

# What kind of service is this?

By GRAHAM LARKBEY

Recent cutbacks by British Rail on several of its lines have prompted the question: Just what does actually constitute a train service?

Newspapers have highlighted some absurdities. At Godley East near Manchester, there is only one train, in one direction, once a week on Saturdays.

Services on the Stockport - Stalybridge line are ever-declining with three trains in one direction, only one in the other (at 0630!) and Monday to Friday only.

If BR wishes to close a station, it is obliged to go through a statutory consultative procedure which allows people to lodge objections and requires the Secretary of State for Transport to consider the pros and cons before deciding whether or not closure should be approved.

Unfortunately it seems that as long as an occasional train stops at a station at some time or another, and however useless it is to people wanting to travel, BR can do what it likes and the passenger (sorry, customer) has no say in the matter. The effect is virtual closure in all but name, without any statutory process being observed at all.

I don't think this is good enough. As a publicly owned body, BR should be required to provide a minimum standard of service at all its stations. The minimum should surely be one train each way in the morning, lunchtime and evening.

Any proposal to provide less would have to be the subject of a consultation process, similar to that governing proposed closures. This would help to avoid the nonsensical situation that now exists at

stations like Denton (Lancs), Reddish South, Combe (Oxon), Pilning (Avon), Primrose Hill (North London), Godley East and others where the service has become so abysmal that it is virtually no use to anybody any more.

One of the worst examples of cuts has been on the Barrow - Whitehaven line where the number of trains has been halved, preventing people going to work in Barrow. The 0749 from Whitehaven has been axed and the next one is three hours later.

RDS Yorkshire chairman James Towler has questioned the legality of cuts in his area. He has told the Department of Transport that the 1974 Railways Act puts a responsibility on Regional Railways to provide a service at least equal to that which existed in 1988 and on Government to provide any necessary Public Sector Obligation funding.

The department which has presided over years of cutbacks on BR is now happy to accept more, as long as the overall level of service is maintained on a national basis. So campaigners fighting to improve services in their area can unwittingly be providing justification for BR and the department to approve cutbacks elsewhere — another Catch 22 invented at Marsham Street to cripple the railway revival.

Any leeway the legislators left in the Act was surely to allow services to be improved not cut back.

The Transport Secretary in 1974 had been careful to say in Parliament that services could still be improved and closed down (subject to proper legal procedure) but he did not refer to any leeway for service cuts. The Government's obsession through-

out most of the Thatcher years with cutting even justifiable public expenditure has left BR with a "gaping wound" cash crisis while the road programme continues to swallow gargantuan amounts of public money.

Transport Minister Roger Freeman appeared unwilling to protect passengers from train cuts when he was quoted as saying that the level of service "has to be judged locally by BR managers who are aware of local conditions".

Mr Towler commented: "The Government appears to condone the abrogation of a consumer protection clause in an Act of Parliament.

"What is so surprising is that the Government should arrive at this decision in the run-up to a General Election.

"It strikes me as something of an own goal as it is directed largely towards Conservative-held constituencies.

"It also seems ill-timed, coming shortly before the clarion call of Transport Secretary Malcolm Rifkind for an increased role for rail in easing congestion on the country's roads.

"Indeed Mr Rifkind should use his authority to overrule Transport Minister Roger Freeman and the Department of Transport and instruct BR to rescind the cuts introduced or planned for BR's Regional rural lines.

"If the Government continues to collude and acquiesce in BR's cuts to rural services while at the same time advocating rail as a solution to traffic problems on the roads, they would be engaging in hubbub."

# Safety is paramount — or is it?

A laser speed-checker, developed in Italy, was on test in June with three British police forces, Devon and Cornwall, Lancashire and Tayside. The Auto-velox gives police a print-out of the offending car and its speed.

What's the chance of seeing it in operation down your street? Slim!

In Italy the speeding driver receives a ticket through the post but the motorised manipulators will do their best to keep the device out of Britain.

In this country, motorway police admitted in June that they don't bother to book M-way drivers unless they exceed 90 mph even though the legal limit is 70.

An M25 patrolman told the magazine *Auto Express* it was impossible to book all the speeding drivers because there were so many of them.

The Department of Transport claims the 70 mph limit is difficult to enforce. In fact the technology exists. The political and bureaucratic will does not.

There are many other ways to make our roads safer but they are constantly neutered by vested interests and road-blocked minds.

An attempt to introduce random breath-testing was defeated in June by 117 non-elected peers, with much talk about the "freedom" of the individual.

*Drivers certainly enjoy an amazing freedom to kill and maim.*

More than 5,000 people die on the roads every year, but often, the only inquiry after a deadly crash is a locally held coroner's inquest.

The Department of Transport continues to build roads — on the spurious grounds of improving safety, while at the same time talking of speeding up traffic.

The vast majority of road accident victims are pedestrians but there are fewer and fewer safe places for them to cross. They also suffer the

indignity of breathing increasingly polluted air from road traffic.

While railways operate to strict safety standards, progressively improved every time there is an incident, the carnage on the roads continues, with little real determination to change matters.

Is there a safe crossing point outside your local station? If not, ask your local politicians to provide one. And be prepared for opposition from the Department of Transport.

"A pedestrian phase at every set of traffic lights along the red route would be **unrealistic** as would pedestrian crossing facilities beside every bus stop and railway station," said the Department of Transport in a letter to Railwatch editor Ray King.

In a glossy pamphlet produced last year, the aims of the red route scheme were claimed to be to "reduce accidents" and to "provide better facilities for cyclists and pedestrians". **Unrealistic surely?**

*Economical with the truth:* Safety considerations are paramount in the department's approach to all transport issues, claims the Department of Transport's report for 1991. It says much of the department's expenditure contributes directly or indirectly to enhancing safety.

In fact the department continues to favour the most unreliable and dangerous form of transport, roads. It builds roads with little or no provision for the most vulnerable people, pedestrians and cyclists.

Roundabouts for instance are 15 times more dangerous for cyclists than for motorists, according to research by the Cyclists's Touring Club.

They are no-go areas for pedestrians.

The department has presided over the closure of the safest form of transport, railways, leaving vast tracts where people are forced to go by road when there were once adequate rail services.

It accepts the reduction of rail services to save a

few pounds while wasting billions building new roads.

*Killer at large:* A leading environmentalist has suggested that cars, like cigarettes, should carry a government health warning. Apart from the 5,000 killed every year in "accidents", car exhaust gases are undermining the nation's long-term health. Increasing numbers of children are asthma sufferers because of airborne pollution.

*Killer at home:* The Government has also revealed that 20,000 people are burned, asphyxiated or crushed each year while engaged on do-it-yourself work on their cars at home.

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