ASLEF Response to the Initial Industry Plan for England and Wales

The Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen (ASLEF) is the UK's train driver's union representing approximately 18,000 members in train operating companies and freight companies as well as London Underground and Overground.

ASLEF is glad to be given the opportunity to respond to the Initial Industry Plan for England and Wales. We recognise that there are many financial constraints on Government spending due to the financial position that the country and wider world finds itself in but we would contend that rail infrastructure is a useful tool to assist growth to the economy, while ensuring growth in transport capacity and contributing to a reduction in carbon emissions.

Figures quoted by Credo Group for Invensys Rail which show that every £1 invested in rail by the Government generates an additional £1.30 from the private sector – in other words investment in transport has a stronger multiplier effect than other sectors of the economy.

ASLEF firmly believes that we must continue to invest in rail infrastructure to continue the successful growth in both rail freight and passenger operations. In the past ten years rail freight has grown by 60 per cent and now has 11.5% of the UK surface freight market as opposed to 8% in 1994. Passenger numbers are currently higher than at any time in history in peace time Britain. This is positive news for road congestions, the environment and the economy. However it also makes it essential that infrastructure is able to keep pace with demand.

Overcrowding on the railway is also at an all-time high according to a report from the ORR this August demonstrating that we have not achieved this. Trains serving the South Eastern commuter belt were carrying three per cent over capacity, with Leeds and Birmingham also suffering badly.

ASLEF supports several schemes which will serve to enhance freight capacity and efficiency including work north of Preston on the West Coast Main Line which will increase capacity to 36 trains per day in each direction by 2019 and 48 trains per day by 2030. In addition, extending freight loops will allow an additional 775 freight trains. Potential delays could also be avoided with improved interaction of freight services with the higher speed passenger services.

The union would also urge the ORR to consider Great Western Main Line Gauge Enhancements while 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. The necessary work would include bridge reconstruction, track lowering and slewing as well as modifications to platforms and canopies.

Additional upgrade work between Felixstowe to Nuneaton would also increase capacity to up to 56 trains per day in each direction by 2030 with works such as signalling, remodelling and double tracking schemes. This would create a great deal of benefits including taking 750,000 lorry journeys off of our roads by 2030. It would also take freight off of the North London Lines and Great Eastern Mainline; the congested rail links into London.

Work on signalling and line speed on the Southampton – West Coast Main Line would also help capacity meet the 2030 forecasts while use of the routes via Andover, Kew, Melksham and Oxford to Bletchingley would provide additional capability. Diversionary capability could also be examined.

ASLEF agrees that a balance needs to be struck between taxpayer and fares, but we would point out that rail transport has many indirect financial benefits for the taxpayer. For example, road congestion costs businesses £17 billion per annum, with HGVs only paying between one to two thirds of the costs they impose on society, depending on the way it is calculated. There are therefore many financial and long-term benefits to getting people as well as freight off of the road and on to rail.

ASLEF endorses the documents assertion that a core component of the industry's strategy to address climate change is network electrification. Electrification releases far less carbon emissions and also allows capacity growth and is particularly beneficial when building extra capacity on rail whether this is from longer trains or more frequent services, as proportionately less additional energy is needed from one single source than from each train. Electrification has many cost savings with reductions in rolling stock operating costs (including fuel), infrastructure operating costs, increases in rolling stock availability rates, extensions to vehicle life and reduction in the capital costs of new vehicles.

Additionally passengers find journeys that are made on electric traction trains are quieter, smoother and usually quicker. The noise issue is also a benefit for those who live close to rail lines. There is also a phenomenon known as the "sparks effect" whereby electrification attracts passengers to the rail line as they notice the investment being made and therefore assume a better quality line.

The union supports the Government's decision to push ahead with the electrification of the Great Western Mainline but we are 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, believes that there is a business case.

As the Industry Plan explains, the business case for electrifying the Midland Mainline is also extremely strong. We would expect the electrification of this line to be a priority to ensure job creation, higher capacity, lower on-going running costs and less carbon emissions.

The Gospel Oak – Barking line is an anomaly in London's transport network. It is 12 miles of non-electrified track which is linked to electrified lines at each end. It also links to the Midland Main Line, the East Coast Main Line, the Lea Valley Line (Stratford to Stansted and Cambridge) and the Enfield and Southbury Loop suburban lines. As well as creating the usual benefits to passengers that come with electrification, it would also be an important development for freight.

Following the expansion of port expansion at Felixstowe and Thames Gateway Port (Shell-haven), electrification would greatly assist by allowing electric traction freight locos to use the line and relieve pressure on the North London Line, and the busy junction at Stratford. Now that the Department for Transport has approved an £18.5m grant from the Transport Innovation Fund to increase the track loading gauge between Woodgrange Park and Willesden to accommodate the 9'6" high-cube international containers, very little extra work would be required to provide the additional clearances for overhead line equipment.

ASLEF strongly disagrees with the suggestion within the plan that franchising is "a highly competitive process which has attracted the involvement of companies with strong track records in cost efficiency." Since privatisation, more than £11 billion of public funds has been misspent: on debt write-offs, dividend payments to private investors, fragmentation costs including profit margins of complex tiers of contractors and sub-contractors, and higher interest payments in order to keep Network Rail's debts off the Government balance sheet.

These are only the readily-quantified costs of rail privatisation, but there are many more costs which are difficult to quantify including: excess interest payment on rolling stock company (ROSCO) debt; poor cost control; excessive bonus payments and high salaries for senior managers; costs of bidding for franchises, awarding them, and re-branding when a new company takes over; bail-outs of failing operators; unplanned costs arising from over-complexity; and unpaid tax. ASLEF therefore strongly feels that it is untrue to assert that franchising ensures cost efficiency and would in fact suggest it has the opposite effect.

ASLEF is also concerned by the issue of "labour productivity" being raised. Productivity has dramatically improved over the past two decades for drivers.

Diagrams from Southern region depot from 1991-92 show that drivers spent 45% of their hours driving and 23% was slack time. In 2010-11 time driving is 66% with 14% as slack time.

ASLEF looks forward to seeing the railway output specifications and funding for the period from April 2014 onwards. The Union hopes that ministers will look at the long term benefits of railway investment and see spending as a way of kick starting the economy and creating growth rather than an area ripe for cutting. Infrastructure investment is essential in increasing transport capacity, reducing carbon emissions and creating jobs and must therefore be a priority for the Government.

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