



ASLEF Response to the Essex Thameside Franchise Consultation

1. The Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen (ASLEF) is the UK's largest train driver's union representing approximately 18,000 members in train operating companies and freight companies as well as London Underground and light rail systems. The Union has just under 250 members working for the Essex Thameside franchise.
2. ASLEF joins the Department for Transport in its aspiration for a railway that offers greater value for money with better punctuality and improved customer satisfaction. However, ASLEF feels that many of the elements within the consultation are misguided and may exacerbate the inefficiencies within the franchise and the wider railway network.
3. The consultation explains that it seeks to improve value for money in keeping with the McNulty Report. ASLEF agrees with many of the causes of inefficiencies that are identified by McNulty. McNulty explains that fragmentation has led to a lack of leadership in the industry. The report also suggests that fragmentation is the first barrier to efficiency. Unfortunately, the report then goes on to suggest greater fragmentation. ASLEF would therefore caution against this approach being taken by the DfT.
4. ASLEF welcomes the ambitions expansion of the Essex Thameside line but is concerned that the consultation does not stipulate how this will occur. As the consultation explains, the franchise is one of the most commuter based lines in the country. This inevitably means extremely

busy AM and PM peaks with large periods of inactivity for much rolling stock in between. In short, for a few hours a day the trains are run to capacity but remain underused for other periods of time.

5. The consultation explains that “with a large stock fleet already serving this franchise, providing additional rolling stock will be a more challenging proposition.” It also calls for the new franchise owner to consider “Developing a clear strategy for the off peak market to support local economic growth, reducing the disparity between rolling stock use between the peak and off peak and maximising the commercial capability of the rolling stock.”
6. The reality however is that peak services are currently running at capacity. Therefore it is not possible to increase capacity on these services without any more rolling stock. Much work has been done to enable stations to take 12-car trains on the Tilbury Loop. Yet without taking rolling stock from other key services this improvement will remain unfulfilled.
7. The consultation puts a great deal of emphasis on trying to shift rail usage on to off peak services so that rolling stock does not remain unused for long time periods. ASLEF supports the DfT’s statement that “one of the challenges we are likely to set the new operator is to grow the use of train services out of the peak. That may lead to services over and above the minimum specification requirements and help make more effective use of the existing rolling stock.” However this will certainly require an increase in driver numbers. To do this it will be important for whoever the new franchise owner is to invest in training at a very early stage of the franchise to ensure there are sufficient staffing levels for these additional services.
8. In addition, whilst it seems that running “metro” style services within London is a sensible approach, it again suggests the need for higher

frequency servicers and therefore an increase in the establishment of drivers.

9. There has been a dramatic increase in the number of passenger journeys on the Essex Thameside franchise. The numbers of passenger journeys went up by 9.6 per cent between 2009- 10 and 2010-11.

10. ASLEF have major concerns over how commuters are “encouraged” to take off peak services. The document talks about “rewarding passengers who travel on less busy services.” The flip side to this is that such measures would be punishing those who have no option other than to take peak services. This would be unfair. Many working people, including the low paid, do not have the luxury of flexible working hours and must simply arrive at work at fixed times. We would therefore call for caution in using fares to manipulate passenger numbers. Prompting use of quieter trains by offering lower fares is prudent, but creating peak services that are reserved for the wealthy would be self-defeating and wrong.

11. ASLEF understands the call for longer franchises in the hope that it may lead to more private investment. ASLEF are unsure whether this will provide any benefit to the traveling public. Transport Scotland’s recent publication “Rail 2014” stated, “there is no conclusive evidence that longer contracts will increase the level of investment from train operating companies.”

12. ASLEF notes research on franchises by KPMG which found that ‘our comparative analysis of UK train operating companies (TOCs) has provided no conclusive evidence of the impact of contract length on performance across the sample of operators that were studied’. It also suggests that longer term franchises might lead to ‘increased financial risk’ affecting the agreement because bidders cannot foresee changes in

economic circumstances. Nonetheless should the DfT opt for a 15 year franchise, ASLEF would advocate robust breakpoints to ensure that TOCs are meeting their obligations although the Union would caution against the inevitable additional costs associated with this. It should also be remembered that a supposed benefit of privatisation was the impact of competition. The public was sold a story that this would lead to greater efficiency and lower costs. Franchises of this length would however lead to a reduction of competition.

13. ASLEF has previously stated in the consultation specifically dealing with the matter that in principle there are no objections to a greater role for the ORR as a stronger regulator. In many ways it would make sense for the ORR to oversee both the infrastructure owners and the Train Operating Companies to ensure a coherent and joined-up approach to standards and delivery of service satisfaction. It must however be strong body that is ultimately responsible to the Secretary of State who is accountable to Parliament.

14. ASLEF understands the desire to have local people and local bodies having a greater say in transport provision. Communications between national decision makers and local authorities as well as Local Transport Authorities are essential. However this must all be done in the context of a national rail network. As previously mentioned, it is the opinion of both the McNulty Report and ASLEF that fragmentation of the British Railway has led to a lack of leadership, responsibility and inefficiencies. Handing responsibilities to local bodies would lead to varying standards and once again a lack of overall responsibility. ASLEF is therefore very concerned that the consultation states, “the Department would wish to work with local bodies who are interested in seeking a greater role in the provision of local rail services with a view to forming a priced incremental option that could be incorporated into the franchise agreement.”

15. Regional rail services are used by people from across the country. For this reason it is always essential that ultimate responsibility remains with the Department for Transport which is led by the Secretary of State. Only then can rail remain truly democratically accountable.
16. It is pleasing to see that the DfT have recognised the importance of Freight that moves within the Essex Thameside franchise. Freight traffic is forecast to grow, not least because of the London Gateway project. In addition to the Thames Haven and future London Gateway port terminal there are important connections at Tilbury Container Terminal, Ripple Lane interchange sidings for Channel Tunnel traffic, Aggregates (Dagenham and Purfleet) plus Automotive (Dagenham and Purfleet) and Ministry of Defence Terminal at Shoeburyness.
17. The Union is glad that “there is an aspiration for an increase from the current 8 freight paths per day to 50 freight paths per day in each direction, primarily along the Tilbury loop, by 2030” and hope that this becomes more concrete than simply an aspiration.
18. ASLEF has major concerns over alliancing. Network Rail is a not-for-dividend company. There is a concern that an alliance with a TOC will introduce an element of profit making back into the maintenance of our rail infrastructure. It will also mean yet more fragmentation. This may in fact lead to a series of mini Railtracks. ASLEF therefore feel that it is essential that the infrastructure remains under control of one not-for-profit organisation.
19. Alliancing raises some interesting questions with regard to regulation and fines resulting from delays. Under the new system, operators would pay track access charges to the Alliance and the Alliance would still be responsible for delay attribution penalties to the TOCs and FOCs. Given that the finances of the alliance will be between Network Rail and the

relevant operator and that any profits will go to both companies, it will in effect mean if delays are the fault of either company there will be no penalty as they will be paying it to themselves. There is also a concern that should the franchise winner join in an alliance with Network Rail to run the line, they will prioritise their passenger services over freight services.

20. There is great concern over the DfT's decision to hand over almost all operational and timetabling decisions to the franchise. Whilst this may be less of an issue for the Essex Thameside franchise as it is heavily used line with very few underutilised stations, it is still concerning that commercial decisions may dictate choices that can have a regional and local economic and social impact. The Union is glad to see that level of service achieved with the current timetable will provide the starting point for the new franchise.
21. ASLEF supports the Department's belief that transparency can assist consumers in holding to account the organisations that deliver public services. Performance, punctuality and overcrowding figures should be available for all passengers to see.
22. The consultation explains that our railways are up to 40% less efficient than the leading European comparators. However ASLEF would point out that most of these European comparators are in fact nationalised railways. It should also be remembered that in terms of staff productivity, Britain has the 4th most efficient railways in Europe according to McNulty.
23. One of the key areas ASLEF members' are concerned about on the Essex Thameside franchise is that of station staff numbers and security. There have been many incidences, including the stabbing of a member of revenue protection staff at East Tilbury station in December. Staffing at stations across the Essex Thameside franchise is currently at half the level it is supposed to be with many staff coming from agencies rather than

being directly employed. This creates security issues for both passengers and staff. Whilst the franchise is supposed have staff at ticket barriers at all times, this is very rarely the case. ASLEF believes that the franchise is currently approximately 250 station staff down. Any new franchise must therefore commit to good staffing levels

24. ASLEF would also point out the contradiction in dealing with station maintenance. The consultation calls for upkeep of stations to be transferred from Network Rail to the new franchise. However as the Great Western Franchise Replacement Consultation states “significant station investment is rarely commercially self-financing.” It is therefore contradictory to give maintenance responsibility to a commercial company rather than keeping it with a not-for-dividend organisation that will have much longer term interest in the stations.

25. The Union would also expect the new franchise owner to deal with excessive overcrowding at Chafford Hundred and West Ham.

26. ASLEF is calling for consideration to the extension of safeguarded staff travel facilities to non-safeguarded staff. For too long we have operated a railway that has an inequitable two-tier workforce which leads to division, a sense of exclusion and frustration.

27. It is inexcusable that two drivers with exactly the same role, salary and job description can have such a significant disparity in their travel facilities. It is also bizarre for non-safeguarded to have greater facilities across the whole of Europe than they enjoy in the country where they supply such a vital service.

28. The travel facilities given to our members here in the UK are inferior compared to those enjoyed by drivers in the rest of Europe. ASLEF fails to see any logical reason why this should be the case. The extension of travel

facilities would offer a significant benefit to staff at a limited cost to the Train Operating Companies and Freight Operating Companies. It would create a harmonious content workforce and most importantly, would give non safe guarded staff the facilities they deserve. The sense of frustration that these members express to the Union should not be underestimated.

29. ASLEF calls for the winning bidder to support the extension.

30. Whilst it is clear that the Essex Thameside performs well in comparison to many of the other franchises in the UK, there is still room for improvement. Morning peak is showing at 2.6% in the Passengers in eXcess of Capacity (PiXC) measure. Evening peak is 0.6%. But the real work will come in ensuring that there are more services in off-peak times. Greater convenience with more frequent service along with safer and better staffed stations would help promote the use of the line in times where rolling stock is underused. This would stop the waste of huge amount of rolling stock simply sitting in depots. To do this more drivers will be needed and this means an investment in training. However, there is little doubt that this would pay for itself with increased passenger use on underutilised rolling stock.

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