



Alton Line Users' Association

39 years serving users of Alton, Bentley, Farnham, Aldershot and Ash Vale stations

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Response to draft Surrey Rail Strategy Document

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1 Introduction

Alton Line Users Association (ALUA) is a Rail User Group (RUG) promoting the interests of passengers using Alton, Bentley, Farnham, Aldershot and Ash Vale stations. Although only two of these stations (Farnham and Ash Vale) lie within the boundaries of Surrey, any changes to rail service in Surrey will impact all services on the line.

ALUA welcomes the publication of the draft Surrey Rail Strategy, and are pleased to see Surrey County Council taking positive steps towards developing rail policy. We are, however, disappointed that local Rail User Groups were not identified as key stakeholders and were not consulted during the development of the strategy.

In our response, we focus on the key issues and proposals that affect users of the Alton Line. Consequently, the Brighton Main Line is largely out of scope, however the South West Main Line (SWML), North Downs Line and Windsor Lines all have significant interaction with the Alton Line, as do many of the proposed Network-Wide options.

2 Response to Individual Options

2.1 South West Main Line Capacity

ALUA agree that lack of capacity on the South West Main Line (SWML) is one of the most fundamental issues affecting rail travel in Surrey.

This lack of capacity prohibits any increase in frequency on the Alton line in the peaks, resulting in morning peak trains from Alton to Waterloo being some of the most overcrowded in the country.

With additional housing being built in Alton, Aldershot, Deepcut and Ash, the level of crowding is only going to get worse, and more capacity is desperately needed.

ALUA support the existing committed schemes for train lengthening, particularly the increase of train lengths to Alton in the evening peak, where all but one train is 8 car, when 12 cars are really needed.

ALUA would support SCC in lobbying for infrastructure changes that would result in more network capacity on the SWML, particularly grade-separation of Woking Junction and remodelling of Waterloo and its approaches.

ALUA also supports the development of Crossrail 2 and the diversion of inner-suburban services through the new line, to provide additional capacity for long distance and outer-suburban services. We would also support proposals to accelerate the implementation of Crossrail 2 from the 2030s to 2026, as with demand for rail travel continuing to grow, it is likely there will be a significant capacity gap before then.

We are however disappointed that the option to provide an extra track between Hampton Court Jn and Clapham Junction has been rejected without further consideration. Should Crossrail 2 not come to fruition, or if it takes a significantly different form to that currently proposed, it would be worth having a fully developed business case for other options to provide an alternative means of meeting the capacity gap.



Conclusion: ALUA would support any and all options to increase capacity on the South West Main Line, including Crossrail 2.

However, Crossrail 2 should not be considered a cure-all, and detailed business cases for all other options should be produced, with a combination of the most beneficial options implemented.

Any extra capacity released should be utilised as efficiently as possible, we would particularly like to see it used to improve frequencies and journey times on trains to Alton, where there is already a significant capacity gap.

2.2 Access To Guildford (Direct Alton-Guildford Trains & Park Barn Station)

ALUA strongly supports the proposal to introduce 2 direct trains per hour between Alton and Guildford. This would not only provide better access to Guildford, but would also improve links between Alton, Farnham and Aldershot, taking pressure off the A31.

We do, however, feel that this proposal is only practical if it includes re-doubling of the entire line between Alton and Farnham. Any stretch of single line would act as a bottleneck and increase the risk of trains being delayed awaiting a path.

Re-doubling the entire line could also provide benefits to the existing Alton-London Waterloo service, journey times could be improved by removing pathing allowances and the extra capacity would provide more flexibility to fit freight trains around the passenger service, without having to curtail trains at Farnham.

A double track would also provide capacity for future reinstatement of the rail service between Bentley and the Whitehill-Bordon eco-town and any future re-opening of the lines south from Alton.

Conclusion: ALUA would support the proposal to confirm the business case for improved Alton-Guildford services and lobby for them to be included in the next South Western franchise specification, but this must include complete re-doubling of Farnham to Alton. ALUA also support the opening of a new 'Park Barn' station in Guildford.

2.3 Re-opening of Sturt Lane Chord

ALUA acknowledge the current poor rail access to Frimley and Camberley, and that there is a need to improve journey times between these stations and London.

However, we have concerns about the proposed option of re-opening the Sturt Lane Chord to connect the Ash Vale-Frimley line with the South Western Main Line.

Specifically:

- As stated in the report, there is currently no capacity on the SWML for additional services towards London. Although some capacity may be released by the measures discussed above (particularly Crossrail 2), it is not clear whether direct services between Frimley/Camberley and London would be the most effective use of this capacity. The benefits should be weighed against the benefits of using the additional capacity to provide more frequent trains on other already overcrowded routes with proven demand (such as to Alton and Basingstoke).
- The report states that, to prevent Down trains having to cross the 4 tracks of the SWML on the level, a grade separated flyover or tunnel would be required.

Fig 17 in the document does not show any proposal for this flyover/tunnel nor is it clear whether the £75m quoted cost includes this.

Any such flyover or tunnel would require a new right-of-way and have a significant footprint, likely impacting buildings beside the SWML and requiring an additional bridge across Sturt Road. Further detail on the route and impact of the flyover/tunnel is required before this option can be evaluated.

- The document makes no mention of the impact on existing services between Aldershot and Ascot. These services are used by commuters, students and patients at Frimley Park Hospital so would need to be retained alongside new direct services to London.
- To make best use of capacity on the SWML, any new services would need to run with 12 coaches during the peaks. The platforms at Frimley, Camberley and Bagshot would all require lengthening to take 12 car trains, but no mention is made of this in the report.

The report does mention a short to medium term intention to investigate ways of improving journey times between Frimley/Camberley and London.

At present the connections at Ash Vale are extremely poor, especially in the evening peak where connecting passengers often have a 29 minute wait.

Passengers travelling between Alton/Farnham and Frimley/Camberley also have to wait 25 minutes for connections most of the day (more time than it would take to drive!)

ALUA would support any attempt by SCC to lobby South West Trains to modify the timetable to improve connection times between Alton-Waterloo and Aldershot-Ascot trains at Ash Vale. Any resulting timetable change should be aimed at improving journey times between Alton/Farnham and Frimley/Camberley as well as between Frimley/Camberley and London. It should not, however, be allowed to impact on journey times between Alton and Waterloo. These were already increased significantly in 2004 and any further increase would discourage passengers from using rail for off-peak travel.

Consideration should also be given to improving the interchange facilities at Ash Vale. At present the station has no step free access between platforms and is unstaffed for most of the day. The steep staircases make interchange a challenge even for able-bodied passengers, especially those with luggage or bicycles.

Conclusion: ALUA considers the best short-term solution for improving journey times to Frimley & Camberley would be to lobby SWT for timetable changes (providing these changes are not to the detriment of existing services). SCC should also lobby SWT and Network Rail for improved facilities at Ash Vale, particularly step-free interchange between platforms.

Although the Sturt Lane Curve option should be considered, the business case would have to clearly demonstrate that it was the most effective use of available capacity on the SWML, and that changes to services would not adversely affect existing travel patterns.

2.4 North Downs Line

Many users of the Alton line also make use of the North Downs Line (NDL) for access to Reading, Guildford and Gatwick Airport.



ALUA would therefore support any proposals to improve services on the route, which has always been somewhat of a 'poor relation' when compared with South West Trains routes in the area.

ALUA would support SCC's proposal to lead the development of an NDL improvement project which includes electrification and general upgrading.

There are a number of specific elements which we'd like to see included within this project:

Interchange at Ash

Ash station is currently serviced by 2tph Ascot-Guildford but only 1tph on the Reading-Guildford line (with only some of these extending to Gatwick Airport).

It serves as a key interchange for passengers travelling between Alton/Farnham/Aldershot and Reading, however the interchange facilities are poor and the level crossing provides a major obstacle for passengers changing platforms.

We would like to see more services on the Reading-Guildford route stop at Ash to provide more journey opportunities and shorter connection times. This would be especially beneficial if the proposed Alton-Guildford direct service goes ahead.

We would also like to see a footbridge provided so that passengers can change platforms without having to use the level crossing (reducing the risk of them missing a connection due to the barriers being down). This could easily be implemented as a separate project well ahead of any major improvement project.

Interchange between North Camp and Ash Vale

The short walking interchange between North Camp and Ash Vale provides scope for many journey opportunities between Alton/Farnham/Frimley/Camberley and Reading/Guildford/Gatwick.

However, this interchange is poorly advertised and the interchange route is poor, particularly due to the lack of step-free access at Ash Vale station and the level crossing at North Camp.

ALUA would like to see step-free access between platforms and street level at Ash Vale, an improved walking route between Ash Vale and North Camp stations (with wider pavements and improved direction signage) and a footbridge at North Camp to reduce the risk of passengers missing connections due to the level crossing barriers being down.

Again, some elements of this could easily be implemented ahead of any major improvement project.

We would also like to see the interchange better advertised, on timetables and via station and on-train announcements, as many passengers are not even aware that it is possible or allowed by the ticketing rules.

Frequency & Journey times

In evenings and on Sundays, only 1 train per hour is provided between Reading and Guildford in either direction, with an even lower frequency running to Gatwick Airport.

As many of the passengers will be connecting to/from other trains at Reading/Gatwick/Guildford, or to/from flights at Gatwick, this can lead to long waits for connecting trains and provide a major disincentive to rail use.

We would like to see all principal stations on this route (particularly Ash and North Camp) receive a minimum 2tph service all day every day, to increase the number of journey opportunities.



Conclusion: ALUA would support any proposals for improvements on the North Downs Line which would increase the number of journey opportunities for passengers travelling from the Alton Line to Guildford/Gatwick/Reading.

However, there are currently major problems with the interchanges at Ash Vale-North Camp and at Ash which could be addressed in advance of any major improvement project.

2.5 Access to Airports

ALUA is disappointed that, with the abandonment of the full AirTrack proposal, there are no active proposals to improve rail access to Heathrow Airport from South West Surrey.

Proposals such as AirTrack Lite or light rail to Heathrow would require additional changes at Staines and would not be competitive with road for journeys between Farnham/Woking/Guildford/Camberley etc and Heathrow.

A far better option would be for SCC to investigate ways of overcoming the obstacles which derailed the original AirTrack scheme and resurrect proposals for direct trains between Woking/Guildford/Ascot and Heathrow.

This could include funding the replacement of level crossings with bridges/underpasses, which would also provide wider benefits to residents and business in the area.

As a short term option, we would also like to see SCC lobby for improvements to the existing RailAir coach service between Woking and Waterloo.

Although this service is integrated with the National Rail ticketing system and journey planners, fares are comparatively high and there are no discounts for railcard holders.

The current unpredictability of journey times at peak hours could be reduced by implementing additional bus priority measures (which would also benefit other local bus services).

Rail access to Gatwick is largely affected by constraints on the North Downs Line (see above).

Extending all trains on the line to Gatwick, improving journey times and frequencies and improving the interchange at North Camp/Ash Vale would all benefit passengers travelling to Gatwick.

Conclusion: ALUA would like to see SCC work with BAA, NR and SWT to revive the original proposal of direct trains from Woking and Guildford to Heathrow, with a view to overcoming the obstacles which caused the project to be abandoned.

ALUA would also like to see SCC work with SWT and National Express to improve the Woking-Heathrow RailAir bus service.

Finally, SCC should work with the DfT, NR and FGW to implement improvements on the North Downs Line to improve access to Gatwick, as detailed elsewhere in this document.

2.6 Station Access Improvement Programme

It is clear that there is a need to improve access to stations by foot, bicycle and public transport.

ALUA would support SCC's proposal to investigate and improve access to rail stations, particularly those that encourage people to leave their car at home.



Though car parking capacity does need enhancing at many stations, it is clear that there will be a point where it is no longer possible to provide additional capacity at an acceptable cost.

We would particularly like to see SCC focus on proposals that provide a greater public transport benefit, e.g. compelling bus companies to provide more frequent services to rail stations, provide adequate services at evenings and weekends and maintain connections with rail services.

There are also a number of 'quick win' solutions that could be easily implemented at minimal cost, e.g. improving pedestrian access to stations with changes to road layouts, adding pedestrian crossings or providing additional station exits to reduce journey times on foot to nearby homes/businesses.

We would like to see SCC consult with local stakeholders to identify these quick wins and implement them as soon as possible.

Conclusion: ALUA would support any proposals by SCC to improve access to stations by foot/cycle/public transport. This should include identifying 'quick win' options that can be implemented in the short term, to reduce pressure on station car parking.

2.7 Station Facilities Improvement Programme

Over recent years, Train Operating Companies have made several attempts to cut station staff and several stations in Surrey have had their staffing hours reduced as a result.

While unstaffed, facilities such as waiting rooms and toilets cannot be used, resulting in an insecure and unpleasant waiting environment for passengers.

Passengers are also unable to get detailed information about tickets, having to rely solely on ticket vending machines. This results in many being overcharged, or simply abandoning rail travel as they cannot fathom out the complex ticket restrictions.

ALUA are disappointed that Surrey County Council failed to effectively block these staff reductions at the time they were originally proposed, and would support any proposals by SCC to set a minimum standard for staffing in future franchises.

Ideally, this minimum should include a manned booking office at all times that trains are running, 7 days a week. Where provided, waiting rooms and toilets should be open from start to end of service.

We would also like to see better provision of step-free access at stations and the provision of footbridges at all stations where currently the only means of crossing the track is via a level crossing (e.g. North Camp and Ash).

Conclusion: ALUA would support any SCC proposals to revert recent station staffing cuts and to ensure that stations are adequately staffed and that high quality facilities are made available for passengers at all times of day.

2.8 Standard Service Specification

ALUA would support the introduction of a Standard Service Specification for services between stations in Surrey and key destinations.



The ultimate aim of this should be to provide a turn-up-and-go service for most journeys, but as a minimum should include:

- Provision of 2tph to key destinations, 7 days a week. At present many routes have only 1tph in the evenings and on Sundays, which discourages passengers from using rail services, especially on journeys that require a connection. Where capacity allows, the minimum service requirement should be increased to 4tph, to provide a truly 'turn up and go' service.
- Reversal of the off-peak journey time increases that took place in 2004 (especially those which added an extra 10mins to all trains between London Waterloo and Alton).
- Requirements for first and last trains to London and other key destinations which should apply 7 days a week. The first train to London should arrive no later than 7am on weekdays, 7:30am on weekends and the last train should leave no earlier than midnight, 7 days a week.

Given that some of these improvements could already be achieved with minimal timetable changes, we would like to see SCC lobby SWT for these improvements in frequencies and journey times as part of their short-term strategy.

We would also like to see the Minimum Service Specification include a requirement to provide a certain number of seats at given times of day. At present, many off-peak and weekend trains are too short to meet demand as they approach the London area, leading to passengers having to stand.

Conclusion: ALUA would support the development of a Standard Service Specification, but would like to see SCC lobby for improved frequencies and journey times as soon as possible.

2.9 Rail Improvements to Support Developments

ALUA are particularly concerned at the potential impact that the proposed housing developments in Surrey will have on demand for rail services, particularly those in Aldershot, Ash and Deepcut.

Many of the people living in these new developments will not be employed locally and will need to commute by rail. With train services in the area already running at capacity during the peaks, it is clear that this demand cannot be met by existing services

We are particularly concerned that many of these developments are already underway, or will commence shortly, yet any potential rail improvements are many years way and have no concrete funding. It is unlikely that the few existing committed train lengthening schemes will be able to meet this demand.

We believe that developments should only be permitted when there is spare transport capacity to meet additional demand, and that funding for additional capacity improvements should come from the developers who would benefit from the new housing, and central government who are setting the targets for additional house building.

Conclusion: ALUA would like to see the level of development in Surrey and surrounding counties kept at a level where additional demand can be accommodated by the existing



transport provision. SCC should compel developers and lobby central government to provide the funding required for capacity increases to support additional demand.

2.10 Demand Management Intervention

The strategy paper proposes a number of possible options that could be employed to encourage passengers to travel on less-busy trains, allowing infrastructure improvements to be delayed. This would require changes to the fare structure to penalise passengers who travel on the busiest trains.

ALUA are strongly opposed to any change that would result in higher fares for passengers, or any increase in the complexity of the ticketing structure.

We believe that fares should provide value-for-money and should be clear and transparent. A passenger should be able to determine exactly how much their journey should cost in advance and the number of different ticket types for each route should be as minimal as possible.

Experience has shown that changes to the fare structure are almost inevitably biased against the passenger (e.g. the introduction of Super Off Peak tickets, which significantly increased fares for passengers wishing to arrive in London before 12noon on a weekday, or depart from London in the evening peak).

We would much rather see infrastructure and service improvements funded by efficiency savings in the DfT, Network Rail and the Train Operating Companies.

We are also concerned that this proposal is based on an invalid assumption; that passengers who could travel on quieter trains currently choose not to do so.

In practice, many commuters have no choice over which trains they use, as their travel patterns are determined solely by the requirements of their employer, most of whom remain wedded to a 9-5 working day.

There is no need to provide any financial incentive to encourage passengers to travel on shoulder peak or off-peak trains, those who have this choice already do so simply because there will be more seats available and provide a more pleasant travelling environment. Financial incentives would be better targeted at employers, to encourage them to institute flexible hours for staff and more remote working. However, there will be many industries (e.g. retail, education) where the standard 9-5 working hours are unlikely to change.

ALUA do support proposals for more flexible season tickets aimed at passengers with part-week commuting patterns, as well as the TOCs being obliged to provide more information on crowding levels, so that passengers can make an informed choice in advance of their journey.

Conclusion: ALUA strongly oppose any proposals which attempt to reduce demand on peak trains by increasing fares, introducing additional time restrictions or increasing the complexity of the fare structure.

We do support proposals that would extend the benefits of season tickets to passengers who do not commute every day of the week.

2.11 Clapham Interchange

ALUA agree that there is significant demand for improved connections at Clapham Junction, given its status as a transport hub for South West London.

We would support any proposal to stop additional trains at the station, as long as it does not impact significantly on journey times to/from Waterloo.

Although we acknowledge that major infrastructure work is required to allow more peak time trains to stop (due to capacity constraints on the SWML), there is clearly scope to stop more off-peak trains (such as those from Alton, only half of which currently call).

If a solution could be found to allow trains to safely call at Platform 8 (the Up Main) rather than Platform 7 (the Up Loop, which has a much slower approach speed), then even more trains could be stopped without increasing the journey time penalty or reducing the capacity of the line.

Conclusion: ALUA support proposals to stop more trains at Clapham, but would also like to see SCC lobby SWT and NR to stop more off-peak trains in the short-term, and to investigate options for bringing Platform 8 back into use.

3 Other Comments & Concerns

After evaluating the report, we feel there are a number of areas that have been neglected or require further detail:

3.1 Schemes outside Surrey

Although the report tries to identify the key issues affecting rail services within Surrey, it fails to consider the impact of rail issues outside the county boundaries which would impact Surrey residents.

Key issues that are not covered in detail by the report include:

Access to Basingstoke, Winchester and Southampton

Basingstoke, Winchester and Southampton are major employment and leisure destinations for residents of Surrey, however to access them from Farnham, Guildford, Camberley etc requires doubling back via Woking or Reading, greatly increasing journey times.

Consideration should be given to improving direct access between key population centres in Surrey and these towns in Hampshire.

Whitehill Bordon rail link.

There have been a number of recent proposals to re-open the rail link between Bentley and Bordon as part of the development of the Whitehill-Bordon Eco-Town.

Although the link itself would be entirely in Hampshire, it would definitely have a significant effect on rail services to Farnham, as well as other routes in Surrey, yet the report makes no mention of this scheme.

It would be prudent for Surrey and Hampshire County Councils to liaise and come up with a joint strategy regarding this proposed line, along with all other proposed schemes which affect both counties.

Long Distance Cross-Country Services

Surrey currently has very few direct services to the Midlands and North. Apart from a couple

of trains per day to Guildford, most long distance journeys require changes at Reading or crossing London.

SCC should consider investigating options which will allow re-introduction of frequent long distance services from Guildford and Gatwick Airport to Oxford, Birmingham and beyond.

3.2 Rail Freight

The report focuses entirely on passenger rail services, with no regard paid to the potential for rail freight improvements.

Shifting more freight onto rail reduces lorry movements, improving capacity on the roads, providing a better environment for residents and reducing the cost of highway maintenance.

We would like to see SCC assess the impact on rail freight of all of the proposed schemes, to ensure that they provide adequate capacity for existing freight services, along with room for growth of new freight flows.

They should also assess whether there are opportunities to improve capacity for passenger services by reducing the capacity impact of existing rail freight services (e.g. by electrification or signalling improvements).

Finally, SCC should look at encouraging local businesses to switch existing and new freight flows to rail, to reduce lorry movements. This could even be included as a planning requirement (e.g. a request to carry out aggregate extraction should come with an obligation to move extracted stone by rail).

Should Alton-Farnham be re-doubled to support additional Alton-Guildford trains, there would be an opportunity to transfer freight flows from the Alton Materials Recovery Facility (which is immediately adjacent to the existing oil rail freight facility) to rail, removing 300 lorry movements per week from the A31 through Farnham.

3.3 Evaluation of Actions

The actions in the plan are all in the format 'support', 'engage with', 'lobby for', 'take the lead on,' etc. There are very few concrete actions that progress can be assessed against. We would like to see a list of clear tangible goals that SCC hope to accomplish, the steps they plan to take to achieve them, and the criteria that they can be assessed against so that the council can be held to account if it fails to meet them.

3.4 Timescales

Many of the actions propose lobbying the DfT to include rail improvement schemes in the next South Western franchise agreement. However, Stagecoach South West Trains have recently had their current franchise extended to April 2019, which means that it would therefore take a minimum of 6 years before any of these changes could be implemented. Given the current level of rail passenger growth and the scale of proposed housing development in Surrey, it is likely that there will be a significant capacity gap well before then.



We would like to see SCC liaising with SWT, Network Rail and DfT to reach agreement on implementing some of these improvements within the timeframe of the existing Stagecoach SWT franchise.

There is precedent for major infrastructure and capacity changes during a franchise, e.g. electrification of the Great Western route, which was confirmed well after the start of First Group's current franchise.

There are also many 'quick win' schemes which could be implemented much sooner, if funding was available. These could include improvements to station staffing and facilities, adjustments to timetables to improve journey times and frequencies, and small infrastructure changes that could allow modest increases in capacity.

Finally, there is no reason why schemes which require development of a business case (e.g. direct Alton-Guildford trains) could not be progressed immediately if the business case was strong and funding could be sourced.

3.5 Funding

We are concerned that this report does little to identify potential sources of funding for these schemes, or evaluate the likelihood of such funding becoming available.

We would like to see SCC do more detailed analysis of the costs of the schemes and lobby central government for greater funding to support the increased housing developments that they are encouraging

4 Conclusion

We are pleased to see Surrey County Council take a long term view on Rail Strategy and the document is a good starting point.

However, we would like it followed quickly with concrete and detailed proposals, with clearly identified funding sources. SCC should also seek to identify 'quick win' options that meet the goals of the strategy, and to get them implemented as quickly as possible.

We would also ask Surrey County Council to treat ALUA and other Rail User Groups as key stakeholders when setting future rail strategy, and to keep them fully engaged when developing the options listed in the Rail Strategy.