

LPC response to request for comment on Maidstone Rail services – a starting point.

As many know, the problems of Maidstone’s rail links are historical – the town never wanted to have much to do with railways in their early days. Once it was realised the rail idea might catch on, the town ended up on what were effectively two branch lines of the major Kent rail routes. Playing catch-up, Maidstone at least now has a limited high-speed link to London from Maidstone West (which is apparently over-subscribed, as are most commuter trains) but only the East station in the town has reasonable (if expensive) provision for parking. There are admittedly plans for development of the East site, but these have been off/on for a few years and as the development ideas centre on retail premises, conflict between rail-user/retail parking is in prospect.

The recent MBC Draft Local Plan noted that many commuters travel to rail stations in the Weald, in preference to those in the town. Many of these commuters will live to the south of Maidstone, including Loose Parish. Their reasons for opting for the Weald stations apparently include the traffic problems associated with travelling across town, the easier options for parking and the ability to arrive at and depart from a more central London destination than St Pancras.

The Draft Local plan envisioned housing development in both Staplehurst and Marden. Aside from concern over road infrastructure issues expressed in other consultation documents, one assumes that the added population will generate increased (improved?) rail services in the Weald which may draw more commuters from South Maidstone to the Weald line. The Draft Local plan was very Maidstone-centric and despite playing lip service to an Integrated Transport Strategy, the Council seems to have no strategy for improved public transport links to the Weald stations. The existing Arriva No. 5 route is the main link, and it runs a timetable which is essentially of little use to commuters, or indeed many potential rail travellers.

The off-peak and recreational traveller may possibly pay less for their rail travel, but they face the same infrastructure problems as commuters: Lack of suitable parking adjacent to rail stations and a town where the main bus station is on the opposite side of the town to its main station. When we say ‘main station’, several route planner requests on the National Rail Service start with ‘first walk to Maidstone Barracks’ so travellers can access the Weald line to the south or North Kent coast route. For instance, a trip to Gatwick from Maidstone East usually involves going via London Victoria for about £31, whilst going via Maidstone Barracks/West via the Weald costs less (about £18) but involves three train changes (and neither journey gets you there before 7.00am – not good for early check-ins). Going to the continent, unless one travels up to St Pancras or Ebbsfleet (which involves the limited High Speed train or other Maidstone West service to Strood and onward), the first train from Maidstone East to Ashford International (6.32) gets in eight minutes after the first train to Brussels has left and the first train to Paris is at 9.55.

Finally, there is also limited guidance for those arriving in Maidstone by rail, and unfamiliar with the town, as to its public transport infrastructure, such as it is. Although aspects of the transport structure are in the hands of bus and rail companies, and MBC may argue other elements are subject to KCC approval/subsidy, this should be no excuse for their lack of co-ordination and publicity of transport facilities. The policy (or lack of it) ill-serves a county town.