Rail Workforce Reform Case Study – Sutton Loop

[redacted under s40]

Member: Disabled Persons Transport Advisory Committee (DPTAC)

DRAFT 9/2/22

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1. Introduction

The Disabled Persons Transport Advisory Committee ('DPTAC') is the statutory advisor to the Secretary of State for Transport on matters relating to disability and transport. In our 'established role' we provide advice to government more widely, the Department for Transport ('DfT'), and associated governmental agencies.

The rail industry is currently approaching a period of unprecedented change. Even before Covid-19 arrived, the Williams Rail Review had started to explore options for significant reform. This has been given added impetus by the dramatic reduction in rail usage caused by the pandemic. Other factors are also driving rapid change: the move towards smart ticketing means fewer face-to-face transactions; and technology is reducing the need for many staff roles involved in station and train operation. It seems clear therefore that the deployment and roles of staff will change dramatically in the short to medium term – which has the potential to impact significantly on the accessibility of the railway. This paper seeks to examine the implications of this, based on a case study of a specific route and its associated stations.

2. Scope

The primary focus of this paper is the current and future impact on accessibility of staff roles and availability (at stations and on train). Both direct and indirect impacts are considered – the latter in the context of some key station accessibility features. The use of a case study is designed to provide some real-world examples of the consequences of policy options.

2.1 Direct staffing impacts within scope

- Station navigation assistance
- Boarding and alighting assistance
- Information (including during disruption)
- Personal safety/ perceptions of safety
- Provision of auxiliary aids (platform-train ramps and customer wheelchairs)
- Ticket sales (face to face)

2.2 Indirect staffing impacts within scope

- Heated waiting facilities
- Toilets/ accessible toilets/ baby change
- Hearing (induction) loops
- Step-free access (street to platform, and platform to train)

2.3 Issues not within scope

- Safety issues not included above
- Other station accessibility features

The paper seeks to: a) describe and quantify the current accessibility of the Study Route and any substantial barriers to access; b) examine the possible impact of any future staffing changes; and c) examine options for improvement in the short/ medium/ long term. In terms of financial analysis, some anecdotal evidence is presented regarding investment in accessible features, as well as some high-level observations on costs and benefits. However, detailed costings of improvement options are not provided, and no detailed analysis of internal/ external benefits has been undertaken.

3. Route description

The Study Route is the Thameslink (GTR) service from London Blackfriars to Sutton (some trains continue north of the Thames to London St Pancras and stations towards St Albans). This is a standard pattern service which operates to a typical 15-minute frequency between London Blackfriars and Streatham, then divides to run every 30 minutes in opposite directions around the Sutton Loop. 20 stations are served, of which 11 also have regular services on other routes, provided by Southern (GTR); South Western Railway; and Southeastern.

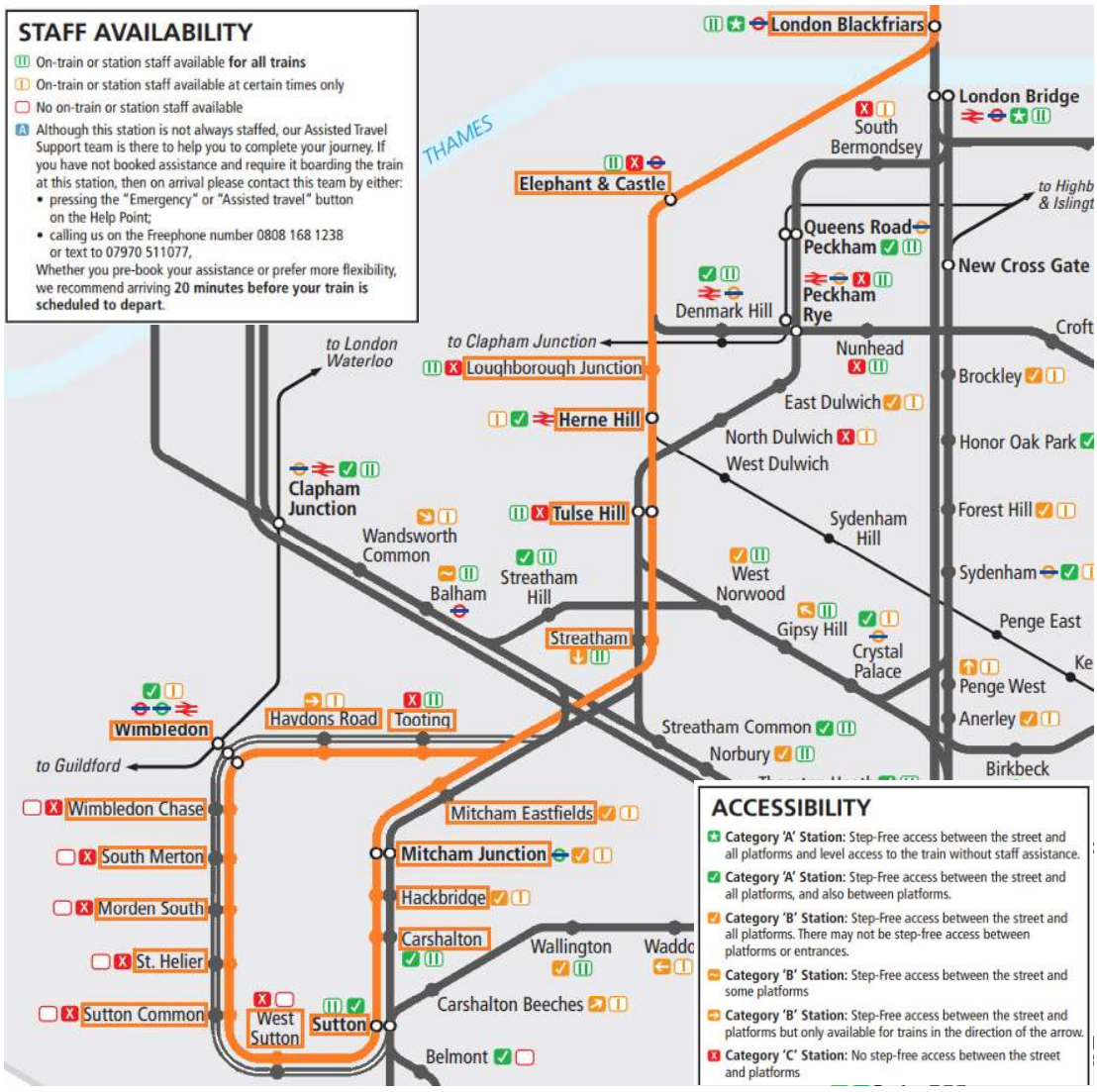

Fig 1: Routes/ stations covered by Study area (highlighted in orange/ box around station names)

Stations served: Sutton (*); West Sutton; Sutton Common; St Helier; Morden South; South Merton; Wimbledon Chase; Wimbledon (*); Haydons Road; Tooting; Streatham (*); Carshalton (*); Hackbridge (*); Mitcham Junction (*); Mitcham Eastfields (*); Tulse Hill (*); Herne Hill (*); Loughborough Junction; Elephant and Castle (*); and London Blackfriars (*). (20 stations)

(*) – station has regular service on another route/ provided by another operator.

4. Route accessibility

The route forms part of the Thameslink network, which has received very substantial investment (of approx. £6bn between 2009 and 2020) as part of the Thameslink Programme. This has included a fleet of modern, accessible trains (Class 700), and key accessibility improvements including platform-train level access at stations between London Blackfriars and London St Pancras. However, despite this investment, some substantial barriers to access remain on the Study Route, as follows:

4.1 Step-free access – street to platform

Of the 20 stations on the route, 10 have no step-free access from street to any platform.

Fig 2: St Helier station, the nearest station to St Helier Hospital – access to platforms via stairs only

A further 2 stations have step-free access in one direction only.

Of the remaining 8 stations with step-free access to all platforms, 3 do not meet new-build standards (step-free access between platforms is via the street). Only 5 stations have step-free access to modern standards, via lifts (this proportion is roughly consistent with the national situation). Lift reliability is an issue – at the time of writing the lifts at Mitcham Eastfields were 'out of order until further notice'.

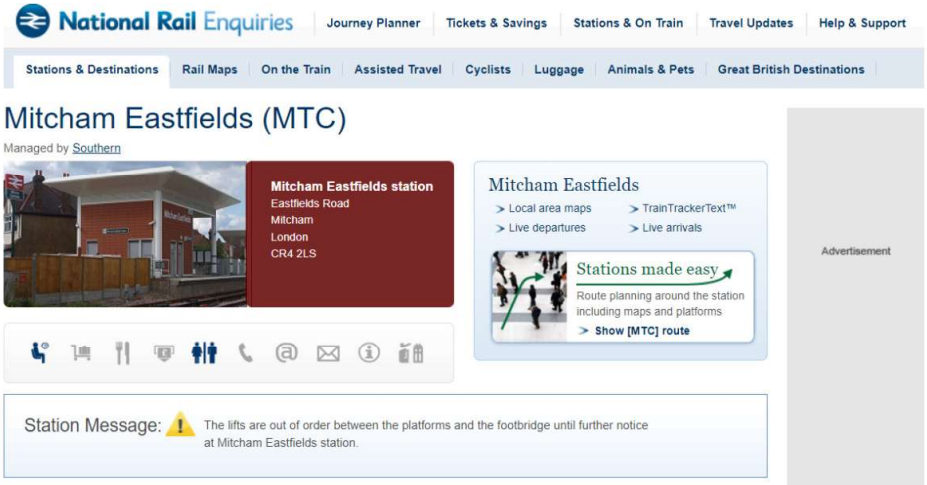

Fig 3: National Rail Enquiries 24/1/22

4.2 Step-free access – platform to train

At only one station, London Blackfriars, is level access between platform and train provided. However, this only applies at 2 of 4 platforms – at the time of writing every other train on this route terminates at the platforms without this feature, and a platform-train ramp would be required. At all other stations, there is a step (and in most cases a gap) between the train and the platform. For passengers needing step-free access between platform and train, this therefore requires a platform-train ramp to be deployed by staff (i.e. an 'auxiliary aid' as defined by the Equality Act 2010).

4.3 Availability of assistance/ auxiliary aids

All Thameslink, Southern and Southeastern trains on this route run without on-train staff (Driver Only Operation). As such, the availability of boarding/ alighting assistance is entirely dependent upon station-based staff, as of course is station navigation assistance. By contrast, all South Western Railway services from Wimbledon station have on-train staff, able to provide boarding/ alighting assistance, and a platform-train ramp, at any station.

Of 20 stations, 8 are advertised on the GTR network map as being fully-staffed, although information elsewhere casts some doubt on this – e.g. at Tooting/ Loughborough Junction where the 'staff help available' times stated on National Rail Enquiries do not cover all the times trains are running. A further issue is that advertised staffing times do not always translate into reality – during a trip around the route on 24/1/22 it was noticed that e.g. ticket offices were not always open as advertised. Furthermore, it is not clear whether staff based in ticket offices can actually provide assistance on platforms on a reliable basis.

Fig 4: ticket offices at Mitcham Eastfields/ Hackbridge on 24/1/22 – closed at a time advertised as open

At 6 stations, part-time staffing is provided. At 3 of these stations staffing is extremely limited, covering short periods until lunchtime only. At 4 of the 6 stations, no staff are available on Sundays.

At 6 stations no staff at all are provided.

There does not appear to be any advertised mobile staffing resource (e.g. to deliver assistance) – except at Herne Hill station which is operated by Southeastern. Elsewhere, it is not clear that staff assistance can be provided when stations are unstaffed. In the absence of any evidence to the contrary, it would appear that assistance and/ or auxiliary aids cannot routinely be provided at all times trains are running, at 14 of 20 stations on the Study Route, even if requested in advance - and certainly not on a 'turn up and go' basis. Given that many disabled people require staff presence to travel, this would seem to represent a substantial barrier to access.

4.4 Staff presence - general

Of the 14 stations which are staffed at some or all times, 6 are assumed to be single-staffed (i.e. only by staff in the ticket office). At the other 8 stations platform, gateline, or other staff are provided – in some cases at certain times of the day only.

Fig 5: unstaffed gatelines at Streatham/ Carshalton

It is well established that passengers value visible and available staff at stations and on trains – and that this has an impact not just on assistance provision, but more generally on perceptions of personal security, and satisfaction with information availability, particularly during disruption. Poor staffing levels on this route are likely to have an adverse impact on revenue.

4.5 Face to face ticket sales

Ticket offices are provided at 14 of 20 stations, in some cases with very limited opening hours. The demand for face-to-face ticket sales is assumed to be low – as the entire route, and many connecting routes, operate within the London Oyster/ Contactless/ Freedom Pass area. However, there are some direct journeys from the 20 stations which cannot be made without the purchase of a paper ticket. Whilst Ticket Vending Machines are provided, not all tickets can be purchased from these, and not all passengers can use these (TVMs may have major accessibility issues e.g. for visually impaired people), so there is clearly some residual demand for face-to-face sales.

4.6 Access to toilet facilities

All Thameslink trains serving the 20 stations have on-board accessible toilets, but this is not the case with the other operators. 9 stations have no toilets, 11 have standard toilets – of which 9 also have accessible toilets and one has a Changing Places toilet. In all cases station toilets are only open when staff are available. In some cases, the availability of toilets has been reduced in the recent past, as station staffing hours have been reduced – for example at Mitcham Eastfields and Mitcham Junction, until recently staffed all day, and now only staffed for very limited periods.

Fig 6: Streatham/ Mitcham Eastfields – toilet opening times reflecting limited staff availability

4.7 Access to heated waiting facilities

At 10 stations there are no enclosed waiting areas or buildings open to the public on platforms – open shelters only are provided. At 9 stations there are enclosed and heated waiting facilities – in all cases these are only open when the station is staffed (and some close in the late evenings even when staffed). At one station (London Blackfriars) there are enclosed waiting areas, but these are unheated.

Fig 7: heated waiting rooms at Carshalton/ Hackbridge stations

Average winter temperatures in the route area fall to around 4 degrees in winter, with much lower temperatures possible. Scheduled train frequencies are every 30 minutes at 9 of the 20 stations, and as such an extended wait is possible – especially during disruption.

Fig 8: A passenger arriving at Haydons Road Platform 1 at 12:16 on 25.1.22 would have a 54 minute wait without access to heated waiting facilities. The outside temperature was 1 degree at this time. Disruption is a regular and foreseeable occurrence.

Fig 9: Study Route – table of accessibility features	Step-free to all platforms/ ORR step-free category	Step-free to train	Assistance available	Ticket office staffed	Other staff available	Toilets available	Accessible toilets available	Heated waiting facilities available
Carshalton	Yes (A)	No	Yes	Part	Yes	Part	Part	Part
Elephant and Castle	No (C)	No	Yes	Part	Yes	Yes	No	Part
Hackbridge	Yes (B2)	No	Part	Part	No	Part	Part	Part
Haydons Road	Part (B3)	No	Part	Part	No	No	No	No
Herne Hill	Yes (A)	No	Yes	Part	Yes	Yes	Yes	Part
London Blackfriars	Yes (A)	Part	Yes	Part	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Loughborough Junction	No (C)	No	Part	Part	No	No	No	No
Mitcham Eastfields	Yes (B1)	No	Part	Part	No	Part	Part	No
Mitcham Junction	Yes (B2)	No	Part	Part	No	Part	Part	Part
Morden South	No (C)	No	No	No	No	No	No	No
St Helier	No (C)	No	No	No	No	No	No	No
South Merton	No (C)	No	No	No	No	No	No	No
Streatham	Part (B3)	No	Yes	Part	Part	Part	Part	Part
Sutton	Yes (A)	No	Yes	Part	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Sutton Common	No (C)	No	No	No	No	No	No	No
Tooting	No (C)	No	Part	Part	No	No	No	No
Tulse Hill	No (C)	No	Part	Part	Part	Part	No	Part
West Sutton	No (C)	No	No	No	No	No	No	No
Wimbledon	Yes (A)	No	Yes	Part	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Wimbledon Chase	No (C)	No	No	No	No	No	No	No

5. Recent investment in accessibility – return on capital and operating costs

It is worth noting the significant public investment that has been made in the accessibility of the route. As key target beneficiaries are wheelchair users and other people who need platform-train step-free access, the deployment of staff is critical in realising the payback on this. It is impossible to divorce consideration of operating costs, from the return on investment in station infrastructure.

Calculating the value of the investment directly relevant to the Study Route is difficult, given that it forms part of a wider direct and indirect network. It seems reasonable to assume that in the recent past, investment in the Route runs into the hundreds of millions of pounds, most of which explicitly targeted improved accessibility as part of the business case.

In addition to the £6bn spent on the Thameslink Programme (which included the procurement of accessible rolling stock) other significant accessibility-related investment includes:

5.1 Lifts (in general funded through the Access for All scheme)

Lifts have been provided at the following stations: London Blackfriars; Herne Hill; Mitcham Eastfields; Carshalton; Sutton; and Wimbledon. This public investment runs into the tens of millions of pounds.

Fig 10: publicly-funded lifts at Wimbledon; Sutton; Herne Hill; Carshalton; and Mitcham Eastfields

5.2 Other step-free access improvements (funded either through Access for All, or via operators' Minor Works fund)

- Other improvements to step-free access include: Hackbridge – new path and ramp to provide access to Platform 2;
- Carshalton (prior to lifts being installed) – new step-free side entrance, and associated additional Oyster readers, new step-free ramp to main entrance;
- Herne Hill – ramp to accessible toilet, and ramp to Waiting Room;
- Streatham – new step-free side entrance to Platform 1 with remote call device, and step-free ramp to waiting room/ toilet;
- Wimbledon – ramp to Waiting Room (on Thameslink platform);
- Mitcham Junction – ramp to road overbridge (step-free route between platforms);
- Various stations – step-free wayfinding signage, indicating where step-free routes differ from the primary signed route.

The total cost of these improvements is likely to be in the millions of pounds.

Fig 11: non-lift step-free improvement schemes at Streatham; Hackbridge and Mitcham Junction

5.3 Other investment in accessible facilities

Other investment in accessible facilities at these 20 stations includes many features relevant to wheelchair users and other people needing step-free access between platform and train, and/or assistance. For example: low level/ adjustable height ticket office windows; accessible toilets; hearing loops; handrails; and visually contrasting features. The total cost of these improvements is likely to be in the hundreds of thousands of pounds.

5.4 Other accessibility investment in the wider rail network

The 20 stations on the Study Route have direct train services to many more destinations, many of which have received substantial investment in step-free access and other accessibility improvements. At least 30 stations served directly from the 20 stations in the study area have had lifts installed – for example: Clapham Junction; Balham; Elstree and Borehamwood; St Albans; and Dorking, at a cost probably exceeding a hundred million pounds – even without considering the many indirect journey opportunities impacted by accessibility investment across the national network. Furthermore, there has been multi-billion-pound investment in accessible rolling stock – which is specifically designed to accommodate wheelchair users and other people needing assistance and/or platform-train step-free access. The return on this investment is undermined, if staffing-related barriers to access at the 20 stations on the Study Route mean a journey cannot be made.

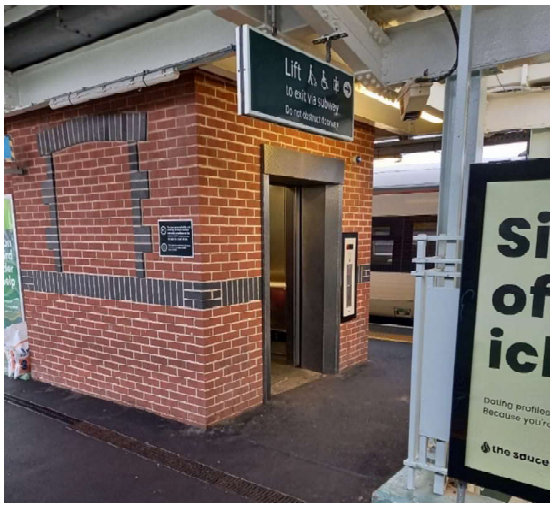

Fig 12: lift at Balham station

5.5 Other relevant transport accessibility investment

It is also relevant that significant public expenditure has been made in non-heavy-rail connecting accessible transport facilities – for example London Tramlink at Wimbledon/ Mitcham Junction; London Underground at Blackfriars; and the accessible TfL bus network, which serves all 20 stations. Where staff availability issues undermine the accessibility of the heavy rail network, this also impacts on the return from public investment in these connecting modes – as whole-journey accessibility is needed.

6. Impact of staffing changes

It is clear that, in addition to major station design issues, staffing has a very significant impact on the accessibility of the Study Route. As things stand, the toxic combination of Driver Only Operated (DOO) trains and unstaffed stations means many disabled people are excluded from using the Route to access employment, services, leisure and health facilities. Other passengers are also likely to be excluded from the Route, due to poor staff availability and visibility, and the consequent impacts of this. It is clear that major improvement is needed, and DfT needs a change of strategic approach, if the Route is to be made accessible to all people. The Williams-Shapps rail reforms present that opportunity for change.

As such, any proposed amendment to staffing needs to be assessed in terms of the implications for all passengers, with due regard to the Public Sector Equality Duty. Obvious impacts of a reduction in staffing would include:

Direct staffing impacts

- Reduced availability of station navigation assistance
- Reduced availability of boarding and alighting assistance
- Poorer quality of customer information (including during disruption)
- Reduced personal safety/ perceptions of safety – especially after dark
- Reduced provision of auxiliary aids (platform-train ramps and customer wheelchairs)
- Reduced availability of face-to-face ticket sales

Indirect staffing impacts

- Closure or reduced opening of heated waiting facilities
- Closure or reduced opening of toilets/ accessible toilets/ baby change
- Non-availability of hearing (induction) loops

It is also worth noting one less obvious impact – that any reduction in staffing then has the potential to undermine the business case for future investment in accessible facilities, where these are dependent on staff presence – as by definition their benefit reduces as staffing reduces. It may also undermine the willingness of rail management to seek accessibility improvements. For example, at Haydons Road a 'golden opportunity' arose recently to provide step-free access to Platform 2 as part of an adjacent development (and with no reduction in the value of that development), but this was not pursued – it can only be surmised due to the inability to provide an auxiliary aid at this station to enable platform-train step-free access. Such an improvement could probably have been achieved at near-zero cost to the railway (i.e. under a 'planning gain' agreement with the local authority), and would have improved the station to 'Category B1' status in terms of ORR's step-free classification

system. The only option now to provide step-free access to Platform 2 at this station would be via lifts, at a cost of perhaps £2.5m.

Fig 13: housing development at Haydons Road – a missed opportunity

7. Short to medium options for improvement

7.1 Step-free access

Street to platform step-free improvement schemes are generally expensive and the low-hanging-fruit on this route has already been picked. That said, there is the potential for a low-cost step-free improvement scheme to a single platform at Tulse Hill, and an Access for All scheme is in development at Streatham station. The priority in the short to medium term is to ensure that no 'perverse incentives' exist to prevent the development and implementation of step-free improvement schemes, for example an inability to provide platform-train ramps.

7.2 Staff availability

It is clear that the current staffing levels on this route are completely inadequate to deliver an accessible railway, and to ensure disabled people can use train services on the same terms as other passengers. Furthermore, the substantial investment in station facilities, targeted to a significant extent at disabled people, is being undermined by an inability to make accessible features and services available. It seems counter-intuitive that trains run through stations bearing a wheelchair symbol, but at most stations on the route, access cannot be guaranteed for wheelchair users.

Fig 14: Hackbridge - an 'accessible' train service? No station or on-train staff are available for large parts of the day, and not at all on Sundays

In the short term, it would seem necessary to co-ordinate the availability of station and on-train staff to ensure unstaffed trains do not run to unstaffed stations. Given that some stations have no staff accommodation, and most are ungated, the provision of on-train staff also capable of carrying out revenue protection duties would seem a potential solution, and with wider benefits.

The use of mobile staff could be considered, but this comes with some disadvantages in terms of 'turn up and go' travel, and is unlikely to be a reliable solution in an urban area where traffic congestion is a significant issue at some times, and where the train frequency does not support a rapid response by rail. In isolating the marginal costs of assistance, it also fails to achieve an inclusive approach to service delivery – which in turn can create perverse incentives for rail management.

In the medium term, the provision of staff at stations may be an alternative – TfL's approach on the Gospel Oak – Barking line may be worth consideration, where prefabricated staff accommodation enabled the rapid provision of staff at previously unstaffed stations. This might deliver significant benefits in terms of perceptions of personal security – it is assumed this issue currently acts as a barrier to access at some of the more isolated stations on this route.

It would also seem feasible in the medium term to consider how staff can be made more visible and available, as demand for face-to-face ticket sales decreases (but ensuring disabled people are not disadvantaged by any alternative arrangements for ticket purchase).

7.3 Facilities availability

In the short term it would be possible to extend the availability of toilet and waiting room facilities, where these are already installed, through matching staffing hours to train running hours.

It may also be possible to link station tenancies (coffee shops etc.) with the provision of toilet and waiting facilities (i.e. including this in lease agreements), to ensure these are available even when the station is unstaffed.

8. Medium to long term options for improvement

8.1 Street to platform step-free access

It is assumed that at all or almost all stations currently without step-free access to platforms, there is a feasible solution to provide this (Tulse Hill is challenging due to platform width, but an innovative design at the similar Denmark Hill station may show the way).

Stations between Sutton and Wimbledon are currently relatively lightly used, but the reasons for this are at least partly due to accessibility problems, and the lack of facilities – as well as poor train frequency. Any assessment of the costs and benefits of step-free access needs to look at what the capacity is for demand generation, if welcoming and accessible stations are provided.

Fig 15: Sutton Common – no step-free access; no staff; DOO trains; isolated platforms with no natural surveillance; no heated waiting facilities; no toilets; low train frequency – and as such a depressed footfall

8.2 Platform to train level access

At stations between West Sutton and Tooting via Wimbledon, the only scheduled train services are operated by Class 700 trains. Furthermore, this is not a useful diversionary or freight route. As such, it

might be possible in the medium term to consider the provision of platform humps/ level access, and to restrict access to this route by other types of rolling stock. This includes Wimbledon Platform 9 (served by Thameslink in both directions) – which alone would represent a major accessibility benefit.

9. Conclusions

- The Study Route (Thameslink - Sutton Loop) in south London is a reasonably high frequency urban train service with good connections to the wider rail network. Whilst clearly not representative of all types of rail service it is nevertheless a good microcosm of the rail network more generally and serves as a useful case study for analysis of the critical role of staffing in current and future accessibility.

- The Study Route has enjoyed very considerable investment in its accessibility over recent years including the introduction of fully compliant Class 700 trains (that meet all accessibility regulatory requirements), the installation of lifts at 6 stations, major step-free access improvements at 6 stations, and a great many more minor improvements such as hearing loops, accessible toilets, handrails, visually contrasting features, and so on.

- The value of this investment directly linked to the Study Route runs into hundreds of millions of pounds, and complements the multi-billion-pound investment in accessibility across the wider rail (and connecting transport) network that the Route feeds into.

- Despite this investment, a current lack of adequate staffing renders much of the Study Route inaccessible to many disabled people for much of the time, significantly undermining the investment in accessibility already made, depriving rail of an important market, and perpetuating the exclusion of many disabled people from a vital public service to the detriment of both their lives and the wider economy.

- The benefits of staff presence are widespread and include not only the provision of assistance, but e.g.: personal security reassurance; ensuring toilets and waiting rooms are available; provision of information; and management of disruption etc. Poor staffing levels are likely to suppress demand at a time when the success of the rail network depends on attracting more customers.

- The ability of staff to provide assistance is the only effective way of mitigating the continued partial physical inaccessibility of many of the stations on the loop, which will take many years to address fully. However, the toxic combination of inadequate station staffing and Driver Only Operated trains, in particular, undermines the ability of staff to mitigate physical inaccessibility on a reliable basis, and leads directly to the exclusion of disabled people from the Study Route.

- Any reductions in current staffing levels will result in the Study Route becoming even less accessible with both direct (e.g. the provision of assistance) and indirect (e.g. the opening times of waiting rooms) impacts on accessibility.

- Such reductions in accessibility will undermine (and in some cases virtually eliminate) the benefit of both previous and potential future investment in the physical accessibility of stations and rail vehicles, and of connecting accessible transport modes.

- Some initial ideas for how the accessibility of the Study Route can be improved in both the short- and medium-terms have been suggested, but more work remains to be done in this area. However, it is clear that until radical improvements in physical accessibility can be implemented, staff will remain the key way of ensuring that accessibility is maximised.