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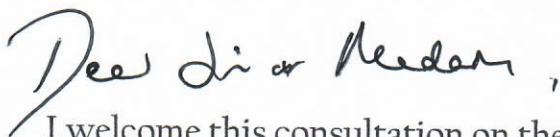
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HW/WA

18 May 2017



I welcome this consultation on the future of the south east rail network. I represented the constituency of Faversham and Mid Kent as their Member of Parliament between 2015-17, and am standing for re-election as the Conservative candidate.

As the MP for Faversham and Mid Kent, I ran a survey of local rail users, with scores of responses. I also held a meeting as a candidate to discuss this consultation with passengers from the constituency. A reliable train service is key to the working lives of thousands of local residents, however, too often passengers are let down.

I have responded to the questions from the consultation which are most important to rail users in Faversham and Mid Kent. However, I would like to emphasise that by far the greatest concern with rail services expressed to me is unreliability, followed by poor value for money. It is vital that the new franchise operator is incentivised to invest in services, achieve greater reliability and better value for money.

I hope that the recommendations that I and others make will be incorporated into the franchise specification to provide a world class rail service which will support the local economy, save commuters time and be a credit to the community.

Cont/...

# Helen Whately

Conservative Parliamentary Candidate for Faversham and Mid Kent  
Thursday 8th June 2017

Promoted by Andrew Kennedy on behalf of Helen Whately and the Conservative Party all at WKCHQ, Suite 3, Business Centre, Commercial Road, Paddock Wood, TN12 6EN.

Question 1

I conducted a survey of local rail users in the winter of 2016/17 and their greatest concerns were reliability, communication about delays, better value fares, more comfortable carriages, part time season tickets, and more frequent services to London. Over-crowding when peak time trains have fewer coaches than normal has also been raised as an issue.

The Department for Transport's priorities seem to broadly match these concerns. However, the consultation did seem to give more attention to Metro services. While passenger numbers may be higher in the Metro area, passengers on Mainline services are generally making longer journeys, spending more time on trains and may have fewer transport options. Improvements should not be made to Metro services in Greater London at the expense of passengers making longer journeys from Kent.

I do not think that the reliability of services has been given enough weight in this consultation. Although it is listed as a top priority, there are no further questions about how to make the trains more reliable. I would like to give my views on this matter here.

The franchise specification must require higher standards of performance, assessed not only as averages, but also for specific trains - given that commuters often take the same train regularly. Another approach could be to assess performance on the basis of all individual passenger journeys, requiring the vast majority of all passenger journeys to be on time. At the moment the train operator is able to use good performance off-peak to mask poor performance at peak times, but the latter affects far more passengers. Reporting and penalties in the franchise must both identify and penalise effectively this kind of poor performance, to incentivise greater reliability.

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Question 2

I agree that overcrowding is a problem. Residents in Faversham and Mid Kent have told me there is usually enough space when trains are full length (i.e., 12 coaches) but sometimes peak time trains are shorter (e.g., 8 or 6 coaches), and then there is severe overcrowding.

Question 3

Short trains should be avoided on peak time services. All commuter trains should be 10 to 12 coaches. The new franchise operator should invest in new rolling stock to ensure that there is enough for all peak services.

While metro-style carriages make sense for short journeys within Greater London, they should not be introduced onto Mainline services where people are spending significant amounts of time on the train – usually over two hours a day for daily commuters in my area. The coaches need to be designed to enable people to travel in reasonable comfort and spend their time usefully. Many commuters will use their time on the train to work.

Question 4

In general, residents who have responded to me on this point are in favour of removing or suspending First Class on commuter services to provide more space during the busiest hours. However, I have been contacted by constituents who pay the premium for First Class services because they have mobility problems and cannot stand for long times.

If First Class is going to be reduced, then the new franchise will have to make extra provision to ensure that those who need a seat, get a seat.

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Question 5

Communication during delays was highlighted as a key problem in my rail survey and at my rail meeting. Staff do not have consistent, accurate or detailed information about what is causing delays, and are therefore unable to give passengers useful information. Improving this will allow passengers to plan their journeys better. Online information could also be easier to find and clearer.

There have been criticisms of customer help points on platforms. While passengers generally have mobile phones to use online or telephone services, in some rural stations there is poor reception. The train operator should be required to make sure there is an effective customer service accessible from all platforms.

I welcome the requirement for the new operator to provide Delay Repay 15. I would like to see further measures for compensation for delayed journeys, such as a cumulative delay repay. Lots of commuters will have regular delays of less than 15 minutes, which is still enough to disrupt connections, and over the course of a year can add up to many lost hours. One commuter told me that in 2016, he spent 44 hours waiting on delayed trains, and was only eligible for a small amount of compensation because most the delays were less than 30 minutes.

Question 6

All mainline services should have sockets for charging devices and wifi, to enable passengers to use their journey time productively.

Question 7

There should be part time season tickets available – for instance, for people who commute less than 5 days a week, reflecting the changing nature of work.

Cont/...

Question 8

Ticket machines are not very clear and do not provide the full range of tickets, such as the 'one pound' fare for children at weekends.

I would like to see smart ticketing introduced throughout the entire network. The Key currently only supports season ticket holders. A tap in/tap out system at all stations in the network would be very welcome, with the option to use contactless payments, and to make all ticket purchases online

Question 9

There should be a review of all stations for accessibility.

Stations should be well maintained. The train operator and Network Rail should be required to keep all stations to a high standard, including a regular smartening-up. Faversham should be specified as a priority for a clean-up and redecoration as the gateway to the town.

Question 10

Residents would like to see improved accessibility at stations for people who cannot use bridges over the train tracks – whether due to disabilities or because they have small children and buggies. Harrietsham, Lenham and Headcorn have been raised with me specifically. Sometimes accessibility could be improved with relatively minor improvements.

Faversham station has a lift but it is often broken and is not designed for regular use. This should be replaced with a new lift suitable for frequent use.

Passengers with disabilities have told me they are not confident to use trains because staff on trains do not necessarily help them, or give them enough time to get on and off. The help offered to these passengers should be improved.

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Question 11

The extension of High Speed services to East Sussex must not come at the expense of existing services. The current HSI trains, which go through Faversham in my constituency, are already near full capacity on many services, so extending the route to more stations without investing in new rolling stock would just lead to less space and a worse service for all.

That said I support increasing the reach of the High Speed network.

Question 12

Bearsted, Hollingbourne, Harrietsham and Lenham on the Maidstone East line, Selling on the Faversham-Canterbury line and Headcorn on the Ashford-Tonbridge line, are in rural locations with often poor road links to other stations. Local rail users have been very clear that they do not want to see reductions to services at stations which serve rural areas.

Question 13

Services from Faversham to London St Pancras typically stop at Rainham, Gillingham, Chatham, Rochester and Strood, despite these five Medway towns stops all having good bus links between them. This makes the High Speed service from Faversham only ten minutes quicker than the Mainline service into London Victoria. A genuinely high speed service might be offered if only some of these Medway stations were serviced by every High Speed train.

Question 14

Faversham to Ashford  
Maidstone East / Bearsted / Hollingbourne / Harrietsham / Lenham to  
Sittingbourne or Faversham  
Headcorn to Maidstone  
Headcorn to Faversham / Sittingbourne

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Question 15

Residents have told me that they would like to see more services to London terminals, including a greater choice at all stations.

I have also heard from local rail users that they would like to see better east-west links including services to Gatwick airport from Mid Kent stations

Question 17

Without doubt, residents in my area want a more reliable service.

However, they also want a choice of London destinations, such as direct trains to Blackfriars from the Maidstone villages during rush hour. I am concerned that less choice will not necessarily result in a more reliable service. I therefore do not support a reduction in choice of London terminals.

Question 18

Aligning the incentives of the train operator and Network Rail is crucial to improve overall performance. We know that during the current franchise two thirds of delays are the responsibility of Network Rail rather than Southeastern because Network Rail is insufficiently accountable to passengers. I fully support integrating the two organisations to put passengers first.

Question 19

In order to make sure that both companies are fully committed to integration, I believe an integrated budget with a common set of measurable outcomes is required.

At a meeting I held, some local rail users suggested that a longer franchise, between 15 and 20 years, would be useful to encourage the operator to make long term investments in assets like rolling stock. Also there should be robust penalties for poor performance and break-clauses.

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Question 20

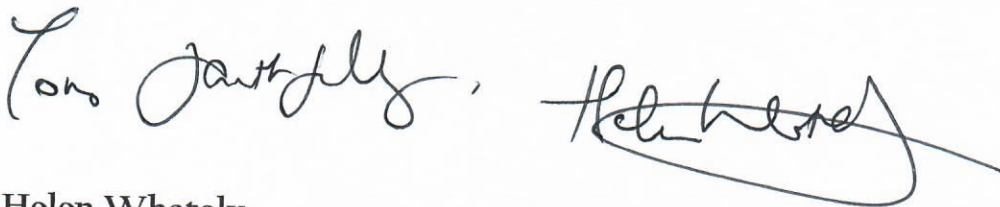
I have sent many letters to the Chief Executive of Southeastern and have been satisfied with their fast replies, along with several useful meetings in which they have set out actions they are taking. I would like the future operator to be similarly willing to engage, and to involve Network Rail representatives where appropriate.

I would like the operator to be required to produce a regular (e.g., monthly or quarterly) formal, accessible report on performance, including explanations and actions being taken to address poor performance, and a tracker of progress against those actions. The report should also show where the operator has been penalised for poor performance and by what amount.

Question 21

Lots of companies succeed in fostering a personal and individualised relationship with their customers. For example, coffee shops offer loyalty cards and airlines will offer perks to frequent flyers. This style of brand/consumer relationship could be effectively provided on a rail network.

I hope that my submission is useful and outlines clearly the needs of rail users in Faversham and Mid Kent. By implementing the suggestions made by myself and local residents above, I am confident that the south east rail network will be a more reliable, more communicative and more accessible community asset.



Helen Whately

Conservative Parliamentary Candidate for Faversham and Mid Kent