

STEVENAGE BOROUGH COUNCIL

ENVIRONMENT & ECONOMY SELECT COMMITTEE MINUTES

Date: Thursday, 18 October 2018

Time: 6.30pm

Place: Autun Room - Daneshill House, Danestrete

Present: **Councillors:** Michael Downing (Chair), Lloyd Briscoe, Jim Brown, David Cullen, Andy McGuinness, Adam Mitchell CC and Simon Speller.

In Attendance: Tom Pike (SBC Strategic Director) and Chris Berry (SBC Interim Assistant Director – Planning and Regulatory), Trevor Mason (Team Leader – HCC Strategic Transport and Rail Environment & Infrastructure), Val Male (HCC Strategic Transport and Rail Environment & Infrastructure), Lynne Barker (Network Rail Project Sponsor), Neil Henry (Network Rail Head of Operations – South Stevenage Turnback Project), Ken Mason (Network Rail Project Manager), Jane Cobb (GTR Communications Manager – Timetable), Larry Heyman (GTR Local Development Manager for Thames & Great Northern), Phil Hutchinson (GTR Head of Strategic Planning), Patrick Ladbury (GTR Local Development Manager for Thames & Great Northern Designate), Graham Lottering (Stevenage Rail Users' Group) and Aljit Vohra (Stevenage Rail Users' Group)

Start / End Time: Start Time: 6.30pm
End Time: 8.35pm

1 **APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting. There was representation from Govia Thameslink Railway (GTR), Network Rail, Hertfordshire County Council (Transport Unit) and the Rail Users' Group for Stevenage.

Apologies were received from Cllrs M Hurst, J Fraser, L Kelly and S-J Potter.

There were no declarations of interest.

2 **MINUTES - 1 AUGUST 2018**

It was **RESOLVED** that Minutes of the Environment and Economy (E & E) Select Committee meeting of 01 August 2018 are approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

The Chair informed the Committee that items relating to the Licence to Occupy procedures and the review of the Direct Services Business Unit (Item 2 – paragraph 2) had been deferred to the November E & E Select Committee meeting.

STEVENAGE RAIL STATION

The Chair informed the Committee that although Stevenage Borough Council (SBC) did not have direct responsibility for rail, the Council has a responsibility to look after the welfare its residents including regular rail commuters and more casual rail users. This was why this issue was being considered by the Committee. The long term objective was to establish improved communication between the Council, rail users and rail companies.

Govia Thameslink Railway (GTR)

GTR offered an apology for the massive disruption caused by the May 2018 timetable change. The company was now focussing on improving and stabilising the service. GTR concurred with the Office of Rail and Road (ORR) report's conclusion that the May disruption was a reflection of industry-wide problems. The problems emanating from the May timetable change had to be resolved by the major stakeholders including the Department for Transport, Network Rail and rail franchise companies such as GTR and London North Eastern Railway (LNER).

GTR tabled a document containing Stevenage morning and evening peak and high peak vehicle, seats and capacity statistics for May 2010, May 2017 and May 2018 and projections for December 2018 and May 2019. Morning peak times are 0700hrs to 0959hrs and evening peak is 1600hrs to 1859hrs. Morning high peak times are 0800hrs to 0859hrs and evening high peak is 1700hrs to 1759hrs. Members were informed that under normal circumstances, a new rail timetable would be signed off by Network Rail at least twelve (12) weeks before the timetable launch date. This new timetable would then be followed by three to four iterations (using a computer program and manual interventions) to develop the most efficient use of drivers and trains and to ensure the reliability of the new timetable. On this occasion, due to the late sign-off, there was time for only one iteration which showed a requirement for 50 more drivers than we had available GTR had been recruiting and training new drivers since the start of the franchise in anticipation of the new May 2018 timetable but due to the late sign off, there was not enough time to ensure the most efficient use of the new drivers which would match their particular track knowledge.. Following the issues caused by the May timetable an interim timetable was introduced in July 2018 which brought in a degree of stability. Forty (40) additional peak time services were introduced in September 2018 and these have significantly contributed to an improved performance.

GTR was now working with Network Rail and other stakeholders to introduce the previously planned May weekday timetable in December 2018 and further improvements in May 2019 so as to ease passenger congestion and the disruption of services. The Committee was informed that services on the East Coast Mainline would benefit from the introduction of more services on the Cambridge to Brighton Route.

Members were informed that the late May 2018 timetable sign off was a direct result of the industry-wide problems that were highlighted in the ORR Report. It was pointed out that Network Rail manages a national timetable that covers all twenty-three (23) rail operators. New timetables are introduced twice a year. The timetable changes introduced in May 2018 were the most extensive in recent years.

Hertfordshire County Council (HCC)

The County Council appreciated that stakeholders were making efforts to improve train services following disruptions caused by the May 2018 timetable change. Twenty four (24) stations in the county were affected by the timetable change. HCC did not have direct control over rail matters but it was actively involved in stakeholder consultation.

Rail Users' Group

The Rail Users' Group were happy to note the planned improvements to the services. The Group informed the Committee that the May 2018 disruptions were the worst that had been experienced by a lot of the commuters. The Group highlighted the poor communication with rail operators and the unavailability of up-to-date statistics. There were no comparable statistics about peak times, actual train running times, passenger numbers, passenger capacity and rail vehicles on the services. The Group sought clarification on projects/programmes that would specifically benefit Stevenage rail commuters. It was pointed out that the majority of trains running between 0720hrs and 0815 hrs on weekdays were full by the time they arrived at Stevenage. Rail users indicated that they prioritised a reliable service from Stevenage over easy transfers to other London stations.

In response to issues raised by rail users, GTR acknowledged that there was significantly reduced seating capacity at Stevenage. GTR indicated that:

- GTR adopted trains that were designed and procured by the Department for Transport in 2013. These trains were designed with the objective of increasing train capacity
- Current rail infrastructure placed restrictions on the number of trains that could be added to the service, specifically related to capacity at London Kings Cross and the Welwyn Viaduct
- More trains were now stopping at Stevenage than before the introduction of the revised timetables
- The Department for Transport set the agenda for the rail industry. The focus of GTR was to deliver on its contractual obligations
- The morning peak time congestion was likely to ease after the introduction of revised timetables in December 2018 and May 2019
- Display boards had been installed at London King's Cross Station to provide up-to-date departure times from St Pancras
- Stevenage users would benefit from the extension of GTR services to Farringdon and other inner London stations

In response to a question about peak time passenger numbers, GTR informed the Committee that the company used estimates collated from several sources. The passenger number estimates were based on the following:

- A combination of train weight and average passenger weight at various points along the route
- Season ticket sales
- On-board counting
- ORR statistics based on ticket sales at train stations

It was indicated that rail operators carry out an all-day passenger survey twice a year and submitted a survey report to the Department for Transport. Season ticket sales alone could not provide conclusive data about commuter numbers. Passenger statistics were used for timetable revisions.

Members asked questions relating to timetable revisions, the use of relatively longer trains by some operators, rail network pinch points, timetable modelling, funding for rail projects, consultations and the volume of business that was lost as a result of the disruptions. It was indicated that:

- Unlike previous arrangements, the new timetable had a repeating pattern that made it easier for signalling. Trains were now assigned to dedicated routes and areas.
- The use of long trains on the London to Edinburgh route reduced commuter train services on the East Coast Mainline from twelve to ten.
- Due to pinch points such as the Welwyn Viaduct, a maximum of 18 trains could be operated per hour.
- A digital rail system was planned to replace the signal system that currently dictated capacity on the East Coast Mainline system.
- Network Rail and the operators had robust modelling arrangements that were subject to internal and external scrutiny. Adjustments were made after the introduction of new timetables.
- There had been a drop in discretionary travel due to changes in commuter working patterns and the May timetabling issues. The impact of the timetable issues has been that the travelling public have taken other options to travel.
- Five-year funding had been secured for re-modelling of London King's Cross station and improvements on the East Coast Mainline.

Members pointed out that the rail industry had to continually support investment and resolve the current complex ticketing arrangements. Rail operators welcomed feedback from Members and commuters. It was highlighted that frontline rail staff had done a commendable job responding to queries related to the May timetable change.

Fifth Platform

The Chair stated that Stevenage Station was no longer fit for purpose. It was confirmed that plans for a fifth platform for Stevenage had been approved. There was ongoing preparatory work involving rail operators, Network Rail, local authorities

and the Department for Transport. Construction was scheduled to commence in 2019 and the project was due for completion in 2021. Network Rail responded to a question and confirmed that the project was behind schedule because the Department for Transport was awaiting publication of the Hendy Report on the re-planning of Network Rail's Investment Programme.

Members were informed that there would be lift access from the fifth platform to the footbridge. There was a commitment to provide full funding for the fifth platform project. Funds had been secured for related projects up to 2019.

Hertford Loop

The Committee received an update on the Hertford Loop - the train line between Hertford North and Stevenage. It was indicated that the train line will not be closed during the construction of the fifth platform at Stevenage but GTR services will not be using the line. The rail service will cease from May 2019 when the second train per hour between Brighton and Cambridge is introduced. Physical works will be expected to commence later in 2019. The train to bus interchange would be at Hertford North. Train services will be in operation during weekends. A bus service will be in operation between Watton-at-Stone and Stevenage. A train service will run between Watton-at-Stone and Hertford North. Commuters from Hertford North to Stevenage will use a bus replacement service. The bus service was seen as a last resort and the best option. Terminating the service at Letchworth Garden City was not a viable option because of insufficient rolling stock at the station. The Letchworth Garden City to Hertford service was ruled out because of signal issues.

The County Council confirmed that it was engaging with Network Rail on the fifth platform, bus replacement service and other rail projects in the region. Stevenage South Station was on HCC's long-term Transport Plan. A reliable and good quality bus service was vital during the transition phase. HCC was liaising with stakeholders to ensure that there were no major traffic disruptions on the A602.

Future Consultations with Stakeholders

In view of the planned rail timetable changes and other issues related to the rail industry, it was agreed that future consultations were necessary. It was suggested that a follow up meeting for stakeholders be scheduled for February or March 2019.

Support for Stevenage Rail Users' Group

The Rail Users' Group acknowledged that it was sensible to engage with GTR and other operators. The Group wanted to take the opportunity to work with rail companies and resolve issues timely. Rail users requested that they be provided with provisional December 2018 and May 2019 timetables to enable consultations with other commuters before implementation of the changes. Feedback from these consultations would be provided to Network Rail and the rail operators.

The Strategic Director indicated that the meeting was a vital information sharing platform and that the Council would welcome information on planned changes in the future to help information cascade given the complex changes relating to timetable

changes in December 2018 and May 2019, which also includes the provision of a bus replacement service. The Council would welcome further rail stakeholder meetings when required.

It was **RESOLVED**:

1. That the following reports are noted:
 - GTR Presentation covering May 2018 lessons, interim measures and December 2018 timetable preparations
 - ORR Independent Inquiry into Timetable Disruption in May 2018
 - The role of Hertfordshire County Council
 - Rail Users' Group Issues and Questions
2. That the Committee considers holding a follow up meeting for all stakeholders in the spring of 2019, following the December 2018 timetable changes (February/March)
3. That GTR and other operators provide statistics about the number of Stevenage commuters at peak times
4. That train operators be encouraged to consult on key changes with the Rail Users Group
5. That Rail operators be encouraged to include Rail Users' Group for Stevenage and other stakeholder groups in consultations prior to the construction of the fifth platform for Stevenage and timetable changes in May 2019 and whilst the temporary bus service between Hertford and Stevenage is in operation.
6. That GTR be encouraged and advised to provide a reliable service and good quality buses for the replacement bus service
7. That ahead of the May timetable changes in 2019, Stevenage Borough Council and Hertfordshire County Council assist with local communication and be provided information regarding the changes

4 **URGENT PART 1 BUSINESS**

None.

5 **EXCLUSION OF PUBLIC AND PRESS**

Not required.

6 **URGENT PART II BUSINESS**

None.

CHAIR