

Maidstone Joint Transportation Board



**6
October
2021**

Update on the Kent Rail Strategy 2021

Decision Making Authority	KCC
Lead Director	Simon Jones, Director of Highways, Transportation & Waste
Lead Head of Service	Tim Read, Head of Transportation
Lead Officer and Report Author	Mark Welch, Principal Transport Planner
Wards and County Divisions affected	All
Which Member(s) requested this report?	Cllr Chittenden

This report makes the following recommendations:

For Information. This report is for update purposes only and the board are asked to note its contents.

Timetable

Meeting	Date
Maidstone Joint Transportation Board	6 October 2021

Update on Kent Rail Strategy 2021

1. ORIGIN OF REPORT

- 1.1 Councillor Chittenden requested that a report be provided to update the October JTB on progress being made to implement the Kent Rail Strategy.

2. PURPOSE OF REPORT AND EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 2.1 This report provides an update on progress in the context of the circumstances of the pandemic, which has heavily affected rail demand, and the proposed Government reforms to the railways.
-

3. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

- 3.1 KCC adopted the Kent Rail Strategy 2021 (henceforth 'KRS') in March 2021. The Strategy was prepared in 2020, in anticipation of a forthcoming franchise renewal of the South Eastern network in London and Kent. The KRS set out a series of proposals that KCC promoted delivery or development of within the next contract award for the South Eastern network, ranging from fares to rolling stock, amongst other aspects.
- 3.2 The continuance of the pandemic and associated restrictions and changes to travel patterns up to the time of writing, have had an inevitable bearing on the implementation of the KRS. Also, since publishing the KRS there has been the published proposed reforms to the rail industry – set out in the Great British Railways White Paper on 20th May 2021.
-

4. PROGRESS

KRS implementation given the pandemic

- 4.1 The KRS set out proposals that sought to influence Government and secure the following broad outcomes from future services to be specified in the next train services contract:
- More frequent services
 - Lengthened services
 - Faster services
- 4.2 These outcomes were sought based on a presumed growth of rail demand that would exceed the demand that drove the then 2019 timetabled services. The pandemic has knocked the trend for rail demand far off course. It is likely that a return to the service levels of 2019 and furthermore additional services to those as outlined in the KRS will be contingent on demand levels returning to pre-pandemic levels. It is, however, not known when that will be.
- 4.3 It is apparent from discourse within the rail industry that, given the high subsidy provided to train service operators to maintain essential rail

services, train service operators and the network operator Network Rail will be under pressure to reduce costs. We do not yet know how that may impact rail services in Kent.

- 4.4 We have and will continue to emphasise to Government and rail industry colleagues the importance of services being attractive in quality and time to attract passengers back to rail, given it will be a part of achieving sustainable growth and decarbonised travel.
- 4.5 The publication of the proposed reforms to the railways in England take account of the pandemic's impact on the viability of the former franchise model. As such we know that the next contract award will be an effective concession and is presumed to be to the current operator Southeastern as part of a transition from the current Emergency Recovery Measurement Agreements towards the desired new model of a Passenger Service Contract.
- 4.6 Within the reforms outlined in the White Paper, there are indications that KCC may have further opportunities for input into the operation and planning of rail services which may aid our future implementation of the KRS. The reforms state that *"In London and the South East, a new strategic partnership will be established to support housing, economic growth and the environment across the highly interconnected transport network in that part of the country. This will bring together Great British Railways, TfL and local authorities and businesses to co-ordinate timetabling and investments and to provide a consistent passenger experience in areas such as accessibility, ticketing and communications"*.
- 4.7 We do not know yet know further details of these reforms, with elements such as the partnership proposal outlined above expected to be made clearer in the forthcoming Levelling Up White Paper.

Progress made on the KRS 2021

- 4.8 Despite the challenges arising from the pandemic, a range of proposals within the KRS have been progressed, including:
 - Continued lobbying for the introduction of Thameslink services to the Maidstone East line.
 - Lobbying of central Government in respect of the upgrade and expansion of the High-Speed train fleet to support longer services, more frequent services and new journey destinations.
 - Work underway to consider wider network infrastructure options for long term service performance and connectivity, as part of Transport for the South East's Area Studies and Network Rail's Modular Planning
 - Lobbying Eurostar International for re-instatement of Ebbsfleet International and Ashford International station services.
 - Progression of the pre-feasibility study of Westenhanger Station upgrade.
 - Submission of a Levelling Up Fund bid for reducing journey times on the High-Speed network between Dover / Folkestone and London St Pancras International.

- Completion of a pre-feasibility study by Network Rail on the Marshlink line from Ashford International
- Preparation of a Strategic Outline Business Case, following studies and public consultation, for improving rail connectivity between Abbey Wood and Ebbsfleet / Gravesend.

4.9 We will continue to ensure the KRS and other relevant strategies and plans such as our Local Transport Plan are responsive to the evolving circumstances concerning National Rail demand and service recovery. Furthermore, that the KRS and our Local Transport Plan reflect our priorities across the county to ensure the rail network supports growth and regeneration and sustainable travel.
