

CHANGING TRACKS

TOWARDS BETTER INTERNATIONAL
PASSENGER TRANSPORT BY TRAIN

JULY 2020



About the Council for the Environment and Infrastructure

The Council for the Environment and Infrastructure (*Raad voor de leefomgeving en infrastructuur*, Rli) advises the Dutch government and Parliament on strategic issues concerning the sustainable development of the living and working environment. The Council is independent, and offers solicited and unsolicited advice on long-term issues of strategic importance to the Netherlands. Through its integrated approach and strategic advice, the Council strives to provide greater depth and breadth to the political and social debate, and to improve the quality of decision-making processes.

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SUMMARY

For urban agglomerations in Europe to be economically competitive it is vital that international destinations are easily accessible. Although in the past century much has been invested in the construction of the European rail infrastructure, rail passenger transport has grown less rapidly than transport by road and air. This is regrettable, because compared with other modes of transport travelling by train is not only safer, but also better for the environment and the climate.

At the time of publishing this advice it remains uncertain when and how the international transport market will recover from the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic. Governments are currently pumping hundreds of billions into recovery funds and economic support packages to contain the consequences of the crisis and at the same time make their economies more sustainable. Some of this money will be used to green the transport sector. In a letter to the European Commission the Council for the Environment and Infrastructure ('the Council') and four advisory councils from other European countries argue for linking government support to companies in the transport sector with the objectives of the European Green Deal (see Appendix). Such a link is also desirable in the Netherlands. Greening the transport sector could be the stimulus needed to change tracks towards better international rail access within Europe.

Bottlenecks for the rail passenger

Why do people not make more use of international trains? The Council has studied the many bottlenecks in the international rail system – not just from the viewpoint of the railway sector (infrastructure managers, train operators), but more particularly from the perspective of the international rail passenger. The Council's analysis shows that although passengers have an extensive international rail network at their disposal, in practice they experience various constraints that discourage international train journeys.

The world of international rail travel is exceptionally complex. Not only are there many countries connected by rail, but within each country the operation of international rail services depends on close cooperation between public and private parties. To comprehend this complexity the Council has broken down the existing bottlenecks in the rail system into four groups that correspond to four layers of the rail transport system: mobility services (journey planners, apps and such like), transport services (railway companies and their rolling stock), traffic services (capacity management and safety systems) and the infrastructure.

Much more can be done with the existing infrastructure

The construction of new rail infrastructure is a way of improving accessibility by train within Europe. However, this is costly, difficult and time-consuming. It is something politicians are all too keen to talk about, but shy away from when it comes down to it. Moreover, the Council contends that much can be achieved with cheaper and quicker measures in the other layers of the rail transport system that make it possible

for the existing rail infrastructure to be used more intensively, more efficiently and by more international travellers. Adaptations and changes to the rail infrastructure will eventually be needed, but then as part of a comprehensive approach involving the services described below.

Improve mobility services: information provision, ticketing and passenger rights

The international rail passenger will benefit from better information services, such as apps that give access to the services provided by all operators. Travellers will also benefit from measures that make it easier to find and book international train tickets. Moreover, the Council feels that train tickets should be available earlier than at present (which is often no more than three months in advance of travel). Improvements are also needed in passenger rights, for example on missed connections.

Improve transport services: new international services and the train as an attractive option

It is important to encourage the introduction of new international transport services and the Council advises the government to actively seek out operators that are willing to run transboundary services. Further, the Council considers it essential to make international trains an attractive travel option that can compete better with other transport modes. This can be achieved by providing comfortable, rapid, direct services between the internationally important metropolitan areas at fair and competitive prices.



Improve traffic services: more efficient capacity allocation and more use of information technology

Under the existing principles for capacity management it will soon become very difficult to find more room for international services. However, the Council thinks that space can be found if the existing capacity is used more intelligently. For example, within the 'basic hour pattern' (basisuurpatroon) scheduling that is operated on the Dutch railway network there is room to increase the frequency of services on all international routes in the Netherlands. Introducing information technology applications will also help to make more intensive use of the rail network.

Improve the infrastructure: invest in one eastern corridor

In the longer term, improvements to the rail infrastructure will also be necessary. The Council urges the government to invest in one eastern corridor. What the Council has in mind are adaptations to the existing tracks that will permit trains to travel at speeds from 160 to 200 km/hour. Unbundling regional, national and international rail transport will help to improve access to destinations in the Netherlands by international train services. Station capacity also needs to be looked at in connection with this.

In conclusion

The Council is aware that boosting international rail passenger transport is a complex business:

- Putting the proposed policy into effect will involve action not only by government but also by the operators. For them it is important that there is indeed a market for a growing number of passengers. The government

can do very little to directly influence passenger numbers, but improving the mobility and transport services will stimulate this market.

- Many countries are involved and they have different ideas about the number of tasks and range of powers the EU should be given in this area. That is why the Council proposes a gradual approach.
- Finally, further growth in international passenger transport will make increasing demands on the available capacity on the rail network. Spare capacity is available, but is not limitless. A time will come when choices will have to be made about the allocation of capacity between passenger and freight transport and/or national and international services. This is a political decision, and it must not be avoided. The Council points out that at the moment the interests of international rail passengers are not being taken fully into account.

Not all of the Council's recommendations can be implemented in the short term, but this does not alter the fact that with its long-term recommendations the Council supports the pursuit of policy objectives that are endorsed both nationally and in the European context.



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