

**17<sup>th</sup> May 2017**

**SOUTH EASTERN RAIL FRANCHISE PUBLIC CONSULTATION 2017**

The Royal Tunbridge Wells (RTW) Town Forum is regularly consulted by TWBC and KCC on various key issues such as planning and development, culture, leisure and tourism, finance and transport. RTW mainline station and High Brooms station, which serves the north of the town, provide a 55 minute journey to central London with frequent peak and off peak services. The service is generally good and as a result Royal Tunbridge Wells is a commuting hub for the town and surrounding communities in West Kent and East Sussex. However, these rail customers contribute to acute congestion on the roads at peak times on weekdays and to on-street parking in residential roads.

These are the two areas that most concern the RTW Town Forum and the people of Tunbridge Wells. The town's roads are at capacity and all-day on-street parking causes congestion and nuisance. Opportunities for improving and expanding the road network and for increasing on- and off-street car parking are extremely limited. In addition, the town is undergoing considerable expansion (some 12,960 new homes by 2033) which will put pressure on the existing rail services as well as roads and parking. Communities 'further up and down the line' are also subject to expansion.

Whilst we do recognise that road traffic and parking are not the concern of this Franchise consultation, the successful operation of the rail services in communities such as Tunbridge Wells will impact directly on issues of congestion and parking locally. It is this context that we have considered the consultation document, commented on the suggested proposals and answered relevant questions as follows:

**Question 1:**

**The RTW Town Forum supports your priorities** particularly the need to make the trains run on time. This will reduce the need for passengers to seek compensation and minimise the unnecessary cost and bureaucracy for all rail stakeholders to blame one another for delays and seek financial redress.

**Questions: 2, 3 and 4 - Increasing capacity**

Most if not all the communities on the Hastings line that runs through Tunbridge Wells and High Brooms will be subject to considerable housing growth. This is likely to result in an

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Formed in 2005, the Town Forum is the voice of the 50,000 residents of Royal Tunbridge Wells on issues of common interest

**Town Forum Management Group**

Adrian Berendt (Chair); Alex Green (Deputy Chair); Alastair Tod (Deputy Chair); David Wakefield (Finance); Jane Fenwick (Transport); Linda Lewis (Culture, Leisure & Tourism); Mark Booker (Strategic Planning); Michael Holman (Water in the Wells)

increased demand for rail travel particularly at peak times in future. Many peak time trains are already 12 carriages long. Although this appears to be sufficient for the current demand any growth in demand needs to be monitored and capacity matched accordingly.

#### **The RTW Town Forum would NOT support**

- any reduction in capacity from current service levels that could deter current rail passengers to change to travelling by road
- any introduction of carriages with fewer seats and more standing room. It is not appropriate for passengers to stand for the 55 minute long service from Tunbridge Wells to and from central London
- a reduction of service levels for any customer including First Class ticket holders. Indeed there is a view that all services should be upgraded rather than down-grading First Class to standard class. Removing First Class seats would see a loss in revenue from the higher ticket prices, result in some travellers reverting to using the roads, and restrict the choice of a more comfortable seat of who wish to work during the journey. Train guards should be empowered to suspend First Class when trains are particularly overcrowded and reasons for this overcrowding reviewed regularly.

#### **Questions 5 and 6 – Improving customer service**

Improving punctuality, maintaining a comfortable and efficient service, simplifying ticket options and prices, and safeguarding the face to face interface for customers with on board guards and ticket office personnel is key to improving customer service. Improvement to ticketing options is to be welcomed, however, the RTW Town Forum is concerned that an over emphasis on online and smartphone purchasing adds to an impersonal environment. Furthermore there is a danger that sections of the population, such older passengers for whom rail travel is a vital service, could be deterred from travelling.

#### **The RTW Town Forum would NOT support**

- ticketing options that reduce or remove staff from ticket offices at the main stations such as Tunbridge Wells or the on-train guard. The ability to purchase tickets on the train is a valued service particularly when the journey commences from smaller and unmanned rural stations.

#### **Questions 7 and 8 - Fares**

Season tickets and standard fares from Tunbridge Wells are among the highest in the region.

#### **The RTW Town Forum would support**

- a complete review of ticket pricing from Tunbridge Wells which is among the highest per mile in the region. The high cost of rail travel forces people into their cars as a cheaper option even when taking into account the cost of fuel and parking. High fares directly contribute to congestion on all the access roads to the town at peak times.
- the introduction of reduced peak time tickets between Tonbridge, Sevenoaks and Tunbridge Wells and other key ‘feeder’ communities would help to reduce road congestion and greatly assist changing from road to rail as the preferred mode of transport.

### **Questions 9 and 10 – Facilities at stations**

Access for elderly and disabled travellers is difficult at both RTW and High Brooms stations.

#### **The RTW Town Forum would support :**

- the installation of a second lift at Tunbridge Wells Station to provide access from platform 1 to the existing pedestrian bridge and thence to platform 2 via the existing lift.
- a fully accessible replacement for the unpleasant tunnel and access steps that currently links platforms 1 and 2 at High Brooms station.

The Town Forum supports the strategic policy ambitions of the TWBC to encourage cycling and walking within 2 miles of the town centre (including the railway station).

#### **Therefore, the RTW Town Forum would support:**

- more cycle parking at both Tunbridge Wells and High Brooms stations. The recently increased cycle parking facilities at Tunbridge Wells are well used. The TWBC plan to encourage more cycling will create more demand for cycle parking.

As already stated, on street parking is at capacity in RTW and the Town Forum is concerned that the rail franchise holder should not implement measures that will increase demand for parking at this mainline station. As a consequence, we would also support:

- increased parking for cars, cycles and motor cycles at stations ‘down the line’ to Hastings to encourage passengers to travel from these stations rather driving to and from Tunbridge Wells at peak times and contributing to congestion in the town.
- increased car park capacity at High Brooms by double decking the existing car park.

### **Questions 11, 12 and 13 – Shorter but less frequent journeys**

The introduction of a high speed services from St Pancras to Hastings, Bexhill and Rye via Ashford is to be welcomed, as it will provide a faster route to London than currently available to those communities. However, any proposals to provide ‘faster’ services on the Hastings line to the detriment of some existing passengers are not welcomed.

**The RTW Town Forum would NOT support:**

- the reduction of service frequency at ‘less well used’ stations on the Hastings to Charing Cross line via Tonbridge because of the potential for increasing traffic congestion and parking demand resulting at the larger stations such as Tunbridge Wells
- the reduction the transport options for many people who live in smaller communities where house prices are affordable but who work in larger towns such as Tunbridge Wells where house prices are high. Less choice at less well used intermediary stations, particularly at peak times, will mean more passengers reverting to the roads to travel to work, and contributing to congestion and parking issues in Tunbridge Wells
- the reduction in frequency of services for school children who commute to schools in Tunbridge Wells from stations both ‘up’ the line from Sevenoaks and Tonbridge and from Robertsbridge to the south.

**The RTW Town Forum would support (as already outlined) measures to**

- increase parking for cars, motorbikes and cycles at intermediate stations
- a review of fares structures to encourage passengers to use intermediate stations and to support more frequent services.

**Questions 14, 15 and 16 – developing new services**

The RTW Town Forum believes that there is unmet demand for new services both north and south from Tunbridge Wells main station, and to the east and west. The current rail infrastructure does not easily enable an east/west travel from RTW.

**The RTW Town Forum would support:**

- a direct and frequent service from Tunbridge Wells to Gatwick Airport via Tonbridge
- the introduction of a fast and frequent orbital service on the Ashford – Tonbridge line to Redhill and Reading as an alternative to the M25 and M20 (para 6.14)
- the suggested improvements to the Brighton - Hastings – Ashford service (para 6.15 and 6.16) to improve access east/west to other south coast destinations from Tunbridge Wells.

**The RTW Town Forum would also support:**

- **Brighton Main Line 2 Project:** Proposals to develop an alternative route from Brighton to London via the Uckfield line to Tunbridge Wells and Tonbridge and thence to London are welcomed. BML2 would provide a faster route to the south coast for leisure and commuter traffic, and an alternative to travelling by car for

people living to the south of the town (in East Sussex towns such as Crowborough and Uckfield) to work in or commute from Tunbridge Wells. This is a long term project but could well fall within the scope of this franchise and could involve co-operation and investment with other bodies. As such it should be included in consideration of future plans.

### **Question 17 – London stations**

#### **The RTW Town Forum would NOT support:**

- a change or reduction in the choice of main line stations served by trains from Tunbridge Wells or fewer 'through' services to these stations.

#### **The RTW Town Forum supports:**

- the additional travel options provided via Thameslink from Sevenoaks and The Elizabeth Line (Crossrail) in future.

Yours sincerely

Adrian Berendt  
Chairman  
Royal Tunbridge Wells Town Forum