



Cross Country passenger rail franchise public consultation

August 2018

1. The Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen (ASLEF) is the UK's largest train driver's union representing approximately 20,000 members in train operating companies and freight companies as well as London Underground and light rail systems. The union currently has 573 members working for the Cross Country rail franchise.
2. ASLEF appreciates the opportunity to respond to this consultation about the next Cross Country passenger rail franchise which focuses on the themes of crowding, the shape of the network, and the customer experience.
3. As mentioned in the consultation document, passenger numbers have increased to such an extent that many routes now have reached full capacity and can no longer accommodate any further growth. ASLEF regularly criticises the terrible crowding endured by passengers on our rail network and we welcome the Transport Secretary's commitments to resolve this problem, but we are disappointed that many of the suggested solutions outlined in the consultation document for the next Cross Country franchise are either unrealistic or inadequate.
4. On Cross Country services crowding tends to be worse in the peak periods, on Friday afternoons and on Sunday afternoons. There is crowding around cities and hub stations, and for some distance along the relatively long routes. In addition, there are often high numbers of passengers boarding and alighting at intermediate stations. The document lists potential ways of reducing the number of short distance passengers on long distance trains, such as alternating calls at certain stations or restricting calls to 'set down' or 'pick up' only. These options could speed up journeys for a fortunate few, but passengers at stations where stops are removed or that are made set-down would be hugely inconvenienced, which is fundamentally unfair. ASLEF does not agree with proposals to accelerate long-distance journeys by omitting calls at intermediate stations and we do not agree that bidders should have the flexibility to make fewer calls at some stations. We would like to see more trains, connecting more communities, not fewer. While the introduction of faster direct services over long

distances would be very welcome, this should only be considered as an addition to current services, if capacity can be expanded to offer this as well as the services that are already in place. Reducing stops at intermediate stations would have a negative impact on communities and businesses in those areas and we do not believe that the interests of certain users should be prioritised over the interests of others. DfT determined franchise specifications may need reviewing over time, but it is important to protect passengers from TOCs that might make decisions based on what is commercially beneficial, rather than what is right for passengers. Furthermore, making some stops set down only would be difficult to enforce and could lead to operational chaos.

5. Removing the validity of local multi-modal tickets on long distance trains would be difficult to enforce. More importantly, introducing ticketing restrictions to deter certain passengers from traveling on certain services would essentially mean offering a poorer, reduced service to those customers. As with alternating or restricting stops, this means that the needs of some passengers essentially get prioritised over others.
6. In the document there is a caveat acknowledging the fact that these ideas could only be appropriate if suitable alternatives exist. Unfortunately, if alternative services exist on other routes this just means pushing the problem onto other regional TOCs where services are equally crowded. Adding new alternative services may be a possibility if there were more joined up planning between operators and with Network Rail about increasing services but in reality, the current fragmentation on the railways means that franchisees plan and make decisions separately, in isolation, and at different times. The best real solution would be for the whole system to be brought back into public ownership as an integrated whole and for the government to invest in substantially expanding the size of the network, adding new lines and additional stations.
7. Other options for reducing crowding included in the document include longer trains, leasing trains and cascading trains from elsewhere on the network, but these suggestions are only touched on. Given the logistical and financial requirements these ideas would entail, the proposals seem unrealistic. No financial commitments are made and there is no mention of the logistical challenge of gaining access on already heavily congested routes.
8. The Cross Country franchise is the most extensive rail franchise stretching from Scotland to Cornwall, Manchester to the south coast of England and Wales. It serves seven of Britain's ten biggest cities and operates through seven of the eight Network Rail routes. The majority of services are long distance intercity or regional routes and some stakeholders have expressed a desire for local, stopping services, primarily used by commuters and leisure travellers, to be removed from the franchise and transferred to another franchise that operates similar services. They would like to see Cross Country focus exclusively

on being a long distance high speed intercity operator and they have proposed removing local services from the franchise, speeding-up longer distance trains and serving additional destinations.

Theoretically, if long distance high speed intercity services could run on separate lines from local stopping services the network could operate more efficiently, but in reality we do not have the infrastructure or rolling stock to accommodate this. The network is heavily congested, routes cross each other and it is already difficult to get access to very busy stations so the scope for substantial change is limited. Little would be achieved by moving local services to another franchise that would face the same dilemmas. Building the infrastructure for new lines and platforms to accommodate additional services would require substantial infrastructural investment which ASLEF would welcome, but the government is not currently considering.

9. Service patterns regularly have to be reviewed to ensure that the requirements of the network are being met and sometimes they need to be remapped. In December 2018 Cross Country will introduce extra services between Bristol and Exeter, for example, and in future linking up with Crossrail, HS2, East West Rail and Northern Powerhouse Rail will offer opportunities for linkages and new destinations. For now, however, ASLEF would urge caution about transferring services to or from the Cross Country franchise. We feel that there must be a very strong case to remap services because of the disruption and costs that changes would entail for companies and staff involved, even though the end result is often just that train drivers do the same job in different uniforms. Remapping the region's railways and transferring routes between franchises presents an upheaval for staff who may be affected in terms of workplace location and uncertainty around job security could create a retention problem. Alongside this are the usual complications of TUPE which lead to a disparate and fragmented workforce with different sets of terms and conditions within the driving grade. Any potential remapping should only be considered in full consultation with ASLEF.
10. The section of two-track railway on the East Coast Main Line between Northallerton and Newcastle is very congested and both TransPennine Express and Virgin East Coast are planning to extend services to Newcastle. If these enhancements happen, it may not be possible to accommodate them alongside the current Cross Country services so the consultation asks whether it would be acceptable for the current Cross Country service serving Newcastle to be curtailed or diverted, if a similar service was provided by another operator. Unfortunately, in this scenario there is no win-win situation because curtailing some routes in order to accommodate others will always mean that some passengers will lose out and will be inconvenienced.
11. ASLEF is well aware of the challenges posed by too many operators competing for access to the same routes. The East Coast section between Northallerton and Newcastle is just one example of a route that struggles to accommodate a mixture of long distance and local passenger services and freight

trains, all of which have different speed profiles. We do not feel the existing pattern of services and station calls necessarily needs to be rigidly preserved, and having fewer franchises operating on the same stretch of a route would make sense logistically, but chopping and changing sections of routes from one TOC to another, and diverting one TOC's services to give another TOC access to a route, are just short-term solutions that don't resolve the problem of crowding and congestion overall. It is ASLEF's view that rail franchising fragments and complicates the railway system and our network would function far more efficiently if it were brought back into an integrated whole under public ownership, so that planners could make decisions based on the needs of the rail network instead of looking at fragmented parts, in isolation.

12. In the furthest parts of the country, at the extremities of the network, trains spend quite a long time serving relatively few passengers. Some stakeholders would like to see resources concentrated in the centre of the network, where more passengers would benefit but ASLEF is not in favour of bidders being given flexibility to change services to the extremities of the network in order to reduce crowding in the centre because nothing is added overall. We believe that long-term solutions must be found to accommodate demand across the whole country. It is not acceptable that adding new services on one line should require a reduction in services on another. TOCs base decisions on how profitable different sections of lines are and they prioritise those that are the most lucrative. It is not fair that the needs of passengers on profitable commuter lines should get prioritised over the needs of isolated communities in the peripheries of the network. It is ASLEF's view that operators should be prevented from marginalising communities that have a weaker voice and currently the easiest way to ensure this is by setting minimum requirements. If additional services are needed, solutions should be found to deliver them.
13. Beyond Cross Country's current core service pattern (Cornwall / north of Edinburgh...) services are generally a lot less frequent and there is a demand for more first and last journeys and Sunday services, and more trains at certain times of the year. If feasible, ASLEF would be in favour of more services being extended further along the network, and the introduction of a longer operational day. This would create more jobs for train drivers and offer more opportunities to people and businesses in parts of the country that are currently quite isolated. However, this should not take away from current services and should be in addition, meaning that there would be financial implications and logistical challenges which would have to be funded and explored in conjunction with ASLEF, Network Rail's Systems Operator, and other stakeholders.
14. The consultation mentions the possibility of some resources being redeployed to enhance other existing or new routes. It is ASLEF's view that exploring plans to open up new lines and connect poorly served areas is a good idea that would have tremendous benefits for isolated communities, but this seems to

be an unrealistic prospect. We have already made the point above that the ideal scenario would be if the government were willing to substantially invest in building more infrastructure and expanding the size of the railway network in order to ease the pressure on heavily congested routes. There is currently great competition for access to shared routes, which constrains growth. This is a particular problem for FOCs who are generally forced to use secondary lines outside peak times because passenger services are given priority during the day. Maintaining diversionary routes is also very important to reduce the number of cancellations and minimise disruption to passengers' journeys, but - as mentioned in the consultation document - there is currently a deficit of such routes and companies are reluctant to commit to staff depots and the staff training required.

15. The consultation document notes that one in two passengers use Cross Country to connect with other services so improving the interchange experience for passengers is very important. For this TOCs and Network Rail must work closely with the Systems Operator, Route Managers and other stakeholders to plan better connections with other forms of transport, such as buses, trams, taxis and air travel. It is also essential that they explore what more could be done to improve access and interchange for those with disabilities or accessibility needs.
16. Passengers value having staff on trains and at stations to assist elderly vulnerable or disabled passengers and they feel safer when there is a visible staff presence. Unfortunately, the consultation document states that on Cross Country services passengers are dissatisfied with the low availability of staff at stations. ASLEF campaigns for more staff on our railways, on platforms, on board trains, and in ticket offices. We welcome the importance given within the consultation document to the franchisee being a responsible employer and equipping staff with the right skills. We see investment in training for public facing staff as one of the best possible ways of achieving better customer satisfaction and meeting the needs of passengers. Investing in the right equipment and training to develop staff helps them to provide passengers with accurate and relevant information during disruption and helps them to assist those with accessibility needs, however the consultation document offers so little detail on this area that it raises questions about whether this could just be a tick box requirement rather than a genuine commitment.
17. The document states that the next operator should engage fully with its users and with organisations with devolved power such as West Midlands Rail, Transport Scotland, Welsh Government, and Transport for the North. This is particularly important for Cross Country because it interacts with most Network Rail routes, all freight operating companies and all but three TOCs. Irrespective of the challenges, ASLEF would welcome a shift towards more meaningful engagement between TOCs, Network Rail and a wider range of stakeholders, including ourselves. A lot could be gained from more consideration being given to the views of those who work on and use the transport system; not just

passengers but also trade unions and railway workers. For example, recent problems with timetables in May caused much disruption to passengers, through cancelled and delayed services. Better engagement with trade unions over the development of plans for journey time improvements could have been extremely valuable.

18. This consultation document details congestion, overcrowding and the deficient size of the current fleet, but disappointingly it focuses mainly on seeking ways to deter passengers from using certain services, or reducing their network services, rather than looking at genuine long-term solutions to meet their needs. On today's constrained network there is limited scope for making small changes that will have a big impact so this approach is inadequate. What is really needed is much greater investment in infrastructure, to expand the network. ASLEF has always been opposed to splitting up and privatising the rail network and we believe that fragmentation is one of the biggest reasons for the inefficiency and high costs in running the rail network in Britain. We campaign for a national, integrated and publically owned network to replace the current franchise system where money is taken out of the industry in the form of dividends to shareholders instead of profits being reinvested in the network, therefore for us this whole document is based in a continuation of a failed franchise model. Nevertheless, we hope that some of the points we have made above will be taken on board and we look forward to more meaningful engagement with other stakeholders over issues where the union's knowledge and experience will be valuable.

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