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Date: 26/09/2024
Page: 16
Reach: 1496
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Season ticket costs £8k - but are we falling back in love with our trains?

What is behind Southeastern's revival? Three years after the franchise was stripped from Govia, reporter Chris Britcher looks at what's changed...

It has long been a tradition for Kent commuters to complain about the county's rail services. They're overcrowded, they're too expensive and, the big one, they're rarely on time. All of which regularly saw the operators of the Southeastern franchise - the county's primary operator - score among the lowest of the low, nationally, when it came to customer satisfaction. But over the last few years a quiet evolution has taken place which has seen our trains bounce back. Whisper it, but we actually seem to like them now. In fact, earlier this summer, the latest survey of rail passengers saw Southeastern given a satisfaction rating of an impressive 87%. That ranked it eighth out of the 22 train operators which cover all of England, Scotland and Wales. The least we should expect, given the prices we pay, many will say, but in 2016, its satisfaction rating was a miserable 69% and joint bottom with fel-

low Kent service provider, Southern. Southern, for comparison, languished joint second bottom in the same survey released this summer. Perhaps more impressive, the traditionally poorly ranked 'reliability and punctuality' score was 82% - joint fifth. In 2016, it was a dire 56% (kept off bottom place only by Southern's 53%). So just what has happened over recent years which has seen such an apparent turnaround in its popularity? And how much is due to the franchise being wrenched from the hands of Govia - three years ago this month - and our trains plucked from private control back into the hands of the state? One, perhaps easily overlooked issue has been the impact of Covid. Explains Steve White, managing director of Southeastern: "In the 12 months before we took over [from Govia at the tail end of the pandemic], we carried 41 million customers. "In the last 12 months that is

now up to 131 million. "So we've grown, but from a very low base. Pre-Covid it was about 175 million. "Now we're running over 1,700 trains a day and we're adding another 220 a week in the December timetables. "We are growing and pinch points are emerging which is why we're adding trains back. "But generally, running a slightly less congested railway has made the passenger experience better and helped the railway run on time better. "When the network is saturated, it's harder for everything." The enormous drop in use during the lockdowns and subsequent widespread shift to hybrid working saw that dramatic fall in passenger journeys - and a resulting huge decline in revenue coming into the companies tasked with running them. The Southeastern service has always been one prone to the fragility of its infrastructure given the size and scale of its commuter base heading in and out of London.

The 'relief' from the drop-off in numbers gave it the much-needed breathing space to perform at a level we demand. But what of that seismic change, behind the scenes, of it now being overseen by the uninspiringly-titled Operator of Last Resort - the Department for Transport subsidiary which has taken over failing franchises from the private sector? "Govia was going in the right direction before the franchise was taken away," says Chris Fribbins, from Cliffe Woods on Hoo, a local representative of Railfuture - an independent organisation campaigning for better rail services for passengers and freight. "They were carrying a lot of passengers at peak times and it was very easy to get problems with your performance when one line isn't operating because a train or the infrastructure has failed. "I think in its last years it did all it could to improve, but it suffered from infrastructure issues and massive schemes like the London Bridge rebuild-

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it really impacted on customers."

The rail infrastructure - think track repairs, over-running engineering works, signal failures - is overseen not by the train operators but publicly-owned Network Rail.

It is a quirk of the way our railways have been operated since the end of British Rail back in the 1990s that there has been such a clear demarcation between the two key elements.

However, since last October, Southeastern has become possibly the only train operator to have a formal alliance with Network Rail (a 'marriage' as the Southeastern MD puts it) - a move designed to enhance communication between the two publicly-owned companies.

"We're equal partners," says Steve White, "who discuss the best thing to do for our passengers and agree to do it.

"The alliance enables us to look at the whole system and come to a consensus."

The remodelling of London Bridge station, handled by Network Rail, was a £6.5 billion scheme which caused problems on the rails for years.

Certainly, it was painful enough, at times, to leave many Kent commuters feeling dissatisfied.

Add to that, of course, the perennial issue of costs.

Commuting to London today has never come at such a

premium.

An annual season ticket today from Ramsgate to St Pancras on the high-speed service is an eye-watering £8,212.

From Maidstone it's £6,884. It's a figure which rises each year - determined by central government, not the train operator - and is loathed by commuters.

According to the Transport Focus survey, just 50% felt they were getting value for money in the most recent survey.

Mr Fribbins adds: "Things have been getting better over the years but there's still a little way to go - standard arrival times to the minute would be good - and the cost of travel needs to be addressed.

"Ultimately, the franchise was taken off Govia due to a financial issue rather than the performance of the operator.

"But more recently they've not had so many issues with cancellations or delays."

According to Southeastern MD Steve White, last year the company cancelled just 2.2% of all services - the third lowest nationwide. It's also planning to replace its Networker trains after more than 30 years of service.

"I think the way we left Govia," the Southeastern boss adds, "disappeared from the psyche of most of our customers quite quickly.

"I'm sure half of our customers still think we're in the

private sector.

"They still ask us questions like, 'You've cancelled my train today - is that to make more money for your shareholders?' No, it really isn't."

Of course, the big question is going to be just how does the network cope when - or perhaps if - we return to the rails in the same numbers we did before the pandemic reshaped people's working lives.

Also on the horizon is Great British Railways (GBR). Billed by transport secretary Louise Haigh as "the biggest reforms to our railways in a generation", it seeks to unify train operators nationwide and infrastructure to provide a better service.

Earlier this month, Shadow GBR was set-up to prepare for the changes which will come into force once existing private franchise agreements end.

Says Chris Fribbins of Railfuture: "It ought to shorten communication lines between planning and operating the railway. That's often been one of the problems - that so many bodies are involved."

Adds Southeastern's Steve White: "We are doing things now under the Shadow GBR and not waiting for Great British Railways. What we expect to happen is that train operators will work more closely together. And more closely with Network Rail.

"I am optimistic, but I don't underestimate the opportunity here and now to make changes in advance of reform."

■ What do you think? Email letters@thekmggroup.co.uk

'Running a slightly less congested railway has made the passenger experience better and helped the railway run on time...'

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Train services delivered by Southeastern have been back under public ownership since 2021

Picture: Southeastern



Transport Minister Louise Haigh

Picture: UK Parliament

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Southeastern managing director Steve White