



ASLEF Response to Transport Select Committee call for evidence on the impacts of the Covid-19 Pandemic - May 2019

1. The Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen (ASLEF) is the UK's largest train drivers' union representing over 20,000 members in train operating companies and freight companies as well as London Underground and light rail systems.
2. We are pleased to have the opportunity to provide evidence to the committee on the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on the UK's transport system. As a rail union, rail will be our primary focus but we note that the most effective way to consider the transport system is as elements of an integrated whole, and no one part of the system should be allowed to fall away as this will have impacts on the rest of the system.
3. Train drivers are considered key workers and have continued working, playing an important role, throughout the pandemic. Drivers on passenger services enable other key workers and those making essential journeys to do this safely and drivers on rail freight services move goods and supplies including medical equipment and food around the country. In addition to moving goods, rail freight operators are also vital to the maintenance and improvement of the railway, providing contracted services to Network Rail.

Immediate Impacts: During the Pandemic

4. During the pandemic, the supply of goods including food and healthcare equipment is paramount and rail freight has been called on to increase operations both in terms of the length of trains and the frequency with which they run.
5. Rail freight operators are particularly vulnerable to market and economic conditions as the freight operating companies (FOCs) are completely privatised, rather than being run under a franchise or contract agreement with central government as passenger operators are. For this reason, some measures are required in the short term to ensure the ongoing operation of the important rail freight network.
6. Freight operators pay Track Access Charges to Network Rail for the use of the rail infrastructure. ASLEF believes that these charges should be temporarily suspended if possible and, if this is not possible, be deferred and made payable over the whole of the current Control Period (2019 - 2024) in order to avoid freight operators suffering from cash flow problems or have their ability to provide the important service of getting food and equipment to where it is needed compromised.
7. Users of Network Rail's freight estate pay rent to Network Rail, in a similar way to those shops in stations which pay rent for their premises. Shops in stations have had rent holidays for the duration of the crisis but Network Rail is still expecting freight operators to pay rent on the freight estate. The union would like to see these rent payments either cancelled during the crisis or deferred for a significant period to provide parity with other Network Rail tenants.
8. Open access operators (passenger operators which are fully private and not operating under a contract or franchise agreement with the Department for Transport) are also very vulnerable to market forces. The two main open access operators in the UK, Grand Central Rail and Hull Trains, have cancelled all their services due to the government lockdown but still need to pay for wages and other operating costs. These operators plug important gaps in the service provided by the government's franchise and contract based rail network so allowing them to go out of business would be very damaging for the future of services. ASLEF believes that the government should provide specific grant support to these operators.

Post-Pandemic Impacts

9. Passenger services have been significantly reduced during the crisis as many people are not making their usual journeys to commute to work. While this has improved social distancing for those who do need to travel, the drop in fare income has been significant. This impact has been felt particularly by Transport for London (TfL) which, since the removal of its government grant, is reliant on fare income to operate. ASLEF has campaigned consistently for the reinstatement of the grant to TfL and we believe that this funding will be urgently needed to keep London moving following the crisis.
10. Devolved transport authorities including in Greater Manchester and Merseyside are facing similar funding crises and Mayors Andy Burnham and Steve Rotherham have also called for significant financial support from government in order to keep public transport improvements on track and services running. ASLEF is supportive of this call, as we are very aware that increasing the use of public transport in areas like Merseyside and Manchester will form a key part of environmental improvements and decarbonising travel in the UK.
11. The drop in commuter passenger numbers has enabled key workers and other people making essential journeys to continue to use the railways while observing social distancing. It is imperative that as lockdown is lifted, safety is the priority consideration for both passengers and rail staff. This is likely to mean services cannot be fully ramped up instantly, and will also feed in to other considerations such as progressive lifting of lockdown rules and encouraging people to continue to work from home if possible.
12. Rail freight is not only efficient but also significantly better for the environment than road freight. Rail produces an average of 76% less carbon dioxide emissions than the equivalent road journey. Moving freight by rail is also safer, with HGVs being involved in a significant number of serious road traffic collisions. When industry begins to resume operations, it is imperative the the government moves to encourage the use of rail freight, particularly for delivery of goods and materials for construction sites. ASLEF believes that the government should take this opportunity to fully consider the charges made to rail freight operators and the subsidies (both direct and indirect) to road haulage operators and seek to bring greater parity.
13. During the crisis, a number of new freight services have begun to operate, and some existing services have begun operating longer trains. As the lockdown is lifted, it is very important that services are timetabled carefully to ensure that freight paths are not lost to passenger services.
14. In the medium to long term, in order to ensure the future of rail freight, we would like to see the government extending track access contracts for Freight Operating Companies to give them certainty of the capacity for freight on the network, as well as committing to network enhancement including infill electrification and progress on larger schemes including upgrades on the Transpennine and Felixstowe to Nuneaton lines. While the amount of intermodal domestic freight has increased during the crisis, deep sea freight and other commodities have seen a drop due to the global economic slowdown. It is important that rail freight is able to stay in business and rebuild and all possible support should be put in place.
15. For passenger rail services to ramp back up to full operation, safety is paramount. ASLEF and our sister unions RMT and TSSA have written to the government this week (4th May 2020) to make clear that significant preparatory work will be required to ensure the safety of both staff and passengers on services in terms of social distancing and therefore the ability to ramp up timetables beyond a certain point. In particular, where protective measures such as slowing embarkation and preventing platform crowding to implement social distancing, the additional time required for these processes needs to be reflected in diagramming and timetabling of rail services.
16. The union is ready to work with the Department for Transport and rail operators to find solutions which will be safe for both passengers and staff, but will not accept any plans which put lives in danger, or prioritise profit over people's health and safety.