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Kjeld A. Larsen
Chairman of Council for Sustainable Transport

Email: kjeld.allan.larsen@gmail.com

Support for night trains and night-time transport in Europe

Dear Kjeld Larsen,

Commissioner Bule has asked me to thank you for your email of 27 May 2016 and apologise on her behalf for the delay in replying to you.

The Commission is well aware of the fact that more and more European international services, particularly night trains, are being discontinued.

Firstly, it is up to each railway company to decide what services they can offer, according to their own specific business conditions. Such decisions are taken on the basis of a number of factors, such as operating costs, passenger demand, service quality and track access charges.

Railway legislation leaves Member States sufficient scope to support the rail services that they consider important, including night trains, by adjusting access charges. By introducing the principle that track access charges should be based on marginal costs (also called 'direct costs'), the Commission has taken positive steps to ensure low track access charges in general. Charges based on direct costs are inherently low, and in 2015 the methods used to calculate those costs were harmonised in an implementing regulation. It is for the Member States to decide whether to adopt higher taxes (in the form of supplements) to cover a larger share of their total costs when making railway infrastructure available. However, this can only be done if such services can be offered at a higher price.

With regard to other business conditions, the Commission considers that introducing competition might make railway companies more customer-oriented and improve rail service cost-effectiveness and interoperability. It is our opinion that the measures in the fourth railway package, expected to be adopted before the end of the year, will increase demand for rail services in general and also improve the commercial basis for night trains.

Commission européenne/Europese Commissie, 1049 Bruxelles/Brussel,
BELGIQUE/BELGIE. - Tel.: +32 299-1111
Office: DM28 04/50. - Tel. ext.: +32 296-8240

Even if business conditions for specific services, including night trains, remain negative, Member States may, if they deem it necessary, contract for public services. That would imply that public authorities cover certain costs incurred in operating a given transport link. If the service concerned is international, contracts may, in cooperation with the authorities of neighbouring countries, be agreed for public services for the respective national sections.

We hope that the arrangements described above will further the development of international connections, including night services.

As you correctly point out, railways remain one of the most environment-friendly modes of transport. In this context, on 20 July 2016 the Commission adopted the European strategy for low carbon mobility and an action plan. In the document referred to, the Commission expresses concerns about the fact that several Member States still use a variety of conflicting tax incentives that are impeding low-emission mobility. To create positive incentives for using low-emissions vehicles and energy sources for transport, those schemes need to be reviewed.

I hope this explanation has been useful.

Yours sincerely,

(sgd.) Sian Prout