

Transport Select Committee

Minimum service levels for rail

Submission by the Rail Freight Forum of the Chartered Institute of Logistics and Transport (CILT UK)

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The rail Freight Operating Companies (FOCs) are not, and have not been, in dispute with any of the trade unions, having successfully concluded negotiations last year. The FOCs and their customers have, however, been severely affected by the RMT dispute with Network Rail, due to line closures when signallers were on strike. Significant collateral damage has been afflicted on the rail freight industry when it was not in dispute with any of its staff.

The impact was particularly severe when multiple strike days were called in the same week, as occurred either side of Christmas. Rail traffic is diverted onto congested roads whenever there is a strike, as urgent deliveries have to be made on the day, but some customers are able to work around odd strike days. When a strike continues for several days, however, it is impossible to work around the problem and supply chains of key strategic products such as construction materials, fuel, steel and supermarket goods are severely disrupted.

Even more damaging is the loss of customer confidence in rail and the impact this has on modal switch, which is a key element in decarbonising UK logistics. It is understood that several large potential customers who were on the verge of starting to use rail for their trunk haulage, in lieu of HGVs, have shied away on the understandable grounds that they do not consider rail to be resilient from 'third party' action. It is too early to establish how much lasting damage has been done, but it seems likely that the RMT strikes have acted as a brake on modal shift and decarbonisation.

Freight customers do not suffer from strikes affecting road infrastructure and, not unreasonably, wish to see the same apply with rail infrastructure. Any 'essential public service' legislation that is introduced thus needs to make full and proper provision for freight services. In parallel, when strikes do occur, better contingency measures need to be put in place to minimise the impact on freight customers.

Some Network Rail Routes (e.g. the West Coast Main Line) did reasonably well on strike days and kept their main signalling centres open for 12 hours using management staff, but others did not perform well. For example, no trains were able to operate west of Cardiff on any strike days, meaning that the Tata steel works at Port Talbot (the UK's largest) received no rail service whatsoever, despite being critically dependant on rail for its key supply chains.

In any future strikes, freight customers need to see 24-hour contingency cover of main signalling centres, accepting that there may be some delays due to reduced staffing levels. With Automatic Route Setting now in widespread use, delays should not be

excessive. Looking to the longer term, key strategic routes which are still controlled by a series of manual signal boxes need to be prioritised for signal modernisation, so that the number of staff required to operate a route is minimised.

The most notable example of this is the Hope Valley route between Manchester and Sheffield, which carries the entire output of aggregates and cement from the Peak District. It is controlled by around a dozen manual signal boxes and it is extremely difficult to cover such a large number of locations with management staff. As a result, no trains operate from the Peak District on strike days, even though it is now the largest source of aggregates in the UK. Aggregates and cement depots across the North, the Midlands, East Anglia and the South East are left without deliveries as a result.

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