

Transport Salaried Staffs' Association

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Huw Merriman MP
Chair of Transport Select Committee
House of Commons
London
SW1A 0AA

22nd September 2020

Dear Mr Merriman,

RE: TSSA submission to Transport Select Committee - Inquiry launch: Reforming public transport after the pandemic

I am writing on behalf of TSSA, a trade union that principally organises in the railways of the United Kingdom and the Irish Republic. In Britain, the Union is recognised for collective bargaining purposes by all the Train Operating Companies as well as Network Rail and many of its infrastructure contractors. Additionally, TSSA bargains with organisations like the RSSB, Transport for London and London Underground.

TSSA's response is structured on the core areas identified in the call for evidence issued by email on 24th July 2020:

- **the use of public transport and the way that people choose to travel, both locally and for longer domestic journeys**

At this stage of the pandemic (late September 2020) when there is a significant increase in the number of positive tests being reported and the recent announcement of government measures to counter that development, it is difficult to be able to see a trend in how people will choose to travel by public transport in the future.

What is clear is that until now people have been gradually returning to the use of Britain's railways, buses and London Tube but against a backdrop of many still being able to work from home.

Prior to the pandemic the railway industry reported that in week ending 23rd February 2020 they had operated 151,000 services and saw 22.3 million journeys. By week ending 23rd May 2020, the level of services was at 53% (103,000) of the February timetable with only 1.7 million journeys. However, since that point there has been several increases in the number of services operated to match anticipated demand arising from Government measures to stimulate the economy. In the latest information released to the trade unions as part of the Railway Industry Coronavirus Forum¹ it is reported that the number of passenger rail services has been increased to 85% of the pre Covid timetable with 122,000 services having been operated and 9.8 million journeys occurring in week ending 16th September 2020.

¹ The Forum is made up of Rail Delivery Group, Passenger Train Operating Companies, Network Rail and the railway trade unions.

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One factor that has to be remembered in these figures is that of social distancing, with more rail services allowing for more people to be able to travel whilst complying with social distancing arrangements. Those arrangements have not always worked with reports of busy trains on certain commuter routes and at weekends, especially with people travelling to coastal towns during good weather. As a response to extra passengers, the industry has also been extending the length of trains by adding additional carriages to allow for more people to travel rather than running additional services.

The Prime Minister's announcement on 22nd September 2020 that office workers should remain at home, if they can, will potentially stop or reduce the steady rise in the number of people returning to work with the consequent knock on to public transport.

Even before this guidance, there was evidence that significant numbers of people remained working from home. Evidence for this can be found in a survey of 2,500 people conducted on behalf of iNews by Redfield and Wilton Strategies² which found that:

- Of those who would normally work in the office, 44 per cent of them are still working from home. Just one fifth had returned to the office full time;
- Six in 10 of those currently working at home believe they will be doing so at least until 2021;
- A major obstacle for people going back to work "is public transport, with the survey revealing that 57 per cent believing it is unsafe to take the bus or train to work."

However, prior to the pandemic there was evidence that increasing numbers of people were able to work flexibly and either carry out their duties from home or adjust their hours so that they compressed their work into three or four days from the traditional five. This was the explanation given for the declining number of season tickets that were being purchased and the increase in daily tickets.³

The coronavirus has magnified this trend. A survey of 100 businesses conducted by Blick Rothenberg in conjunction with iNews indicated that 60% of employers and 58% of workers thought that a return to work after the end of 2020 would only be for an average of 2-3 days a week.⁴

However, fears about the use of public transport can be misplaced as research published by the Railway Safety and Standards Board (RSSB) under the title of "Rail still safer than road during Covid-19"⁵ shows. The research, published on 31st August 2020, shows that:

- The risk of contracting Covid-19 while travelling by train is about 1 in 11,000 journeys. This

² News article (published 3rd September 2020) at: <https://inews.co.uk/news/politics/coronavirus-remote-working-uk-employees-shunning-office-work-home-626266>

³ See Office of Rail and Road's "Passenger Rail Usage 2019-20 Q1 Statistical Release" available at: <https://dataportal.orr.gov.uk/media/1481/passenger-rail-usage-2019-20-q1.pdf>

⁴ News article (published 1st September 2020) at: <https://inews.co.uk/news/business/employers-return-office-home-working-staff-nervous-commute-615531>

⁵ Available to view at: <https://www.rssb.co.uk/what-we-do/insights-and-news/News/Rail-still-safer-than-road-during-Covid-19>

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is equivalent to a chance of less than 0.01%, based on an hour-long train journey in a carriage with **no** social distancing or face coverings;

- The risk halves with the use of face coverings (which have been mandatory since June unless the individual passenger is exempt);
- On safety alone, for an individual traveller per kilometre travelled, the car is 25 times less safe than rail. Cycling is 403 times, walking is 456 times, and travelling by motorcycle is 1,620 times less safe;
- When the effect of the virus is taken into account and compared against the average road safety risk, the risks are almost the same (road is 1.14 times the risk of rail). Across all transport modes risks of catching the virus are very low, and certainly tolerable. Experts accept that most people will want to use a combination of different modes of transport to get around.

The conclusion reached by the RSSB is that:

“Public transport had been perceived as an infection hotspot due to the vast number of people being in a close proximity. However, research is challenging this, showing that passengers are not as prone to infection as previously assumed, certainly not given the current underlying national infection rates, and people generally conforming with government Covid-19 guidelines

From the evidence that we have presented above, therefore, we draw the conclusion that whilst the pandemic is certainly having a significant effect on public transport in the short term, in the medium and long term passengers will return to their workplaces via their current modes of transport, especially if it becomes known that public transport is safer than the media seeks to portray. However, for many firms and their employees the option of working from home and more flexibly has been proven to operate successfully which is where a trend that was already in place may accelerate, with a resultant impact on public transport. This means that the high number of journeys by rail, particularly, that we were used to seeing before the Covid lockdown in March are not likely to return but to what degree is currently unpredictable.

One impact of this view is that with more people working from home they will not need to make use of a privately owned car as an alternative to get to work by public transport, although whether that would encourage short road journeys to schools, shops or other locations during the working day is something to consider. For the medium and longer terms, TSSA would support calls for alternatives to the use of privately owned cars because of the environmental issues caused. Alternatives such as the adequate provision, and promotion of, the use of (and facilities for) walking and cycling, not to mention better integrated public transport. TSSA is particularly impressed by the highly integrated takfahrplan system that originated in Switzerland and is being adopted in Germany. Whatever system is adopted, integrated (across transport modes) and simplified fares are a must to encourage people to travel by public transport.

- **central and local governmental transport priorities and finances and funding for transport**

TSSA remains concerned that central government will begin to cut back on its plans for public transport in the light of the pandemic. The announcement on 21st September 2020 of the introduction of Emergency Recovery Measures Agreements (ERMAs) ending the use of passenger

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franchises was accompanied by aspirations in connection with “driving down the railways’ excessive capital costs” and using the reform to “enable substantial medium and longer-term savings for the tax payer.”⁶ No detail was given about what these objectives relate to and whether savings are limited to the end of franchising but what is certain is that the railway does have capital costs associated with items such as rolling stock and infrastructure renewal and enhancement that requires material like rail, signals, etc (the infrastructure elements forming part of the five yearly Control Period plans set by Network Rail and agreed with the ORR and Government under the HLoS and SoFA arrangements).

This statement comes at a time when the country is facing an environmental crisis which the government has recognised by its intention to bring all greenhouse gas emissions to net zero by 2050. One of the major planks of being able to achieve that plan is the use of public transport which would cut back car and lorry use. However, to get to that stage, the railway industry has to be able cut its contribution to greenhouse gases which has led the government to set a target of 2040 for railway locomotives to become carbon neutral. Network Rail has recently published its “Traction Decarbonisation Network Strategy”⁷ which envisages large scale additional electrification and some use of hydrogen and battery technologies.

The rail freight sector has also been carrying out research with RSSB in connection with replacements for diesel rail locomotives capable of hauling heavy trains for long distances and concluded that electrification is the only way forward. Transferring freight to rail is a significant way of impacting on greenhouse gases because of the effect caused by HGVs on our roads. The Freight on Rail Campaign has identified the ability of one freight train to be able to eliminate 76 HGVs journeys.⁸

Our concern is that if the Westminster Government are considering making spending cuts to Britain’s railway, they also risk undermining the ability to achieve Net Zero Carbon in sufficient time for 2050 because the work required on the nation’s railways will require significant public sector capital investment.

What the ERMA do confirm is the ongoing government support and funding for our railways, although they are not an end to privatisation - a model which has so badly failed passengers, staff and services. For instance, that failure has been seen in the 20 per cent real terms increase in rail fares since 1995⁹ and the huge amount of rail investment from the tax payer and not the private sector. TSSA advocates full public ownership of our railways in order to better integrate and innovate services, achieve common standards across the network and lower ticket prices for passengers.

- **the devolution of transport policy-making responsibilities and powers**

TSSA is generally supportive of the devolution of transport policy making responsibilities and

⁶ See Written Statement to Parliament, 21st September 2020 at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/rail-update-emergency-recovery-measures-agreements>

⁷ Available at: <https://www.networkrail.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Traction-Decarbonisation-Network-Strategy-Interim-Programme-Business-Case.pdf>

⁸ Quoted in: <https://www.commercialfleet.org/fleet-management/environment/replace-road-haulage-with-rail-freight-what-is-the->

[solution#:~:text=Around%2010%25%20of%20domestic%20shipping,almost%20four%20billion%20HGV%20miles.](https://www.commercialfleet.org/fleet-management/environment/replace-road-haulage-with-rail-freight-what-is-the-solution#:~:text=Around%2010%25%20of%20domestic%20shipping,almost%20four%20billion%20HGV%20miles.)

⁹ House of Commons Library Briefing Note Number SN06384, 30 November 2018 at page 3.

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powers because it not only introduces an element of local accountability, it also means that timetables and service provision can be better matched to local needs and aspirations. It can also mean local coordination of the different transport modes. This is the effect that is seen in various locations around England, Wales and Scotland. The issue is always whether sufficient funding is also made available for the mayor¹⁰ or other elected person to be able to make a difference locally, something that could be affected by the pandemic.

TSSA is concerned at the situation that exists in London where the pandemic has had a significant impact on public transport due to many fewer people than anticipated travelling. This has impacted on Transport for London's finances, already severely strained because of the decision by the Government to stop the General Grant (worth £700 million a year) in 2017-18, three years earlier than originally planned (for financial year 2020-21), a situation that has been exasperated by the delays in opening the central section of Crossrail. The current Mayor's request to the Government for support due to the pandemic has led to an in depth independent investigation into Transport for London's finances and the fear that conditions for assistance will include terms that will have a detrimental impact on public transport in the nation's Capital. Further cuts to public transport in London, like those already actioned for the bus network, will only be detrimental and undermine the devolution that is already in place.

One fear about policies around devolution is that a national government faced with the "scale of the coronavirus pandemic may drown this narrative out: as Davide Vampa says, 'when an external shock is threatening the very foundations of the economy and society, and total mobilisation of national resources is required, the role of the central government may be re-discovered, with effects that last even after the crisis is over'"¹¹

However, the government appear to be pressing ahead with its devolution agenda, linking it to their levelling up policy. Simon Clarke MP, Minister for Local Government and Regional Growth, advised the Local Government Association's annual conference in July 2020 that a White Paper on devolution and local recovery would be published in the Autumn of 2020.

However, in a railway context, with services in one area potentially having an impact in another through interconnecting trains, we see a need for coordination meaning that devolution has to be with has to be within a national system. We are also concerned that devolution could mean that some transport authorities (eg, Transport for London) would seek to take on the role of the UK's principal (rail) Infrastructure Manager, Network Rail, with all of the implications in terms of the operational train service pattern, safety issues, different maintenance and operational standards, the loss of scale in terms of procurement, etc.

One area that we see the need for greater freedom in a post Covid-19 world is that of devolved transport authorities being given the freedom to be able to choose to form public sector companies (eg, like a municipal bus company) for the provision of local services. This is the

¹⁰ See: "How might English metro-mayors adapt to the post-coronavirus world?" by Mark Sandford, Bennet Institute of Public Policy, Cambridge University at: <https://www.bennettinstitute.cam.ac.uk/blog/how-might-english-metro-mayors-adapt-post-coronavi/>

¹¹ David Vampa author of: "The territorial politics of coronavirus: is this the hour of central government?" (published on 15th April 2020 and available at: <https://www.democraticaudit.com/2020/04/15/the-territorial-politics-of-coronavirus-is-this-the-hour-of-central-government/>) quoted in "How might English metro-mayors adapt to the post-coronavirus world?" by Mark Sandford, University of Cambridge (available at: <https://www.bennettinstitute.cam.ac.uk/blog/how-might-english-metro-mayors-adapt-post-coronavi/>)

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power conferred on the Scottish Government as a result of the Smyth Commission (enshrined in the Scotland Act) in terms of the ScotRail passenger franchise. Devolution appears to work best when the devolved authority has freedom to exercise its powers in the way that the majority of people locally want them to and not within strict policy constraints imposed by a central government with an opposing political ideology.

One other area is in terms of properly funding local authorities so that they are able to adequately finance public transport. We have alluded to this earlier. For instance, since 2010, well before the pandemic, the level of council funding for bus services had been cut by 46% resulting in the loss of thousands of socially necessary, council sponsored services that profit seeking private companies would not run. One of the examples seen from the pandemic has been the imposition by central government of new responsibilities onto local authorities but without any additional funding.

- **the resilience of the transport system for future crises**

Resilience of the transport system comes in different guises but one of the most significant is that of how workers in the industry are affected. In common with all other sections of society, transport workers have been touched by the virus, with ten railway workers and some 25 bus drivers paying the ultimate price as they continued to work under the designation of 'key worker' status.

Apart from the pandemic, the other known issue of resilience for the transport industry is in relation to the impact of climate change which causes weather events that lead to flooding, damage to earthworks and destruction of infrastructure. The recent Carmont derailment on 12th August 2020 occurred after an exceptionally heavy rain storm washed stone out from an embankment which led to three people being killed. In Network Rail's subsequent Interim Report¹² to the Secretary of State for Transport over the derailment, it is reported that in the financial year 2019-20, 250 earthwork failures took place. Based on the figures in the Report, it appears that this annual rate is significantly higher than for each of the previous three five year Control Periods.¹³

Network Rail has 190,000 earthworks assets¹⁴ and plans to spend double what it did in CP4 (2009-14) in this area (and drainage) during the current Control Period (2019-2024).¹⁵ We would submit that a recommendation from Transport Select Committee should be for the Government to increase the amount of money available for Network Rail to tackle this issue.

- **the decarbonisation of transport and the capability to meet net zero carbon emissions targets by 2050**

We would refer to our comments at page 4 of this submission (in our answer to "central and

¹² See: "Resilience of rail infrastructure Interim report to the Secretary of State for Transport following the derailment at Carmont, near Stonehaven", 1st September 2020 and available at:

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/915898/resilience-of-rail-infrastructure-interim-report.pdf

¹³ See Page 8 of Interim Report referenced in Note 12

¹⁴ See Page 3: <https://www.networkrail.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Earthworks-Technical-Strategy.pdf>

¹⁵ See Page 4 of Interim Report referenced in Note 12

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local governmental transport priorities and finances and funding for transport”).

- **innovation and technological reform within transport**

Britain's railways are already going through a technological change with examples around new signalling and control systems (eg, ETCS) installed on Thameslink and with work started on the southern end of the East Coast Mainline. To progress this work beyond these locations will take time, funding and staff recruitment and training.

The Government have been pushing SMART ticketing for some years as a way to either supplement or replace existing ticket office arrangements at stations, often without regard to the findings of a Transport Focus report from 2016 that passengers “like and value having staff around.”¹⁶ The advent of the new ERMs and more direct management by the DfT of the former franchises is likely to lead to this policy being escalated and has been cited by one operator as the reason for cuts to ticket office staff.

However technology and innovation are introduced, TSSA is calling for staff to benefit and not be cast aside in the interest of profit or cost savings. One way of doing this is for employers to commit to re-training and re-deployment, enabling workers to gain the skills required to continue their employment and bring to bear their experience and continuing commitment to the industry, especially at a time when the age of the workforce is increasing. TSSA also wants to see the workforce benefit through better career prospects as jobs change and share in savings through better pay and conditions.

In making this submission, we trust that its contents will be considered and look forward to the Select Committee's response.

Yours sincerely



Manuel Cortes
TSSA General Secretary

¹⁶ Transport Focus, “Passenger attitudes towards rail staff”, published in February 2016) concluded at page 2 that passengers “like and value having staff around.” See:

<http://www.transportfocus.org.uk/research/publications/passenger-attitudes-towards-rail-staff>