Written evidence submitted by SHRIMP (St Leonards & Hastings Rail Improvement Programme (RTC0067))

SUBMISSION : GTR TIMETABLE REVIEW
SHRIMP welcomes the opportunity to participate in this review. Formed in 2010 to give Hastings’ rail users a voice within the industry, our aim is to work to improve rail connectivity and reap the associated economic regeneration. Within this process we have attended numerous meetings with industry groups, MPs, and TOCs.

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 MP Amber Rudd has been invaluable.

We consider that participating in these submissions is a vital part of the on-going process.

IN SUMMARY:
GTR’s 20 May 2018 Timetable for the East Coastway / Marshlink was designed by user groups & GTR representatives to provide extra capacity & service provision. It was well received by most passengers. (Contrary to other parts of the GTR network) the new East Coastway Timetable ran to schedule in the early period, but subsequently performance has deteriorated.

The Timetable derives from GTR’s positive approach to public consultation. This was well received by GTR who publicly hailed the detailed negotiations with local Rail User Groups (RUGs) over a long period as constructive.

GTR are now holding quarterly review meetings with SHRIMP and other RUGs, providing a forum to address current problems and plan for the December 2018 Timetable. In accordance with the previous atmosphere of inter-cooperation, the next meeting has been rearranged to address new issues.

THE NEW TIMETABLE PROVIDES IMPORTANT ECONOMIC AND COMMUNITY BENEFITS
The East Coastway comprises east-west services between Ashford and Eastbourne (previously to Brighton), which is colloquially known as Marshlink. The section between Hastings/Ore and Ashford is not electrified, thus requiring diesel-powered units, a factor which constrains timetable design.

Vital services from the coastal towns between Hastings and Eastbourne to London Victoria are also operational.

The new Timetable directly addresses over-crowding by providing more trains and capacity between Hastings and Eastbourne together with more capacity and a balanced frequency for trains between Eastbourne and Brighton.

Crucial to the anticipated economic benefits is the re-scheduled diesel service, which now connects all stations from Eastbourne through to Ashford where re-timed connections onto Javelin High Speed services enable much faster journey times from East Sussex to London St Pancras.

An original TOC plan to reduce the Marshlink to a Hastings <-> Ashford service would have removed direct links from Eastbourne, Bexhill and St Leonards to Ashford. The direct connectivity between Ashford and Rye to Eastbourne would also have been lost. Accordingly the RUGs, supported by many key local stakeholders, proposed an alternative diesel service from Eastbourne to Ashford. GTR quickly accepted both the feasibility and the strategic advantages; this route is now a key feature of the new Timetable.
Eastbourne is a potential terminus for the High Speed project now being planned to further connect East Sussex coastal towns to St Pancras. So the new diesel route will build confidence and usage, on the clear provision that current operating problems are resolved.

THE TIMETABLE INITIALLY RAN WELL.....
In the early weeks from 20 May the Timetable ran largely as scheduled, clearly demonstrating its technical and operational feasibility.

Recently there have been increasing frequencies of operational problems which are causing significant, sequential delays and cancellations. These problems are becoming a major concern for the Eastbourne-Ashford service, further exasperated by the service’s limited capacity. The key necessity of public confidence is being lost.

Reliability of services from the East Sussex coast to Victoria is also suffering, but the reasons are separate from those on Marshlink.

Public announcements on Marshlink refer 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, with some smaller stations receiving only a 2 hourly frequency. Cancelled trains consign all passengers to unacceptable delays and considerable over-crowding. RUGs have considerable evidence of the hardship now being caused for passengers from all social backgrounds. Unfortunately the credibility of this key service is coming under threat with pictorial evidence of passengers being left on platforms.

Services to Victoria which run along the busy Brighton (or preferably Sussex) Main Line have had journey times lengthened in the new Timetable. This was accepted by the RUGs on the understanding that passengers would receive a more reliable & comfortable journey. In reality the service has got worse with increased overcrowding resulting from reduced carriage supply. Important connections are missed.

SHRIMP and other regional groups are strongly pressing GTR to address these critical problems very urgently. MPs are now becoming involved as passenger frustrations mount.
WHAT ARE THE KEY LESSONS WHICH COULD BE REPLICATED ELSEWHERE?

Whilst there are afore-noted issues, our core message to the Committee is a very positive one. It has been shown that a well thought out timetable can have benefits. But the time-table is not a stand-alone solution and other sectors of the TOC have let it down. Lessons here need to be learned.

GTR’s decision to accept the proposal for a new Eastbourne-Ashford “all stations” service and increasing the service frequency 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. Crucial elements such as services for school children were identified. As a result GTR were able to present DfT with well-defined and clearly costed May 2018 plans for East Coastway / Marshlink.

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 what could be achieved on East Coastway / Marshlink and ensured that their own actions coincided to approve the proposed Timetable with no exceptions. Good team work, if all the participants are talking to each other and cooperating to the same end.

This submission has already emphasised that despite careful planning and a successful launch the East Coastway / Marshlink Timetable has already suffered operational setbacks. It is discomforting to note that these have increased since mid-July when the TOC attention may have been deflected. It is also concerning that most of these problems were well known under the previous Timetable, thus suggesting that valuable and key lessons are either not being learned, or the knowledge is not being transferred when appropriate. Thus 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, having been brought forward to reflect the increasing seriousness of the service failures. 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.

Having been so involved in the Timetable process thus far, SHRIMP, in conjunction with other groups, 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” then further positive progress will be made which will be valuable across the whole UK rail network.

The process of negotiating the new Timetable has provided very useful information about a number of practices. We will be willing to go into more detail in a different methodology.

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