

Communication from the Commission. A sustainable future for transport: towards an integrated, technology-led and user friendly system. COM(2009) 279/4

Introduction

The International Air Rail Organisation (IARO) appreciates being able to respond to this consultation. We are a world-wide industry group bringing together those interested in rail connections to airports, with a mission to spread good practical ideas and world-class best practice. Our members include railways, airports, airlines, universities, manufacturers and suppliers: some may be responding to the consultation themselves.

Integration

Paragraphs 45 and 46, discussing the integration of air and rail transport, are supported. People need to make the complex end-to-end journeys they do make as easily and efficiently as possible: effective public transport connections at airports have a vital part to play in this.

Good public transport can attract over 50% of air travellers. Just as important is the need for good public transport for employees, who represent roundly a third of all airport access journeys.

Good practice in this area needs to be publicised and promoted. There are good surface access strategies, green commuter plans and the like: there are excellent airport access models. IT, in the form of journey planning systems, is also of value: people need to know what their choices are.

We think that people are mode-neutral. They are where they are, and they want to be where they want to be: they want to get from here to there as easily and efficiently as possible. They don't want to fly, they don't want to drive or take a train or bus: they just want to bridge the gap.

Intermodality

Paragraph 63 continues this theme with a focus on the need for efficient intermodal nodes.

We agree entirely.

Quick interchange, short step-free walking distances, clear signage and excellent information are needed by passengers.

Cargo has different requirements – unlike passengers, it won't walk between train and plane. However, the experiments planned under the EuroCAREX scheme, at Leipzig-Halle, at Stockholm Arlanda, at Milan Malpensa and at Amsterdam Schiphol in the air-rail cargo arena are worth following and fostering.

That said, rail has a very important role in moving low-value high-bulk freight to airports – construction materials and aviation fuel are the cargos most often transported. The Colnbrook interchange, near Heathrow's Terminal 5, and the Märsta oil terminal near Stockholm Arlanda, are excellent examples.

Increased intensity of use

Making optimal use of existing facilities is covered in paragraph 66: again, we agree entirely.

Airports not connected to the rail network can often be linked in by short spurs (a good example can be seen at Hamburg) or bus shuttles (as at East Midlands airport). Both of these increase use of the main line.

Where a link already exists, capacity can usually be increased. This can be done by lengthening trains (as has been done on Airport Express Oslo and Heathrow Express), by using double-deck trains (where the infrastructure will take it – as in Zürich) or by increasing frequencies (which may need signalling enhancements).

A characteristic of airport passengers is the need for early and late services. Many flights depart between 6:00 and 6:30: many more between 6:30 and 7:00. When do passengers want to be there for those flights? When have staff got to be there to check them in and serve them coffee? This aspect is easy to overlook.

Another need is for through trains. Air passengers, typically travelling with luggage, do not want to change trains. It adds hassle and uncertainty.

These are areas of good practice which need promoting. Selective financial assistance may be necessary. Early morning and late-night trains can be uneconomic in themselves while contributing to a public transport system – if employees cannot get to or from their place of work for one of their shifts, they are unlikely to make the commitment of an annual season ticket.

Some airports, as part of their green travel plans, have given marketing assistance to public transport operators rather than direct operating finance.

Information and IT

This is briefly discussed in paragraph 69.

The EU's Rail-Air Intermodality Facilitation Forum (RAIFF) of some years ago did valuable work on some of these aspects (legal liability in particular): what has happened as a result?

One problem was the inability of some railways to accept air tickets because of wording issues: if this could be resolved, possibly as part of the Passengers' Rights/Unified Conditions of Carriage debate, it would make air-rail intermodality easier.

Impartial information systems, like Transport Direct in the UK, are good: these need to be expanded.

Allied to this is standard-setting, as discussed in paragraph 78. Air and rail seem to be moving closer together with the onset of 2D bar-coded tickets. These have much potential – but is this being realised? We understand, for example, that there are two standards for 2D bar-codes for rail travel in Germany depending on whether the journey is domestic or international. This does not inspire confidence!

We are currently involved in a long-running proposal for in-town check-out. The plan is for passengers to be able to check-in their bags at any airport through to Kuala Lumpur Central Station. One of the many problems is that, if a passenger is ticketed for the throughout journey, the railway would have to pay a standard GDS segment fee of the same magnitude as the ordinary train fare, making the whole thing uneconomic. This has cleared one major obstacle: IATA have modified the relevant Recommended Practice to remove that particular requirement. Sadly, there appear to be several more obstacles, especially in the form of insurance and liability, still needing resolution.

Issues not covered so far

The Value Added Tax (VAT) issue was discussed as part of the RAIFF process. Different countries impose different rates of VAT on different modes of transport for their own domestic reasons: for some journeys, whether or not one pays VAT depends on the mode of travel one uses. This does not help impartial competition.

We do not believe that there is a single impartial authoritative source of information on the well-to-wheel environmental impacts of different modes of transport over a range of distances. We accept that this will be country specific and in some cases route specific (because some railways use diesel power and others use electricity; and some countries generate electricity in a more environmentally friendly manner than others). If this information existed, it would help passengers make informed choices.

We see a major problem with intermodality generally being the silo or stovepipe mentality. Within governments at all levels, there tend to be separate departments handling rail, air and road; and sometimes local rail or local transport as well. Each deals with their own subject-area. Who looks at people travelling by rail from suburb to city, by metro across the city, by Airport Express to the airport and by air to a different country? Solutions are thin on the ground, but need to be explored – possibly by creating organisations dealing with long-distance, medium distance and short distance travel rather than air, rail and bus.

What can the Commission do?

1. Begin at the beginning

We were pleased to be able to respond to the consultation on integrated air-rail ticketing last year.

However, we did feel that this was the wrong start-point.

It was our view that a more fruitful way forward in promoting air-rail intermodality would have been to ascertain what barriers potential passengers faced and how important those passengers felt them to be in influencing their choice of mode.

This could have led to a prioritised programme to reduce barriers.

What are the top ten reasons why people do not use trains to get to and from airports? Which five of those are easiest to solve?

2. Demonstration projects

In addition, the Commission could promote good practice and demonstration projects in areas like integrated information systems, air-rail cargo and green travel plans.