Campaign for
Better Transport

System operation - A consultation on making better use of the railway network

Response from Campaign for Better Transport

Consultation question 1

Campaign for Better Transport agrees system operation needs to include choosing and developing changes to the network, determining and allocating capacity, and directly enabling services.

While acknowledging the above, we are concerned that the proposed approach to system operation remains very internally focused within the rail sector, rather than making clear the roll rail can plan in meeting wider public policy objectives.

To give the plan much needed context, indications of the kind of outputs that might result for good system operation should be included. This does not need to be exhaustive but could include, for example, improving access to jobs, choice and reducing reliance on the private car, rebalancing economic growth, supporting development and economic growth, reducing carbon emissions.

Consultation question 2

Campaign for Better Transport agrees that meeting the needs of passengers, freight customers and funders requires safe network operation, getting more from the network, choosing the right investment; and helping TOCs deliver.

In considering investment priorities, we would highlight the need to think creatively and involve voices from a wide range of policy disciplines. Simply focusing on extrapolating existing passenger trends and doing more of what the rail network already delivers (for example, heavily used commuter services in south east England) ignores markets that are currently poorly served and fails to make the most of rail's potential in supporting growth.

We are concerned that helping train operators deliver their objectives – while very important – should not be used a cypher for wider goals of meeting passenger expectations. We would particularly highlight the importance of Network Rail taking a network-wide perspective on services, rather than one based on the needs of individual franchise holders.

Consultation question 3

Campaign for Better Transport is concerned that Network Rail is often one stage removed from the experience and interests of passengers. Addressing this could significantly enhance efficiency in network utilisation. For example, the successful model of timetabling and service planning used by Switzerland's railways makes use of rail hubs and regularly interval services (i.e. on the hour, half past the hour etc.) to support the highest density and most widely used rail network in Europe http://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/bigger--faster--longer_rail-network-modernises-to-stay-on-track/33124756)

Consultation question 4

Campaign for Better Transport is concerned that Network Rail lacks transparency and accountability to passengers. We look to enhanced system operation to help encourage and support such accountability. We suggest the following as areas where improved accountability could be achieved:

1. Rolling stock: Network Rail should actively support the interests of passengers on the issue of rolling stock. Through Route Utilisation Strategy work (including specifically on rolling stock), Network Rail already has a key role in identifying future rolling stock capacity and needs. Network Rail should go further than the average age of rolling stock figures published by the ORR and report annually where the network lacks sufficient rolling stock to meet plannable capacity.

2. Devolution and local decision making – Decisions on rail sometimes appears to be taken in bubble with little reflection on the direct interests of passengers, the wider needs of the economy or local objectives such as housing provision or integration with other modes of transport. Improved accountability could be fostered

3. Integrating rail with other objectives: We look for more importance to be given to integrating rail with other transport modes. The objectives and benefits of doing this are set out in the Government's door to door travel strategy. A key focus should be on increasing rail passenger numbers by providing an alternative to journeys currently undertaken by road. Realising this potential requires much closer working between rail operators, Network Rail and local authorities.

Network Rail often has a big role to pay when disruptions happen. There is very little assessment of how passengers feel about how well such disruption has been handled. We would welcome the ORR or Transport Focus explicitly seeking passengers views on Network Rail's performance in this area.

We also look to the ORR to include progress with the implementation of Government policy within its system operation role. For example, the Government sought to address some of passengers main criticisms of the rail network through its Fares and Ticketing Review (the final report of which was published in 2013) and the later manifesto commitment to freeze regulated ticket price increases to RPI inflation for the lifetime of the current Parliament. There has been very slow progress with a number of ticketing initiatives in the Fares and Ticketing Review. These include trailing of part-time season tickets, single leg ticketing and smart-ticketing.

All of these measures have the potential to encourage better use of the network, making rail a more viable option for many journeys, increasing the flexibility with which passengers can travel, and improving value for money.

In practice, recent Campaign for Better Transport analysis showed there has been very little progress with most measures in the Fares and Ticketing Review in the past two years. Keys reasons for this are the slow roll out of technology with both TOCs and DfT looking to the other to take responsibility blaming each. As part of assessments of network capacity, Network Rail could very usefully show where the absence of progress with initiatives in the Fares and Ticketing Review is leading to sub-optimal use of capacity.