



Consultation on Transport for the North's Draft Strategic Transport Plan

April 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.
2. ASLEF would like to congratulate Transport for the North (TfN) in becoming the first sub-national transport body in England after gaining approval for statutory status from parliament in April 2018. TfN will not replace or replicate the work of existing local transport bodies but will work with civic and business leaders to ensure that funding and strategy decisions about transport infrastructure are informed by local knowledge and needs. TfN partners include Highways England, High Speed 2 (HS2), Network Rail, Local Authorities, Local Enterprise Partnerships, and TfN will work with the Department for Transport (DfT) to ensure that the North's transport priorities are clearly understood by the government. TfN will also need to work closely with the National Infrastructure Commission (NIC) – set up to provide recommendations on the country's strategic infrastructure –to coordinate their work and reach the right decisions about where transport investment funding is needed most. ASLEF believes that devolution of decision-making can bring many benefits and it is important to give local communities more say over how our transport network functions - so long as it is done properly and devolution doesn't create further fragmentation within an already overly fragmented system. Unfortunately, we question how much influence TfN will genuinely have. As a statutory partner, TfN will be responsible for setting the objectives and priorities for investments in the area, but will not have direct responsibility for managing the network, or even the ability to directly borrow capital or raise revenue, and will be taking over the role and functions of Rail North Limited in relation to the TPE and Northern franchise agreements in conjunction with the transport secretary. Our other concern, as a union, is that TfN's focus is very much on supporting local and national government, the private sector and transport operators, and we would like to see more consideration of the views of those who work on and use the transport system, such as trade unions, railway workers and passengers.

3. (Q1a). TfN's vision is that better transport connections will drive economic growth and support improvements in quality of life. ASLEF supports this vision of transport contributing to a stronger, more balanced economy. After years of inadequate investment, we are pleased that plans are developing to promote growth and close the long-standing gap between the North and the rest of the UK. Transport can act as a key enabler in supporting growth in the economy and generating social benefits because investment in better transport connections creates opportunities. 14% of people in the North live in rural communities and unfortunately north-south routes and east-west routes are already short of capacity, which restricts and discourages movement. Many journeys between Northern economic centres are slow and infrequent. A more reliable, less congested, and better connected network would improve access to previously isolated areas and encourage more businesspeople, commuters, students and tourists to use the transport system more. Better connections would offer wider opportunities for trade and make the North a more attractive place to invest, better place to live, work, visit and spend money. This would facilitate the supply chain of goods, services, knowledge and skills, making it easier to find and retain skilled labour, pushing up wages and improving productivity. It would take a sustained increase in infrastructure investment to boost the economy after years of under-investment, but if enough funding were invested, it would result in higher wages, more tax revenue for the government and less government expenditure on welfare benefits.

4. (Q1b). ASLEF agrees with the four objectives in the Draft Strategic Transport Plan, but would like to highlight the need for the government to make adequate and sustained funding available if the objectives are to be met:
 - It is vital that the transport system is able to adapt to changing demands and challenges, and we consider it a prudent precaution that while the overall plan is a long-term plan, progress will be reviewed regularly, timed to fit within industry planning processes including Rail Upgrade Plans and rail franchise renewals. It is impossible to forecast for every eventuality but the system needs to be able to respond to shifts in commuter patterns, and to unexpected expenses that arise from a rise in the cost of fuel, materials or sudden adverse weather conditions, for example. This requires sufficient funding to be available, so that unforeseen expenditure does not take away from planned maintenance, upgrades or improvements. We have seen many rail projects delayed and cancelled over recent years, due to delays and budget overruns, and this has had a major knock-on impact on the wider network.

 - We have already spoken, above, about how investment in transport infrastructure and services at local and regional level could improve productivity in the North and make the region a more attractive place for businesses to invest. Better connectivity can make previously isolated areas more accessible, open

up new opportunities, and generate further demand for passenger and freight services. Investment and economic growth are very much interconnected but investments will only be effective if made across other relevant sectors too (the education system, housing, etc) and if sustained, over time.

- As a union we see investment in the railway network primarily as a public service, which must be inclusive and accessible to all. Unfortunately, many rural communities in particular have been isolated, socially excluded, and cut off from education and employment opportunities since Beeching's cuts. ASLEF campaigns against cuts and for affordable fares, fully accessible platforms and trains, and fully staffed ticket offices, station platforms and trains at all times, to ensure that passengers feel safe.
 - Trains are better for the climate and better for our health than other forms of public transport, and ASLEF urges TfN to put pressure on the government and partners to ensure that any new initiatives and interventions across the transport system take greenhouse gas emissions, pollution and sustainability into account: Rail travel offers many social and environmental benefits that make it a faster, greener, safer and more reliable way of transporting goods and passengers than roads. We would like TfN to encourage investment in better intermodal connections, particularly to and from ports, airports, freight depots and distribution hubs 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. Also the North has a lot of expertise in renewable electricity, offshore wind and new innovations including biomass and hydrogen, which should be explored as possibilities for building a cleaner and greener transport system.
5. (Q2a). The draft document highlights the fact that the North is increasingly being given more devolved powers and funding, yet the economic gap persists and there remain differences in goods and services productivity per capita compared to the rest of the England. The Strategic Transport Plan will become a statutory document - setting out TfN's long term transport infrastructure investment programme. It will be a useful tool for TfN partners, to guide them in coordinating and aligning their plans, and should give confidence to public and private investors, reassuring them there is a long-term commitment to boosting the economy in conjunction with regular progress reviews to identify any delays or cost-overruns. The draft document identifies that the North has strengths (or 'prime capabilities') in advanced manufacturing, health innovation, energy and digital technology. Clusters of businesses specialising in these sectors are spread across the North and there would be more opportunity for them to thrive if they had better transport links, to facilitate the movement of staff and clients and of materials and finished products along the supply chain. The document identifies 7 'strategic development corridors' that link economic centres and prime

capabilities, but highlights that these sectors would have even greater potential to grow if improvements to the transport network were made in conjunction with greater investment in the education system and other key sectors that would contribute to improving productivity. ASLEF recognises that there are opportunities for economic growth across all parts of the North and it is difficult to identify the sectors likely to generate the highest returns and worthiest of priority. It is particularly difficult to forecast future transport demand when changes to commuter working patterns, the cost of energy, technological developments, and a wide range of other factors, could strongly impact on lifestyles and investments. Nevertheless, as a union we would agree that any efforts to boost the economy should be based on sustained investment in transport, education, housing and other key sectors of vital importance to the economy and the wellbeing of the population.

6. The estimated projections for economic growth in the draft document are all based on optimum conditions and all parts of the plan being delivered, so changes to too many variables could affect the forecast outcomes quite severely. Clearly one of the biggest uncertainties is whether international investment and business links will be much affected by Brexit. Depending on what sort of trade deal the UK has with the EU after Brexit, the impact of leaving the EU could affect different sectors very differently. The TUC is calling for tariff-free, barrier-free trade with Europe. We don't yet know whether manufacturers will have to meet different standards following the withdrawal date, or what the costs are likely to be when goods and services are traded with countries with different standards, or what import and export tariffs will be like. The relationship between the EU and the UK in the field of railway transport will also change. EU businesses have long been investing in the UK's rail markets, and currently border management controls and immigration controls are covered in separate bilateral and tripartite agreements. These are examples of some of the uncertainties that make planning for growth over the next few decades very difficult.
7. (Q2b). The Draft Strategic Transport Plan identifies three main roles which transport can play to help to drive the economy: Connecting People, Connecting Businesses and Moving Goods. On the rail network, existing East – West services and connections are slow and routes lack capacity, meaning that the network isn't able to support more trains. ASLEF agrees that onward connectivity and interchanges between modes of travel need to be improved, for the HS2 and Northern Powerhouse Rail networks and also at local level, with buses. People are traveling more for work and leisure, short and long distances, and roads are equally over congested. Enhancements to rail services would make passengers' journeys faster, more pleasant, and more appealing, but it is no longer enough to tinker with small improvements when what is really needed is large scale investment and infrastructure development.

8. Because of the congestion on lines, passenger rail services are usually prioritised over rail freight services when it comes to access. The vast majority of rail freight services do not travel at peak times and are forced to use secondary lines in order to give access to passenger trains on the main lines. As a union that campaigns for more investment in freight on rail, we welcome TfN's freight and logistics analysis which models the benefits of a modal shift to rail and identifies areas for multi-modal transit improvements. We are also pleased that TfN sees the benefit of developing sites for the freight and logistics sector with multimodal access, and recognises the problem of the lack of rail routes capable of accommodating container trains. High volumes of biomass and construction aggregates pass through Northern ports and quarries and where modal shift from road to rail is possible, freight on rail can offer the best way to move fuel, waste, aggregates and bulk products for engineering and construction projects. If freight trains had more access to direct routes and better connections, companies could attract more business opportunities and some of the road congestion caused by HGVs could be alleviated, but at present access is limited by the capacity of the rail network. ASLEF hopes that increased use of digital railway infrastructure will allow for stronger traffic management.
9. (Q3a). For many years there has been under investment in rail infrastructure and trains in the North, resulting in congestion, poor punctuality and constraints on the capacity for growth. TfN's Investment Programme will include significant rail interventions that support HS2 and Northern Powerhouse Rail including station upgrades, line speed improvements, network capacity increases and even investment for wholly new sections of railway within the Northern Powerhouse Rail network. The Great North Rail Project, Network Rail's programme of improvements and enhancements, will result in more frequent and faster trains and a more integrated rail network with better connections and interchanges between economic centres. However not all of the North will benefit equally from Northern Powerhouse Rail, or HS2, and current improvements will only provide short term capacity to meet growth and address overcrowding. So we encourage TfN to push for bigger commitments to continue investment in the whole of the rail network in the North, for freight and passenger services, and for fairness at regional and local level. The draft document highlights that transport infrastructure is expensive due to long distances covered and topographical challenges, and has an irregular profile of spend required over extended timeframes. Meeting TfN's ambitions will require substantial increases in transport investment, and over an extended period.
10. ASLEF hopes that TfN's Strategic Transport Plan will be successful in giving businesses the confidence to invest in the North over the coming decades, and that the government will genuinely take on board what TfN and the partners who have been consulted, are advocating for, when making decisions about funding for infrastructure investments.

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