



Call for evidence: London Assembly investigation on Future Rail

July 2018

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. ASLEF is pleased to have this opportunity to input to the London Assembly Transport Committee's investigation into how rail capacity, frequency and reliability can be improved, and what infrastructural developments are needed to ensure that London's rail services are fit for purpose.

1. Currently, what are the main challenges for London's rail network?

Overcrowding on busy services is currently a major challenge for London's rail network. The Mayor's Transport Strategy states that without further action, 67% of travel on National Rail in the morning peak would be in crowded conditions by 2041. As train drivers, we are well aware of the reality of the problem of crowding on most routes into central London both on the Tube and on national rail services: People struggle to get on board trains and experience uncomfortable journeys, and forecasts predict further growth in London's population over the years ahead.

Congestion on the rail network is another problem, affecting both rail passenger and freight services, and the lack of access to paths is constraining demand for services and thereby the possibilities for future growth. Any capacity that can be freed up on existing infrastructure offers the opportunity for additional passenger or freight services to be introduced, but in the long term building new lines and modernising rail and underground lines will be essential to meeting demand for future generations and alleviating congestion.

The fast, reliable and sustainable movement of people and goods is essential for London's growth and success, and it would be damaging to the economy if we are unable to expand transport infrastructure to meet the demand for greater capacity. Other modes of public transport are not a viable or sustainable alternative, so it is important not to jeopardise trends towards growth by turning passengers away from the railways with overcrowding and overpriced fares. Indeed, it is concerning that although trains are currently overcrowded,

season ticket sales are beginning to drop because the fares are becoming unaffordable for many commuters. In January 2018 fares across all operators were 20% higher in real terms than they were in January 1995. Nationally rail fares are rising at a much higher rate than the median increase in wages and the result is the creation of transport poverty: Commuters are being priced off the railway and are being forced to change jobs, move home, or use alternative modes of transport. If this is allowed to continue London's economy will suffer.

As a union another key concern for ASLEF is that the rail network should be accessible, safe, and well integrated with the wider transport system. Improving the accessibility of the rail network and ensuring seamless connections between trains, and between rail and bus services would remove barriers to travellers including elderly and disabled passengers.

2. What are likely to be the future challenges for London's rail network over the next two decades?

We have already mentioned overcrowding and congestion as major challenges for London's rail network and we have called for investment in a reliable public transport system that is able to cope with more passenger and freight services. Another challenge for London's rail network, going forward, will be making London a zero-carbon city. This will make London a more pleasant and safer place to live and work, and Londoners will enjoy a healthier and better quality of life, but this will not be achieved without the successful implementation of the Mayor's Transport Strategy. Reducing car dependency would not only improve London's air quality and reduce the number of road accidents but would also benefit Londoners who suffer from health problems relating to physical inactivity and pollution. Reducing the number of road freight vehicles on our roads by using rail freight instead would also be important: Having fewer lorries in the capital also makes our roads safer (in 2013 there were 14 cyclist deaths in London of which nine involved HGVs) and rail freight produces 76% less carbon dioxide emissions than the equivalent HGV journey. For both passenger and freight services we hope that commitments to electrify all rail lines by 2050 will be honoured.

3. How is demand on the rail network likely to change over the coming decades?

London needs investment in transport to support the creation of jobs and opportunities but also to support the building of new homes, which are in high demand. Rail freight could have an important role in servicing housing projects within the capital as long as suitable sites, with good rail and road connections, are available and so long as passenger services stop being given priority access over freight, which makes running freight services very difficult. It is a mistake to see freight trains as a nuisance on the network to be excluded from London rather than recognising them as a critical part of the transport solution. An average freight train can remove 60 HGVs journeys from our roads, and is a popular solution. Indeed, rail freight is by far the best method of transporting aggregates and construction materials and removing waste without adding to congestion on London's roads.

Currently rail delivers almost 50 per cent of aggregates into London, but more rail freight terminals are needed. We are aware of the pressures caused by the lack of available land for building housing in London, but ASLEF has warned against selling railway land and rail depots because this would damage the network's ability to meet growing demands on the transport infrastructure. Intermodal terminals and rail-linked warehousing, such as the facilities at Barking, Tilbury and London Gateway, are essential. Safeguarding this land and investing in infrastructure is key to meeting the growing demand for rail freight, so ASLEF welcomed the recognition in the draft London Plan of the importance of protecting key road rail transfer sites.

4. What rail and station improvements would bring most benefits to Londoners?

London's rail services need to consistently be customer focused, accessible and affordable, with support provided by highly trained staff. Many of the people passing through London's transport system are foreign tourists, parents accompanying young children, and individuals requiring assistance because of their age or a disability, but there is little mention in this Transport Strategy of provisions made for them. Specifically, ASLEF would like to see a commitment to keeping adequate numbers of highly trained staff on platforms, trains, across stations and in ticket offices, at all hours of the day and night.

The electrification of all rail lines will hugely improve services for passengers by making trains quieter, cleaner, faster and more reliable.

For ASLEF members, we would like to see a commitment that all new London Underground rolling stock will have dedicated and secure driver cabs.

5. To what extent does the Mayor's Transport Strategy address London's future rail needs?

ASLEF responded to the Mayor's Transport Strategy consultation in October 2017 and broadly we were happy with the Mayor's vision and plans, although we raised concerns about overcrowding, the need for additional rail capacity, and the marginalisation of rail freight.

The union was pleased to see the Transport Strategy commitment to get London's entire transport system to be zero emission by 2050. Investment in electrification will improve services for passengers by making trains faster, cleaner and more reliable, will reduce CO2 emissions and will also create long term savings on maintenance. We also welcome the Mayor's commitments to encourage car drivers to switch to using trams which don't produce harmful emissions.

The Transport Strategy recognises that rail is a cleaner mode of transport and that that rail is particularly important for heavy goods and construction, and it makes the point that freight and servicing activity must be managed in an integrated way. The document recognises that the most should be made of London's rail network for both passengers and freight but advocates that passenger services should be given preferential access to the network infrastructure. There is an emphasis on moving rail freight at quiet times, trying to bypass the London Overground network, and the provision that additional rail freight services should not lead to a reduction in passenger services. The Draft Transport Strategy actually described rail freight as 'long, slow-moving trains that limit the full potential of the network for passenger services' and although this statement has been removed in the final version, the focus with freight is still very much on road vehicles and London's street network.

ASLEF would like to see the development of cross modal consolidation and distribution centres capable of being rail served and from where goods can then be delivered by low emissions road vehicles including electric vans and e-bikes for light loads. We were pleased that the identification and protection of new sites for load consolidation that are rail connected or rail serviceable is supported by the London Plan, and we hope that the use of these centres will be encouraged in the planning process. It is disappointing that the Mayor only commits to consider the benefits of establishing regional consolidation and distribution centres in inner and outer London. Nevertheless, the Transport Strategy does state that the Mayor will seek to identify opportunities to get more of London's freight closer to its final destination by rail and to identify and make the most of opportunities for rail freight capacity and capability enhancements.

6. To what extent does Network Rail's plans for Control Period 6 address London's future rail needs?

A £47bn funding pot for infrastructure investment has been given to Network Rail for its next funding period, CP6 (2019-2024) and the vast majority of this will go on track maintenance and renewals. The government is creating a separate rolling programme of investment for enhancements and just £10bn has been set aside for Network Rail to finish enhancement projects carried over from CP5 (2015-2019) and fund new enhancement projects.

ASLEF welcomes the government's decision to move away from Control Periods in five-year cycles because major projects need careful planning and management and can't be rushed or squeezed to fit in with control periods or political deadlines. Unfortunately, this has led to some projects – like the electrification projects – being reneged on and abandoned due to cost, or at least subject to delays and downgrades. When chunks of work are pushed from one control period to the next in order to remain within budget this has a knock-on effect on other projects. Although National Rail has successfully delivered some major projects, others promised in CP5 have been scrapped and there is an increasing backlog of renewals work to be completed. Going forward, we believe that a greater focus on maintenance and renewals in control period 6 is necessary and, following the postponement of works during the current control period, it is important to improve efficiency in the railway industry and to strengthen the periodic review process. ASLEF has for a long time been calling for more and

better collaborative working on the railways and we welcome plans to more closely integrate Network Rail route businesses with train operating companies.

By the start of CP6 each of the nine routes will have its own strategic plan, separate regulatory settlements, and the managing directors will be handed the authority to approve 99% of all work, with the hope that devolution to route level will help with efficiency and delivering projects on time. ASLEF does not oppose devolution of responsibility for rail to regional representative bodies but our policy is that a unified single, vertically integrated, publically owned national railway would offer the best value to passengers and the taxpayer, so we welcome the Transport Secretary's reassurances that route devolution is not intended to lead to privatisation of route businesses. As a union we urge caution when looking at devolution because many networks cross a number of different routes and complications arise when there is competition for access to routes among companies. The creation of a London Suburban Metro by the late 2020s, which will devolve responsibility for suburban rail services from the Department for Transport (DfT), should be positive in terms of giving the Mayor control over Network Rail and train operating companies and a greater influence over the planning and delivery of these services with improved frequencies, journey times and smooth interchanges. Also if revenue is kept by TfL and train operators are paid according to performance targets being met, they will have more incentive to improve their performance.

7. What impact will the Digital Railway Programme have on London's rail network? What are the challenges of implementing this programme?

Digital railway technology is designed to modernise our railways by focusing on optimising the flow of trains across the network and thereby improving performance, enabling higher service frequencies, better reliability, and more capacity. By improving traffic flows it can assist with the introduction of additional services and help to reduce congestion in a way that is less disruptive and more cost-effective than building new tracks. If this technology is introduced in conjunction with improvements in track layouts at bottlenecks, capacity upgrades at stations and in-cab signalling to reduce headways between trains, it would free up capacity for running more services.

Vast amounts of funding have already been invested in the digital railway programme but unfortunately implementing this technology on our Victorian railway infrastructure is a challenge and there have been delays to the introduction of digital rail technology across much of the country. ASLEF considers that preparing for the digital railway programme should be a priority but implementing this technology will not be possible everywhere it cannot fully replace human workers. As this technology is gradually introduced it is crucial that all railway staff receive adequate training, that they are fully prepared, and that they feel confident about the changes it will entail. How our members drive trains will fundamentally change, but it must be recognised that this does not mean that drivers will be de-skilled, simply re-skilled.

8. What opportunities and challenges will the Government's new Rail Network Enhancement Pipeline (RNEP) bring for rail enhancements in London?

The Rail Network Enhancements Pipeline (RNEP) sets out a new process for new enhancement projects which will not be funded through Network Rail's financial control period cycle. The idea is to use third parties such as local authorities and the private sector to invest in new major rail infrastructure projects, protecting the taxpayer from costly overruns during the construction stage like those we have seen in the current rail financial control period on projects like the Great Western Main Line electrification.

ASLEF believes there is a good case for dealing with enhancements outside of the five-yearly control period because many enhancements span several control periods. Serial governments have failed to provide a clear long-term vision for investment and innovation and this has been problematic for Network Rail and other stakeholders who need certainty about future direction and spending levels if they are to plan efficiently and make decisions about investing in skills and technologies. The unpredictability of renewals spending from one control period to another has caused problems along the supply chain when funds are running low and it is not clear where efforts and funding should be focused next.

One problem with the new process for rail enhancement projects is that the Transport Secretary has asked investors to come forward with ideas for schemes but his call for proposals does not specify a list of projects available for third-party investment or give a sufficiently clear picture of the DfT's strategic priorities for investment in each region. Another problem is that new rail enhancement schemes will be decided in a staged approach. This means that although the new process will no longer be bound to five-year control cycles, the rail sector still won't have the long-term visibility that suppliers need to be able to plan.

Under the new system funding for enhancements is not being maintained to current levels so the DfT will be relying very heavily on market-led proposals. There is no "plan B" without third-party investors. ASLEF is fundamentally opposed to the privatisation of the railway network because we believe that profits should be reinvested into the railway, not paid out as dividends to shareholders. Unfortunately, we know that any third-party investors are most likely to be private sector profiteers because years of austerity measures have slashed local authorities' budgets to such an extent that they are unlikely to be able to support the financing and delivery of railway services. Either way, devolving responsibility for designing, financing and implementing projects to third parties who have limited knowledge of the railways in order to access funding from them could make an overly-complicated system worse, and potentially be dangerous.

The lack of clarity around the DfT's strategic priorities is likely to damage third party confidence in the process and could inhibit investments along the supply chain in workforce, skills and innovation. If the DfT continues to pursue third party investment, it will be necessary to provide a clear set of strategic priorities for rail infrastructure investment in each region and outline which projects are likely to be available for investment. The Transport Secretary should also clarify how proposed rail enhancement projects will be assessed in terms of cost efficiency and value for money. There is a very real risk that the current problem of badly planned schemes will be replaced with a slowdown in new enhancement projects. This would be particularly disadvantageous to regions that have experienced under-investment in recent periods.

9. What examples of innovative approaches to improving the frequency, capacity and reliability of rail services, could be applied to London?

For years ASLEF has been calling for our railways to be electrified. Electric trains would be more reliable, lighter, faster, quieter and cleaner. Unfortunately, most of the electrification schemes planned in the last decade have been scrapped due to costs and delays. Similarly, Digital Railway technology and new traffic management systems can be useful in improving the flow of traffic with better frequency, capacity and reliability of rail services – as we have seen on the Thameslink programme, for example. But although such technology can be very effective, it is not enough in itself and needs to be introduced alongside upgrades to stations, infrastructure and new fleets of trains as well as investing in staff and training, making the improvements slow to deliver and costly.

Sometimes, however, improvements can be made with slight adjustments to timetables and stopping patterns, made – of course – in consultation with trade unions and stakeholders who can draw on their expertise and experience to make recommendations and highlight possible flaws in plans before they are implemented.

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