

When the Train Becomes a Bus

There are some strange events taking place during this unprecedented time of lockdown. A significant one is the fact that our railways have sort of been re-nationalised. Aware of the fact that the rail companies and the rail system was in danger of imminent collapse, the government has stepped in, abandoned the existing franchise system and re-awarded the franchise holders with 'stay-put, we'll pay you' contracts. So the train operators are now paid a set amount (apparently 2% over the cost of running the railway) by the government.

Naturally the amount the government was willing to pay would determine the level of service to be offered to the public during a time when people were exhorted to stay at home unless travel was essential. This immediately meant a scaled down level of service which has taken place across the country.

In the case of the Hereford-Worcester-Birmingham service the government in association with West Midlands Trains (the franchise holder) determined no trains would run between Hereford and Worcester and a bus would be substituted. Fair enough you might say at this exceptional time of lockdown. But are there undertones? One can see the Department for Transport rail section rushing for the archive shelves and dragging down the proceeds of an exercise that took place in the 1980's on bus substitution for rail services. I was in the industry at that time and was involved in that exercise.

The general policy paper that emanated from the British Railways Board in 1983 is attached here for interest. You will note that bus replacement has moved away from that of the Beeching era idea when lines were closed and bus services replaced them. In the document there are strong hints of buses replacing some trains in an integrated timetable. Where trains are lightly loaded, say evenings and Sundays, the temptation to save train and signalling costs by replacement with a bus have always been lurking in the background. Hence the change of terminology to bus substitution. The concept is widely practiced by SNCF in France where you will often see the note 'autocar', signifying a bus, appearing against certain journeys in the railway timetable.

Incidentally, there is already an example of long standing bus substitution in the Marches timetable. On a Sunday morning the 0750 train from Shrewsbury to Hereford is a bus. Note the symbol at the top of the column.

The long delayed Williams Rail Review is also likely to pronounce that the current franchise system is not fit for purpose, although what will replace it remains unknown. Whatever it is, hot foot on the continuing disastrous effect of the lockdown on rail services, it follows that the government is likely to be desperate to save money. So bus substitution for some journeys at certain times of the day and week cannot be ruled out. We live in very interesting times!

Gareth Calan Davies (RBfH editor)

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BUS SUBSTITUTION

GENERAL POLICY STATEMENT

1. The Board are interested in pursuing bus substitution for two main reasons:-
 - (a) Because it may be impossible to meet financial objectives in any other way.
 - (b) Because there may be opportunities for improving on the financial objectives by introducing schemes of bus/rail integration which make sense in transport terms.

There may be other more localised reasons for proposing bus substitution in particular cases - e.g: the need for major renewal on infrastructure.
2. Bus substitution would normally be associated with total withdrawal of passenger services from a rail route or routes, but not necessarily so. For example, a basic train service may be supplemented by buses during daily or seasonal peaks, or a train service may be run on a one-shift basis with buses providing for travel at other times.
3. The Board's major concern would be to preserve a network of national public transport broadly similar in extent to that provided by rail today. It may prove more cost effective to provide some links in this network by bus rather than by train. But the integrity of the network must be preserved, and any substitute bus services must be integrated into it as fully as if they were rail services. Protection of contributory revenue would be a primary consideration in designing the bus services.
4. In order to preserve the network concept, the Board would wish to have full control over substitute bus services. This means that their frequency, routing and journey times would conform to a B.R. specification, physical interchange would be arranged to suit the convenience of through bus/rail passengers, and B.R. marketing and fares policies would be applied. Normally, high quality vehicles akin to express coaches would be employed.
5. The Board would expect the services to be provided under contract by established bus operators, would pay a contract price for their provision, and would receive all the revenue. Losses would be recovered as part of P.S.O. grant. The Board have no wish to set up in business as an owner and operator of P.S.Vs.

6. There might be some cases where the network contribution of a rail service was insufficient to justify the provision of a wholly B.R.-sponsored substitute bus service of the type described above. In these cases, the Board would be content if the alternative provision were made as part of the local bus network in the area, subsidised if necessary by the local authority.
7. There may be other cases where a B.R.-sponsored service could be "topped-up" by a local authority to meet a particular local transport need.
8. Should bus substitution be proposed for major cross-country routes, the traffic within the confines of those routes may be sufficiently important in itself to justify a B.R.-sponsored replacement service, even if the "network" effect were limited. The Board would be interested in maintaining a presence for the sake of "line of route" business.
9. Generally, bus substitution should be developed on a planned rather than piecemeal basis. But any proposal for bus substitution would need to be examined individually within the general policy framework outlined above.

Director, Provincial Services
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