



## Great Western rail franchise public consultation

January 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 1,197 members working for the Great Western rail franchise.
2. ASLEF appreciates the opportunity to respond to this consultation about the next contract for the right to run the Great Western rail services and highlight some of the issues we feel are important. The union is glad to be able to have input regarding our views on whether Great Western should be retained as a single franchise in its current form or whether it should be split into smaller parts.
3. As the Transport Secretary mentions in the foreword to this consultation, the Great Western Railway is currently undergoing multi-billion-pound infrastructure enhancements and trains in response to the need to invest in providing more seats, more frequent and faster journeys and improved station facilities. Unfortunately, important elements of what had initially been promised have been scaled back or reneged on due to cost increases and delays. Improvements still being undertaken are due for completion by the end of 2019 - after the current franchise is due to expire (in March 2019).
4. The government's view is that a change of franchise operator is best avoided in March 2019 as that now falls in the midst of this programme of work, and therefore plans to extend the franchise with a view to the current operator continuing until March 2022. ASLEF understands that it would be logical to exercise the contractual option to extend the current franchise for a further twelve months to avoid the disruption of a change of operator mid-way through a major programme of change but we question the decision for First Group to continue as franchise operator for another two years after that. ASLEF is opposed to the direct award of contracts on the Great Western franchise and the wider rail network.

One of the selling points of privatisation was the idea that competition would drive standards, efficiency and innovation but the fallacy of this argument is underlined by these awards. ASLEF takes the view that the direct award of contracts results in operators being guaranteed income with virtually no risk and no incentive to improve performance.

5. First Group's continued tenure is controversial since they opted out of a franchise extension in 2011 to avoid £826.6m in premium payments due to the Treasury by 2016. In December 2005 the Great Western franchise had been awarded to First Group for ten years with the last three years being optional. In 2011, First Group announced it would not be taking up the option, and would terminate the franchise in March 2013, citing a desire for a longer-term contract. Expressions of interest in bidding for the new franchise were called for in 2011 but when the West Coast refranchising process collapsed, the government scrapped plans to retender and First Group got the contract by default, on more favourable terms. First Group was offered an extension on a management contract basis and in 2015, the DfT confirmed a further extension until 2019. ASLEF condemned the direct award in 2015 because it guaranteed the company an income with virtually no risk and no incentive to improve performance. It was our view at the time that the Transport Secretary should have given the Great Western franchise to Directly Operated Railways, so that taxpayers rather than First Group's shareholders might have seen some return. If DOR had not been privatised since then we would be calling for the same thing again now.
6. ASLEF has never been in favour of splitting up and privatising the rail network and we campaign against money being taken out of the industry in the form of dividends to shareholders instead of profits being reinvested in the network. The private sector is unlikely to invest in rail infrastructure without being guaranteed a return and the time-limited nature of franchising further constrains the readiness of operating companies to invest any more than strictly necessary. This is one of the reasons why we have argued elsewhere against the franchise system and for the renationalisation of our railways.
7. The Great Western franchise was formed in 2006 by combining services previously operated by the Great Western, Wessex and Thames Trains franchises. ASLEF understands the current argument for splitting the franchise in order to focus on the different needs of commuter and long-distance passengers, but we do not believe that fragmenting the network is efficient. Combining separate parts into a single franchise has brought significant benefits because it is far easier to coordinate timetables and connections and provide a coherent, integrated service. Split franchises are less efficient and less viable because each one has overheads for offices, suitable depots and rolling stock, with less income

to invest. Since the integrated Great Western franchise was formed branch lines in Devon and Cornwall have much improved – although they still require further investment. We are concerned that if they are separated again these lines - which are the least profitable - would see the least investment and their services would be affected with a negative impact on railway staff and passengers. Although meeting the needs of a range of different passengers is challenging for a large and diverse franchise, it is ASLEF's view that overall the advantages outweigh the disadvantages and Great Western should be retained as a single franchise.

8. ASLEF does not feel that this is the right time to look at transferring the Brighton-Southampton service into the Thameslink, Southern & Great Northern (TSGN) franchise. The contract for this franchise is to be retendered in 2021 and there is a strong possibility of the franchise being split at that time. Until we have clarity around the future of that franchise, we are unable to comment on which operator would best run the service and would not want our members unnecessarily affected by temporary or misjudged decisions that were taken at the wrong time. As for the Greenford branch, we believe that incorporating it into the Chiltern franchise would result in a reduction in services stopping at Acton and Ealing Broadway and would impact on passenger services out of Paddington.
9. The government's Strategic Vision for Rail outlines a move towards more collaborative working between Network Rail and partners so that the organisations responsible for railway lines and train services can work together to design services, align objectives, agree access and deliver infrastructure enhancements. ASLEF supports this move because at present, with multiple organisations involved, this can be challenging to achieve. ASLEF is opposed to the proposal in the consultation paper that financial incentives should be given to franchisees to provide them with a commercial interest in meeting targets. We do not agree that financial incentives motivate train operators to assist Network Rail, because they actually benefit from compensation for delays attributed to the infrastructure manager. Instead, ASLEF believes that the government should explore ways to foster collaboration which would be mutually beneficial to both rail operators and Network Rail. Working together to improve Network Rail's efficiency would facilitate work being carried out, which in turn would benefit the operator's performance, reputation and revenue.
10. The consultation paper states that as a result of the ongoing investment in the network, much of the Great Western franchise will be transformed beyond recognition and virtually every route will receive some kind of improvement. It is true that many passengers now enjoy more comfortable, frequent, and/or faster journeys, but others will still be left disappointed and frustrated by U-turns and scrapped

plans. New bi-mode trains will soon be operating on the intercity network and brand-new electric trains will be operating as far as Reading and Didcot, releasing old trains for use in the West Country but passenger numbers on the network are projected to continue to grow and in spite of the improvements that have been made and currently underway, much of the railway is still operating on the edge of what it can cope with because of capacity constraints. Passengers want more frequent services, better punctuality and reliability, more space, more seats, more affordable fares, and better customer service and it is likely that even after the improvements currently underway, further modernisation and additional rolling stock will be required to assure the long term economic prosperity of the region.

ASLEF agrees with many of the government's other objectives for this franchise for the 2020s as set out in the consultation document but we would like to make the following points:

11. ASLEF welcomes 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. Passengers value having staff on trains and at stations and feel safer when there is a visible staff presence. 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 special needs. Supporting the workforce to maintain a healthy work-life balance and high levels of morale is also an effective way of assuring that staff are motivated and helpful. The consultation document pledges additional staff at 15 stations franchise-wide but we believe that consideration should be given to employing more.
  
12. ASLEF welcomes the commitment to improve the environmental performance of the railway in terms of carbon dioxide emissions from trains, non-traction energy consumption, waste and water consumption. We were deeply disappointed at the government's decision to make short-term savings by scrapping plans such as the electrification of the 60-mile stretch between Cardiff and Swansea. While bi-mode trains will be an improvement on the existing stock, electric trains are better for the climate, better for our health and better for passengers. Electrification is cleaner, greener, faster and more reliable than diesel operation and while other new technology – such as digital signalling, and battery and hydrogen-fuelled trains – may eventually offer cost-efficient alternatives to electrification, these technologies are still in development.

13. ASLEF is particularly concerned that the interests of freight operators should not be marginalised because they run across more than one Network Rail route. Freight services on the Great Western franchise are set to grow, carrying consumer goods to distribution centres, goods for export, stone from quarries, steel and steel products but pressures on infrastructure capacity could make it difficult to accommodate rising demand for freight traffic. ASLEF has an interest in protecting the rail industry from potential decline and we want rail freight to continue to support supply chains. Freight on rail offers environmental benefits that road freight cannot match as well as keeping HGVs from congesting our roads. It must also be remembered that freight operators do ballast and infrastructure work and if they are forced into decline, maintenance of the whole network would be threatened.
  
14. ASLEF supports plans for the next franchisee to reintroduce services on the route between Okehampton and Exeter, which were discontinued as part of Beeching's cuts in the 1960s, and to engage with local groups such as the Peninsula Rail and North Cotswold Line Task Forces, and hope that the government will be making the necessary funding available. It has widely been recognised that the rail services axed by Beeching left many rural communities isolated and deprived of inward investment as well as cut off from employment and shopping opportunities. Reopening closed lines could help address the problem of overcrowding across the network and give a new lease of life to communities that have been isolated after being cut off from the railway network. Opening new lines – such as a diversionary route that bypasses Dawlish – could be also transformational. This will require substantial investment but many communities have been deprived of investment for decades and it is time to rectify this. ASLEF's concern is that instead of taking responsibility for financing the reintroduction of these services, the government is seeking to encourage private investment from local authorities, developers and communities who have limited knowledge of the railways. Devolving responsibility to applicants who would require an enormous amount of guidance and ongoing support, in order to access funding from them, could just make an overly-complicated system worse, and potentially be dangerous.
  
15. Within the consultation paper it is suggested that First Class accommodation could be introduced to middle-distance services which do not currently provide this. The paper fails to mention the need to consider removing First Class accommodation from very busy and overcrowded services, which would benefit more passengers.
  
16. ASLEF does not agree with the proposal to accelerate long-distance journeys by omitting calls at intermediate 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 high demand. 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.

17. ASLEF would be open to discussions around seasonal variations to timetables when additional services are required to meet demand (during summer holidays, for Christmas markets and special events...) if driver availability could meet the demand for additional services, but it would be imperative that negotiations take place with us, as a union, and that the concerns of railway staff be heeded.
  
18. We look forward to working closely with the DfT, the rail operator and other partners, to deliver a quality service for passengers in southern and south west England, South Wales, the Cotswolds and the Malverns.

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