Summary

- Elstree & Borehamwood is fundamentally reliant on the Thameslink for jobs and livelihoods.
- The scale of demand is significant with the 3.2 million journeys per year.
- The area has gridlocked traffic and Thameslink is the only mass-transit option for travelling to the city of London.
- The demand is growing with 9,000 new homes planned in the 15-year period from May 2018.
- The May 2018 disruption had a significant impact on E&B commuters.
- The impact is ongoing due to the July 2018 interim timetable, with key rush-hour services removed and half-hour gaps in the early-evening rush-hour. This particularly impacts commuters who have hard childcare deadlines.
- Govia Thameslink have a history of failure in delivering change to the service and we have lost all trust in their ability to deliver.
- I ask the transport select committee to establish the full extent of what went wrong, what can be done to prevent such a fiasco happening again, to establish how long the interim July 2018 timetable will be in-force for and when key rush-hour services will be restored.

About Elstree and Borehamwood – Total Reliance on Thameslink

Commuter Belt Town dependent on jobs in London

Elstree and Borehamwood (E&B) is a London commuter belt town in Hertfordshire of 37,065 residents (2011 census [1]). The population and the local economy are fundamentally dependent on jobs in London, which means that thousands of people absolutely have to commute to London every day in order to work. The Thameslink service is the only mass transit means of getting in London for thousands of these commuters. Additionally thousands of people earn in London and spend locally, which means that the Thameslink is not only vital for workers who commute but also for generating demand for the goods and services of non-commuting E&B workers.

Scale of Demand.

Every day, thousands of commuters travel south-bound into London to work and travel north-bound to return home. E&B is one of the busiest stations on the line experiencing 3.2 million journeys per year according to the office of rail regulation. This makes it one of the busiest 6.5% of rail stations in the country [2]. Despite this, E&B is treated by Thameslink as a low volume station, and it is normal to have 3-4 fast trains which skip E&B and travel directly from St Pancras to St Albans [3].

Thameslink is the only option

E&B has a very high level of road traffic congestion, especially during rush hours, with limited exits to major arterial routes, and with all exits carrying a single lane of traffic. This means that travel by bus or car to jobs in London is very difficult, especially when combined with school/childcare drop-offs and pick-ups. To illustrate the point, it can take 20 minutes to travel out of Borehamwood and reach...
the first intersection, Apex Corner in Mill Hill, 3.6 miles on the A1 Southbound. In 20 minutes the Thameslink, when it works, reaches St Pancras International which is 14 miles.

**Rapidly Growing**

E&B has experienced rapid population growth in recent years. This growth is set to continue with a large amount of development planned in the area: 9,000 new homes planned in the 15-year period from May 2018 according to the town council's planning portal [4], enough to significantly increase the population of the town. We expect therefore significant growth in demand for the Thameslink service from E&B rail station.

**Disruption is more than just inconvenience.**

The disruption to Thameslink services since the May 2018 Timetable change was not merely an inconvenience, it had a profound effect on the lives of E&B commuters. The disruption fundamentally affected people's ability to travel to their livelihoods and to return home to retrieve children from school and other childcare where no alternative means of transport is available. Since there is now a reduced service interim timetable in place, some of these effects are ongoing. Some workers have been unable to work as many hours as they can, leading to loss of income or career advancement opportunities. As a result of the disruption, some people actively sought out local jobs or jobs within driving distance, but these opportunities aren't available for everyone and usually involve reductions in take-home pay. Many people I spoke to reported increased levels of stress and anxiety.

In my own household the biggest impact of the disruption (and ongoing impact due to interim timetable) was on combining work and childcare. Childcare providers such as nurseries, childminders and after school clubs usually require children to be picked up by 6pm. Since May 2018, and with the interim timetable having a 30-minute gap leaving St Pancras between 5 and 5:30, we have to leave work well before 5pm to be able to retrieve children by 6pm. Many people will be caught in a trap between trying to perform at work and fetching children on time from childcare providers.

**Interim Timetable – Creation of new difficulties for E&B Commuters.**

The interim timetable introduced in July 2018 is meant to stabilise the route with reduced service. The stabilisation is of course welcome. But the reduction in service has hit E&B very hard, especially in comparison to other high-volume stations such as St Albans. The timetable includes significant reductions at rush hour [3]. These reductions not only reduce the options for E&B commuters to leave work and travel home at a time that suits them, but also mean that services running after long gaps are very busy. For example, between 17:03 and 17:33 there is no northbound service to E&B from St Pancras. For my wife and myself, catching the 17:03 means leaving work significantly before 5pm, but catching the 17:33 which arrives at E&B at 17:56 means missing childcare deadlines. Furthermore, a half-hour gap at rush-hour means that the 17:33 is more likely operating at capacity, with no seats available, limited standing room and some people simply unable to board the train. Given that until May 2018 there used to be 3 trains during this half hour period, the interim timetable disregard for the rush hour demand to E&B station is scandalous. There has been no clarification from Thameslink as to how long the interim timetable will be in-force for and on what timescale withdrawn rush-hour services will be reintroduced.

**Govia Thameslink – A history of failure**

The Thameslink service has had history of significant disruption since the GTR took over the Franchise in 2014. We believe that this is because GTR have a history of failing to conduct due
diligence before major change and a history of failing to recover from issues created by major change.

(1) In 2014, when GTR took over the franchise from First Capital Connect, there was a significant reduction in the service levels due to driver shortages. We now know that FCC had a hiring freeze in place since their franchise was not renewed, but GTR fundamentally failed to adequately highlight this issue during the due diligence of acquiring the franchise and failed to transition smoothly from FCC on day of the new service. After the FCC/GTR switchover there was an immediate and devastating reduction of reliability and service on the Thameslink route due to the driver shortage [5].

(2) The old Thameslink trains (class 319, class 377 and class 317) broke down frequently which caused acute disruption on the Thameslink. In private meetings, Thameslink bosses claimed that unreliability was worsened by the closure of the London Bridge route, but there is no public record available for this claim.

(3) The later than planned roll-out of new class 700 trains from 2017 onwards restored the level of performance of Thameslink to a far more acceptable level. In the months before the 2018 timetable roll-out, we had the highest level of Thameslink performance and reliability in years.

(4) However, in May 2018 Thameslink failed to deliver the new timetable and an immediate, devastating loss of performance was experienced by E&B commuters. This included delayed trains, cancelled trains and a completely lack of predictability.

(5) In July 2018 an interim timetable was rolled out, with significant cuts in service to E&B commuters, including during the morning and evening rush-hour. Whilst the service is now more reliable, it is also less frequent and with services which do run being significantly busier.

Conclusion

The Thameslink route is of vital importance to the residents of E&B. It is a key enabler of livelihoods for thousands of people, including not only commuters but also workers in the local economy who benefit from people who earn in London and spend locally. Disruption to the Thameslink route since May 2018 has meant disruption to jobs, livelihoods and family life. The July 2018 interim timetable, whilst increasing reliability, has cut many services from E&B including crucial rush-hour services and the 30-minute gap in the evening rush-hour is scandalous, hitting parents who need to retrieve children from childcare. Years of failure to deliver has meant that commuters have completely lost faith in GTR and it would be entirely appropriate for them to be stripped of the franchise if there are legal grounds within the Thameslink contract.

As a follow-up to this, I would be grateful if the Transport select committee could establish:

(1) Precisely why the roll-out of the May 2018 went so badly and establish what steps are to be taken to ensure that there is no recurrence of the fiasco.

(2) How long the interim July 2018 timetable will be in-force for, and

(3) When critical rush-hour services such as the 8:09 Southbound from Elstree & Borehamwood will be restored, as well as the services during the scandalous 30-minute gap between 17:00 and 17:30 in the evening rush-hour.

August 2018
References

[1] https://www5.hertsmere.gov.uk/democracy/documents/s31675/20140618AR07%20SocialElstreeBo
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[3] https://www.thameslinkrailway.com/-/media/goahead/gtr-all-timetables/interim-timetables-
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[4] https://www.hertsmere.gov.uk/Planning--Building-Control/Planning-Policy/Local-Plan/New-
Local-Plan-Planning-for-Growth.aspx.

that-went-wrong/