

Surrey Rail Strategy Draft – scrutiny response from London TravelWatch.

London TravelWatch is the statutory consumer watchdog representing transport users in and around London, including most rail services in, to and through Surrey.

The Surrey Rail Strategy is an important policy document to steer rail development in the County over the next few years. As such, in its' draft form the strategy has many laudable aims. However, it does in our view have a number of deficiencies, particularly in relation to accessibility, Community Rail Partnerships and the extension of smartcard technology.

Accessibility

The document refers to accessibility in quite a wide sense not just physical or technological accessibility for people with reduced mobility. It is noteworthy, that in the stakeholder engagement section, there was no reference to any consultation with groups representing disabled people. This would seem not to fulfil the four strategic wider objectives that the Council has set itself:-

- Growing a sustainable economy so that everyone can benefit
- Enabling a greener future
- Tackling health inequality
- Empowering communities

The Council is bound by a Public Sector Equality Duty, and would normally be expected to produce a Equalities Impact Assessment before deciding to proceed with a particular policy. In this case, we would recommend that consultation on the document should take place with groups representing disabled people to evaluate the proposals in the light of their lived experience.

In particular, we recommend that the strategy should look at prioritising step free access and interchange at key junction stations to enable passengers to travel within the county easily. Many of these stations are already fully step free, the exceptions are Effingham Junction (platform 1 towards London), Ash Vale (already proposed for step free access), Leatherhead (proposed for improvements), Dorking (Deepdene) and Hurst Green (where provision of pavements on the public road would enable easy interchange between platforms). Completing schemes at these locations would enable coherent and easy interchange between all of Surrey's major rail routes without necessarily needing to travel via interchange points outside of the county.

Secondly, we recommend that the county prioritises works at non-interchange stations where replacement of small numbers of steps by ramps and or additional side gates could be done at reasonable cost and without the necessity of ongoing maintenance costs that the provision of lifts entails. An example of this would be Woldingham platform 1 where four steps could be replaced by a ramp.

The county council also has the ability to significantly improve step free access to stations through its role as a highway authority and maintainer of footpaths. This is true of more rural stations where step free access to the platform might be available,

but on the roads / footpaths to the station pavements, dropped kerbs, hard surfaces and accessible bus stops may not exist.

These small measures would help achieve a network with much higher accessibility, enabling with reduced mobility a much greater scope to use the network in the same way as able bodied people and to make a choice to use public transport.

The strategy makes no reference to the other major barriers to rail use by people with reduced mobility; the platform train step-gap and tactile paving.

In the case of step-gaps some stations will have platforms which significantly differ from the national standard, and example of this Clapham Junction, not in Surrey but a key interchange journeys between points in Surrey, and on which this strategy also relies. Research for London TravelWatch¹ showed that for non-rail users perceptions of the step-gap are a major barrier to their taking up of rail journeys. This issue has become heightened in the coronavirus pandemic, because passengers are much less willing to use poles / stanchions on trains to aid their getting on and off, due to fears about virus transmission on surfaces. Any station enhancement schemes involving the County Council we recommend that opportunities are looked at to reduce the incidence of non-compliant step-gaps between trains and platforms.

Similarly, the provision of tactile paving at stations is nationally inconsistent, and particularly at suburban and rural stations where no platform enhancements have taken place which have allowed their installation. This is particularly dangerous for visually impaired people. Surrey County Council could when funding station projects ensure that where no tactile paving is currently installed that this is included in any project².

Both step-gap and tactile paving issues form a key component of the numbers of slips, trips and falls on the rail network which is the single largest cause of accidents involving passengers³.

Community Rail Partnerships

The strategy refers to the need to recover rail patronage in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic. It is clear from research by London TravelWatch and Transport Focus, that previous levels of commuting for work purposes will not return to the levels experienced in the pre-pandemic era⁴. However, the same research indicates that more travel is likely for leisure purposes, and if this to be sustainable growth this will need to be by public transport. Surrey's rail network is well placed to take advantage of this if services and their marketing are tailored to encourage this

¹ [Report Title \(londontravelwatch.org.uk\)](https://www.londontravelwatch.org.uk)

² [Report 01/2021: Person struck by a train at Eden Park station - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/news/transport/person-struck-by-a-train-at-eden-park-station)

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<https://www.bing.com/search?q=rssb+slips+trips+falls&form=ANNH01&refid=0b055011d880475389d8f052b6fe25b7&pc=U531&sp=-1&ghc=1&pq=rssb+slips+trips+falls&sc=1-22&qs=n&sk=&cvid=0b055011d880475389d8f052b6fe25b7>

⁴ [Week 36: Travel during Covid-19 survey - Transport Focus](https://www.transportfocus.co.uk/news/transport/week-36-travel-during-covid-19-survey) and [Checking in during lockdown in January - Transport User Community - Transport Focus](https://www.transportfocus.co.uk/news/transport/checking-in-during-lockdown-in-january)

market. The discretionary nature of this travel means that in our view a greater emphasis needs to be placed upon the role of Community Rail Partnerships in order to encourage this growth. These partnerships need to have strong links into the local business community and community groups such as those adopting local stations. Such groups have good records previously for encouraging passenger growth.

Surrey with its North Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and good links to London has significant potential to fulfil this type of activity.

Smartcard technology

The Strategy is unnecessarily dismissive of the aspirations of Spelthorne Borough Council to a modest extension of the Oyster / Contactless payment system used by Transport for London (TfL). It is our view that there are a number of benefits to agreeing to such an extension, notably encouraging modal shift to both bus and rail in this area, primarily because the majority of local bus services in Ashford (Surrey), Staines and Sunbury are provided by TfL, including ones serving the stations in those locations.

London TravelWatch recommends that Oyster / Contactless extension should be contemplated in two sections. Section one should be the inclusion of the Shepperton branch in Travelcard Zone 6 covering Kempton Park, Sunbury, Upper Halliford and Shepperton stations. Services on this route are of stopping nature and generally take longer for journeys into London than neighbouring lines. However, experience of incorporating the Caterham, Tattenham Corner and Epsom Downs branches into zone 6 in 2006 showed that in a similar situation to that of the Shepperton branch, additional passenger journeys can be generated by this from passengers who are more price and less time sensitive. This in turn would ease concerns about crowding on faster routes either side of the branch i.e Staines / Ashford and Esher / Walton-on-Thames. The Shepperton branch also has more capacity to absorb any growth easily.

Section two should incorporate Ashford in zone 7 or 8, and Staines in either zones 8 or 9. This would mitigate any potential revenue change away from paper based tickets. In addition, it would reduce the number of Penalty Fares issued at Staines to passengers travelling to Thorpe Park, who wrongly assume Oyster / Contactless is valid to Staines now.

London TravelWatch

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22nd February 2021.

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