



## **Consultation on the combined Thameslink, Southern and Great Northern Franchise**

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 would have over 1,700 members on the new Thameslink franchise.
2. ASLEF shares the Department for Transport's aspiration for a railway that offers greater value for money with better punctuality and improved customer satisfaction. However, the union feels that many of the elements within the consultation are misguided and may exacerbate the existing inefficiencies within the franchise and the wider rail 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 understands the desire to reduce the costs of the railway. However, with the Southern franchise and First Capital Connect franchise running at capacity, the union finds it hard to see where such services can have costs cut. The union would contend that these are already well run

businesses. To state that “it is expected that the successful franchise bidder will be required to set out, and commit to, reducing the cost of operating the franchise,” is disingenuous. Savings must only come where they can occur without reducing the quality or capacity of the service. It is simply not right to look for savings where they may not exist.

5. The union is therefore concerned that the one potential area where a new franchise may seek to save money would be the introduction of more DOO services. ASLEF would categorically reject any attempt to impose DOO on any more services than those that currently utilise it. The union understands that the new rolling stock for the Thameslink project will have guard’s panels within them and therefore expects that these will be used as intended.
6. ASLEF would also oppose reductions in station staff. This has a significant impact upon the public’s perceived safety in using the railways. Cuts to station staff could be counterproductive with many of the more vulnerable people in our society deciding not to use free capacity late at night due to a lack of staffing at stations and concerns for their safety in empty stations. These proposals will ultimately lead to a reduction in revenue and thus offset the savings accrued from getting rid of the staff in the first place.
7. ASLEF appreciates that the DfT is only using a 7 year franchise rather than the preferred 15 year model used on the other recently re-let franchises. We note that this is only to support the operational aim of the merging of the services and infrastructure work and would suggest that the Government see the new franchise as a transitional one. We would point out that if the central role of the franchise is just to deal with the merging of services this could be problematic in itself if new franchise undertakes short term solutions to deal with these problems. The prospect of not having to deal with such consequences should they lose the franchise, could generate long term problems.

8. ASLEF would highlight the fact that dealing with the transfer of staff and harmonisation is always a difficult and arduous process. The history of the railway demonstrates that if such issues are not handled properly in the first instance, problems will be caused further down the line. The union would urge both the DfT and new franchisee to ensure that all decisions on harmonisation and dealing with the merger of staff from different employers should be dealt with comprehensively in consultation with the recognised trade unions.
9. We also regret that there is no meaningful reference to staff in the consultation. It states that ‘the Government’s priority is to ensure that the significant infrastructure work and the merging of services, staffing and business structures into one franchise is achieved in the most cost-effective way for passengers and taxpayers.’ These alterations will create fundamental changes to our member’s working lives.
10. Notwithstanding points previously made, the union struggles to see many benefits from a longer franchise following the proposed seven year contract. 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.”
11. 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. Passengers and taxpayers were told that such a step would lead to greater efficiency and lower costs. Franchises of this length would however lead to a reduction of competition.

12. 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 could lead to varying standards and once again a lack of overall responsibility. ASLEF therefore has reservations when the consultation states, "views are being sought on whether improved outcomes for passengers and transport users might be achieved in some cases if more decisions on local rail services were made closer to the communities they serve."

13. 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.

14. Asking those responsible for track and train to work closer together makes sense. However the creation of a formal alliance with a single board would be of great concern given Network Rail is a not-for-dividend company with a different structure. ASLEF is concerned that an alliance with a TOC would introduce an element of profit making back into the maintenance of our rail infrastructure and would also mean yet more fragmentation. This may in fact lead to a series of mini Railtracks. The union therefore believes it

essential that infrastructure remains under the control of one not-for-profit organisation.

15. Alliancing also 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 would, in effect, mean if delays are the fault of either company there will be no penalty as they will be paying it to themselves. There is also a concern that should the franchise winner join in an alliance with Network Rail to run the line, they will prioritise their passenger services over freight services.

16. It is sensible that the DfT recognises the need for more detailed specification whilst the disruption due to the Thameslink Programme restricts services to many stations. The consultation does however state that “franchise operators should have more commercial freedom and flexibility to develop the train service to meet the needs of passengers... The Government therefore intends to set the train service specification so that operational and timetabling decisions are devolved to TOCs where possible.” ASLEF is greatly concerned by this proposal. The union believe that many necessary and vital services for local communities and economies are not commercially profitable services and should be judged as part of the public service ethos of the railway.

17. The consultation suggests the “franchisee will have a greater involvement in the station management and in particular how the maintenance, repair and renewal arrangements are managed.” Once again there appears to be a contradiction between commercial motives and long term investment. In the consultation on the Great Western refranchising, the DfT notes, “significant station investment is rarely commercially self-financing.”

ASLEF believes it 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.

18. The union is calling for consideration to the extension of safeguarded staff travel facilities to non-safeguarded staff. For too long we have operated a railway that has an inequitable two-tier workforce which leads to division, a sense of exclusion and frustration.

19. It is inexcusable that two drivers with exactly the same role, salary and job description can have such a significant disparity in their travel facilities. It is also bizarre for non-safeguarded to have greater facilities across the whole of Europe than they enjoy in the country where they supply such a vital service.

20. The travel facilities given to our members here in the UK are inferior compared to those enjoyed by drivers in the rest of Europe. ASLEF fails to see any logical reason why this should be the case. The extension of travel facilities would offer a significant benefit to staff at a limited cost to the Train Operating Companies and Freight Operating Companies. It would create a harmonious content workforce and most importantly, would give non safe guarded staff the facilities they deserve. The sense of frustration that these members express to the Union should not be underestimated. ASLEF calls for the winning bidder to support the extension.

21. ASLEF would also like to address some other specific points not raised in the consultation. If more services are due to merge, it makes sense that Gatwick Express drivers become fully integrated into the new franchise. There should be questions as to whether the separate branding is still necessary.

22. The remodelling of London Bridge will involve the low level reducing to six 12-car platforms. The union would ask how this will affect services that currently terminate at the low level. Will morning and evening peak services continue as now or will these services eventually continue north through the core? This will of course affect suburban services in both the long and short term.
23. ASLEF appreciates the DfT's desire to improve services to Luton Airport and Gatwick, but it is essential that this isn't to the detriment of other mainline services south of Gatwick.
24. ASLEF would support the creation of a 24 hour rail service from the South Coast through London to further most north stations of the franchise. In addition it is essential to eliminate the current situation which sees less peak hour services running through the core route to and from Brighton than at off peak times.
25. During the rebuilding of London Bridge, the Union is able to agree with the prospect of two services running from the Thameslink core and the two from London Bridge to Brighton. However, if the DfT are looking at extending Gatwick services, new timetables from Brighton and Bedford could regain 4 trains an hour via the core. Any stock issue that would come from this should be part of the franchise agreement with 377 units looking like the obvious choice.
26. A combined franchise creates a unique opportunity to allow a more integrated train service in the South East of England. The new operator should make use of the core route for longer distant destinations connecting with suburban services at Blackfriars, Finsbury Park, and Kentish Town. This will maximise usage for destinations like Kings Lynn/ Cambridge, Peterborough and Bedford, to Brighton/ Gatwick, Horsham,

Eastbourne, Littlehampton , Tonbridge, Tunbridge Wells, Maidstone and Ashford.

27. ASLEF believes that improvements to rush hour services are vital. Brighton services south of London are a major issue and a reduction from four trains an hour to two during the rush hour would create significant overcrowding issues. A later finishing or night service would also aid customers. Four trains an hour from Brighton must be maintained or expanded, but routes direct to Peterborough and Cambridge rather than just terminating in Bedford would be a good step forward.
28. The union believes that there should be a minimum service level of at least two trains an hour over most routes at off peak times, and on all routes at peak times.
29. The opening of the Canal Tunnels at an earlier stage would save waste on empty coaching stock moves from the TL route to Hornsey for heavy maintenance, and provide a way to spread the impact of Driver Route Training. The DfT proposal for services during the work at London Bridge needs stock transfers to protect the current FCC service which is dependent on 4 trains per hour from Brighton to Bedford serving Gatwick airport.
30. It must be a high priority to increase both bike stand capacity and car parking. Added pressure is coming from local councils who have increased parking restrictions in both local authority and private car parks. With on street parking now being reduced and stopped within an ever increasing proximity of stations, there needs to be consideration to use more Network Rail land for parking facilities.

31. It is essential that the Great Northern suburban network is retained as a feeder service to those going into the core. The Cambridge and Kings Lynn services must therefore be kept.
32. In relation to Southeastern services, it is imperative that the Southeastern drivers at Orpington and Victoria continue to cover this work until 2018. Drivers should be “contracted out” to the Thameslink franchise until the completion of the London Bridge re-modelling in 2018. This will affect approximately 30 drivers’ jobs.
33. The sheer size of the new franchise means it is essential that it is managed correctly. A huge amount of London commuters will use the service as well as it being an essential connection for London’s main airports. Yet all of these services must be delivered whilst significant infrastructure works take place at London Bridge station and throughout the Thameslink line. ASLEF would therefore urge caution on choosing any bidder who simply offers the DfT largest savings. The line is already highly profitable and to seek savings rather than ensure a good service through the next disruptive seven years would be a mistake that could have long term ramifications for a huge amount of people.

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