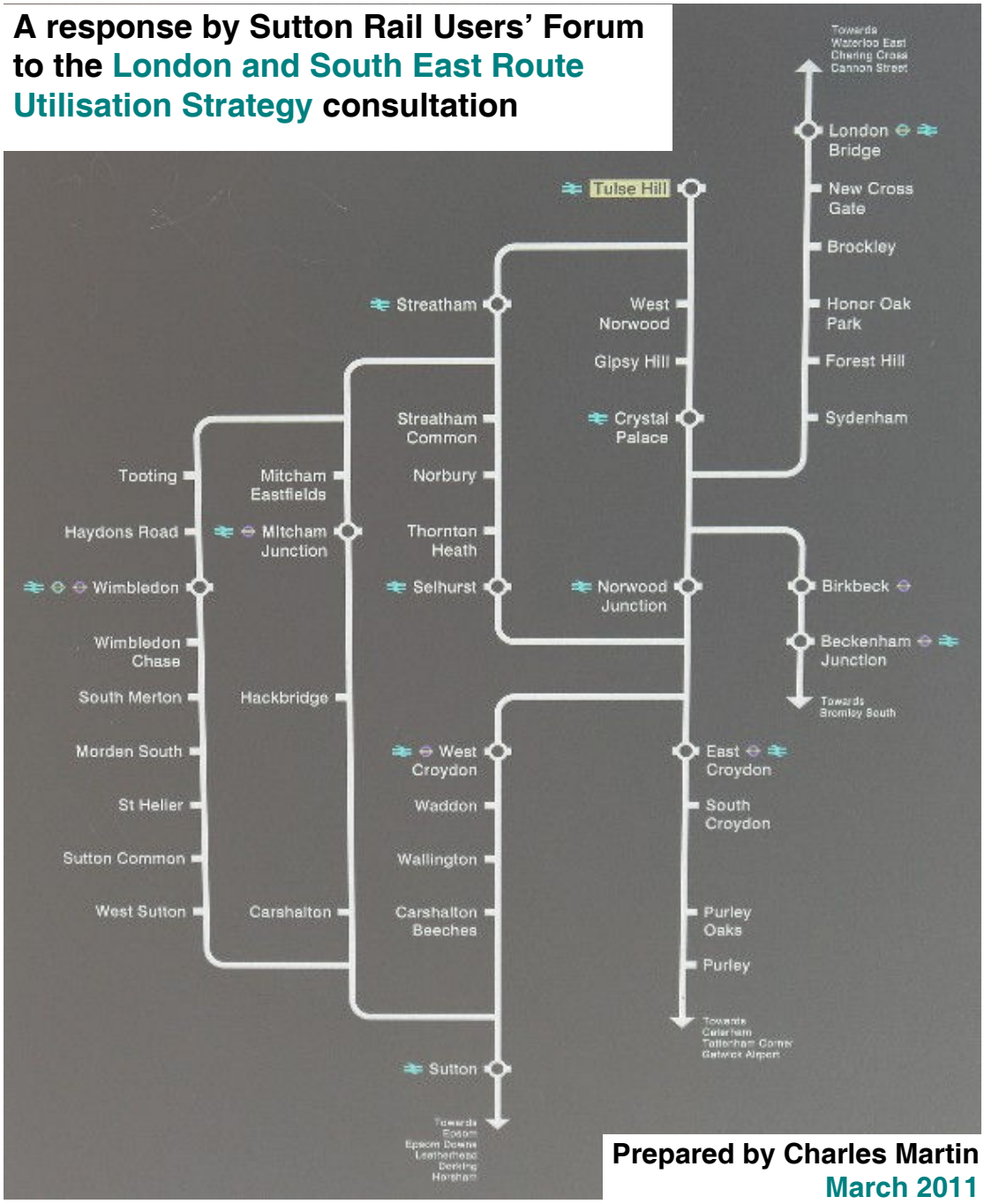
A response by Sutton Rail Users' Forum to the London and South East Route Utilisation Strategy consultation



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About the Sutton Rail Users' Forum

The Sutton Rail Users' Forum is all about debate and discussion on issues relating to rail services in the London Borough of Sutton. Public meetings are held around three times a year, and have been every since the Forum was formed in 2002. These events have developed to become an increasingly important opportunity for regular commuters, occasional day-trippers, residents, rail representatives and managers and anyone else with an interest to get together and listen and talk about the issues that matter to them.

Although 'rail' features in the title, we like to think that we are not just restricting ourselves to rail issues. We are considering all modes of transport really, because when you take a train you have to get to the station, and that may involve walking, cycling, taking the bus, tram or tube, or driving or even skateboarding! So accessibility issues are important to us.

It is also essential to recognise that the Forum is not campaigning for a better rail service in Sutton at the expense of a less good service elsewhere. Indeed quite the opposite. Our campaigning, from a strategic viewpoint, could just as easily be on behalf of any part of suburban London or any other city that offers a comparable rail network where rail services play an increasingly important role in the lives of the citizens.

Introduction

The Sutton Rail Users' Forum (SRUF) welcomes the opportunity to feedback some ideas and observations in relation to the London and South East Route Utilisation Strategy (RUS) draft document for consultation. This short note is our contribution to the debate, and is presented in an informal way to highlight some of our thinking at this time.

The RUS is a comprehensive and well-presented document, and clearing demonstrates the challenges ahead. SRUF can by no means claim to be experts on the complexity of the rail network in the South East region, but we do recognise that there are many conflicting issues and demands on the system. Therefore this response includes ideas that support the context of the strategy, but perhaps are not explicitly documented as such. For example, train and platform lengthening is one obvious way of providing extra capacity, and these initiatives are mentioned regularly throughout the RUS. What does not appear to be included, however, is the idea that in order to get the maximum benefit out of lengthening trains, more access and egress points to the platforms are required (to encourage passengers to sit (or even stand) in different parts of the train). Although not directly a strategic route issue, such ideas are complimentary to getting the best use of any additional capacity.

Finance is clearly an issue, but then it always is and always will be. The emphasis is now focussed on getting value for money, and everyone awaits the McNulty report on this in the coming days. But sometimes spending more up-front (in an effective way) can result in being able to spend less in the future, and of course the benefits will be realised sooner. Also, in the shorter term efficiencies can be achieved through compromise. On the busy suburban network if the speed of one service is decreased slightly in order to increase the frequency, or regularise the service, of another, a potentially better balanced outcome can be achieved. Ultimately though, major infrastructure projects, such as the idea to construct a new tunnel from outer London in order to accommodate both Brighton main line and suburban services, will almost certainly be necessary.

It is clear that one of the great drivers of this RUS is the predicted population growth and the expectation that the workplace, for a great number of people, will continue to be situated in central London. However, rather than focus on providing a railway in the south-east that is finely tuned for the peak demand into and out of zone 1, perhaps more thought should be given on producing a rail network that can adapt more readily to any future demographic changes. The outer London metropolitan centres may be set to grow too.

SRUF hope that the views and comments here are of interest, and we wish those taking the process forward every success.

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The right decisions are essential when balancing conflicts

It is pleasing to note that conflicts are recognised in the RUS, as noted in paragraph 7.7.5, page 91, for example, where "…it is emphasised that mixing fast and slow services on any pair of tracks reduces the number of trains which can run overall…". It is also good that there is acknowledgment that sometimes small sacrifices have to be made for overall improvements, as in the case detailed for the Windsor Lines in option G1, page 96, where, despite the passenger impact that "increasing the number of trains over this section is likely to result in journey time impacts for fast services (of up to four minutes additional time)" an increase in service frequency is recommended. The idea of getting the balance right is a useful concept to apply across all corridors in the London area, and the case has to be made to ensure that passengers recognise the principle.

Platform lengthening requires added-value

Train lengthening is mentioned a lot in the draft RUS. But to get to get maximum benefit out of lengthening trains and platforms, more access and egress points to the platforms are required (to encourage passengers to sit in different parts of the train). This is not mentioned in the RUS, but it is an important aspect because it gives added value to the schemes. By opening up the stations, congestion and pinch points will be reduced, passengers will enjoy a more comfortable experience and, importantly, the station catchment area can be expanded. All of which helps make rail travel become a more appealing prospect, and can help to attract more people at times other than the peak.

It is disappointing, therefore, that two of London's newest stations, Shepherd's Bush and Imperial Wharf on the West London line, were not constructed with long platforms and are now, just two years later, cited in the RUS as requiring platform extensions. Lessons should be learned from this.

It is perhaps worth mentioning at this point that interior design of the rolling stock is also an issue – determining how quickly people can get on and off relates to the speed of the service and the throughput (quite apart from whether one can stand in comfort).

Network connectivity is crucial, and "turn-up-and-go" needs a definition

An overriding objective to the strategy is to provide an efficient railway. Connectivity is vital for an efficient railway and Section 8 *Network Connectivity* gets off to a good start by noting that "improving rail connectivity is a key aspiration of stakeholders". The example given is Transport for London's (TfL's) recommended standard for stations within Greater London of "four trains per hour frequency from first to last train, enabling a turn-up-and-go service". It is questionable whether four trains per hour (TPH) frequency can truly be described as a turn-up-and-go service. It all really depends on the context, so it is worth exploring this idea a little further.

A fifteen-minute interval service operating between Gatwick Airport and London Victoria, or a thirty-minute service between London Euston and Manchester Piccadilly would both clearly qualify as turn-up-and-go services. Long distances are involved, journey times would exceed the maximum service interval by a considerable margin, and in many cases the journeys are probably not being made regularly by the same people. However, for the suburban network where journeys

distances are relatively low, both the frequency and the volume of journey trips are high, and journey times are typically less than 30-minutes in duration, it could be argued that a better definition of turn-up-and-go would be a regular ten-minute interval service.

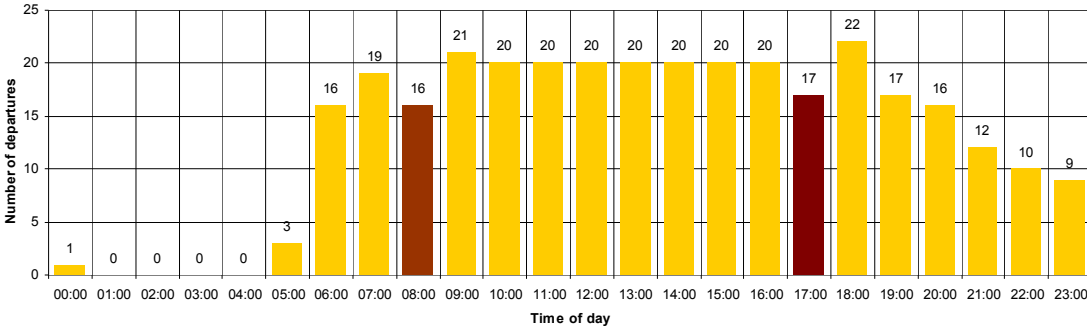
Furthermore, the turn-up-and-go services should operate along the same route in its entirety, and with the same stopping pattern (structured like the Underground), to qualify as a metro status. So, for example, 4 TPH between Sutton and West Croydon but with two continuing to London Victoria via Selhurst and two to London Victoria via Crystal Palace really comprises two routes at 30-minute intervals, not two at 15-minute intervals. Similarly, 4 TPH from Sutton to Victoria via Hackbridge with two trains stopping at Wandsworth Common and Battersea Park and two not stopping at those stations is really two services even though the same route.

It is very unlikely that even with route consolidation the existing infrastructure would facilitate a consistent regularised turn-up-and-go service at many stations in outer London. So now is the right time to consider new infrastructure (from relatively simple platform lengthening at Norwood Junction to enable easier cross-platform interchange, to high-cost tunnelling under south London to separate stopping and non-stopping services) to ensure many of these aspirations can be met.

Meeting peak demand is crucial, but could off-peak route consolidation help?

The RUS is all about dealing with capacity gaps relating to peak demand, but the strategy does not say how the minimum 4 trains-per-hour (TPH) service (or, more correctly perhaps as discussed above, maximum 15-minute service interval on all routes) is to be developed on the suburban network to match the Mayor of London's aspiration. This will require a railway that can deliver a consistent service across the day. As the peak periods are not just about running additional trains on all routes, but are also (unfortunately perhaps) about operating additional routes too, the idea that if the peak demand is met the off-peak will be fine is not absolutely convincing.

Figure 1: Total number of departures from Sutton station by hour of day (May 2009)



Source: National Rail Timetable

Arguably travel by rail across the highly intricate network of suburban south London would benefit from a consolidation in the number of routes operated. After all, if fewer routes were operated, more trains at higher frequency could run on the routes that remained. But how would this trade-off equate with the need (perceived or real) to run, for example, just one train in the morning peak from Guildford to London Bridge via Sutton as is currently the case. Despite such peak only services, there are fewer trains (if not seats) departing from Sutton during either the morning or evening peak than there are during the inter-peak (see Figure 1). It would be a pity if any enhancements to deliver benefits for the peak did not provide off-peak benefits as well.

So perhaps more emphasis should be placed on enabling an enhanced off-peak baseline service that can be operated throughout the day, but which, at the same time, could cope with the extra peak demand on top. Although this would require improvements at stations to facilitate improved connectivity and interchange, and perhaps alterations to track layouts, it would also ensure perhaps that the rail network would be able to more readily adapt to demographic changes, as well as become a more marketable entity.

Some thoughts on major infrastructure

The extent of the limitations in capacity on Sussex routes are evident from option E1 on page 91 of the RUS where it is noted that post the Thameslink Programme further trains to London Bridge would not be operationally viable without additional infrastructure.

In a further response to this capacity gap, option E3 notes that the construction of a new tunnel from outer London would create additional paths on Brighton Main Line. Clearly a tunnel would create these welcome new paths. But it is important to note, in support of this idea, that a tunnel would also facilitate a major enhancement to suburban services too in addition to creating more capacity for Gatwick and Brighton. Ideally, almost essentially, below surface stations at East Croydon and Clapham Junction (if that was the chosen route) would also be needed, as these locations may increasingly become less "by-passable" (given their strategic roles as both place and gateway). Including new stations underground would enable fast and semi-fast services to make full use of the tunnel and thereby allow stopping suburban services to make full and optimum use of the surface routes. Clearly ways of providing additional capacity at London Victoria and London Bridge would need to be considered too.

After the completion of the Crossrail project, tunnels could become the next big thing! There are many other rail bottlenecks across south London that could benefit from line segregation, and tunnelling could be the only real answer.

The Elephant and Castle corridor capacity gap cites the complexity required to lengthen platforms at stations along the section of route between Tulse Hill and Elephant and Castle, plus operational constraints due to crossing moves at Herne Hill. The construction of a tunnel under Herne Hill station (but with the inclusion of a sub-surface station at the site), either on the Thameslink or South Eastern axis, would provide greater capacity than platform extension, and the costs would be partially offset by there no longer being a requirement to extend platforms elsewhere. Although very expensive and disruptive it would be less costly perhaps than an alternative option of extending the London Underground Bakerloo line.

The area around Streatham junction would be another prime candidate for tunnelling, perhaps on the Streatham/Tooting line. Surprisingly, this appears not get mentioned in the RUS. If carried out in conjunction with tunnelling at Herne Hill, this area of south London could benefit from a significantly enhanced link, part orbital and part radial, that could reduce congestion on the Northern Line and, through interchange at Wimbledon, help connect south and west London. Again, an expensive option but not perhaps compared to Crossrail. It is debatable of course, but perhaps enhanced links like these in densely populated areas, that directly benefit Londoners, could also result in a greater reduction in local trips by car or even stem growth in car-ownership.

Summing up

As the London and South East RUS document notes, route utilisation strategies are all about establishing the most effective and efficient ways to use the capacity available across the network. The overall impression of the RUS document, however, is that only options that will help manage the emerging demand forecasts relating to predicted population growth are really being considered. Perhaps the approach now, fifteen years after the railways have been privatised and with changes to franchising on the horizon that could give rail operators a greater say in how services are run, there should a broader view to grow the railway in a way that looks beyond the peak hour requirement.

SRUF would like to see the RUS give more consideration to providing infrastructure that would benefit inter-peak travel as well as peak, and encourage rail use for urban journeys that perhaps would otherwise be taken by car. Rail could benefit from improved connectivity with bus, underground and tram services too. Although rail in London and the South East is a unique product in that it ensures vast numbers of people can get to and from work everyday, perhaps the concept of predict and provide is a bit outdated now. After all, only about 10 or 15 years ago it was still being predicted that rail numbers would continue fall. Rail, in common with all forms of public transport, needs to take the lead to grow the market but at the same time be more adaptable to changing circumstances. A railway that is more able to provide sufficient capacity in the morning peak *towards* an outer London metropolitan centre as well as *away from* it will be more adaptable to change. And it is that adaptability that is the key to efficient use of the capacity.

In many areas of south London there could be a considerable suppressed demand for rail services throughout the day. Peak service themselves present a distortion to running patterns which make national rail services far less marketable than, for example, those of London Underground or bus services. Although supplying the peak demand is the raison d'être for the railways (and over relatively long distances), concentrating on this aspect alone may not automatically guarantee that the off-peak services are optimised or offer the most efficient and effective railway, (especially given the complex network of services across south London). The RUS gives little indication of how a more regularised service, in terms of stopping patterns and service interval, can be accommodated in addition to the need to provide for the intra-urban market. Perhaps the idea that getting the peak right will help the inter-peak should be turned on its head, and instead ideas sought that provide infrastructure that serves a greatly enhanced off-peak service that could easily be adapted to any changes in peak demand. Costly infrastructure upgrades, far exceeding those suggested in the RUS, would almost certainly be needed to bring this about. But when talking about value for money, and effective, efficient railways (or urban transport) a good case over the longer term could be made.

Of course, in many ways, it is great news that there are so many issues around a growing railway. Despite rail fares increasing above inflation, people are making more trips by train now than for many decades (perhaps in part due to capacity issues on the road network, but also an improving railway). So it's nice to have the challenge!

In closing, the Sutton Rail User's Forum would like to express thanks and good wishes to the Stakeholder Management Group, Network Rail and its partners. It is clear that the final RUS, in whatever form it takes, will deliver an improving railway across London and the South East.