

To: John Whittingdale OBE MP,
House of Commons,
London,
SW1A 0AA.



From: Theo Steel

Date: 9th March 2001
Tele: 020-7904-3302

Dear Mr Whittingdale

Bob Breakwell has asked me to thank you for, and reply to your letter of 26th February enclosing the letter from Mrs. Warner concerning various issues on the Southminster Line. I have tried to separate the various issues out:

1. Service Standards on the Southminster Line

We accept that there have been particular difficulties on the Southminster Line; unfortunately there will always be more difficulties on branch lines with limited capacity, track and train length (as is the case on the Southminster Line). Given that in the early days of gauge corner cracking our overall capacity was depressed, we attempted to run as many 12 coach trains as possible and this meant that there was no evening through train to Southminster. We also attempted to "self contain" the branch line in an effort to run the branch service on time to cover the considerable local traffic.

The service was supplemented by buses and our service expansion back to near normality in terms of number of trains in the peak was advanced datewise to mid January, in an attempt to provide as many seats as soon as possible.

Unfortunately since January the gauge corner cracking issues have broadened into more general, particularly water, related issues and our recovery has been protracted. I can only apologise.

One of the side issues of the difficulties was a tendency for cars to concentrate on the most used stations and clog up the car parks - hence the February/March offer which looks to be achieving its aims of getting people to use the branch.

We did actually run a through evening service to Southminster during the landslip period in the first week of March.

2. Capacity of Southminster Line Trains

At the moment we are only able to run 12 coach slam door trains on the Southminster branch and then only one due to the length of the loop at Fambridge. The slam door trains are being phased out over the next two years. We have in hand modifications to the sliding door trains with toilets to permit their operation as 12 coach trains on the branch.

The effective capacity of the Southminster line, as it is, is a 40 minute interval service. To up it (to say 30 minutes) would require us to build 2 new loops (probably at Woodham and Burnham) and/or to extend the platforms to 12 coach lengths - approximately a £10m spend in total. We have looked at this with both Essex and SRA as it is not a scheme that will pay for itself and there are frankly, more pressing priorities.

I accept that there is growth along the route but the numbers involved are at factors of 1 Southminster branch : 5 on the route between Rayleigh and Southend, and much higher than that on the route out to Chelmsford, Colchester and Ipswich. The ratios are reflected in the service intervals. Obviously we watch and seek to influence the Chelmsford housing planning possibilities very carefully as their evolution could affect the Southminster Line situation.

On the branch line itself there is actually capacity for growth on the trains.

This is not to say that we have totally ignored the Southminster line – within the last 2 years we have instituted an additional train at 1640 from Wickford and run an extra through train from London at 1854 on Mondays to Fridays. It is no secret that our franchise renewal plans include a 40 minute interval shuttle service during the day formed by trains with toilets.

3. **Change of 1804 departure to 1816**

There are currently at least 200 people standing on the 1802, 1810 trains out to Chelmsford (and Hatfield Peverel/Witham) and we need to build in additional capacity. A way that it can be provided is by running an extra train down the Colchester line at 1804 and easing the Southminster Line departure back to 1816; this is what will apply for the Summer 2000 timetable. We are, however, reviewing the situation to see whether we can ease the Southminster line position in October while retaining the extra capacity on the Colchester route.

There are a number of further points:-

- a) The departure at 1816 will ease pressure from customers to Wickford who are tending to create loading problems from Liverpool Street as demand eases after 1800.
- b) The 1804 Southminster departure is off an arrival at 1756 which is a tight turnround and more liable to unreliability.
- c) Prior to working on First Great Eastern I have been the "victim" of a similar move of a departure to Stroud from Paddington from 1803 to 1818 with comparable frequencies either side, which created a perception problem prior to implementation but which has been retained at 1818 in the event. I accept that Paddington is not Liverpool Street and Stroud is not the Southminster Line but seek to demonstrate that there are swings and roundabouts in any change. We have actually had some encouraging noises from 1800 Southminster line finishers too.

4. **Season Ticket Pricing**

Season Ticket pricing is heavily regulated on a RPI – 1% basis, overlaid by a retrospective performance factor applicable to the previous July – hence the increases this year. These are pretty certain to be balanced by decreases next year.

Prices to Southend are complicated (and always have been) by the fact that there is a more direct and faster route which historically has had much cheaper fares than First Great Eastern, which have also been held down by their quality of services : the margin was 20% at privatisation. We have therefore been attempting to align our fares over the years.

The Colchester situation is primarily as a result of a historic distance taper in prices.

So far as Maldon is concerned the rail business focuses primarily on Fambridge and Hatfield Peverel, which are very similarly priced.

I think that this covers the issues but please return if there is further information you require. I accept that we have had a very difficult winter and take this opportunity to apologise to you and your constituents.

Yours Sincerely
Theo Steel

THEO STEEL
SALES & MARKETING DIRECTOR