1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1.1 GTR’s 20 May Timetable for the East Coastway / Marshlink provides more services, more capacity and better strategic connections. It was well received by most passengers.

1.2 The new Timetable initially ran to schedule – but subsequently performance has been marred by increasing delays and cancellations.

1.3 The Timetable is particularly notable because it highlights the benefits of GTR’s positive approach to public consultation – and specifically GTR’s direct and detailed negotiations with local Rail User Groups (RUGs) over a long period.

1.4 GTR are now holding regular review meetings with the RUGs – providing a positive forum to address current problems and plan for the December Timetable.

1.5 The process of negotiating the new Timetable provides useful lessons about “what works and why” in relations between the rail industry and their customers. RUGs would be happy to assist the Committee further if required – including giving Oral Evidence.

2. WHO WE ARE - AND WHY WE ARE SUBMITTING EVIDENCE

2.1 Our Alliance comprises 6 RUGs representing rail users from Ashford International in the east to Normans Bay in the west – full organisational details are set out at the foot of this submission.

2.2 Our focus and expertise is specifically on how better rail services can support economic regeneration and build more prosperous communities. This area has lagged behind overall prosperity in the South East Region, and there are significant problems of social disadvantage.

2.3 Our Groups have worked together for a decade – building a reputation as “constructive partners” with the rail companies and authorities. The Groups include members with considerable knowledge and expertise in rail operations and public/private economic partnerships.

2.4 GTR’s invitation to participate fully in designing the new East Coastway / Marshlink Timetable was most welcome. We are particularly grateful to Phil Hutchinson (GTR Head of Strategic Planning) and his team for encouraging us to produce innovative ideas – and also to Department for Transport and Network Rail for approving the additional services. The constant support of our local MPs (Amber Rudd and Huw Merriman) has been invaluable.
2.5 Although our Groups’ membership only covers rail users on the eastern section of the East Coastway and Marshlink – i.e. all stations east of Eastbourne – our work has always focused on the entire routes to London Victoria and to Brighton because the problems and opportunities are firmly located in operational decisions taken at higher levels. The Timetable negotiations with GTR also focussed on these entire routes.

2.6 We are convinced that our experience of working so closely, and positively, with GTR can provide the Committee with important lessons for future relationships between rail companies and their customers.

3. THE NEW TIMETABLE PROVIDES IMPORTANT ECONOMIC AND COMMUNITY BENEFITS

3.1 The East Coastway / Marshlink comprises east-west services between Ashford International and Brighton – and services from coastal towns (Hastings and Eastbourne) to London Victoria. (The section between Hastings/Ore and Ashford International is not electrified and requires diesel units, a factor which constrains timetable design).

3.2 The new Timetable directly addresses unacceptable over-crowding by providing more trains and capacity between Hastings and Eastbourne – and also more capacity on trains between Eastbourne and Brighton.

3.3 The most important economic benefits will flow from the re-scheduled diesel service - which now connects all stations from Eastbourne through to Ashford International, where re-timed connections onto Javelin high speed services enable much faster journey times to London St Pancras. Access to Eurostar services for Brussels and Paris is now more reliable.

3.4 GTR’s original plan was to cut back the direct Brighton-Ashford International (diesel) service to Hastings. But this would have removed direct links from (a) Eastbourne, Bexhill and St Leonards to Ashford International, and (b) Ashford International and Rye to Eastbourne. Accordingly the RUGs – supported by key local stakeholders – proposed instead a diesel service from Eastbourne to Ashford International. GTR quickly accepted both the operational feasibility and the strategic advantages – and this route is now a key feature of the new Timetable.

3.5 Eastbourne is thought to be the most likely terminus for the High Speed project now being planned to connect East Sussex coastal towns to St Pancras. So the new diesel route will build confidence and usage – providing that current operating problems are resolved.

4. THE TIMETABLE INITIALLY RAN WELL – BUT IS NOW SUFFERING PROBLEMS

4.1 In the early weeks from 20 May the Timetable ran largely as scheduled – clearly demonstrating its technical and operational feasibility.
4.2 But more recently operational problems are causing significant delays and cancellations. These problems are increasing and becoming a major concern for the Eastbourne-Ashford International service (see para 4.3). Reliability of services from the coast to Victoria is also suffering (see para 4.4). We differentiate between these sets of problems because their contexts are different.

4.3 Service announcements attribute the Eastbourne-Ashford International problems mainly to “shortage of train crew”, “a fault on this train”, and “more trains than usual needing repair”. This strategic route currently provides only an hourly 2-car service. Cancelled trains consign all passengers to unacceptable 60 minutes delays – and likely over-crowding. RUGs have considerable evidence of the hardship now being caused for passengers travelling for both work and leisure. Regrettably the credibility of this key service is now coming under threat.

4.4 Services to Victoria – which run along the busy Brighton Main Line – have had journey times lengthened in the new Timetable, and it has not been possible to add more capacity to address often severe over-crowding. In compensation passengers were promised that trains would run on time. But on many days this promise has not been delivered. Infrastructure failings and crewing problems have caused cancellations and delays. Hastings and Bexhill have only one hourly service to Victoria (which also serves Gatwick) – so any cancellations cause massive personal problems for passengers. Despite our urging – and constructive suggestions - GTR have not yet solved the infuriating situation whereby late running “down” services are prematurely terminated at Eastbourne, leaving Bexhill and Hastings passengers with a 2-hours service gap.

4.5 RUGs are now strongly pressing GTR to address these critical problems very urgently. MPs are now becoming involved as passenger frustrations mount.

5. WHAT ARE THE KEY LESSONS WHICH COULD BE REPLICATED ELSEWHERE

5.1 Despite the current problems our core message to the Committee is a positive one. A new Timetable – and in this case a very innovative new Timetable – CAN work well from the outset. But in our experience this happy outcome will be much more likely to occur if three critical factors are firmly in place. Take any of these away and the East Coastway / Marshlink Timetable, could not deliver the local advantages which, we earnestly hope, are now in prospect.

Critical Factor One –GTR’s Timetable was Designed Jointly with Rail Customers

5.2 GTR’s decision to accept the RUGs’ radical proposal for a new Eastbourne-Ashford International “all stations” service – and in consequence increasing from 3 to 4 the trains per hour between Eastbourne and Hastings – was taken in July 2017. From then until February 2018 GTR and the RUGs were in continual direct negotiations to identify and test all operational details of the emerging new schedules. So customer expectations were directly linked with operational realities.
As a result GTR were able to present DfT with well-defined and clearly costed May 2018 plans for East Coastway / Marshlink.

Critical Factor Two – Willingness to Trust and Implement a Radical, Innovative Timetable

5.3 The May 2018 Timetable required massive national planning and detailed local preparation – a context normally unhelpful for radical innovations which can be decently avoided or deferred. But instead the rail industry at all levels (GTR, DfT, Network Rail) made space to understand the potential advantages and ensured that their own actions worked together to approve the proposed East Coastway / Marshlink Timetable with no exceptions. This outcome reinforces the importance of Critical Factor One – but also reflects well on the willingness of senior rail authorities to trust and take forward initiatives originating from their local customer base.

Critical Factor Three – Recognising the Importance of Performance Review

5.4 This submission has already emphasised that despite careful planning and a successful launch the East Coastway / Marshlink Timetable has already suffered operational setbacks. And most of these problems were already visible under the previous Timetable. Accordingly it is very significant that both GTR and the RUGs quickly highlighted the need for regular joint performance reviews. The first review was on 25 June – the next will be on 11 September. It is already clear that this forum is well placed to (a) identify and address current service problems, (b) find agreement on any Timetable changes for December, and (c) very importantly provide an ongoing link with GTR to pursue long-standing issues such as capacity on services to Gatwick and Victoria.

5.5 Having been so involved in the Timetable process the Hastings & Rother Rail Users Alliance would be pleased to assist the Committee’s Inquiry further – including, if invited, to give Oral Evidence - if that could help increase understanding about “what works and why” in relationships up and down the “rail chain”.

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