



ASLEF Response to the Great Western Franchise Replacement 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 1,000 members on the Great Western 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 believes that franchise objectives are too limited and perhaps underestimate the passenger growth expected. For example, according to Network Rail, passenger numbers in the Greater Bristol area are expected to rise by 41% in the ten years from 2009. Many commentators consider that this figure is likely to be exceeded by 2014. ASLEF agrees with Travel Watch SouthWest that the South West as a region has suffered the lowest level of investment in its transport networks. This must change.

5. New routes should be considered including re-opening closed routes. In the early 1990s, Avon County Council proposed an incremental implementation of line and station openings. These were never put in practise. Considering the increased passenger numbers expected and the emphasis on cleaner transport, it is time these were once again considered.
6. 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."
7. 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.
8. 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.

9. The Growth in passenger demand must be considered in the context of current overcrowding. The current franchise is the most overcrowded in the whole of Britain. Morning peak sees a “Passengers in Excess of Capacity (PixC)” score of 18.5% compared with that Industry Average of 4%. Evening peak is 14.4% compared to 1.9%. This record is appalling and must be looked at. It is particularly bad in and around urban areas. All ten of London’s most overcrowded routes are FGW, whilst rail journeys within the Bristol travel-to-work area are running at almost three times the level that they were at the time of privatisation. This shows that not only do we need to prepare for passenger growth in the future, but we have failed to deal with passenger growth over previous decades and must make up ground.

10. The problems will only get worse without real investment when considering that over the last twenty years the South West’s population has seen the fastest rate of growth and it has had the highest net gains from migration of all the English regions. Its population is projected to remain the fastest growing of any region between 2008 and 2033, increasing by 30%.

11. Over the last ten years passenger numbers have increased by; 269% to well over 800k annually on the Severn Beach line, 158% on the Truro-Falmouth line and 124% on the Exeter-Barnstaple line.

12. The HLOS should consider the four-tracking of Filton Bank. It is essential work to ensure capacity can meet demand and will allow also enhance freight services to Portishead and to Avonmouth via Henbury.

13. ASLEF strongly supports the electrification of the Great Western Mainline. Electrification brings a huge amount of benefits. Electrification can have many long term savings. Due to there being fewer moving parts, maintenance on the trains becomes simpler and cheaper. Also, because the vehicles vibrate less and are more rugged, electric traction trains have far longer operational lives meaning they are more cost efficient. It also has many environmental

benefits. Electrifying the mainline is a good start but it should not represent the end of the process. Branch lines must also be considered.

14. The Union is concerned that the electrification will end at Cardiff. This will lead to a dramatic deterioration of the service between Cardiff and Swansea and have a negative effect on Swansea's economy. This is despite the fact that First Great Western who run the franchise believe that there is a business case to continue electrification to Swansea.
15. Whilst the InterCity Express programme is to be welcomed, as previously stated, capacity remains a major issue within this franchise. Receiving old rolling stock from franchises receiving additional units may help, but a more strategic long term plan is needed.
16. ASLEF would strongly welcome the re-opening of the Portishead line as well as improved rail access to Heathrow from the West.
17. 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 new franchise should be structured in a way that could allow the transfer of certain responsibilities after franchise award, should decentralisation proceed in a particular area."
18. 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.

19. Consideration to Rail Freight is essential. ASLEF is pleased that the Department “recognises that efficient and sustainable freight transport is increasingly important to the achievement of our environmental goals and for the growth of the UK’s national and regional economies.” However the Union is concerned that whilst the consultation recognises the importance and potential growth of rail freight, it does little to explain how rail freight will be promoted, protected and safeguarded in the west of England. Growth in rail freight will require infrastructure improvements.

20. ASLEF would push for Great Western Main Line Gauge Enhancements. The enhancements from Acton to Bristol and Cardiff would assist in accommodating larger containers to add to efficiencies gained from earlier enabling works by the Crossrail and Great Western Mainline Electrification Works. These works would include bridge reconstruction, track lowering and slewing as well as modifications to platforms and canopies.

21. There is great concern over the DfT’s decision to hand over almost all operational and time tabling decisions to the franchise. This is for the very reason stated by the Department. “The specification also needs to recognise that the Great Western railway serves different railway markets: InterCity, Regional, Suburban and Branch Line, and that purely commercial decisions may not fully reflect the economic benefits and connectivity provided by these services.”

22. It therefore seems contradictory to allow greater flexibility for operators to “respond to demographic and market changes and commercial opportunities than is the case under the current franchise.” ASLEF call on the DfT to be very careful in discarding many areas of prescribed minimum provision. Often necessary and vital services for local communities and

economies are not commercially profitable services. It must be the big picture that is worked towards. Not the profit of the franchise winner.

23. It is pleasing to see that current service provision will be the starting point for deciding what goes into the new franchise. As previously noted this must become a new minimum and built upon to deal with overcrowding issues.

24. ASLEF are concerned to see the consultation ask “Should branch line services continue to call at all branch line stations, or could the needs of most passengers be better met by omission of some of the intermediate stops on some or all of the trains, so that the final destination is reached more quickly?” In short this is asking whether some stations should close. This would be met with strong opposition. Stations are often the life blood of rural communities despite a relatively small numbers of users. Closure would also be detrimental to the “feeder” effect of branch lines. Station closure would lead to less railway journeys and more journeys by car. Something the DfT wants to avoid for both reasons of congestion and carbon emissions.

25. 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.

26. 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.

27. 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.
28. 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.
29. 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 the document later states that “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.
30. Trying to ensure the most efficient use of capacity is sensible. However punishing passengers who have no choice over what time they get to work is simply unfair. 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.
31. ASLEF support the simplification of fares and the introduction of smart ticketing. This will make travel on the Great Western franchise simpler and more attractive to passengers which can only assist in profiting more people on to the railways and out of their cars.

32. As noted some services on the Great Western franchise will transfer to the new Crossrail franchise. Whilst there has not yet been any examination into how this will be done, ASLEF call for the DfT to ensure that it is not used as an opportunity to erode staff pay and conditions and that TUPE principles are upheld by all parties involved.

33. ASLEF believes that the new Great Western Franchise faces a huge challenge. Rail in the South West and Wales has been a huge success. Passenger numbers have risen enormously which is a positive thing for the region and the country as a whole. Unfortunately capacity and punctuality have failed to keep up with demand. The South West has suffered from low investment. Breaking up the infrastructure with alliances and leaving the TOCs free to change services according to the whims of the market are not the solution. Infrastructure investment is. Rail infrastructure has a higher multiplying effect than any other investment. Therefore it is essential environmentally, socially and economically.

Mick Whelan
General Secretary
75-77 St John Street
Clerkenwell
London
EC1M 4NN