zone 1 destination ticket:
 - Starting between 04:30 and 09:16 Mon/Fri £24.30
 - Otherwise (note: an off-peak, non GX Travelcard) £23.20

3. Travel via St Pancras International [Thameslink], then walking
 - a. With a ticket:
 - Monday to Friday £15.10
 - Weekends £14.50
 - b. With contactless:
 - Starting between 06:30 and 09:30 Mon/Fri £19.20
 - Starting at other times £10.70

4. Travel via London Bridge
 - a. Buying a “Not Gatwick Express” ticket then contactless on the Underground: £21.30 + £2.90 £24.20
 - b. Buying a Thameslink only ticket then contactless on the Underground: £14.40 + £2.90 £17.30
 - c. With contactless throughout:
 - Starting between 06:30 and 09:30 Mon/Fri: £22.10
 - Starting at other times £13.50
 - d. With a “Not Gatwick Express” ticket & Zone 1 destination ticket:
 - Starting between 04:30 and 09:16 Mon/Fri £24.30
 - Otherwise (note: an off-peak, non GX Travelcard): £23.20

In total there are 14 different fares, depending on departure date time and routing. At times the fare varies between £10.70 and £35.00. Arguably the £10.70 fare is the most pleasant (a surface walk between St Pancras and Euston) and is of comparable duration.

Notes: All fares are without a Railcard and for an adult | Underground fares are 10p cheaper off-peak – this saving has been excluded | GroupSave will offer a saving to 4 or more adults | kids for £2 can be relevant | Some routes offering a saving but less likely to be used (e.g., change at Balham when using Contactless) are not included.

In 2024 the ticket office at Gatwick Airport Station was removed and replaced with a series of 21 Ticket Vending Machines (TVMs) and one ticket counter. All written information about ticketing was also removed. Today there is no written information on ticketing at the station only verbal announcements about Oyster and bankcards which can be used for journeys to any station in London. Although the ticket TVMs have French and German they do not have Italian or Spanish.



Eastbourne train at East Croydon formed of 2 Gatwick Express units August 2025. Photo by Charlie King for Railfuture

Rolling Stock: Gatwick Express services, although similar to other GTR Southern rolling stock, are operated using dedicated and branded rolling stock. However, today this branded rolling stock is used on many other Southern services, both between Victoria and the

south coast and also along the south coast. It is quite common to see many Southern services made up of mixed Southern and Gatwick Express stock and it is not uncommon for a Southern service to be completely made up of Gatwick Express units, while the occasional Gatwick Express train consists of Southern units. This does create some confusion for passengers.

What effect have these changes had on rail passengers to Gatwick?

There have been a number of changes at Gatwick which have affected both the types of passengers using the airport and where and how they travel to the airport. The main change at the airport is the huge increase in low cost airlines using the airport and serving nearer destinations while longer distance and charter flights have reduced.

Rail services have changed due to the increase in Thameslink services along with the opening of the Elizabeth line connections at Farringdon which has transformed travel from many parts of London. As a result, Thameslink is just as important a service as the services to Victoria for journeys to central London.

However, Victoria with 2,702,746 journeys remains an important destination for Gatwick Airport passengers even though it is no longer the main destination. Victoria remains important with around 50% of journeys to central London, adding Clapham Junction this rises to 60% (this excludes those interchanging there to stations outside zone 1). However, only 25% use the Gatwick Express to Victoria and around only 12% of all journeys to central London Zone 1 are on the Gatwick Express.

Railfuture observations show that many Gatwick Express trains arrive at Gatwick Airport partially empty while Southern trains are often fully loaded (GTR timetable loading information confirms this). We are of the view that there are a number of reasons for this:

- If you arrive at Gatwick Airport, 6 out of 8 trains per hour to and from Victoria are Southern services which stop at Clapham Junction and only take around 2 minutes longer to reach Victoria and are likely to be the first train to leave (and arrive).
- There is no premium on Southern trains, typically saving between £10 and £20 (many guide books tell readers to avoid the Gatwick Express).
- The Gatwick Express doesn't call at Clapham Junction.
- Single fares from Thameslink stations can save up to £25 at certain times of the day.

The Railfuture View and Proposals

The future – 2030 and beyond: Gatwick Airport has sought and has now received planning permission to move its reserve runway some 12 metres north to allow it to be used as a second runway rather than a reserve runway. The airport estimates that use could increase the number of passengers from 43m up to 75m by the late-2030s and to 81m by 2047. The UK Government gave permission subject to various conditions

including environmental issues and improving the numbers of passengers using public transport. The target is to achieve 54% of passengers arriving or leaving the airport by public transport.

What should be done to improve the passenger experience now:

We are of the view that the Gatwick Express still has value as a brand, but not in its present form. We suggest the following changes, which we believe would increase the number of passengers using public transport to and from Gatwick Airport.

The present train service from Victoria to Gatwick should remain the same, but the Gatwick Express should be integrated with the 6 other Southern services and should call at Clapham Junction to promote the interchange possibilities with the over 200 stations that have direct interchange at Clapham Junction (this would also reinstate the all-day service to Brighton). This would relieve overcrowded Southern services to Gatwick Airport at both Victoria and Clapham Junction and assist with luggage provision.

Once passengers are aware that the “Gatwick Express” stops at Clapham Junction with good marketing, the use of both Gatwick Express and Southern services to Gatwick Airport from there should increase.

The all-night service operated by Thameslink should continue, however, it is currently unreliable and that needs to improve. In addition, **the all-night service to Victoria should be reinstated** all week as Victoria provides better onward connections in central London at night than Blackfriars due to its proximity to Victoria coach station and the extensive London night bus network. This could be by Southern services stopping at East Croydon and Clapham Junction with no supplement and Oyster with normal off-peak fares until 4.30am and all-day Saturdays and Sundays.



1 Eastbourne train consisting of one Southern and one Gatwick Express unit August 2025. Photo by Charlie King for Railfuture

Rolling Stock: As the Gatwick units have better provision for luggage than the Southern stock, the additional Gatwick units could now form the rear unit on all the Victoria - south coast services to Bognor, Eastbourne and Worthing.

This provides improved luggage provision and makes it clear to passengers that Gatwick Airport is served.

Ticketing for Gatwick Airport should be restructured to bring it in line with other Southern stations, and to that which existed prior to privatisation. This would consist of only the following tickets:

Central London (National Rail) | London Zone 1 | Travelcard valid on all services.

The Central London fare would be valid to all central London stations with direct services, so including Farringdon and St Pancras (as is already the case for Thameslink only fares). For consistency, coverage should extend to stations for which a London Terminals ticket is currently valid, but without direct services: Charing Cross, Waterloo, Waterloo East and Cannon Street.

London Zone 1 would cover all other National Rail and TfL stations in Zone 1 which would include stations such as Euston, Liverpool Street and Paddington.

The Travelcard, as now, would cover a return journey to Gatwick and all stations within the zones. This would bring Gatwick in line with all other stations in the south of England. Oyster and contactless would be the same fare on all services.

Although there would be a loss of revenue from removal of the Gatwick Express premium, in our view **there would be a net gain of revenue** from the likely increase in passengers and greater numbers paying a fare between the current Southern and Thameslink fares. This would also make using the TVMs simpler and quicker relieving the queues at the TVMs – and also give travellers the confidence to use options such as contactless and online purchase.

Italian and Spanish should be added to the languages on the TVMs. There should be written information on the types of tickets available including Family travelcards and Group save tickets. The practicality of adding other languages from elsewhere in the world should be considered.

Beyond the de-facto increase in capacity caused by setting prices for the current Gatwick Express services so they are attractive to customers – and linked to this, making fares simpler and more understandable, which can also be expected to stimulate demand, further capacity growth will require investment.

We understand that there should be limited scope to increase mileage of existing rolling stock, by either (or both of) lengthening existing train services and using paths previously used for the third and fourth Gatwick Express services (and probably terminating at Gatwick Airport).

The second runway and capacity on the Brighton main line

It is also important to recognise capacity issues on the Brighton Main Line and the cancellation of improvements following covid consequent changes in demand.

We believe the first key step should be investment in rolling stock, so all Gatwick services to / from Victoria are increased to 12 coaches. This allows the remaining

limited line capacity that exists to be used by local services (essential for airport staff who need to travel there every day, and indeed local passengers) and other services, in particular a third train to Reading (which could vastly improve services along the North Downs Line, an aspiration of many including current operator GWR) and also enable a long sought after Kent (via Tonbridge) – Gatwick Airport service.

The exact size of the requirement requires a detailed study; this should also determine if the existing infrastructure can provide sufficient paths for the required numbers of trains to operate reliably. This study needs to be instigated imminently in view of likely lead times if significant infrastructure capacity (and rolling stock to run on it) is to be delivered contemporaneously to increases in demand from airport traffic once two runways are in use. Candidates for infrastructure investment include a platform extension at Reigate, trackwork changes at Redhill and some variation of the CARS project at East Croydon.

The **Appendices** below give detail as to the services and costs of services to Gatwick.

References

<https://dataportal.orr.gov.uk/statistics/usage/estimates-of-station-usage/>

<https://www.railwaydata.co.uk/odm/gbr/>

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*Registered Office: Edinburgh House, 1-5 Bellevue Road, Clevedon, North Somerset, BS21 7NP (for
legal correspondence only)*

All other correspondence to 3 Chandos Court, Martlesham, Suffolk IP12 4SU

Appendix 1: Journeys from Gatwick to Central London Usage by route and services

Victoria	2,702,746	Clapham Junction	495,756	London Bridge	1,018,839	Cannon Street	1,854	All
		Vauxhall	23,391	Blackfriars	489,113	Waterloo East	17,617	
		Waterloo	19,607	City Thameslink	63,451	Charing Cross	11,355	
		Battersea Park	11,174	Farringdon	266,538	Liverpool Street	17,775	
		Queenstown Road	1,663	St Pancras	234,998	Paddington	26,469	
						Tottenham Court Road	26,441	
						Bond Street	7,945	
Totals	2,702,746		551,591		2,072,939		109,456	5,436,732
Totals: Clapham J & Victoria		3,254,337		Total London Bridge		2,182,395		
Trains Per Hour		8		8		8		16

Split between Gatwick Express 2 tph and Southern 6tph		
<i>This assumes an even distribution of passengers by train</i>		
GEX	675,687	25%
Southern	2,027,059	75%
Total	2,702,746	100%

Split between Gatwick Express and Thameslink		
GEX	675,687	24%
Thameslink	2,182,395	76%
Total	2,858,082	100%

Split between Clapham Junction and Victoria and Thameslink		
Clapham Junction & Victoria	3,254,337	60%
Thameslink	2,182,395	40%
Total	5,436,732	100%

Comparison of Victoria with all other stations		
Victoria	2,702,746	50%
Clapham Junction to other central London stations	551,591	10%
Thameslink to other central London stations	2,182,393	40%
Total	5,436,730	100%

Comparison of Gatwick Express with all other stations		
Gatwick Express	675,687	12%
All other	4,761,045	88%
Total	5,436,732	100%

Note: This does not include stations where passenger would change trains at Clapham Junction or Thameslink in London for other stations in London Zones 2-6

Source <https://www.railwaydata.co.uk/odm/gbr/> April 2023 - March 2024

Appendix 2: Comparison of fares from Gatwick Airport to Central London

Destination	Gatwick Express Peak	Gatwick Express Off-peak	Gatwick Express Oyster Peak	Gatwick Express Oyster Off-peak	Southern/Thameslink Peak	Southern/Thameslink Off-Peak	Southern/Thameslink Oyster Peak	Southern/Thameslink Oyster Off-Peak
London Victoria	£24.10	£24.10	£24.00	£24.00	£21.30	£21.30	£19.20	£10.70
London Bridge					£14.40	£14.40	£19.20	£10.70
London Blackfriars					£15.10	£15.10	£19.20	£10.70
London Farringdon					£15.10	£15.10	£19.20	£10.70
London St Pancras					£15.10	£15.10	£19.20	£10.70
London Zone 1	£35.00	£35.00			£24.30		£22.10	£13.50
Travelcard								
	Gat Express Peak	Gat Express Off-peak			Southern Peak	Southern Off-peak	Thameslink Peak	Thameslink Off-peak
Travelcard	£61.60	£45.90			£42.00	£23.30	£37.10	£20.60
London Terminals								
Other London Terminals					£21.30	£21.30	£15.10	£10.70

- Notes

- Cheaper Advance tickets are available but are used by a very small number of passengers.
- Thameslink Travelcard can only be used on Thameslink trains between Gatwick Airport and Zone 6
- Family Travelcards and Group tickets are available on the TVMs, but no information is available.
- Tickets to Paddington and Liverpool Street on the Elizabeth line are not available, unless you book to TfL zone 1.