

Backtracking on a safe railway

Despite my belief (*Railwatch* 82) that we were beginning to win the safety battle, sadly not everything is as it seems.

The case for Automatic Train Protection is overwhelming and yet it was successfully put on the back burner in the run-up to privatisation.

Despite the experts' calculations, it was essentially a political decision to exclude ATP from the privatisation process.

The train leasing companies, the train operators and Railtrack all sprang into being but none were responsible for installing ATP nationally.

The two test bed schemes on the Great Western main line and on Chiltern became, after a time, to be known as pilot schemes and not as the forerunner of national implementation.

After the Clapham disaster, the then Transport Secretary Cecil Parkinson said money would not prevent safety systems being implemented.

After Paddington deputy prime minister John Prescott does a fair impersonation of Mr Parkinson and it is difficult to tell them apart. Now the public



Rayner's review

emotion has faded, ATP is once again on the back burner and the Train Protection Warning System is promoted as the thing of the future.

Do not let them persuade you TPWS is anything other than a cheap alternative to ATP. It may bring down the number of signals passed at danger but it is questionable if it will really prevent dangerous situations developing. In many cases it

will not even prevent the signal being passed at danger, although it will reduce the overrun. It will have the cosmetic effect so beloved of politicians.

For most drivers a signal passed at danger is a "once in a career" mistake and is taken extremely seriously. Its actual significance must not be undersold by equipment that is less professional than the people it purports to supervise.

The real problem industry and Government face is that if there is now another accident which ATP could have prevented, those who chose TPWS will be in a difficult moral position and a public outcry will ensue.

Months after Paddington, it is now suggested Railtrack may retain its overall safety responsibilities. To me it is obvious that the Safety and Standards Directorate should be taken away from Railtrack.

The number of interventions by the Railway Inspectorate by way of improvement orders has increased dramatically. The Chief Inspector has had to be pro-active and has become a player rather than the referee.

This lessens the Inspectorate's usefulness and capacity to review the industry.

Where safety is concerned there is truly a need for safety not only to be impartially supervised but also to be seen to be impartially supervised. How the changes should be made is more difficult. It appears unlikely the Government will want to make any change until Lord Cullen's Paddington Inquiry finally pronounces.

But if another accident takes place before Lord Cullen's report is published, politicians will be blamed. Whoever manages safety and standards should be independent of any company.

Maybe the companies should fund an independent government agency. Whatever you call it, that agency would monitor Railtrack's own operation and its contractors, as well as the train operating companies.

It is not surprising therefore that the Association of Train Operating Companies supports leaving safety with Railtrack!

■ Peter Rayner is a former BR operations and safety officer and is RDS safety adviser.

Rail gets a look-in

By John Davison

The guidance on transport issues provided by central government to all English planning authorities - PPG13 - is being revised again.

An October draft contained many familiar hopes and suggestions and set the stage for maximum parking standards across the country which would be a break from traditional practice.

Unitary and district councils are asked, in the draft edition, to give priority to people over traffic in town centres, other places with mixed uses and local neighbourhoods.

They are urged to safeguard "sites and routes which could be critical in developing infrastructure to widen transport choices" a definition that would allow room for much progressive interpretation.

Where interchanges are already good, an acceptance of higher densities of settlement or employment is called for, on the basis that such planning could raise the proportion of people selecting public transport for their regular trips.

The approach introduced by John Gummer is endorsed in the new Department of Environment Transport and the Regions publication.

This means that councils or developers looking for sites for new leisure or shopping centres should first examine town centre sites, then any on the edge of a centre, then any "out-of-centre" sites which are or will

be well served by public transport. Councils are also told to identify "interchange improvements that need to be made" and seek funding for them.

Unfortunately this is largely wishful thinking. Many bus operators opt out of managed bus stations and simply set down or pick up passengers at the kerbside.

So PPG13 cannot be seen as a serious attempt to rectify England's shabby assortment of uncomfortable bus and rail termini.

But at least PPG13 says that when looking to bring disused transport sites back into occupation, a preference should be shown towards "uses related to sustainable transport".

More specifically, the draft suggests that councils "explore the potential and identify any proposals for new rail, including the reopening of rail lines, or creation of new stations on existing rail lines, light rail or guided bus routes (giving due consideration to the funding for such proposals)".

If this advice is incorporated in the new version of PPG13, district councils will no longer be able to side-step questions of passenger rail services by passing the buck to county councils which in the past have had to shoulder transport responsibilities largely alone.

RDS contributed a response to the consultation draft, asking for greater protection of closed railway alignments. The Government is currently working on the final version which we hope will take our

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