

**LOUIE FRENCH MP**  
OLD BEXLEY & SIDCUP



HOUSE OF COMMONS

LONDON SW1A 0AA

Huw Merriman MP  
Minister for Rail and HS2  
Department for Transport  
Great Minster House  
33 Horseferry Road  
London  
SW1P 4DR

23 November 2022

Dear Huw,

Thank you for taking the time as the new Rail Minister to meet with Sir David Evennett and I last week to discuss the important issue of Southeastern's December timetable changes.

As discussed, Sir David and I are extremely angered and frustrated at the new timetable and the lack of consultation for such drastic changes, alongside the lack of information provided to constituency MP's who only found out about the new timetable via press speculation in late September. We worked extremely hard to secure new trains for Bexley earlier this year, which makes the loss of these services even worse.

Whilst Southeastern have consistently argued that their previous 16 timetable changes were not consulted upon, this argument is not comparable given the changes now being pushed through, and I would also highlight that when Southeastern previously proposed moving the Victoria services from the Bexleyheath line to the Sidcup line this was consulted upon and rejected.

My main concerns and the most impactful changes highlighted in my Southeastern survey results remain the loss of off-peak and weekend Charing Cross services on the Bexleyheath line, the near 50% reduction of Albany Park Station services, and the loss of the loop service on the Sidcup line. I am therefore asking again for urgent concessions and the reversal of these changes given the significant impact they will have on my constituents, which I have continually emphasised since the announcement and outlined again below.

Firstly, I am concerned about the loss of off-peak and weekend Charing Cross services on the Bexleyheath line because of the impact on passengers travelling to the West End for leisure and work and the subsequent increase in journey times and inconvenience to change at London Bridge. As someone who previously commuted to the City for over a decade, I can confirm that the Cannon Street services at these times are of minimal benefit to local residents and instead will force thousands of people to change at London Bridge, adding to pressures on the railways. Following my requests, Southeastern have committed to publishing their equality impact assessment for these changes alongside additional measures to support passengers having to change trains at London Bridge. Can you please press Southeastern to confirm when this will be please?





Secondly, the significant reduction of Albany Park services is extremely concerning, especially because of the drop in frequency from 7 trains per hour to 4 trains per hour in the peak and from 4 trains per hour to 2 trains per hour for off-peak services. This reduction of Albany Park services has also resulted in the loss of direct services to Lewisham Station, which is used by local commuters to the DLR and Canary Wharf. As discussed, I am concerned over the data used by Southeastern to inform the timetable changes for this station, particularly passenger numbers, where I have seen first-hand how busy the station is during peak hours, which I remain concerned are not being fully accounted for. I welcome Southeastern's commitment to look at the live train loading data for this station on a daily basis following my last meeting with them, but so far when questioned on this point, I have only been given the latest off-peak data. I therefore would like to request again that Southeastern provide the latest peak time passenger numbers and capacity for this station especially Tuesday-Thursday. Furthermore, I would be grateful if you could use your position to ask Southeastern again why there is such a significant reduction in trains stopping at Albany Park Station and I would like to seek assurance and commitment over the future of this station, which is frequently used by commuters in a residential area with limited alternative transport connections. Albany Park commuters have my full support and they always will.

At all meetings I have also expressed my significant concern and disappointment over the loss of the loop service on the Sidcup line, which is used by many constituents, including for the Elizabeth line, Charlton Athletic fixtures and children and parents travelling to school. Again, I am concerned over the data used by Southeastern to inform this decision, particularly the time period used to capture passenger numbers, with the Elizabeth line only opening in May this year and only recently beginning to serve Bond Street. I am therefore concerned that the data on passenger numbers used to inform this decision does not incorporate the increase in passenger numbers for this service since the Elizabeth line was opened. It would be a huge loss and shame for residents to lose this connecting service to the Elizabeth line, especially given the four-year delay and billions it has cost taxpayers, alongside the vital loop services provided to school children, commuters and football fans. I note that the published timetables show that there are some services to Abbey Wood Station and Charlton Station, particularly during the evening peak, but I would be grateful if you could help get full details from Southeastern of these services on the Sidcup line and for further consideration of the reinstatement of off-peak services.

At our meeting last week, I also highlighted the inaccuracy of the claim from Southeastern that there are benefits of the timetable change, namely the increase of trains on a Sunday on the Bexleyheath line. I therefore point to the current 5b Dartford to London via Bexleyheath timetable which I believe to be incorrect as it does not include the Sunday services to Charing Cross and Cannon Street on the Bexleyheath line which are currently 2 trains per hour on each service. This points to another likely oversight on these timetable changes, as Southeastern have argued in every previous meeting that they have recognised that Sunday services on the Bexleyheath line are busy again and that the timetable changes have therefore increased these services to accommodate this. I would therefore request for this to be urgently looked at and a response provided.

Southeastern have consistently stated that the purpose of the timetable changes has been demand-led and to reduce crossovers in the Lewisham area thereby improving reliability and reducing delays. I fundamentally disagree with this reasoning, especially given the consistent increase in passenger numbers following the pandemic (latest estimate provided was 65%) and





because of the £250million investment in junction works conducted at Lewisham over the last couple of years. These engineering works, which have often required full and partial line closures, have been for the purpose of improving track, signalling and capacity at Lewisham to meet demand for "decades ahead". I am frustrated that my constituents have been negatively impacted by regular disruption caused by these works, including a planned 9-day full closure of the Bexleyheath line in December, only a couple of weeks after the timetable changes. We have begrudgingly tolerated this major disruption to our journeys in recent years on the basis that these works will help "meet the demands of the railway today", but my constituents are now losing a substantial number of services and choice of termini to reduce crossovers at the same junction near Lewisham.

At previous meetings, Southeastern have also stated that the design of this timetable provides them "additional flexibility" to add services when required, but when I have asked for more trains to stop at Albany Park especially in peak times and for other services to be reinstated ahead of December, I have frustratingly been told this is not possible because of the impact on other railway services, which have to be agreed more widely with the likes of Network Rail, rail unions and other rail operators. I would therefore be grateful if you can help provide clarity over how services can be re-instated, the demand threshold that needs to be met in order to add new services on this timetable given Southeastern's stated passenger demand is currently around 65%, and I would also be grateful if Southeastern could outline when the May timetable will be finalised and the window of opportunity for changes to be made to the next upcoming timetable given the extent of concerns across Bexley.

As you know, Bexley does not benefit from direct access to the Underground meaning rail services are the principle means of transport into and out of London, as well as for travelling to other areas in the South East. As such, it is important that our frequency and links to a range of Central London stations is preserved and I therefore continue to urge for an urgent reversal of these changes. I fully appreciate that you are new in post with many demands on your time, but as local MPs we will continue to push Southeastern to ensure the timetable delivers upon the needs of Bexley passengers.

Yours ever,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Louie French', written over a horizontal line.

**Louie French MP**  
**Member of Parliament for Old Bexley and Sidcup**