

Caroline Pidgeon AM, Chair of the Transport Committee

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The Rt Hon Patrick McLoughlin MP
Secretary of State for Transport
c/o The Combined Franchise Replacement Sponsor
Department for Transport
Zone 3/15, Great Minster House
33 Horseferry Road
London, SW1P 4DR

13 September 2012

Dear Secretary of State

Response to consultation on the combined Thameslink rail franchise

I am writing, on behalf of the London Assembly's Transport Committee, to set out our response to the consultation on the combined Thameslink, Southern and Great Northern (TSGN) rail franchise. We welcome the opportunity to respond to the consultation following the decision to extend the deadline for responses to 14 September 2012.

This response is based on our past work covering rail services in London. The TSGN franchise is important to the capital given it will be the biggest franchise ever let covering many rail services used by Londoners. Moreover, as the consultation makes clear, it is important that the successful franchisee builds on the £6 billion invested in the Thameslink programme for improvements such as the redevelopment of London Bridge station and new trains so this programme delivers maximum benefits for passengers.

In our past work we have expressed support for the increased capacity and better services that the Thameslink programme will provide. Our past work has shown this programme is vital for addressing the high levels of overcrowding on rail services in the capital which could worsen as the number of rail passengers is forecast to rise.¹ We have also highlighted the need for rail passengers to see other improvements relating to specific train services, service standards during periods of disruption, station improvements and ticketing. These improvements are relevant to many of the consultation questions as set out in the remainder of this response.

Specific train services (consultation questions 10-19)

There is a need to address the forthcoming withdrawal of the South London line service following works at London Bridge station for the Thameslink programme. We have frequently highlighted the importance of this service from London Bridge to Victoria and expressed our disappointment that, as yet, no adequate mitigation measures have been agreed for when the service is withdrawn.² We would like to see everything done to maintain the South London line service and urge you to re-examine this issue to ensure it is addressed as a matter of urgency.

We also want to see measures taken to address the concerns raised by passengers regarding the proposals for the Wimbledon loop. Many passengers do not want to see the existing services

¹ London Assembly Transport Committee report, The Big Squeeze: Rail Overcrowding in London, February 2009

² For example in our letter to the Mayor on the delivery of improvements to London's orbital rail network, 29 July 2010 and our letter responding to Network Rail's draft London and South East Route Utilisation Strategy (RUS), March 2011

terminate at Blackfriars station rather than continue on to City Thameslink, Farringdon and St Pancras stations. Passengers have stressed to us the current benefits of being able to travel ‘through’ Blackfriars to other London stations and the inconvenience and extra journey time created if this ceases to be possible.

Improving customer experience (consultation question 27)

Rail passengers should receive better services especially during periods of disruption. Our past work on the impact of winter weather on rail services in early January 2010 showed problems with First Capital Connect’s Thameslink service. First Capital Connect operated an emergency timetable during this period largely because of train technological failures even though it had identified a need to replace traction motors on its trains to improve their performance a year before. In the run up to January 2010, First Capital Connect passengers had also suffered months of disruptions because of train driver shortages.³

Our work on the impact of winter weather on rail services showed the need for train operating companies to improve their communications with customers. Many companies including Southern experienced difficulties in ensuring up-to-the-minute service information was displayed on their websites in January 2010. Southern acknowledge a need to learn lessons and told us it would provide blackberry devices and additional radios to station and train staff so they could give more up-to-the-minute information to passengers at stations.⁴

We recognise steps have been taken since January 2010 to improve the rail industry’s response during bad weather but more can be done to improve information for customers. This should include the successful franchisee providing better real-time information for rail passengers about other transport services in the capital especially on the approach to interchanges so passengers can make informed decisions about the next stages in their journeys.

Station improvements (consultation question 29)

There is a need to relieve congestion at certain rail stations in London. Our past work on rail overcrowding highlighted the most severely overcrowded train routes in the capital and found the greatest crowding – or “pinch points” – occurred at 15 stations.⁵ These stations included Bromley South and Clapham Junction which are covered by this franchise. More recently, we have also expressed support for plans to relieve congestion at Victoria and Wimbledon stations which are covered by this franchise.⁶ As demand for rail services in London is forecast to rise by 34 per cent in the next two decades⁷, there is potential for congestion at other stations too. The successful franchisee will need to ensure it works to relieve congestion at all stations where overcrowding occurs.

Cycling facilities (consultation question 30)

We support the provision of more cycle parking spaces at rail stations. In our past work, we highlighted the benefits of TfL’s involvement in developing the specifications for the Southern franchise which had helped to deliver an additional 1,500 cycle parking spaces over the five-year term. Without making such specifications in the franchise, it was unlikely train operating companies would deliver more cycle parking since this could involve them having to replace retail outlets or car parking spaces with cycle stands, which would involve a loss of revenue.⁸

³ London Assembly Transport Committee letter to the Department for Transport Rail services in London during the bad weather, 17 February 2010

⁴ London Assembly Transport Committee letter to the Department for Transport Rail services in London during the bad weather, 17 February 2010

⁵ London Assembly Transport Committee report, The Big Squeeze: Rail Overcrowding in London, February 2009

⁶ London Assembly Transport Committee response to Rail Industry’s Initial Industry Plan 2011, November 2011

⁷ Network Rail, London and South East Route Utilisation Strategy, 2011

⁸ London Assembly Transport Committee report, Stand and Deliver: Cycle parking in London, June 2009

Ticketing (consultation question 31)

We want to see the new franchise deliver improvements on ticketing providing these do benefit passengers. Our work on TfL's plans for the adoption of contactless bank cards as its primary ticketing system showed the need to maintain passenger confidence in any new ticketing system, and ensure broad access to its benefits. We have noted a range of risks and benefits from the adoption of smart card systems and it should be the aim of any new system to maximise the benefits while addressing the risks to passengers. One major benefit is the ability for passengers to move freely between different transport providers and regions; hence the enormous popularity of the extension of TfL's Oyster Pay As You Go to suburban rail services. We are thus supportive of ITSO being promoted as a national standard to allow passengers the freedom to move between regions and providers.⁹

Accessibility improvements (consultation question 32)

More of London's rail stations should be fully accessible to people with reduced mobility. In 2010, we identified that around one million Londoners had reduced mobility but just one-third of London's 300 rail stations had step-free access from street level to platform. Moreover, we found the forecast rise in the number of Londoners with reduced mobility would outstrip current plans to improve the provision of step-free access.¹⁰ We thus want the successful franchisee to deliver more accessibility improvements at stations in conjunction with other organisations such as Network Rail as appropriate.

In summary, the new franchise should deliver considerable improvements for rail passengers. The successful franchisee should provide a highly reliable, comprehensive set of services with less crowding that exploits the benefits of the Thameslink programme in full. The successful franchisee should ensure the delivery of improvements to stations so passengers experience less congestion, improved accessibility and better facilities. The new franchise should result in the same minimum standards of service for passengers as found on London Overground, namely:

- A 'turn-up and-go' frequency of trains throughout the week;
- Improved station ambience by deep cleaning and refurbishing;
- A visible staff presence across the network throughout the day;
- Improved passenger security with networked CCTV and Help Points at all stations, plus improved lighting and more stations gated;
- Visual and public address systems providing real-time train service information, supported by a comprehensive online and mobile enabled journey planning system; and
- High quality cycle parking facilities to promote cycling as a means of accessing stations.¹¹

We trust this response will inform the consultation and look forward to seeing the outcomes in due course.

Yours sincerely

Caroline Pidgeon AM
Chair of the Transport Committee

⁹ London Assembly Transport Committee report, The Future of Ticketing, November 2011

¹⁰ London Assembly Transport Committee report, Accessibility of the Transport Network, November 2010

¹¹ The Mayor of London's Rail Vision, February 2012, p18