

Herne Hill Society – Response to Consultation on the combined Thameslink, Southern and Great Northern franchise – August 2012

1. Introduction and context

- 1.1 This document provides the considered response of the Herne Hill Society to the DfT Consultation on the combined Thameslink, Southern and Great Northern franchise. The consultation document was issued in May 2012, and this response is being provided before the due date of 23 August 2012. A parallel document responds to the South Eastern Franchise Consultation.
- 1.2 Herne Hill lies at an important junction in the south London suburban rail network. Opened in 1862, the rail station is served by the Wimbledon Loop of the Thameslink franchise, with services currently running past Blackfriars providing the stopping service to St Albans. The Southeastern franchise also serves, and operates, Herne Hill Station, and the Orpington / Bromley South to Victoria services cross the Wimbledon Loop Thameslink at the station. Prior to the opening of the Channel Tunnel Rail Link HS1, the train paths for the Eurostar services used Herne Hill. Until recently, several services a day serving Blackfriars, East Croydon, and Gatwick Airport also stopped at Herne Hill.
- 1.3 The district of Herne Hill (roughly covering the SE24 post code and fringes) is also served by two other rail stations:
- Denmark Hill (managed by Southeastern) is currently served by: 2 tph from London Bridge to Victoria (the Inner South London Line – to cease operation at the end of 2012 when the London Overground extension to Clapham Junction is introduced); 2 tph Sevenoaks to Blackfriars and beyond; and 2 tph Dartford to Victoria. The station is currently being refurbished, with the installation of lifts. While the loss of the Inner South London Line will remove the direct link between Guys and Kings College Hospitals, overall the introduction of the London Overground extension will improve the range of destinations served.
 - North Dulwich (managed by Southern) with 2tph West Croydon to London Bridge, and 2 tph Beckenham Junction to London Bridge. The station recently suffered the loss of the Smitham (now Coulsdon Town) to London Bridge via East Croydon service, severing the last local link to East Croydon.

The levels of service at these two stations adjacent to Herne Hill are understood to be not under consultation, and are not discussed further in this response.

- 1.4 The Herne Hill Society, formed in 1982, is the local amenity society, active in planning and transport matters, and serving cultural and historical interests in the area.

<http://www.hernehillsociety.org.uk/>

2. Background

- 2.1 Herne Hill rail travellers have suffered considerable disruption and poor service in the past. The accommodation of Eurostar services restricted suburban service frequencies from 1994 to 2007. The limited availability and age of the dual voltage rolling stock needed for the through London Thameslink services has resulted in chronic poor reliability, with cancellations and short formations. The on-going Thameslink '2000' infrastructure works has led to prolonged periods of poor service with limited or non-existent evening and weekend services.
- 2.2 While the level of service on the Southeastern routes is better, there is currently severe overcrowding in the peak on both routes, with trains frequently leaving passengers on the platform at the peak of the peak.
- 2.3 The Southeastern franchise only provides intermittent part time staffing of the station, and there is an inevitable lack of liaison with First Capital Connect operations. The ground level approach service information screens are located in the ticket office area, which is locked early morning and evening. This means that train information at these off-peak times can only be obtained at platform level, after passing the Oyster readers. The physical layout of the station makes the installation of a full gateline barrier very difficult, even if full time staffing was available.
- 2.4 Herne Hill is mainly a 'walk in' and interchange station, bordered on the London Borough of Southwark side by CPZs. On the London Borough of Lambeth side, however, there is currently considerable uncontrolled rail-heading commuter traffic parking problems not yet subject to residential parking controls. The limited cycle parking is well used. There is a busy private hire taxi operation immediately outside the station, which abuses the short term parking facilities for the local shops and station passenger drop-offs and meeters. The recently constructed lifts have suffered from maintenance failures, and lack of regular platform staff has precluded their use to allow access to trains for wheelchair users.
- 2.5 Herne Hill has suffered years of service restrictions during the Thameslink and Crossrail works at Farringdon, and the immediate future is far from clear. With the blockade of the Thameslink chord at London Bridge at Christmas 2014 (one year into the new franchise) for at least three years Brighton services will be routed through other south London routes – presumably including Herne Hill. This will at least eliminate the delays at the junction south of Blackfriars (but perhaps transfer them to the Elephant and Castle junction). It also reintroduces the possibility of a connection to services through East Croydon to Gatwick Airport.
- 2.6 It is planned that the chord will be reconnected three years later – Christmas 2017 (four years into the franchise) with a fundamental restructuring of the route pattern. Herne Hill travellers could benefit (or suffer) at this point. Although the timetable and procurement are still in doubt, it is hoped that up to 1,200 new dual voltage carriages (100 12 car trains) will start to come into operation on the Thameslink route from

2018 onwards (five years into the franchise). This new dual voltage rolling stock needs to be modular in nature, with four car units able to be deployed flexibly between the services.

- 2.7 Crossrail is planned to start operation in late 2018 (five years into the franchise) with Farringdon station serving as one of the major interchange points. This can be expected to cause a major diversion of passenger demand to the suburban Thameslink services.

3. The Consultation document and process

- 3.1 The document is bland, general, and lacks any evidence base to inform the discussion of what is claimed will be the largest rail franchise ever (para 1.3). Despite the franchise being large, and involving several considerable external uncertainties regarding the timing of infrastructure and demand changes, there is little detail on the intended franchise arrangements. The document appears to propose a much looser franchise arrangement than hitherto, without suggesting what incentives for, or penalties on, the franchisee are proposed.
- 3.2 The document puts forward the ambitious and challenging policy of merging three (later four) complex rail operations, while managing the interface with the remainder of the Thameslink capital programme, bringing a new set of rolling stock into operation, and introducing ATO across the core Thameslink route. At the same time it is vaguely suggested that more operational risk will be transferred to the franchisee. This goes against the principle of allocating risks to those best able to minimise, mitigate, or manage them. It is considered this will result in excess franchise costs – to be expressed through real fare increases.
- 3.3 It claims the franchise will be responding to future growth - but offers no evidence on the congestion statistics, demand forecasts, or the expected passenger capacity of the Thameslink core route with ATO. The document fails to suggest which elements of the current pattern of passenger flows would benefit from through trains, or conversely suffer a transfer penalty, both at Blackfriars and at St Pancras International low level. Thus a meaningful debate about the balance of operational constraints, timetabling, and matching demand patterns is impossible.
- 3.4 None of the existing data sources, nor the transport demand forecasting models relying on them, are considered fit for use in this consultation process:
- The confidential LENNON ticket sales data is of limited value in the context of the multiple routes and 'London termini' in the corridors under consideration, and the high level of use of zonal travelcards means that actual journey information is not obtained, and in any case this commercially sensitive information would not be made available to consultees;
 - The London rail termini passenger counts in 2010 excluded Blackfriars, since the underground station was not in operation at the time;

- LATS, RODS, and NRTS travel pattern surveys are all old and of very small relevant sample size;
- The DfT PLANET model is poorly calibrated in the complex Thameslink suburban corridor; and
- The TfL Railplan model, while probably the best synthetic forecast source, is also poorly calibrated in the core Thameslink route.

This lack of passenger demand pattern information is considered to be a fundamental and fatal flaw in the franchise bidding process, and, unless remedied, will result in high cost franchise bids to cover the unknown passenger demand risks (or possibly unsustainably optimistic bids).

- 3.5 The consultation process has been low key, with limited public information, and no public meetings or presentations. It makes no mention of integration with TfL or the Mayor's Transport Strategy, and does not discuss the crucial competition between inner London stopping services and longer distance commuter services – this despite the warm words regarding decentralisation in para 6.4. No mention is made of the TfL aspirations to invest £100M in suburban rail station improvements – part of its submission to the Rail Decentralisation and Fares consultation. (That TfL submission makes specific mention of Herne Hill and Denmark Hill as stations where improvements could be made).
- 3.6 Overall, given the importance of the franchise and the major unknowns surrounding it, the consultation document and the process are considered weak and inadequate.

4. Issues and constraints

- 4.1 The proposed franchise does suggest the reintegration of some overlapping London and the southeast rail operations – this is to be welcomed if achieved efficiently and economically. While the possible future capital financing through CP5 is still unknown, it is unlikely to be of significance, given the current national financial situation and the on-going committed investment taking place around the franchise infrastructure and rolling stock.
- 4.2 The management of the pattern of adjusted routes consequent on the blockade of the London Bridge to Blackfriars link during 2015 to at least early 2018 will present a major challenge to the franchisee, and probably presents the incumbent operator with an advantage in the bidding process. The radical changes to the demand pattern consequent upon the opening of Crossrail will present a major challenge to adjust the route capacity to minimise overcrowding near and within Farringdon.
- 4.3 Real fare levels will be under multiple pressures, with the general balance between fare box and subsidy for urban services expected to tip more towards the fare box, especially in the context of a step change in the quality and quantity of rolling stock for some parts of the route network. In our view, the proposed loose and risky franchise arrangements are likely to result in unacceptable real increases in passenger peak fares.

- 4.4 The Herne Hill flat junctions have in the past coped with the additional passage of Eurostar trains, and will presumably have to cope with diverted Brighton trains over the period 2015 to 2017, and probably beyond. This will be linked to the timetabling for the crucial East Croydon and Gatwick bottlenecks. At least some of these diverted services should stop at Herne Hill.
- 4.5 Wimbledon Loop trains have in the past suffered frequent delays at the junction south of Blackfriars, due to the un-reliability of the longer distance Brighton services. This has led to the relatively un-demanding current timetabling, with prolonged waiting at stations, and relatively low commercial speeds.

5. Objectives and opportunities for the franchise

- 5.1 The Objectives in Chapter 5, while endorsed by the Secretary of State (para 5.1) lack practical quantification or detail. Further specification is considered to be necessary on:
- How the risks and responsibilities will be shared between the industry partners during the complex changes over the coming years;
 - How the costs and rewards of any rail value for money initiatives are shared;
 - How the supporting of the creation of a subsequent long term franchise is consistent with a fair bidding process for that franchise;
 - How the reliability and punctuality standards will be balanced with crowding and commercial speed standards;
 - How cost-effectiveness will be defined, and from whose viewpoint – the DfT or the fare paying passenger.

The fundamental objective is considered to be to share the core Thameslink route capacity in an efficient way so as to minimise interchanges, and maximise accessibility opportunities. It is our firm belief that this includes the continuation of the Wimbledon Loop running through central London.

- 5.2 This fundamental objective needs to be informed by an understanding of the potential train path capacity; the train length and seat layout options; and the full range of route options, both south and north of the core Thameslink route. This potential passenger carrying capacity needs to be analysed with the demand patterns expected after the introduction of Crossrail, to establish both peak and off-peak optimal service patterns minimising interchange and crowding. The consultation document gives scant and incomplete information on this, and does not provide any direct references to relevant sources.
- 5.3 Against this lack of information, we suggest the following breakdown of the core Thameslink route frequencies:

	Current Peak	Future off peak
Brighton to Luton/Bedford	4	8
Wimbledon Loop to St Albans	4	4
Catford Loop to Kentish Town	2	4
Others?	3	8
Total	13 tph	24 tph

This suggests there is more than ample spare capacity to maintain the current Wimbledon Loop through services, with ample capacity for new routes to be added, even with a tripling of the passenger capacity on the Brighton services (from 4 x 8 car, to 8 x 12 car).

- 5.4 During the 2015 to 2017 blockade of the London Bridge to Blackfriars chord, it is expected that some of the Brighton and East Croydon services will be routed through Herne Hill. It is considered that the permanent reintroduction of the Herne Hill (and indeed North Dulwich) to East Croydon direct rail link is a feasible and significant opportunity in the long term, via Selhurst or Crystal Palace.
- 5.5 The 'Others?' category will include some Great Northern services using the new chord connecting Finsbury Park to St Pancras, some of which could continue to connect south of the river to the Wimbledon Loop (see Consultation para 7.19)

6. Herne Hill Society views

- 6.1 We welcome the eventual combined franchise with Southeastern in the hope that it will deliver:

- A committed full time station platform staffing at Herne Hill;
- A marked and sustained improvement in the reliability and comfort standards;
- Better route integration, and a continued Wimbledon Loop service through the core Thameslink route, and the re-introduction of services to East Croydon and other significant south London centres; and
- No relative fare rises beyond those resulting from industry wide policy

It is considered, however, that these hopes are not clearly supported by the consultation document and that considerable further background detail is required to support the Stakeholder Briefing Document promised for October 2012 (Consultation para 8.7).

- 6.2 As discussed earlier in this document, the limited information provided confirms our strong view that there is ample scope to maintain, and indeed to improve, the Wimbledon Loop route serving stations north of Blackfriars.
- 6.3 We consider the franchise should specify a much greater level of engagement by, and accountability from, the franchisee to the local passenger base. Given the enlarged nature of the franchise, this will require a strong emphasis on local management.

Response to the Consultation questions

Consultation question	Herne Hill Society response
Q1 Improvements possible through partnership working between NR and the franchisee	Much tighter timetabling with higher commercial speeds, with greatly reduced unreliability from congestion at infrastructure junctions.
Q2 Specific aspirations	Better and more responsive local management, able to implement simple station improvements. At Herne Hill these include arranging for the departure information to be available to passengers prior to passing the Oyster readers when the ticket office area is closed.
Q3 Wider development schemes	Commercial and retail developments in Croydon town centre need to be supported by improved and restored rail connectivity, including services from Herne Hill.
Q4 What increments or decrements to the specification	There is no definition of the specification to be commented on. The continuation and enhancement of the Wimbledon Loop through London services is considered essential.
Q5 Specification aspects to be mandated	Reliability standards must be incorporated in the franchise specification, involving both NR and the franchisee.
Q6 Alternative approaches to specification	Full route specification, with crowding level standards.
Q7 Service change proposals	Impossible for stakeholders to answer without more information, but clearly connections between Herne Hill and East Croydon could be explored in 2015 to 2017, and made permanent thereafter if viable.
Q8 Better use of current capacity	Tighten the current undemanding timetable.
Q9 Managing demand	The bigger, more strategic and more connected network provides a wider range of service pattern opportunities to the franchisee to bypass bottlenecks and minimise interchange while providing 'Metro' levels of frequency. Demand can be managed through a simplified system of lower off-peak fares.
Q10 Destinations to be served	Clearly through London destinations, especially Farringdon (and hence Crossrail) need to be continued to be served from Herne Hill; East Croydon routes are considered feasible and attractive. Studies are required to investigate the south of the river demand potential for the Great Northern services to be added to the core Thameslink route.
Q11 Better use of the Brighton Main Line	A wider spread of routes, and station stops, though suburban south London, including Herne Hill.
Q12 Improved performance expectations	Comprehensive route planning to optimise rolling stock utilisation, minimise crowding, and improve reliability while avoiding real fare increases.

Q16 Airport services	Although Herne Hill currently has easy access to the premium fare Gatwick Express through Victoria, the reintroduction of direct services from Herne Hill to Gatwick would offer a cheaper and more convenient alternative. The Gatwick Express brand needs to be protected, with the reintroduction of appropriate rolling stock and the preservation of fast non-stop services. For access to Luton Airport, the continuation of through Wimbledon Loop services is important to allow same-platform interchange for passengers with luggage.
Q18 Services via Elephant and Castle	This depends on minimising interchange, but certainly should include the Wimbledon Loop services.
Q19 Blackfriars interchange	Given the longer trains, and ATO, it is unclear what shortfall of core Thameslink route capacity is considered to exist. The principle should be to minimise interchange, facilitate cross platform interchange northbound, and provide timely and conveniently located departure information for southbound passengers needing to interchange under the core Thameslink platforms.
Q24 Performance information publication	Accurate and regular performance information should be displayed at ticket offices.
Q25 Frequency	This is largely information collected in real time, and easily published monthly.
Q26 Disaggregation	Again this is largely real time detailed information, which should be published transparently without obscuring problems by bundling information.
Q27 Passenger priorities	Reliability of service, and accurate information when problems occur.
Q28 Security	Visible staff – through both on-board revenue protection, and station platform staff
Q29 Station improvements	In general, improving the real time information accuracy, particularly on cancellations. At Herne Hill, either keep the ticket office area open, or duplicate the destination boards currently located there in an area before the card readers accessible at all times the station platforms are in use.
Q30 Car parking and cycling provision	At the Herne Hill forecourt, the temporary waiting bays for cars needs to be enforced, to stop the abuse by private hire vehicles. The cycle parking facilities are well used, and may require expansion in the future.
Q32 Accessibility and mobility issues	The unreliability of the new lifts at Herne Hill, and the lack of station platform staff, renders services through the station unusable by wheelchair users, since the wheelchair ramps cannot be used by carers or drivers.