



Manchester Recovery Task Force Consultation: Timetable option to improve rail performance in the north of England

ASLEF Response

March 2021

1. The Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen (ASLEF) is the UK's largest train drivers' union representing over 21,000 members in train operating companies and freight companies as well as London Underground and light rail systems.
2. ASLEF is pleased to have the opportunity to respond to this important consultation on the future of rail timetabling around Manchester. As the consultation rightly acknowledges, the flow of rail traffic in the Manchester area affects the whole of the north of England and beyond and it is therefore important to make the system as robust and efficient as possible while continuing to serve every part of the north and keep our towns and cities well connected.
3. The union is also aware that the current UK Government was elected in December 2019 with a manifesto pledging to 'level up' the country, invest right across the UK and ensure that the north and midlands saw increased investment in things like infrastructure in order to give people right across the country opportunity for the best possible work and quality of life.
4. The union also understands that the 2018 timetable change, the re-opening of the Ordsall Chord, and other improvements to the network around Manchester have led to a critical point in terms of network congestion. We further understand the aims of this consultation in order to resolve some of these issues in the short term. We do not, however, believe that 'tinkering around the edges' with timetabling, and removing or downgrading services from key towns and cities is any kind of long-term solution. Additionally, these short-term measures without any investment are not at all compatible with the Government's 'levelling up' agenda.
5. The only solution to the challenges with rail (and other public transit including bus and tram) in this region is investment. The government must commit further funding to increase capacity, ensure HS2 reaches right through the midlands and north and on to Scotland, and expand and upgrade existing lines.
6. ASLEF has always maintained that the railway, as a public service, should be owned and operated in the public sector. There are many reasons why the union takes this position but chief among them is because public services should be operated for and with the communities they serve. Any public transit system which is operated by a private company will inherently have profit - not people - as its priority. The lack of commitment to running public transport for the public has caused many of the problems we see on the railway today.

7. Across the UK, the Rail Industry Recovery Group is considering how to make rail more attractive to passengers following the Covid-19 pandemic. This work aims to aid the industry's economic recovery and will, of course, also have benefits for environmental aims and decarbonisation of passenger travel. By reducing and restricting services in the manner envisaged, the proposals in this consultation are diametrically opposed to this aim. Rather than reducing services it is important to further invest in the necessary infrastructure to run more services and continue to increase rail capacity in the region.
8. The consultation document acknowledges that one of the specific problems facing rail in and around Manchester is that all of the lines are mixed use (that is to say they are used by long- and short-distance passenger services as well as freight trains) and that this causes congestion problems. ASLEF has continually advocated for HS2 and other high-speed rail investment in order to resolve this exact issue. It is obvious that separating out lines by average speed will significantly increase capacity. Given the current layout and plans for the UK's rail network, the only clear solution to this is for full delivery of HS2 through the midlands and Manchester and on to Scotland. It is absolutely imperative that there is no reduction of the ambition and scale of this project.
9. The union is in agreement that the current situation caused by the Covid-19 pandemic and a number of local and national lockdowns and 'stay at home' orders should not be considered when making plans for future capacity. As the pandemic ends and both commuter and leisure travellers return to the railway, capacity will continue to be required. ASLEF will continue to campaign for not just a return to using the railway but for more people to use rail as it remains the most sustainable and low-carbon option for both people and goods.
10. Additionally, the pandemic has highlighted the vital importance of rail freight and it is imperative that freight is not overlooked when timetables are re-designed. While the union of course acknowledges that delays are more likely to both be a result of passenger services and have an impact on passenger services, freight paths must not be lost as part of this process.
11. While the consultation makes it clear that the changes under consideration are to be implemented following this open process and taking into account the views and needs of stakeholders and rail users, ASLEF is concerned by a leaked document produced by Northern Rail which outlines proposals to change the timetable in the Manchester area from May 2021. The plans detailed in this leaked document appear to be aiming to reduce the number of services from key towns and cities including Wigan, and have obviously not been consulted on or had the same rigorous process of modelling that the Manchester Recovery Taskforce has followed.
12. Consultations of this nature rightly focus on the widest possible group of stakeholders - in this case the passengers who use these rail services either to commute or for leisure travel but it is important that the impact of any changes on rail workers is also fully considered. A document such as this one leaking from a train operator does understandably cause concern among workers that the company is seeking purely to rationalise and reduce services, rather than taking full account of the needs of the people and communities using the railway. The union is very concerned that these plans may be pushed forward and therefore influence the outcome of this consultation rather than the consultation being conducted in good faith and plans made as a result of any responses.
13. Obviously without the wider investment for rail in the north, it is not possible to satisfy every need while making this kind of timetable adjustment to reduce congestion. The union

maintains its firm position that more investment in infrastructure including HS2 and other upgrades and expansions are the only real long-term solution. For this reason the union cannot support any of the options currently proposed in the consultation. MPs from both the Labour and Conservative parties have already expressed their disappointment in the options being proposed. It is clear that the government must re-think these reductions in service and bring more investment to the table urgently.

14. Each proposal would lead to either a significant reduction in, or complete removal of, a service which is relied on by people across the north West region. While these services may seem like details on a timetable, to the people who use them they are a vital connection to work, leisure or services that they need to access. As we come out of the Covid-19 pandemic, it would be unacceptable for commuters to arrive at a station only to find that their usual service has been removed. Additionally, taking away these rail links will push more people onto the roads (if they can afford to own a car, or are able to drive) which will in turn lead to more road congestion, poorer air quality and long-term reduced health outcomes. The union would also be concerned that an equality impact assessment of any of these changes would show that they would have a disproportionate impact on those already facing disadvantage including disabled people and those from lower socio-economic backgrounds.
15. Some of the most stark examples of this are the service from Southport via Wigan; the link from Liverpool to Manchester Airport, and the service from North Wales to the Airport. Removing the Southport service via Wigan would leave these communities unconnected to the north West's largest city and the employment and leisure opportunities it offers. In the north Wales context, the improvement in the link from north Wales to Manchester airport was a long-sought element of a strategy to reduce road congestion and make journeys more sustainable. It would not be acceptable to lose the benefits of this progress now. Finally the direct link between Liverpool and Manchester Airport is very obviously a key connection, providing (through Liverpool's local services) a sustainable route to the airport and onward international connections for people from right across Merseyside.
16. We believe that a fourth proposal is required to resolve the issue of congestion in the Manchester area. This proposal must take account of the fact that trains through this area serve a very wide area from Scotland to the north of England to the midlands and Wales and it is not acceptable to disadvantage any one of these communities. It must be progressive and forward-looking, and aim to maintain as much capacity as possible, keep passengers on the railway and look to the future to further increase the number of people travelling by rail for work and leisure.
17. The union will of course offer our expertise to assist with making these plans, and is happy to be consulted at every stage of planning in this area. Our members are all train drivers and, as such, are very familiar with the impacts of congestion on the railway including navigating complex signalling systems and ensuring passengers are able to safely embark and disembark from trains at stations. Our aim is the same as that stated by the government - to 'level up', increase investment and ensure that communities in the north of England have a world-class railway fit for the twenty-first century. Unfortunately it currently appears that the government have lost their way and aren't prepared to deliver this.

ASLEF

77 St John Street
London EC1M 4NN
www.aslef.org.uk