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DfT applies to withdraw ghost rail services

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The Department for Transport has begun the formal procedure to withdraw passenger rail services along three short stretches of railway line in west London.

When the CrossCountry rail timetable was overhauled in December 2008, a lightly used service operating between Manchester and Brighton via Kensington (Olympia) was scrapped so that rolling stock could be more effectively deployed on busy routes.

But according to a consultation document published this week: "It was realised late in the process of re-letting the CrossCountry franchise that not only would the withdrawal of the through Brighton to Manchester trains leave three small sections of line in west London without any scheduled passenger rail services running along them, but also that if left this would constitute a 'closure' of scheduled passenger services over those sections."

To comply with the Railways Act 2005 the Department for Transport is required to provide alternative services on these stretches of railway or formally apply to withdraw passenger services. Therefore on two of the routes - Willesden West London Junction to Acton Wells Junction and Acton Wells Junction to Acton East Junction - rail replacement bus services currently operate a return journey once a week (on Tuesdays) linking Ealing Broadway and Wandsworth Road stations. On the third - the Factory Junction to Latchmere Junction stretch of railway - train operator Southern provides a daily return service linking Kensington (Olympia) and Wandsworth Road stations.

These arrangements provide 'ghost' services, maintaining the pretence that regular passenger trains continue on the three stretches of line. However, under the Railways Act this practice is supposed to be temporary. More importantly, the services are being provided to comply with the legislation rather than meet passenger demand.

The DfT points out that between zero and three passengers use the weekly bus services. It says the opening of phase two of the East London line extension in December 2012 will allow passengers to travel between Wandsworth Road and Olympia (by changing at Clapham Junction) and means there is no need to incur the costs that would be involved in specifying a train service via Factory and Latchmere junctions in the new rail franchise that will take over Southern's routes.

The Department is proposing to formally withdraw the three services in December 2012 and a consultation period will run until 9 August 2012. The plans will have no impact on rail infrastructure which will remain available to freight and charter trains as well as future passenger services that may be routed via these sections of track.

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