

**RAIL REPLACEMENT BUS SERVICES**  
**Improving the Travel Experience for Passengers**

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## **Foreword**

Any passenger who suffers inconvenience and discomfort on a journey using public transport may well consider changing to a different mode of travel next time, if the choice exists. A really bad experience may even convince all but the most committed to think twice before using public transport again at all.

Such thoughts are almost certain to occur to many rail passengers whose planned journeys are disrupted by engineering work, and who suffer a bad experience as a result of having to travel on a rail replacement bus service which temporarily replaces the train. This arrangement, which causes delay and inconvenience to passengers - and significant hardship for some - has become increasingly favoured by the rail industry in recent years, instead of every effort being made to keep the trains running or to divert them. As a consequence the journeys of an increasing number of passengers are disrupted in this way. This gives the railway a poor image and causes a loss of custom and revenue.

This report draws attention to many of the problems passengers experience from rail replacement bus operations. It reviews the background to this important subject with examples drawn from recent experiences in North West England. Aspects of current practice, both good and bad, are reviewed and some principles of good practice are suggested which should be observed whenever a rail replacement bus service is planned during engineering work.

The report has been prepared and researched by Keith Pennyfather, a member of the North West Public Transport Users' Forum Liaison Committee and an ex-member of the former Rail Passengers Committee for North Western England. The principles of good practice which are set out in Appendix 1 have been endorsed by a wide range of transport users following consultation through the Public Transport Users' Forum network.

In addition to suggesting how rail replacement bus operations can be made less disruptive for passengers the report goes further by questioning aspects of the rail industry's policy towards engineering work and the need for so many replacement bus services in the first place. It challenges the rail industry's readiness to close the railway on so many occasions and to provide buses instead. Other European countries generally manage to keep the trains running during engineering work, and comparisons are drawn.

It is hoped the issues raised in this report will be accepted as a positive contribution towards reducing the level of disruption caused to passengers' journeys by replacement bus services, and that it will be seen to be in the rail industry's best interests to undertake engineering work in ways that will keep the need for such services to an absolute minimum.

## **Executive Summary**

Railway engineering work with rail replacement bus services in operation, in the past largely confined to Sundays and Bank Holidays, nowadays frequently occurs during the working week as well. Continuous blockades lasting several days, weeks or even months at a stretch are increasingly favoured by the rail industry instead of efforts being made to keep the trains running most of the time, as in earlier days. The journeys of far more passengers are now affected, causing inconvenience, discomfort, a longer journey time and significant hardship for some. There is concern that Network Rail appears to envisage lengthy blockades as the preferred way of working in the future without fully considering alternatives, and this needs to be challenged.

Routine track work also frequently takes place on Sundays, when many lines are closed for much of the year. This depletes revenue and limits the railway's ability to grow weekend patronage. The assumption that rail services on Sundays are expendable because fewer people wish to travel needs to be challenged. This is not the case today, as a comparison with motorway use demonstrates. Passengers need a rail service seven days a week, not just five or six.

Replacing a train service by a bus almost always results in an inferior service. Extended journey times are a particular deterrent, with a bus easily taking over three times as long as the train journey it replaces. Certain categories of passenger, such as those with special needs or accompanied by bulky luggage, are discriminated against and may be prevented from travelling at all. It is doubtful whether the rail industry fully understands the real predicament faced by a passenger on a replacement bus service, resulting in serious inconvenience, discomfort, delay and the likelihood of missed connections. Every effort should therefore be made wherever possible to avoid suspending a rail service and replacing it by a bus.

Passengers' views have shown a clear preference for a continued journey by train rather than by a replacement bus, even if this takes longer. During a line closure some regular rail passengers may well drive to a railhead on a line nearby and take the train from there, but others will be sufficiently alienated to abandon the railway altogether and drive to their destination instead. This will lead to loss of revenue for the railway and will add to congestion on the roads.

Replacing trains with buses is only one of a number of options available to maintain a service during engineering work, although rail engineers have been led by increasingly stringent health and safety requirements to assume it to be the obvious and preferred solution. Yet other European countries generally manage to keep their trains running during engineering work. Network Rail's readiness to close the railway on so many occasions needs to be critically examined.

Other feasible options exist which would cause far less disruption. For instance a line may not need to be closed completely. On a double track railway it may be possible for one track to be kept open on which trains can continue to run. Single line working is standard practice almost everywhere else in Europe and was also widely adopted in this country in the days of British Rail. Network Rail's decision nowadays to close a line completely when track work is undertaken may be the most convenient option from the engineering point of view, and may simplify contractual arrangements. But such decisions taken widely across the network place engineering convenience and contractual simplicity above the needs of passengers, causing serious harm to the rail industry. To ignore the significant disruption caused to passengers is self-defeating.

The rail industry needs to understand that most passengers do not want to travel on a rail replacement bus. They have paid for a train journey and that is what they are entitled to. Other ways of working which would avoid total line closures and the need for buses to replace trains should be seriously examined. A sensible balance needs to be struck which takes much greater account of the needs of passengers. Some assumptions based on issues of cost, efficiency and safety may also need to be challenged.

If the wider costs to the rail industry as a whole are properly taken into account, operating replacement buses will almost certainly prove to be more expensive than keeping the trains running. In addition to the operational costs there will be a loss of fares revenue and the loss of goodwill of passengers and freight customers alike. In total the cost to the rail industry could be considerable, and there is need for a more joined-up view which takes all these costs into account. The current compensation regime acts against the interests of passengers, disguising the real loss of revenue, and also leads to revenue protection not being taken seriously. These are issues the Office of Rail Regulation and the Department for Transport need to address.

Efficiency will also be an issue. Although a series of short possessions may sometimes be less productive than one longer closure, more efficient ways of working may reduce the 'dead time' and there are other

measures that could improve efficiency, such as the use of longer-lasting materials and more efficient plant and machinery. The installation of bi-directional signalling and other "possession friendly infrastructure" could make it easier in future for trains to continue operating during engineering possessions. Enhancing the railway's assets in this way will be an investment for the future and the whole industry will benefit.

Safety is often the reason given to justify closing a line, even if the work being carried out on a double track railway is confined to just one of the two tracks. The over-protective safety culture that has spread throughout the rail industry is completely out of step with the practice adopted elsewhere in Europe. Despite this, Network Rail should examine what scope there might be for adopting some aspects of European practice. Whilst closing a line completely may possibly be safer for the track workers, it increases the danger for passengers, and since passengers will be affected in greater numbers the overall risk will be greater. Passengers will be much safer on a train than on a replacement bus, and there is also a higher risk of slips, trips and falls when transferring between train and bus and carrying luggage. A realistic risk assessment is required which takes into account the comparable levels of risk to passengers and track workers. In most instances the least risky option will be to keep the trains running and to keep passengers on them.

In some circumstances a replacement bus operation will be unavoidable. Where this is so its impact on passengers' journeys can be minimised by careful planning, for example by ensuring easy transfer between train and bus. The bus journey should be kept as short as possible, perhaps between two adjacent stations, instead of closing a much longer stretch of line, as often happens. By timing the buses and trains to give reasonably short connections at the transfer points delay will be reduced and onward connections may still be feasible. The overall duration of closures should also be kept as short as possible. From the passenger's point of view it is frustrating if long stretches of line remain closed with bus services operating long after the work has been completed. On Sundays the restoration of a train service by late afternoon is important for the many passengers who need to travel at that time.

The problems suffered by passengers on replacement buses have been the subject of many complaints aired at meetings of the Rail Passengers Committee. Most operators called to account have generally recognised the problems and have proved receptive to suggestions for improvement, and in those areas which have experienced the greatest incidence of rail replacement, such as south of Manchester, subsequent bus operations have improved as a result. Nevertheless in other parts of the North West the standard of service still remains unacceptable.

In contrast to the attitude of most train operators, Network Rail has responded less positively to criticism of the way the engineering work has been handled, especially when closures have been introduced at the last moment without warning, or when lines have been closed but no work has actually taken place. When challenged at meetings in public NR's representatives have appeared not to accept the need to take more account of the interests of passengers rather than simply the demands of the rail engineers.

The impact of replacement bus operations on passenger journeys is considered in some detail in Section 11 of this report. Some practical suggestions are made in Appendix 1 which should help to reduce the inconvenience to passengers and ensure the journey experience is as painless as possible. These principles have been endorsed by transport users following consultation through the Public Transport Users' Forum network. The principles suggested may appear obvious, but they are not always applied and too often insufficient thought is given to the impact on passengers' journeys.

When planning a rail replacement bus operation representatives of passenger groups should be consulted by the train operators. This will be even more desirable in future, given the demise of the regional Rail Passengers Committees. It is equally important for Network Rail to undertake its own consultations with passenger representatives. There are precedents in the consultation process which took place for the major West Coast Main Line blockades in recent years.

The most frequent complaints about rail replacement services concern information, or the lack of it. Information about journeys affected by engineering work has often been misleading, incorrect or in some cases non-existent. Even when accurate the information has sometimes not been available until a few days before any work starts, despite a rail industry-wide commitment to provide passengers with reliable timetable information at least 12 weeks in advance. Last minute changes to train services also occur frequently, sometimes with only one or two days' notice. This causes confusion and frustration for passengers, and Network Rail needs to consider how to reduce the need for changes at such unacceptably short notice.

Passengers who have to pay a rail fare for a slower and less convenient journey by bus understandably feel cheated, and some form of compensation should be considered for all replacement bus journeys over a

certain length. The justification for this is even greater for passengers who have paid extra to travel First Class, and also for season ticket holders who have paid in advance for a train service which turns out to be a bus. It is also quite unacceptable for passengers to be penalised by having to pay more for their journey as a result of engineering work, for example if the cheapest advance purchase tickets cannot be obtained due to last-minute changes to planned engineering work. Nor should passengers be required to pay more as a result of taking a longer diversionary route, or one using the services of a different train operator, to avoid the engineering work. Agreement between operators should ensure that tickets for travel on the affected route are accepted without surcharge on alternative routes within reasonable limits.

Taking all the issues into account, it is clear that rail replacement bus services result in serious disruption to passengers' journeys and cause significant hardship for some, though the observance by train operators of the basic principles of good practice suggested in this report can minimise some of the inconvenience. Total line closures damage the image of the rail industry as a whole, and lead to loss of patronage and revenue. It is ultimately in the railway's best interests to undertake engineering work as far as possible in ways that will reduce the need for rail replacement bus services to an absolute minimum. A review of the current strategy for engineering work, which relies so much on total line closures, is also urgently needed. Specific recommendations are contained in Appendix 2.

## **1. The need for Rail Replacement Bus Services**

1.1 The replacement of a train service by a substitute bus service when a rail line is closed for engineering work has long been a feature of the railway scene in Britain. Historically this was confined mainly to Sundays, Bank Holiday weekends and overnight work, but recent years have seen a considerable increase in activity and Network Rail and its contractors now frequently require longer track possessions than a weekend can provide. As a result some major engineering work is now often carried out in the daytime throughout the working week as well as weekends and may entail closing lines and suspending train services for a whole day, several days or in some cases for very much longer. During such closures extensive rail replacement bus operations are put in place by the Train Operating Companies (TOCs) to replicate as closely as possible the train services they would otherwise have operated. Even if closures are confined to overnight hours when few trains run, this can still affect some late evening and early morning train services, for which replacement buses may need to be provided.

1.2 The replacement of trains by buses is thus likely to affect the journeys of far more passengers today than was the case even a few years ago. This will generally mean an inferior service compared with the train, with greater inconvenience, less comfort and a longer journey time, and for some this will cause significant hardship. It is hardly surprising that studies of passengers' attitudes show a clear preference for a continued journey by train, rather than by a replacement bus, even if this takes longer.<sup>1</sup> Sometimes this may be feasible but often a replacement bus operation will be necessary. Thoughtful planning which puts passengers' needs above operational convenience will help ensure that travel on replacement buses is as painless as possible.

## **2. Scope of the report**

2.1 Based on experience gained in the North West in recent years, this report considers the effects of well planned and less well planned bus operations on passenger journeys. It considers the practical steps a TOC can take to ensure the process operates smoothly and keeps inconvenience to a minimum. Some of the principles of good practice suggested may appear obvious but recent experience shows they are not always applied, and often insufficient account is taken of the serious impact on passengers' journeys.

2.2 The report also considers the need for rail replacement in the context of the wider issue of planning engineering work on the railway. Replacing trains with buses is only one of a number of options available to provide passengers with a service while engineering work is carried out. The report therefore examines the rail industry's attitude towards line closures, and questions whether sufficient regard is given to other feasible alternatives which would cause less disruption to passengers' journeys and would not involve the complete closure of the railway. This aspect of the report is therefore aimed primarily at Network Rail (and also indirectly at the Office of Rail Regulation and the Department for Transport) rather than the TOCs.

2.3 To clarify the scope, this report concerns rail replacement bus operations during *planned* engineering work, when train services are temporarily suspended. It does not cover situations where replacement buses are arranged, often hastily, in cases of unexpected emergency such as a major breakdown, a signal failure or an accident, although many of the principles of good practice suggested for a planned operation should still be observed if possible. Nor is the report concerned with 'bustitution', which is generally understood to mean a bus service which replaces a rail service permanently withdrawn when a line is closed. Wherever the term 'buses' is used, the principles apply equally to other types of vehicle such as coaches or minibuses that may be used to convey passengers whenever a rail service is suspended. The term 'possession' is used to refer to the stretch of track temporarily closed to trains and in the possession of engineers whilst work is being carried out.

## **3. Railway engineering work in the North West**

3.1 In the North West much recent rail engineering work has formed part of the West Coast Main Line (WCML) Route Modernisation Project to upgrade and renew the track and signalling to enable Virgin's tilting trains to run. In its early stages the project had progressed too slowly to meet Virgin's requirements, and a big push became necessary to complete the work. Coupled with arrears of track maintenance neglected in the early stages of privatisation, recent years have seen the pace accelerate significantly, with absolute priority being given to completing the maximum amount of work in the shortest possible time.

3.2 In addition to extensive weekend closures (in some places covering up to 18 consecutive weekends during 2002) much longer continuous blockades were judged to be necessary, some lasting several weeks or even months at a stretch. This method of working, which would have been unthinkable in British Rail days,

has now almost become accepted as the norm. Accepted, that is, within the rail industry, but certainly not by passengers. Line closures have particularly affected the routes immediately south of Manchester and around Stockport, where the station was closed completely for lengthy periods during 2004 and 2005.<sup>2</sup> A extensive series of rail replacement bus services operated throughout each of these blockades.

3.3 The bulk of the WCML modernisation is proceeding towards completion and the tilting trains have now started running, though further work is in progress to enhance the track layout along parts of the route in the Midlands. Apart from the WCML, work at a variety of other locations in parts of the North West will also be necessary in the foreseeable future to undertake track renewal and re-signalling, and clearly all lines across the network will continue to require regular maintenance, as in the past. Much of this will undoubtedly necessitate further line closures and periods of bus replacement. However with the experience of the lengthy WCML blockades now under their belt, Network Rail appear to have become 'blockade happy' and may envisage this as the preferred way of undertaking most work in the future instead of considering alternatives. With the top priority to prepare the WCML for tilting trains having been accomplished, the need for urgency no longer applies now, and it must be seriously questioned whether blockades as lengthy as those recently imposed, which cause such disruption to passengers, can continue to be justified in future.

3.4 Apart from major projects such as the WCML upgrade, over the years it has become the norm to undertake much of the routine track renewal and maintenance work on Sundays, with Sunday line closures becoming almost standard practice on many routes all over the country for much of the year.<sup>3</sup> This is in marked contrast to most other European countries, where a seven-day timetable generally operates, with Sunday treated no differently from any other day of the week.

3.5 Whilst it clearly makes sense to minimise disruption to weekday business travel, the assumption that rail services on Sundays are somehow expendable, and that fewer people wish to travel, needs to be challenged. This may have been the case 30 years ago, but is no longer so today. With the expansion of Sunday trading, more sports fixtures on Sundays, more activities requiring employees to work on Sundays and the explosion in leisure travel generally, one only has to look at how busy the motorway network is on Sundays to realise the popularity of this day as a day for travel. In particular a train service on Sunday evenings is important as this is a busy time for rail travel, with people returning home after a weekend away as well as those travelling to workplace or college in readiness for the working week.

3.6 Regrettably the rail industry appears oblivious to all this and continues to close down large parts of the rail network on Sundays as it always has in the past, leaving only replacement buses on many routes. One can imagine the outcry there would be if the Highways Agency routinely closed long stretches of motorway on Sundays to carry out resurfacing work. The need for a change in policy towards Sunday rail closures is long overdue, a fact recognised by some senior figures in the rail industry, who have argued the case for a 'seven day railway', pointing out that Sunday possessions not only deprive TOCs of revenue but also limit their ability to grow weekend patronage because of the public's poor perception of Sunday services.<sup>4</sup> Where Sunday possessions are essential, train services should be restored in time for Sunday evening travel in any case.

#### **4. The impact on passengers of rail replacement bus operations**

4.1 Replacing a train service by a bus will almost always result in an inferior service for passengers. Not only is it inconvenient to have to transfer between train and bus, and back again, and frustrating to endure the additional journey time involved (with onward connections being missed as a result) but for many people bus transfer causes significant discomfort and often hardship. Passengers with special needs or accompanied by heavy or bulky luggage are disadvantaged or may be excluded altogether, depending on the type of vehicle used. Bus passengers are also at the mercy of road traffic conditions and are likely to be delayed by congestion. A passenger on a rail replacement bus, and in transferring to and from it, is also at greater risk than a passenger travelling on a train.

4.2 A rail service of some kind is, from a passenger's point of view, far preferable to a replacement bus service. This is fundamental and needs to be understood whenever engineering work is envisaged. When passengers' views have been sought it is hardly surprising that a clear preference is shown for a continued journey by train, rather than by a replacement bus, even if this takes longer.<sup>1</sup> Faced with a lengthy and less convenient bus journey, many regular rail passengers may well abandon the railway altogether and travel by car instead. If an alternative line nearby has a normal train service, some will perhaps drive to the nearest railhead and take the train from there but others may be sufficiently alienated never to return to rail. This will lead to loss of revenue for the railway and will add to congestion on the roads.

4.3 Extended journey times are a particular deterrent, with a replacement bus easily taking three times as long as the train journey it replaces.<sup>5</sup> What kind of incentive does this provide for passengers to use the replacement bus rather than to travel by car ?

4.4 There have been a number of studies into passengers' attitudes towards engineering work and rail replacement bus services.<sup>6,7</sup> These have shown that during engineering work passengers clearly prefer a continued journey by train rather than by a rail replacement bus.

## **5. Avoiding the need for rail replacement buses**

5.1 Replacing a train service by a bus may appear to rail engineers to be the obvious and simplest way of providing a service while engineering work is being carried out. But it is only one of several options. In view of the amount of disruption caused it is reasonable to examine those other options. In British Rail days much track maintenance work took place overnight after the last train of the evening had run, without any need to provide a replacement bus service at all. The London Underground is still largely maintained in this way.

5.2 There are other options which would cause less disruption and be more acceptable to passengers. For instance, is it absolutely essential that the railway needs to be closed completely while work is carried out ? The road network has to be maintained too but it is rare for a road to be closed completely, and if it is, diversionary routes are always provided. If the railway is double track, what is there to prevent one track being kept open, on which trains can continue to run ? This is standard practice in almost every other European country, helping to retain passenger goodwill and protecting revenue.<sup>8</sup> There are also precedents nearer at home too, for example in the 1970s British Rail renewed long stretches of track and resignalled and electrified over 200 miles of railway between Crewe and Glasgow in just three years, and for the vast majority of that time the railway remained open for trains to run.

5.3 The harsh reality today is that, compared with earlier years, the needs and interests of passengers have slipped well down the list of priorities of Network Rail, and to some extent of the TOCs as well. Network Rail's decision to close a line completely when track work needs to be undertaken may well be the most convenient option from the engineering point of view as it may simplify the contractual arrangements, but it rarely takes any account at all of the amount of disruption caused to passenger journeys. Indeed Network Rail gives the impression it does not fully appreciate the predicament faced by passengers when a line is completely closed. This lack of concern is in stark contrast to the attitude of some other European countries, where it is the interests of passengers first and foremost which determine how engineering work is planned and undertaken, and where the whole philosophy governing track maintenance and renewal is based on measures which aim to minimise the disruption to passengers' journeys above all else.<sup>9</sup>

5.4 It is important for the rail industry to understand that most passengers do not want to travel on a rail replacement bus. They have paid for a train journey and that is what they are entitled to and what they expect. The feasibility of adopting other ways of managing engineering work which would avoid total line closures in the first place should therefore be seriously considered. It is doubtful however whether any serious evaluation of alternatives does in fact take place, as complete closures and blockades invariably seem to be the engineers' obvious first choice.

## **6. Reconciling passenger needs with engineering requirements**

6.1 A number of obstacles will have to be overcome if the needs of passengers are to be reconciled with the demands of the engineers. Among the reasons likely to be advanced in favour of complete line closure are those of cost, efficiency and safety, perhaps supported by the unspoken assumption that there is no need to change current practice. Indeed the most likely obstacles to examining other ways of working could well be attitudinal: what might be described as the "can't do" approach.

6.2 These factors, coupled with the increasingly stringent requirements of the Health & Safety Executive and tighter Railway Group Standards, have led Network Rail to close lines completely in ways which would have been unthinkable even five years or so ago. However there may be ways of overcoming these obstacles and improving the efficiency and safety of engineering work without the wholesale closure of lines, as most European rail networks demonstrate. Much greater effort needs to be devoted to examining other ways of working, including those practised abroad, rather than to assume that total closures and lengthy blockades are now the only acceptable way of undertaking engineering work in future.

6.3 If the wider costs to the rail industry as a whole are taken into account, operating replacement buses will almost certainly prove to be more expensive than keeping the trains running. In addition to the hiring of bus drivers, supporting staff and a fleet of vehicles (some of which may carry few passengers or even run empty), these wider costs will include the loss of fares revenue from passengers who abandon the railway and decide to drive (perhaps never to return), the loss of ticket revenue from a proportion of those who travel on the replacement buses (it is common knowledge that a significant number do so without paying) and the loss of the goodwill of passengers and freight customers alike. In total the cost to the rail industry could be considerable. The present fragmented nature of the railway makes it difficult for such calculations to be made, but there is clearly need for a wider, more joined-up view to be taken. This is a matter the Office of Rail Regulation and the Department for Transport should be asked to examine, and Network Rail's Directions and Guidance should address the need for other factors and elements of cost besides the direct engineering costs to be taken into account. Being closer to passengers, TOCs may take a somewhat less narrow view, but their negotiations with Network Rail (since they need to give their formal approval) may nevertheless be influenced by the prospect of receiving significant compensation payments.<sup>10</sup>

6.4 Efficiency will also be an issue. The engineers' case will be that the time spent in setting up a series of short possessions for just a few hours and in clearing the line afterwards in readiness for re-opening is time wasted, compared with the 'big bang' approach which entails the closure for a much longer period. It is true that a significant proportion of the time available during an overnight possession will probably be absorbed by setting it up, putting protection in place and clearing it all away afterwards ready for reopening. But more efficient ways of working may reduce this 'dead time', and almost certainly the inconvenience to passengers and the costs attributable as a result never feature in the equation.

6.5 There are measures that Network Rail could take to improve efficiency in the longer term which may reduce the need in future for engineering work on the scale that currently takes place. The use of longer-lasting materials such as heavier rail and higher grade ballast, and techniques such as closer sleeper spacing should ensure a more robust railway which will need less routine maintenance. The use of more efficient plant and machinery may also speed up the work significantly. The installation of "possession friendly infrastructure" such as bi-directional signalling to allow reversible working, passing loops, adequate crossovers from one track to the other and, as opportunities arise, increasing the space between tracks will all contribute to making it easier for trains to continue operating during engineering possessions, thereby reducing the need for replacement buses. Enhancing the railway's assets in this way will be an investment for the future and the whole industry will benefit. Passengers too will gain from less disruption to their journeys.

6.6 Safety considerations will very often be the main reason put forward for keeping a line closed. Network Rail's planners and engineers and Health and Safety experts alike invariably seek to justify total line closure of a double track railway even if the work being carried out is confined to just one of the two tracks. With the over-protective safety culture that has been fuelled by the Health & Safety Executive and has spread throughout the rail industry, safety has now almost become an end in itself. This has led to a significant shift in recent years in the balance between Red Zone working (work being undertaken whilst trains are running) and Green Zone working (with the whole line isolated), with the latter now far more prevalent. What seems clear is that those who make such decisions fail to give any consideration whatsoever to the adverse impact on passengers. However under the Railways Act 2005 the responsibilities for safety regulation have now transferred from the Health & Safety Executive to the Office of Rail Regulation and it remains to be seen whether this will provide an opportunity to bring about a change in attitude.

6.7 In these matters Britain is completely out of step with the practice adopted in most other European countries where, as already noted, every effort is made to keep trains running at all costs whilst engineering work is being carried out.<sup>9</sup> The Office of Rail Regulation and Network Rail should examine why things should be so different in other countries, and what scope there might be for adopting some aspects of European practice which would result in less disruption for passengers, despite the over-zealous safety culture which exists in Britain. The trend in favour of more Green Zone working may arguably be safer for the track workers but pays little regard to the safety of passengers, who are affected in much larger numbers. They will be much safer staying on a train rather than having to transfer with heavy luggage, perhaps crossing a road or two, to travel on a replacement bus. Clearly there is a higher risk of slips, trips and falls when transferring between bus and train and there will be considerably greater stress. Passengers alienated by rail replacement bus operations who abandon the railway and decide to drive their car instead will be placed at even greater risk on the road network. The consequent risks to passengers, as well as to track workers, cannot simply be ignored.

6.8 Even though the number of passengers at risk will easily outweigh the number of track workers it is doubtful whether any realistic risk assessments are undertaken which take into account the comparable levels of risk to each of these groups. Clearly a more holistic approach needs to be taken when deciding whether or not to close a line or to continue work with trains running on an adjacent track. A sensible balance will need to be struck, and in most instances the least risky option will be to keep the trains running and to keep passengers on them.

6.9 The justification for the complete closure of a line as the first option rather than the last resort is questioned from time to time by senior figures within the rail industry<sup>11</sup> and there have been several calls for a review of possessions policy.<sup>12</sup> In 2001 Railtrack initiated the first stages of such a review and this work was continued by Network Rail.<sup>13</sup> What progress has been made in any review is unclear, but if judged by the experience of recent closures it would seem the outcome has yet to have any significant impact on day to day operations. In the longer term a review of this kind may provide the most likely opportunity for putting the needs of passengers higher up the list.

## **7. Keeping the trains running**

7.1 Keeping the trains running will rarely be the engineers' preference, but if this can be achieved a replacement bus service will not be needed. This will save hundreds of journeys being disrupted, will cause less hardship for elderly and infirm passengers, will be better able to accommodate those with heavy luggage, will not disenfranchise those travelling with pushchairs or cycles, will avoid the need for TOCs to make special arrangements for transporting the disabled, will protect revenue and will be safer for all. There will be no need for bus contracts, special timetables, signs and posters, bus stop identification and additional staff. Clearly for passengers it will be the best of all options, and goodwill and the railway's image will have been protected as well.

7.2 From a passenger's point of view the need to keep some kind of train service running during engineering work is therefore extremely important. If long-distance services use the affected route, the diversion of these trains via an alternative route may be possible and this will benefit through passengers. Regrettably this practice is less frequently adopted than in the past as some TOCs' drivers may lack the necessary knowledge of alternative routes. On a diversionary route some intermediate stops which could also provide local passengers with better bus connections may sometimes be resisted by the TOC if this entails negotiating contracts with another operator, at additional cost and trouble. Nevertheless ways need to be found of overcoming obstacles of this kind which act against the interests of passengers.

7.3 If the line directly affected is double track the most obvious way of keeping the trains running for local passengers is by single line working, i.e. to operate trains in both directions on just one of the two tracks. This is the procedure adopted by virtually every other European rail network wherever possible in order to keep the trains running and avoid disrupting passengers' journeys. Single line working keeps passengers on the trains, provides them with a safer journey and protects revenue. For efficient operation single line working does ideally require "possession friendly infrastructure" of the kind already mentioned, an investment which, in Britain, is frequently lacking.<sup>14</sup> In the absence of such infrastructure single line working can still take place but may require additional staff such as a pilotman in the driving cab and others to operate the points manually, but these should not be used as obstacles to prevent a practice which is one of the most obvious ways of maintaining a train service while track work is being undertaken.

## **8. Some worst case scenarios**

8.1 Sometimes a planned closure is not proceeded with, but the line remains closed nevertheless and the arrangements for bus replacement still go ahead. This is the worst of all options and a cause for concern. It is comparable to the frustration suffered by motorists caught up in a slow queue of traffic on the motorway who witness long stretches coned off for no apparent reason with no signs of any work being done. If a planned closure is not proceeded with, there is no case for the line continuing to remain closed and it should be reopened.

8.2 There have also been occasions in the past when what might be termed speculative possessions have been booked.<sup>15</sup> Other examples have come to light where Network Rail has booked possessions longer than are justified to complete some planned work, and when pressed the engineers have admitted allowing some slack in the programme in case the need for some unplanned work arises. This inconveniences passengers quite unnecessarily and is unacceptable.

8.3 The number of track possessions may sometimes be higher than justified for other more perverse reasons. Today's privatised railway has created an environment based on contracts, where cost incentives and penalties abound. One effect of the present regime has been to discourage maintenance contractors from allowing other contractors access during possessions to carry out other quite separate work whilst a line is closed. This may well simplify the contractual arrangements but is inefficient and results in additional possessions which could have been avoided. It may be compared to the wasteful situation whereby the water company digs up the same stretch of road only recently dug up and restored by the gas company.

## **9. Minimising the impact on passengers**

9.1 For the remainder of this report it is assumed that any alternatives to the complete closure of a line have been ruled out, for whatever reason, and that a rail replacement bus service is necessary and unavoidable. Consideration therefore needs to be given to ways of minimising some of the worst effects of the disruption caused to passengers' journeys.

9.2 Even if a replacement bus service is inevitable there are many ways in which its impact on passengers' journeys can be minimised. To achieve this will require a genuine effort on the part of the TOC to try and understand how directly passengers will be affected. An appropriate maxim that should be followed might be: 'Think Passenger'. This is so fundamental that those two words should perhaps be written large, framed and hung on the wall of every Network Rail and TOC planning team's office as a reminder. At times it may mean challenging the "can't do" culture and finding ways round it if resistance is encountered. For example if the traction current on an electrified line is switched off for maintenance, this need not necessarily rule out operating a rail shuttle with a diesel unit even if the normal train service would be operated by electric rolling stock. It may also mean choosing options other than the cheapest or most convenient from the TOC's point of view, but will be for the railway's overall benefit.

9.3 The bus journey should be kept as short as possible, perhaps between two adjacent stations, assuming they can provide suitable and safe transfer, such as a minimum number of steps and adequate parking and turning space for the buses. If the engineering work is confined to only a short stretch of line it makes no sense at all *from the passenger's point of view* to close the whole line, as often happens at present. The engineers' preference may well be for total closure and it may well be more *convenient* for operational reasons to provide a bus service over a longer distance, rather than operate a rail shuttle over the sections of track not affected, but this will do no favours for passengers, will prolong their discomfort and make onward connections more likely to be missed. In short, all the disadvantages of bus replacement already referred to will apply and many passengers will vote with their feet. 'Think Passenger', again.

9.4 By timing the buses and trains to give reasonably short connections at the transfer points, and making those transfers easy (e.g. by bringing the bus as close as possible to the train<sup>16</sup>) the overall delay will be kept to a minimum and onward connections further down the line may still be possible. The longer the bus journey, the more difficult this will be to achieve.

9.5 The overall duration of closures should also be kept to a minimum. If work is scheduled to take say four hours to complete, it may be more *convenient* for a TOC to shut the line for the whole day, but from the passenger's point of view it makes no sense to do so if this means long stretches of line remain closed with bus services operating long after the work has been completed. On Sundays in particular the restoration of a train service by late afternoon is important as it will at least ensure that travellers can return home by train after a weekend away. This was often achieved in the days of British Rail.

## **10. Feedback from passengers**

10.1 Lest it be thought the problems of replacement bus operations have been overstated, it should be recalled that these have been issues raised repeatedly over many years at meetings of the RPC. Many column inches of the minutes of those meetings have been taken up with reporting adverse comments made about the quality and reliability of a particular bus operation, and on numerous occasions the TOC in question has been called to account when problems have arisen. One of the most frequent criticisms has been the accuracy of information made available to passengers. Other important concerns such as inadequate signage and the lack of any destination indicators being displayed on the buses have also repeatedly been the subject of complaints. Other more serious problems have been reported such as the inadequate briefing of bus drivers, resulting in them getting lost or not stopping to pick up passengers at the correct points.<sup>17</sup>

10.2 Concerns such as these have often been raised by rail user groups who have recounted the first-hand experience of their members who, when travelling on the replacement buses, have suffered serious inconvenience when things have gone wrong. The problems encountered have been neither isolated nor just based on hearsay, as some groups have undertaken surveys which have provided reliable evidence of the number of specific occasions when very real difficulties have been faced by passengers as a result of agreed procedures not being followed or sensible guidelines not being adhered to.

10.3 As a result of confronting the rail industry representatives present at meetings on these matters there has been some recognition of the problems and acceptance of the need for improvement, so the message may gradually be getting through. In those areas which have recently experienced the greatest incidence of rail replacement, such as south of Manchester (where the procedures have probably become well oiled), subsequent bus operations have improved as a result. Undoubtedly the pressure exerted by those representing passengers has aided this process and it is fair to say that most TOCs have generally reacted positively and have proved receptive to suggestions for improvement. However Network Rail has not escaped criticism either for the way the engineering work has been handled, especially when closures have been introduced at the last moment without any warning, and when challenged at meetings in public the responses of its representatives have made it much less certain whether Network Rail has really understood, let alone accepted, the need to adopt an approach which takes more account of the interests of passengers rather than simply the demands of the rail engineers.

10.4 Whilst the average passenger's journey experience on a replacement bus today is possibly less traumatic than was the case five years or more ago, feedback from passengers shows that serious problems still occur and in some parts of the North West the standard of service continues to fall short of what can be considered as acceptable. It is to those such operations that this report is particularly directed, whilst accepting that many TOCs already go to some trouble to operate replacement bus services in ways which minimise disruption to the passenger. For the remainder which do not, no apology is needed for drawing attention to what might be regarded as obvious principles of good practice, when seen from the viewpoint of the passenger.

## **11. The passenger's experience**

11.1 A passenger's overall impression of a rail replacement bus service will be determined by a number of small but important points of detail, some very simple and obvious but others which may easily be overlooked by those planning the operation. At this stage it may be helpful to bring together some good and bad examples. Consider therefore the following two scenarios, each of which is based on actual experiences during recent blockades.

*Scenario 1 A passenger decides to make a journey by train but is unaware that engineering work is taking place and a replacement bus service is in operation. Although work on the track is confined to just a short stretch between two adjacent stations, the entire line affecting a dozen stations has been closed for the entire day. The passenger will have bought a ticket in advance and enquired about times and connections without having been informed of any possible disruption, and no posters at the station advertise the fact. He therefore arrives at the station on the day of departure, complete with heavy luggage, expecting a smooth journey. It will come as a nasty shock to discover that part of the journey will need to be undertaken by bus.*

*At the station where the train service terminates it is necessary to alight and try and find the connecting bus. No announcements provide any advice, and station staff show no inclination to help. To reach the bus entails crossing the line by a footbridge and negotiating steps, which is difficult with heavy luggage. There is no sign of any luggage trolleys. Two buses are parked at a bus stop at the far end of the station forecourt, entailing a walk up a slope. Each bus has a windscreen sticker reading "Rail Replacement" but neither of them has any destination indicator, nor are any drivers to be seen. The station staff are talking among themselves and need to be interrupted to respond to an enquiry about which is the correct bus. The steep steps onto the bus prove difficult to negotiate with the luggage, and there is nobody to assist. The bus is fairly ancient and is dirty inside and out, especially the windows, and there is a lengthy wait before it departs. Eventually it sets off but the erratic way it is being driven causes some discomfort. The journey takes some 45 minutes, calling at several wayside stations en route, some of which the driver finds it difficult to locate and has to be advised by a knowledgeable passenger. Clearly he is not local to this area and has not been properly briefed. The loud music from the driver's radio is annoying and not to the passenger's taste. Some stations are passed without even stopping, but earlier than at the times shown in the timetable. Nearing the end of its journey the bus becomes caught up in a lengthy queue of traffic which causes a long delay. The final destination is eventually reached far too late for the connecting train service the passenger had planned to catch and the one after that as well. At no time since leaving the first train has the passenger's ticket been inspected. Annoyed at having*

*missed his connection the passenger decides to hail a taxi to his final destination, at considerable extra cost. Perhaps understandably he resolves not to travel by train again.*

11.2 Of course it could have been even worse. The bus might not have been already waiting at the station, and the passenger might have been obliged to stand at the bus stop to await its arrival (with no shelter or seating at the bus stop). In bad weather this would have been an uncomfortable experience. The bus might well have arrived late, or even worse the passenger might have arrived in time for it, only to find it had already departed five minutes earlier. Or it might have not even turned up. The passenger might have been elderly or infirm, adding to the distress. The bus driver's style of driving might not have been too safe, and he might have been observed using his mobile phone whilst driving. The vehicle itself might not have been entirely roadworthy either, and the tax disc might possibly even have expired. (All these are genuine concerns which have been reported during recent bus replacement operations in the North West.)

11.3 But it does not need to be like that. Consider this alternative scenario:

*Scenario 2 When enquiring in advance about the train times and fares, the passenger is advised by the station staff of the need to travel by bus for a short part of the journey, just between two adjacent stations, and he is given a timetable showing the connections. This also contains a map showing the location of the bus stops. He has the option of deciding to defer the journey until a later date when the train service operates throughout, but decides to proceed with it, accepting what he hopes will only be some slight inconvenience. On the journey itself, before reaching the point where the train terminates, a clear loudspeaker announcement advises passengers of the need to change, and where to locate the bus and its departure time. The train approaches the station 'wrong line' and terminates at a different platform from usual in order to arrive as close as possible to the station entrance where the buses are waiting, avoiding any need for passengers to cross the lines and providing a level interchange. Station staff are on hand to advise passengers and direct them to the correct bus (since there are two separate connecting services) and to check tickets. Clear posters and signs also indicate the route to the bus and luggage trolleys are available. The vehicle is a clean and modern 'Optare' low floor bus which enables passengers with luggage and pushchairs to board easily, and the driver offers help where needed. A clear signboard indicating the destination is provided in the windscreen and also in the side window, by the door. As soon as all passengers are on board (which takes only a few moments) the bus departs. Since only a short stretch of line is closed, the bus journey is soon completed and the final destination is reached with only a slight delay. Transfer to the waiting train is again smooth, and most onward connections at stations beyond are still possible. The passenger is reasonably satisfied with his experience.*

11.4 In each of the two scenarios the rail replacement operation was necessary. The difference was that in the second example sensible planning and attention to small points of detail helped ensure the experience was as painless as possible. "Think Passenger", once again.

## **12. Raising the standards**

12.1 Some problems which arise are an unavoidable consequence of any bus replacement operation, however much care is taken in planning for passengers' needs and in providing them with information. But others are not, and there is certainly no excuse for shoddy customer service. Special efforts to make the transfer between train and bus as painless as possible can make all the difference between a tolerable journey and one which causes great frustration and inconvenience. Sadly, experience shows there is still a wide variety of standards between the two extremes. As previously noted, given a really bad experience, passengers adversely affected could become so alienated that they might well abandon the railway altogether as a result. This will do little to meet the government's aim of encouraging increased use of public transport and a reduction in car use.

12.2 Based on the experience of many replacement bus operations in recent years, some well planned and others less so, it is possible to suggest a number of basic principles of good practice which will make all the difference to a passenger's journey. These suggested principles, which should be observed in planning any rail replacement bus service, are shown in **Appendix 1**. Given that bus contracts are likely to be awarded to the cheapest operator, who may sub-contract some of the work, the TOC will need to ensure that these minimum standards are nevertheless maintained.

## **13. Consultations with passengers**

13.1 When planning a rail replacement bus operation most TOCs will probably work closely with Network Rail, the local council and perhaps other stakeholders, to plan the overall strategy. It would also be beneficial if representatives of passenger groups were consulted to enable the TOC to take adequate account of their

specific needs, since these may otherwise not always feature fully in the process, particularly now that the regional RPCs have been disbanded.

13.2 Equally important is the need for Network Rail to take greater account of the views of passengers by undertaking its own consultations with passenger representatives. This will be even more desirable in future, given the demise of the regional RPCs and also in view of Network Rail's wider planning responsibilities under the Railways Act 2005. There are precedents.<sup>18</sup>

13.3 Some TOCs already consult passenger representatives as a matter of course. London Underground, in particular, goes even further by examining the particular needs of its passengers on the line in question and actively plans each of its engineering closures on an individual basis. These determine what, if any, bus replacements need to be provided.

#### **14. The vital importance of information**

14.1 The most frequent complaints about rail replacement services have concerned information, or rather the lack of it. Reliable advance information about impending engineering work which will necessitate a replacement bus journey is vital. Many passengers only travel by rail occasionally and are particularly vulnerable if information is inaccurate or not forthcoming. Advice given by booking staff at the time of ticket purchase is crucial for such passengers, since without this advice passengers will often not be aware of the situation until the day of travel, with obvious annoyance at finding their travel plans unexpectedly wrecked at the last moment.

14.2 Recent experience has revealed serious shortcomings in information about journeys which are affected by engineering work. This information has often been misleading, blatantly incorrect or in some cases simply non-existent. Information provided by the National Rail Enquiries Service (NRES), one of the main sources the public are encouraged to rely on, has quite often proved to be inaccurate. A survey undertaken in 2002 by the RPC for Southern England revealed that despite rail replacement buses affecting the journey being enquired about, in only a very small number of cases (17%) did NRES even mention that part of the journey would involve bus travel, and correct information and times were given in less than half of those cases.<sup>19</sup> This is extremely disturbing.

14.3 Even when the information is accurate it has sometimes not been available until a few days before any work starts, despite a rail industry-wide commitment to provide passengers with reliable timetable information at least 12 weeks in advance. This requirement was originally introduced under an initiative known as 'Informed Traveller', and is commonly referred to as "T minus 12". During the WCML modernisation work in 2003 and 2004 Network Rail frequently failed to comply with T-12 and did not finalise the details of which trains would run at weekends on some occasions until as late as T-1, or in extreme cases only a day or two beforehand, and late changes still occur.<sup>20</sup> When this happens the correct information is often not entered on the rail industry's internal Train Service Database (TSDB) until the very last moment. Since station staff, travel centres and NRES rely on the TSDB to provide them with their information, for several months in 2003 and 2004 the public were being given incorrect information (or no information) about weekend journeys. The TSDB also drives many of the destination screens at stations as well as the Network Rail and TOC websites. Passengers of course are at the end of this chain and suffer accordingly if any information given to them earlier in good faith, based ultimately on the TSDB, later proves to be incorrect. As a further consequence many will also miss out on the cheapest fares. Following pressure on Network Rail by the Rail Regulator the number of weeks' notice did gradually increase as the WCML work progressed during 2004, but the extreme situation of giving only a few days' notice must not be allowed to occur again. Nevertheless last minute changes to train services do still occur fairly frequently, and continue to cause frustration for passengers.<sup>21</sup> Network Rail needs to consider how to reduce the need for such changes.

14.4 If the TOCs are advised of late changes, they may need to revise their bus plans accordingly. On some recent occasions this has meant reprinting timetables at short notice or hastily preparing notices and faxing them to stations, as well as sending couriers to post up the revised times at bus stops, or to put up somewhat unprofessional handwritten posters with details of last-minute alterations. At unstaffed stations this presents a particular problem. All of this could be avoided if late changes were not made by Network Rail. From the passenger's viewpoint changes made at the last moment add further to the atmosphere of unpredictability and uncertainty arising from planned engineering work, and may persuade some to abandon rail altogether and choose another mode of transport which they judge to be more reliable.

14.5 Current Network Rail policy is to include major line closures within the National Rail Timetable (NRTT) on the assumption that this will bring about the widest possible awareness among passengers. This may be preferable to making the information available only locally at the stations affected, the practice adopted in British Rail days, since that clearly disadvantaged passengers travelling from outside the local area who may not have been aware of it.<sup>22</sup>

## **15. The cost to the passenger**

15.1 Passengers understandably feel cheated when they have to pay a rail fare for a slower and less convenient journey by bus. Passengers have paid for a train service and make the choice to travel by train, and this is what they prefer and expect. By the same logic that some train operators use to justify charging premium prices for a faster or more comfortable journey on modernised rolling stock, passengers who have no option but to travel on a slower, less comfortable and generally inferior service by replacement bus, with limited luggage space and the added discomfort of no toilets or refreshment facilities, should be entitled to some form of compensation. A customer who is offered a product in a shop that is not up to the usual standard is entitled to expect a reduction in the price. Why should the situation on the railway be different? At the very least a goodwill gesture, such as a complimentary voucher for future travel, or a discount off the next journey, or at the very minimum a free item of food and a drink, should be considered for all replacement bus journeys over a certain length.

15.2 The justification for compensation is even greater for passengers who have paid extra to travel First Class. As there is no First Class accommodation in a replacement bus, such passengers should be entitled to an automatic *pro rata* refund appropriate to the length of the journey. Season ticket holders, having paid in advance in good faith for a train service which turns out to be a bus, and who have no option but to make regular journeys on it as they are not in a position to change their mode of travel, also deserve to be recompensed in a more generous way.

15.3 Irrespective of recompense for any inconvenience, what is totally unacceptable is for passengers to be penalised by having to pay *more* for their journey as a result of engineering work, yet this is what has actually happened in the recent past, when the cheapest tickets have been unavailable.<sup>23</sup>

15.4 By the same token passengers should not be required to pay more as a result of taking a longer diversionary route, possibly one using the services of a different train operator, in order to circumvent a section of route closed for engineering works. The route availability set out in the National Routeing Guide should be over-riden in such circumstances, to enable any reasonable diversion route used during times of engineering work to fall within the "any permitted route" category. Agreement between TOCs should ensure that tickets for the affected route are accepted without surcharge or penalty on other operators' services, within reasonable limits.

## **16. Conclusions**

16.1 The replacement of trains by bus services during engineering work is increasingly favoured by the rail industry instead of efforts being made to keep the trains running, as in British Rail days. As a result the journeys of a large number of passengers are nowadays affected, especially at weekends and over Bank Holidays, and increasingly for long periods during the working week as well.

16.2 However well planned, replacing a train service by a bus almost always results in an inferior service for passengers, with greater inconvenience, less comfort and a longer journey time, and it causes significant hardship for some. Certain categories of passenger are at a particular disadvantage. Studies of attitudes show a clear preference for a continued journey by train, even if this takes longer.

16.3 Replacing trains with buses is only one of a number of options available to Network Rail and the train operators, and other alternatives exist which would cause far less disruption to passengers' journeys. The rail industry appears less inclined to favour such alternatives, even though other European countries generally manage to keep the trains running during engineering work. Network Rail's readiness to close the railway on so many occasions and to provide buses instead needs to be questioned, as it is almost certainly the least cost-effective option for the rail industry as a whole, if all costs are taken into account.

16.4 In some circumstances a replacement bus operation will nevertheless be unavoidable. Even where this is so there are many ways in which its impact on passengers' journeys can be minimised by careful planning. The needs of passengers first and foremost should be an integral part of the planning process, and

the principle to be followed should always be to 'Think Passenger'. The journey should be kept as short as possible and steps should be taken to ensure the transfer between train and bus is smooth and painless.

16.5 Experience of recent replacement bus operations shows a wide variety of standards between a well planned and a less well planned service. There is often a lack of reliable advance information and poor customer service, but there is no excuse for either. If all train operators were to follow some basic principles of good practice this would make all the difference to a passenger's journey. Even so, passengers who endure the inconvenience of a slower and less comfortable journey by bus should be entitled to some form of compensation.

16.6 Taking into account the disruption caused to passengers' journeys, Network Rail and the train operators should accept that it is ultimately in the railway's best interests to undertake engineering work in ways that will reduce the need for replacement bus services to an absolute minimum.

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## Appendix 1

### PRINCIPLES OF GOOD PRACTICE FOR RAIL REPLACEMENT BUS OPERATIONS

It is assumed that most TOCs will maintain a list of approved bus and coach operators within their areas, and that these will meet established minimum standards and cover such basic issues as the quality and availability of vehicles, the provision of drivers and support staff, and matters such as insurance and supervision. In addition certain minimum operational standards are likely to be prescribed, and some may be included in the TOCs' franchise agreements. These may well cover some of the suggested principles of good practice set out below, which should be followed in planning a rail replacement bus operation. Many of the principles will also apply equally when buses operate to replace light rail systems suspended during engineering work.

#### 1. Overall Strategy

1.1 Length of journey The length of all bus journeys should be kept to the minimum. Wherever possible they should operate only along sections of railway directly affected by engineering work, between the most suitable stations beyond each end of the possession. Bus services which extend beyond these points, or cover the whole or greater part of a much longer stretch of line, even though much of it is not directly affected by the work, should be avoided and a connecting train shuttle service provided instead.

1.2 Express and local services If the closed rail route includes several intermediate stations two separate bus services should be considered, one calling at all local stations and the other an "express" or limited stop, to save journey time for through passengers.

1.3 Links to other lines If a nearby rail line remains open, bus links to stations on that other line may be desirable to provide passengers with better onward connecting services. In some situations this may be preferable to operating a bus service which replicates exactly the suspended train service on the closed line.

1.4 Use of service buses Where a commercial bus company operates a scheduled bus service which passes close to the stations affected, an agreement with the company may be possible which would allow passengers with valid rail tickets to travel free on the service bus between specified stations. This may be particularly beneficial to passengers if the service is more frequent than a rail replacement bus service (which would operate at a similar frequency to that of the train). It would be suitable for times of day when the service bus is expected to be lightly loaded and the number of rail passengers relatively few. It may relieve the TOC of the need to provide its own replacement bus service on certain routes at times when traffic is relatively light. If the route of the service bus passes close to all intermediate stations it may even be possible to rely on this to provide the replacement service to those stations and for the TOC simply to operate a non-stop replacement bus between the terminal points. Adequate publicity would be important to enable intending passengers to locate the bus stops (which might not be outside the stations) and it would be advantageous for the buses themselves to display some form of signage to identify them as ones on which rail tickets would be valid.

1.5 Road conditions Advice of the local highway authority should be followed in planning the routes as special factors may need to be taken into account, such as the existence of one-way streets, banned turns or low bridges. The highway authority will also be aware of any planned roadworks due to take place along the route which may cause delays and extend journey times.

1.6 Contact point A single point of contact, such as a dedicated helpline, should be available for use by rail industry and bus company staff to obtain day to day information and advice on any aspect of the replacement bus operation. This should ideally be based in the area covered by the replacement service and be operated by staff with local knowledge.

#### 2. Train/Bus Interchange

2.1 Criteria for interchange stations The choice of stations for passengers to change between buses and trains should take into account the suitability of the station to provide a 'seamless' transfer. Every effort should be made to reduce the walking distance needed, with the aim of achieving level transfer if at all possible, avoiding the need for passengers to negotiate steps on footbridges or in subways. This may be optimised if the track layout and signalling permits trains to start from and terminate at a platform nearest to the bus boarding point, with no need for passengers to cross the lines. Such an arrangement will enable passengers to transfer with the minimum of delay. Where this is not feasible, but would be possible at another station nearby, it might be preferable to use that other station as the interchange point. Other criteria

to be considered will include adequate space for parking and turning the buses, the availability of covered waiting facilities, whether the station is staffed and whether facilities such as luggage trolleys are available.

2.2 Bus stops If service buses do not normally stop at the station, temporary bus stops may need to be provided. Seating and lighting may also be required if the buses stop other than outside the station entrance.

2.3 Authorised stopping points The general rule should be that the buses should only pick up and set down passengers at the interchange points at each end of the route and at any intermediate stations, and drivers should be instructed not to accede to requests by some passengers to board or alight at other intermediate points. However if a station is sited some distance from a town centre there may be a case for an additional authorised stopping point in the town itself, to minimise the inconvenience to passengers and to shorten their overall journey time. This concession should be applied sparingly.

2.4 Staffing It is essential that sufficient staff are available at interchange points to advise and assist passengers. Staff should be adequately supervised to ensure they are visible at the station at all times, and that they do not retreat into their office to avoid contact with passengers, as sometimes happens. Whether employed by the TOC, the bus operator or a third party, staff should be suitably briefed to be able to advise passengers in detail about both train and bus movements equally, to counter the tendency for TOC staff to provide information only about the trains and the bus staff to confine their attention to information about the buses. Since the buses are in effect virtual trains, no such distinction should exist.

### 3. Type of vehicle

3.1 Vehicles with comfortable seating and adequate luggage space will be needed. A level of comfort should be aimed at which most closely approaches that of the train being replaced. Ideally modern low-floor buses should be used as these will be able to accommodate passengers in wheelchairs as well as those accompanied by pushchairs or cycles. Modern vehicles will also be less likely to suffer breakdowns.

3.2 The choice of vehicle may be governed by anticipated loadings and the length of the journey. **Buses** offer greater flexibility as standing passengers can be accommodated if necessary, whereas this is not permitted in coaches. Low floor buses make boarding and alighting easier and can accommodate passengers with pushchairs and possibly cycles. However buses are generally less suitable for journeys lasting more than about 30 minutes. Although offering greater seating comfort, **coaches** are generally less suitable for rail replacement journeys on account of the steps that need to be climbed. Space for luggage is also limited, and will often be in the form of a compartment accessed from outside the vehicle. If the journey requires frequent stops and there is much luggage the driver will have to alight to supervise the loading and unloading at each stop and this will add to the journey time. However if the route includes fast roads or motorways, coaches may sometimes be preferable due to their capacity for operating at higher speed. They may well be acceptable for some longer express or limited stop services on account of their greater comfort and in some cases integral toilets, but these advantages may be offset by their inherent drawbacks. A further point for consideration is that if revenue protection staff are to travel on the vehicles and issue or check tickets during the journey between stopping points, this will only be possible on a bus and not on a coach, where all those travelling must be seated throughout. Some narrow lanes giving access to intermediate stations in rural areas will rule out the use of large vehicles such as coaches.

3.3 Whatever type of vehicle is used, it should obviously be roadworthy and in good condition, inside and out. (This has not always been the case in some recent examples.) It should be a requirement that the interior and the windows are cleaned thoroughly at the start of each day's journey.

### 4. Provision for passengers with special needs

4.1 Wheelchair passengers Provision will need to be made for passengers with special needs. Whilst most low floor buses will be able to accommodate wheelchair passengers, other types of bus may not, and coaches will obviously be quite unsuitable. Special arrangements should be made to transport disabled passengers by other means (such as by a wheelchair accessible taxi) if the journey is booked in advance. These arrangements should be well publicised. Other passengers who have difficulty in accessing coaches (if these are to be used instead of buses) could also be conveyed in this way.

4.2 Passengers with cycles Some coaches may be able to accommodate cycles in their luggage compartments, but for major blockades when a number of passengers are likely to be travelling with cycles, dedicated vehicles may be needed to transport them. Journeys would need to be booked in advance, as with

those for wheelchair passengers. Whether or not cycles can be conveyed should be well publicised in advance.

4.3 Dogs Special vans to convey dogs may also need to be considered. (These were used successfully during recent blockades between Preston and Carlisle.)

## 5. Timetabling & connections

5.1 Journey times The importance of adhering to the agreed timetable should be impressed upon drivers, to enable connections to be made, traffic conditions permitting. At intermediate stations drivers should be required to wait until the advertised departure times shown in the timetable before setting off, and firm instructions should ensure they do not leave early. Test journeys should be undertaken at peak times as well as other times of day, as there may be significant differences and it will often be necessary to allow more time for the journey at peak hours if the timetable is to be robust and realistic. Even more journey time may be needed at peak hours during school terms to allow for anticipated additional traffic and possible congestion. Timings may also need to be adjusted to take account of any road works which might affect the route.

5.2 Connections Connection times at the train/bus transfer points should be kept to a minimum as this will reduce the overall delay and onward connections further down the line may still be possible. This will be easier if the bus journey is kept relatively short. It is important that connections at transfer points should be held and that trains should await passengers transferring from the bus and vice-versa.

5.3 Provision for long journeys Where a long journey is unavoidable, provision of drinking water for passengers and timetabled toilet stops should be considered.

## 6. Signage

6.1 Stations Clear directional signs and posters at station departure points which direct train passengers to the buses, and vice-versa, are important. It is helpful if the design is eye-catching to make them stand out from standard customer notices. For major projects a logo may be desirable (a colourful 'West Coast' logo was successfully used on posters and timetables throughout the WCML blockades).

6.2 Bus Stops The authorised stopping point to serve each station should be clearly identified. This will usually be possible by means of a special timetable sheet inserted in the timetable case at the bus stop, helped by a prominent coloured flash or logo at the top. In some instances it may be desirable for the bus stop to carry additional identification such as a coloured strip attached to the post or the bus stop flag (a method widely used by London Underground) which immediately identifies the correct bus stop for passengers and drivers alike.

6.3 Vehicle signage All buses should display a clear destination indicator at the front, not simply a route code letter or number. If modern vehicles are used, these may well have dot-matrix indicators which could be used to display the destination. Otherwise a large label should be fixed to the inside of the windscreen. This should be in a sufficiently prominent position, with the destination lettering sufficiently large, to enable passengers waiting at a bus stop to read the destination without difficulty as the bus approaches the stop. It may also be helpful to display a 'line of route' diagram adjacent to the entrance, showing the station stops.

## 7. Information

7.1 Advance information Booking clerks should be required to warn passengers who book tickets for journeys on the affected dates that they will need to travel on replacement buses. Notices should be posted on internet booking sites giving similar advance information.

7.2 On-train information Announcements on trains should similarly give advance information to warn passengers in the week leading up to a weekend closure, or three weeks in advance for major blockades.

7.3 Press advertisements For major weekend closures and longer blockades prominent display advertisements should be inserted in local newspapers giving full details. It will help to enhance the railway's image if the reasons for the closures are stated, with an assurance that when the work is completed passengers will notice an improvement to their journeys as a result.

7.4 Station posters A dedicated poster case at each station should be used to provide information about forthcoming timetable changes and bus services arising from engineering work. It is important that this

information is removed promptly after the last day of operation, to avoid confusion. Where there is more than one train operator, details of the replacement services for all the operators should be included together.

7.5 Train timetables Rail replacement buses should be clearly identified in timetables, both in wall display form and in booklets. Maps showing the location of the bus stopping point at each station should be included. This information, together with any updates, should also be available on the TOC's website.

7.6 Customer information at stations It is important that destination screens and monitors at stations, as well as public address systems, clearly indicate the station where a train terminates and where it is to be replaced by a bus. Since screens and monitors will usually be programmed to show only the train destination contained in the Train Service Database it may be necessary for the bus information to be entered manually, but it is important that it should be shown.

7.7 Helplines A dedicated phone line should be set up to deal with individual passenger queries.

7.8 Major blockades Where passengers are likely to experience significant changes to their journeys over a period of time, such as a long series of weekend closures or a lengthy blockade, it may be advantageous to produce additional publicity. This could include a special leaflet containing full details, or a series of well advertised 'surgeries' or 'roadshows' at stations when rail managers would be available to respond to passengers' queries and concerns. A personal letter addressed to passengers from the TOC's senior manager (or even the Managing Director) and placed on the seats of trains some weeks in advance may be beneficial in terms of public relations. During a lengthy blockade a fortnightly bulletin or newsletter indicating the progress made, and distributed on the buses, may also be a positive move.

## **8. Driver training and route knowledge.**

8.1 Drivers should be adequately briefed about the preferred routes to follow and the exact location of the designated stopping points which serve each station. Video may have a role to play in route learning.

8.2 Route learning is particularly important where bus or coach companies not local to the area are employed or sub-contracted to operate a service, as the drivers are likely to be unfamiliar with the locality. These may include part-time staff who have not been fully trained. (There have been many well-documented examples of such drivers becoming disorientated and needing to rely on passengers to advise them of the correct route.) TOCs should make every effort to ensure that even where services are sub-contracted, minimum operational standards are maintained.

## **9. Management and Control**

9.1 Vehicle tracking For a large operation it may be desirable, depending on the availability of GPS equipment, to establish a vehicle tracking system which enables managers at a central control point to oversee the movement of vehicles and deal immediately with any problems that might arise. Real time information can then be supplied in the event of delays. (This proved beneficial during some of the lengthy WCML blockades, e.g. when coaches were required to transport an exceptionally large number of passengers between Hemel Hempstead and Milton Keynes, and was a major factor in ensuring a smooth operation.)

9.2 Audits Regular spot checks and 'mystery shopper' trips should be undertaken to ensure the operation is working smoothly.

9.3 Monitoring of loadings Passenger counts should be undertaken to assess the vehicle capacity required for any future replacement bus operations.

9.4 Follow-up action At the end of a rail replacement operation it will be beneficial to undertake a review of the lessons learned, as this may suggest changes which are desirable to put in place for any future operations.

## **10. Revenue protection**

10.1 As bus and coach drivers will not be expected to issue or check tickets, staff at terminal points should undertake ticket checks of passengers boarding and leaving the vehicles, and spot checks at some intermediate stopping points may also prove advantageous. At peak times it may often be productive for a train conductor or other TOC staff member to travel on the buses between certain stations in order to check tickets and issue them to passengers who have been unable (or who thought it unnecessary) to purchase

these from station booking offices before boarding the bus. Traffic regulations would however not permit staff to travel on coaches in this way unless they remain seated while the coach is in motion.

## **11. Contingencies**

11.1 Communications All drivers, supervisors and TOC staff involved in the bus operation should be advised of an emergency telephone number which can be contacted on a 24-hour basis to deal with any problems.

11.2 Breakdowns Arrangements should ensure that trained fitters are available at strategic points (perhaps by arrangement with local garages) to attend speedily to any vehicle experiencing a mechanical problem.

11.3 Standby vehicles Spare vehicles and standby drivers should be available at strategic points to replace any vehicles that break down and to rescue stranded passengers.

11.4 Over-runs A contingency plan should be in place to enable the bus operation to be extended if the track possession over-runs its allotted time scale and the train operations are unable to be restored on schedule.

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## Appendix 2

### RECOMMENDATIONS

#### (a) Recommendations concerning engineering work generally and the need for line closures:

1. In all engineering work entailing line closures the passenger's viewpoint should be taken far more into consideration, i.e. 'THINK PASSENGER'. Network Rail should accept the important principle that, from a passenger's point of view, some form of rail service is almost always preferable to a replacement bus service.
2. Network Rail should be required to consider seriously the feasibility of adopting ways of managing engineering work which would avoid total line closures and the need for buses to replace trains.
3. Network Rail should review its policy of imposing lengthy blockades in order to undertake major engineering work, such as those experienced during the WCML upgrade which caused such disruption to passengers, now that the bulk of that project has been accomplished and the need for urgency no longer applies to the same extent.
4. The policy of undertaking so much engineering work on Sundays, often involving extensive line closures throughout the day, should be reviewed in the light of the increased demand for Sunday travel.
5. Where a line is closed on a Sunday it is important that the train service is reinstated by Sunday evening to enable passengers to return home by train after a weekend away or to travel in readiness for the working week.
6. The Office of Rail Regulation and the Department for Transport should be asked to ensure that other elements of cost besides the direct engineering costs are taken into account by Network Rail in making decisions on line closures.
7. For each engineering possession when a line closure is contemplated, a realistic risk assessment should be undertaken which takes into account the comparable levels of risk to passengers transferring to and from, and travelling on, replacement buses as well as to engineers working on the track.
8. The overall duration of closures should be limited to the minimum time necessary while the work is carried out. A line should not remain closed with bus services operating long after the work has been completed.
9. Network Rail should ensure that information about train services affected by engineering work, particularly at weekends, is finalised within T-12 time scales. Steps should be taken to ensure that the release of information much later than this, which occurred during the WCML modernisation and caused passengers such difficulty, is not repeated.
10. Network Rail should consider how to reduce the need for last-minute changes to train services which do not comply with T-12 and cause frustration for passengers and train companies alike.
11. Network Rail should not book line possessions for periods longer than are justified to complete a programme of planned work, and speculative possessions should be avoided. If planned work is not proceeded with, the line should not remain closed but should be reopened.
12. Network Rail should include passenger representatives in any consultative stakeholder groups they set up for future major closures which may entail bus replacement.
13. Passengers should not be disadvantaged by having to pay more for their journey as a result of the cheapest advance purchase tickets not being available due to the late confirmation of train times during periods of engineering work.
14. Passengers should not be required to pay more as a result of taking a longer diversionary route by train, or to travel on the service of a different train operator, in order to circumvent a section of route closed for engineering works. The National Routeing Guide should be over-ridden to enable such a journey to be regarded as a "permitted route" and agreement between TOCs should ensure that tickets for the affected route are accepted without surcharge or penalty on other operators' services.

**(b) Recommendations specific to rail replacement bus operations:**

15. The principles of good practice suggested in Appendix 1 should be observed in planning any rail replacement bus service.
  16. The journey by a replacement bus should be kept as short as possible and be confined to the stretch of track being worked on, rather than replacing the entire train service over a much longer stretch of line.
  17. Buses and trains should be timed to give short connections at transfer points, and transfer should be made easy by bringing the bus as close as possible to the train.
  18. When planning a rail replacement bus operation train companies should consult representatives of passenger groups to ensure adequate account is taken of their specific needs.
  19. The principle should be accepted that all passengers who travel on replacement bus services over a certain length should be entitled to some form of compensation as recompense for the inconvenience, discomfort and extended journey time, whether in the form of a complimentary voucher for future travel, a discount off the next journey, or at the very minimum a free item of food and a drink.
  20. First Class passengers who are obliged to travel on a rail replacement bus should be entitled to an automatic refund of a proportion of the fare paid, appropriate to the length of the journey.
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## Appendix 3

### NOTES

1. The attitude of passengers towards engineering work was studied in 2003 as a result of research commissioned by the Rail Passengers Council, Network Rail, the Association of Train Operating Companies and the Rail Safety and Standards Board. The feedback provided by nine focus groups and over 3,000 questionnaires was summarised in the publication *Passengers' attitudes towards engineering works* published by the Rail Passengers Council in July 2003.

Among the main findings were that engineering works convey a negative image and are a contributory factor in the overall poor image of the rail industry. Replacement buses were judged to be more inconvenient than a train running on a diverted route or even a journey requiring a change of trains. The majority questioned felt that engineering work should be carried out at night when it would cause least inconvenience to passengers, but if daytime closures were necessary, most passengers would clearly prefer a train journey on a diverted route rather than suffer the inconvenience of travelling on a replacement bus. So strong was this preference that the majority, rather than travel on a replacement bus, would accept a journey on a diverted train service that would take up to an hour longer. In general most passengers would accept major disruption if adequate advance information is provided and the work is done quickly. The priority is reliable information in advance so passengers can make an informed decision about their travel plans.

2. The Cheadle Hulme-Macclesfield-Stoke line was also closed for four months in a major blockade during 2003. This was followed by the complete closure of the Cheadle Hulme-Wilmslow-Crewe line for two separate periods totalling almost eleven months in major blockades during 2004 and 2005-2006. To add insult to injury the Stoke line failed to reopen on time as the work over-ran by a week, and this was compounded by the need for a further series of weekend closures during 2004 because sections of the track had not been laid properly. In 2006 the Crewe line blockade was extended by almost a further three months (prolonging the closure to six months altogether) to enable more extensive testing of the new signalling to take place.

3. The Stockport to Stoke line, for example, has been closed completely on Sundays for several months at a time over three different periods in the past three years, while Sunday travel on the Buxton, Hope Valley and many other lines in the North West has also been made difficult for long periods.

4. Adrian Shooter, Chairman of Chiltern Railways, is among senior railway figures who have challenged the rail industry's readiness to close things down on Sundays. In the publication *Transit* (20 May 2005) he was quoted as having commented as follows: "One of the busiest periods on motorways is a Sunday morning, which demonstrates to me that a lot of people want to be out and about travelling on a Sunday. What do we do to railways on a Sunday? Close them. I can accept that taking a Sunday possession for 12 to 18 hours might, but will not necessarily, give a lower unit cost than doing the work in shorter periods at night, but if you're losing a lot of revenue on Sundays it may be better for the industry to spend a bit more doing the work in shorter periods. On many routes where there isn't freight you may have a window at night for four, five or six hours."

5. For example the normal rail journey between Stockport and Crewe takes 40 minutes, stopping at all stations. Compare this with the rail replacement bus during the 2005-2006 blockade which took two hours for the same journey, exactly three times as long, without even allowing for any traffic delays. At peak hours delays were often considerable and could easily add an extra 20 to 30 minutes to the journey time. In place of the last train of the evening from Stockport to Crewe, arriving soon after midnight, the last replacement bus was not due to arrive in Crewe until half past one in the morning.

6. In December 1999 the Rail Users Consultative Committee for North Western England (the forerunner of the Rail Passengers' Committee) was asked by the then Rail Regulator to prepare a report on the effects of disruption caused by engineering work during the early stages of the West Coast Main Line upgrade. The request arose from serious concerns which had been expressed following the problems passengers experienced during a blockade of just *five days* which was considered to be excessive. (How times have changed!) The Committee consulted a wide range of interested parties, including passenger representatives, rail user groups and key staff within Railtrack (as it then was) and train operating companies, and the report (*The West Coast Main Line Upgrade - Disruption to passengers*) was submitted to the Regulator in March 2000. This included a number of specific recommendations, many of which related to rail replacement bus services which echo some of those in the present report.

7. A detailed study into rail replacement bus services in the London area was undertaken in 2003 by the London Transport Users Committee (LTUC, which has subsequently been re-branded as London TravelWatch). This revealed examples of both good and bad practice. LTUC members travelled on 23 replacement services over a period of several months and recorded their experiences. The TOCs were each contacted for details of their policies, in response to which London Underground in particular proved reassuringly co-operative and invited LTUC to discuss the issues of bus replacement with them. London Underground was commended for the way it actively plans its engineering closures and treats each individually, examining the needs of its passengers. The report particularly welcomes the quality of the information provided at Underground stations during rail replacement operations and the fact that additional station staff are brought in to advise and help passengers. The findings of the study were published in 2003 by LTUC in the report *When is a train not a train? - a study of rail replacement bus services*. This contains many examples of good and bad practice, with illustrations, and includes copies of the responses from the TOCs.

8. The WCML modernisation project has been described by Network Rail in press briefings as "the largest and most complex rail construction project in Europe". Whilst that comparison may arguably have been valid during the most intensive phase of the project in 2003 and 2004, it should be recognised that similar if not even more complex work has been undertaken in many other European countries over the past decade. Major schemes to improve track layout, construct cut-offs and increase line speeds in many parts of Germany, Switzerland, Belgium and Austria have been no less extensive.

The significant difference has been that despite the scale of the reconstruction work in those countries, the effects on scheduled train services have been minimal. The fact that in almost every other European country (with the exception of France) trains have continued to operate during the vast majority of engineering possessions, albeit with slight speed restrictions in some cases, would repay close scrutiny. It would be beneficial to examine what it is about the techniques and practices adopted by other European rail networks which have enabled them largely to avoid disruption to passenger services on the scale experienced in Britain. Apart from the more widespread adoption of bi-directional signalling encountered abroad, and the slightly increased width between adjacent tracks in places, it would be surprising if there were any really significant technical obstacles which would prevent Network Rail adopting a similar "passenger-friendly" approach. The most likely obstacles would be attitudinal and an unwillingness to accept that the over-riding priority should be to keep the trains running.

In Austria for example the Westbahn main line between Vienna and Salzburg has been virtually rebuilt, with single track sections doubled, new four-track sections constructed and junctions installed to connect with new cut-offs, all with very little alteration to daytime train services which have operated almost normally throughout. In Switzerland the doubling of the single track Lötschberg main line between Spiez and Brig, which entailed widening almost 20 tunnels through hard crystalline rock and rebuilding large numbers of bridges and viaducts, was undertaken without any significant disruption to an intensive service of both passenger and freight trains, other than temporary speed restrictions in some of the tunnels whilst the work was being carried out alongside the passing trains. It can be done.

France is the notable exception to all this, where some of the less intensively used lines are routinely closed in mid morning for periods of up to two to three hours to provide a 'maintenance window'. Although this has long been a tradition, this peculiarly French practice is markedly out of step with other European networks, and is not an example to follow.

9. At a lecture in London in September 2001 given to Transport 2000's rail supporters' group 'Platform', Dr Peter Grossenbacher, Business Development Director of Swiss Federal Railways (SBB) described the Swiss philosophy towards engineering work. "The passenger is King" said Dr Grossenbacher. "He pays towards our costs and we must do all we can to avoid disrupting his journey". By placing the passenger at the centre of their thinking, SBB aims to bring about a culture of co-operation. Engineering work is planned following consultation and with the needs of passengers first and foremost. "Otherwise" said Dr Grossenbacher "cars and buses will win". Even the draft SBB timetable is put out for extensive public consultation. By planning ahead with a four-year maintenance horizon, the track is maintained to a constant high standard to avoid the need for major reconstruction. Delays during routine maintenance work are minimised by switching trains between tracks, helped by bi-directional signalling and strategically placed crossovers. As a consequence bus replacements are rarely needed. In this way the trains continue to run and the passenger is treated as "King".

10. Although the original compensation regime was designed as a means of reimbursing a TOC for lost revenue, regrettably some TOCs may regard the compensation they receive as a bonus and use this as an

excuse for not incurring extra costs such as providing a train shuttle which would benefit the needs of passengers during engineering work. High levels of compensation which will be guaranteed may also act as a disincentive to take revenue protection seriously.

11. Chiltern Railways have worked with Network Rail to examine the more appropriate application of safety regulations and have argued for a new possessions policy. Says the TOC's Chairman, Adrian Shooter, in *Transit* magazine (20 May 2005): "It's a whole area where more work needs to be done. ... Network Rail have taken maintenance in house and got a grip on it but I think they would agree there are a lot more discussions to be had on how it could be done more efficiently, looking at the impact on the whole railway and not just the cost of doing the work."

12. In an article in *RAIL* magazine 491 (7 - 20 July 2004), *Buses are no substitute for rail in blockades*, an experienced former British Rail manager took an in-depth look at some of the fundamental problems arising from Network Rail's current possessions policy. By closing a line as the first option rather than only as a last resort, and relying on replacement buses, it was argued that the rail industry is playing into the hands of its competitors and large numbers of customers are being turned away. The article concluded that there was a need for this policy to be seriously questioned, since alternatives to line closures and bus replacement would greatly benefit passengers.

13. In 2001 Railtrack initiated a review of its planning of track possessions. In part this was driven by changes in the financial incentives as a result of a review by the Rail Regulator of the so-called "Schedule 4 payments", whereby Railtrack was required to pay full compensation to the TOCs for the disruption caused by all future possessions (prior to 2001 a number of these were allocated "free"). A cross-industry working group was set up to recommend changes but it is not clear whether Network Rail subsequently acted on them. Judging by the fact that there has been no noticeable change in the way recent possessions have been undertaken it seems unlikely that any major changes resulted.

14. It is a matter of regret for instance that over large parts of the network there appears to be no plan to install "possession friendly infrastructure", even on parts of the recently modernised WCML.

15. For example in a case drawn to the attention of the Rail Passengers Committee (RPC) at a meeting in public it was admitted that despite three months of Sunday closures on the Stockport - Buxton line not a stroke of engineering work had in fact taken place.

16. In Germany and Austria it is sometimes the case that where replacement bus operations cannot be avoided, and the station layout permits, the buses actually drive onto the station platform itself and stop immediately adjacent to the connecting train, thus providing quick and level transfer.

17. The problem of some bus drivers getting lost and being unable to find rural stations is not exaggerated. Some have had difficulty negotiating narrow approach roads and could not reverse easily once at the station. There is less excuse for drivers not stopping at the correct bus stops at larger stations in towns, but this has occurred on a number of occasions. During the Stoke and Crewe line blockades in 2003 and 2004 there were frequent complaints about buses not stopping at the correct pick-up points. At Congleton, during an earlier blockade in August 2000, passengers waiting at the correct bus stop in the station forecourt were dismayed on several occasions to observe a bus stopping briefly on the main road instead of pulling into the forecourt, and as a result departing without picking up any passengers at all, leaving them stranded. On several occasions during the first few weeks of rail replacement on Saturdays on the Crewe line in 2005 there were reports of some buses taking the wrong road through Alderley Edge and consequently by-passing the correct bus stop, thus failing to pick up waiting passengers. These problems could (and should) be resolved by the adequate briefing of drivers and their strict observance of the instructions, but the likelihood of problems is greater if the drivers are not local people or are brought in at short notice or on standby, which has often been the case.

18. As part of the process to consult stakeholders affected by the major WCML blockades in and around Stockport in 2003 and 2004, Network Rail established a Cross-industry Communications Group with representatives from the TOCs, Greater Manchester PTE, local authorities, Chambers of Commerce, and Manchester Airport. Passenger interests were represented by the RPC and the main rail users' group affected by the work. Inclusion of passenger representatives provided an opportunity for valuable feedback, from which Network Rail benefited. This even extended to proof checking the public information leaflet from the passenger's perspective and identifying a number of ambiguities and errors which were corrected before printing took place. Similar input would be desirable for other major closures in future which may entail bus replacement. Regrettably Network Rail saw no need to re-convene the group or to consult passenger

representatives the following year before finalising subsequent blockades. Had they done so this would similarly have enabled corrections to have been made before press advertisements announcing the blockades were published, which unfortunately contained erroneous and misleading information which confused passengers.

**19.** In 2002 the RPC for Southern England undertook a survey of the quality and accuracy of information provided by the National Rail Enquiry Service (NRES). This was based on over 100 telephone calls by RPC members to NRES, enquiring about train times for a hypothetical journey in Kent. The passenger would be accompanied by a cycle, and would be travelling over a weekend when engineering works were due to take place and a rail replacement bus service was due to operate. The survey was concerned with the quality of the information being provided by NRES generally, including fares information, and was not primarily concerned with bus replacement. However the results provided interesting evidence about the large number of instances when, unprompted, NRES failed to alert the enquirers that part of the journey would require to be undertaken by bus. The RPC noted that the quality of information about services disrupted by engineering work were among the main reasons for complaints to the RPC received from passengers. The findings were published by the RPC for Southern England in a report entitled *What kind of information do you call that?*

Perhaps the most significant finding to emerge, in the context of the present report, was the disturbing fact that in only 17% of the enquiries did NRES mention that part of the journey involved bus travel. Furthermore in only 50% of those cases where this information was volunteered was a warning given that the replacement buses might not be able to transport the passenger's cycle. Where the need to transfer to a bus was mentioned, arrival and departure times of the buses were given in only 44% of enquiries. Overall, in 13% of the enquiries tested, departure times were inaccurate by as much as 40 minutes.

Although not the reason at the time of the RPC survey, the late downloading by Network Rail into the Train Service Database (TSDB) of information about weekend engineering work during 2003 and 2004 may partly, but not entirely, explain some of the shortcomings in the accuracy of information provided by NRES which have been reported in more recent years. Nevertheless NRES would have been aware of engineering work already shown in the National Rail Timetable, and should have alerted passengers accordingly, even if the actual train times were not known at that stage.

**20.** T-12 is a licence condition for both Network Rail and the TOCs, and failure to comply can result in enforcement action by the Rail Regulator. Although the Regulator was made aware of the non-compliance with T-12 during the WCML work, enforcement action was declined, although pressure applied to Network Rail did eventually result in the information being provided earlier.

**21.** For example the complete four-week closure of the Settle - Carlisle Line between Settle and Appleby in March 2006 was announced by Network Rail a mere eight days in advance, with no details of the replacement bus services being available until just four days before the blockade started. Major changes of this kind announced at such short notice cause considerable inconvenience to a great many people (not least to the TOC involved) and are completely unacceptable.

**22.** However, inclusion in the NRTT gives rise to difficulty when the start of the work coincides with the start of a timetable period, since the timetable book is rarely available to the public more than about three or four weeks in advance. To rely on the NRTT to provide the necessary compliance with T-12 it would therefore be necessary, if the information is not also made available in other ways, for the work to be programmed to start no sooner than 12 weeks into the period covered by a new timetable book. However this is rarely taken into account.

**23.** During much of 2004 it was well nigh impossible to make advance reservations for weekend travel on the WCML as last-minute changes to planned engineering work by Network Rail meant that train times could not be confirmed until, in some cases, two days before travel. By this time the 'booking window' for advance purchase tickets had closed and the cheapest quota-controlled tickets (e.g. 'Virgin Value') were no longer available. As a result passengers had little option but to purchase a more expensive 'walk up' ticket (such as a 'Saver'). Unsurprisingly this situation gave rise to an unprecedented number of complaints to the RPC and the media and is an intolerable situation which must never be repeated. (The minimum notice period for purchase of Virgin's cheapest tickets has since been drastically reduced.)

