

Ways we can avoid this continuous disruption to tube

LAO Tzu, the father of Taoism, may not be someone who comes immediately to mind when we think about getting around London. But as a daily user of our City's public transport network, I am often forcibly reminded of one of his lessons: "A good traveller has no fixed plans, and is not intent on arriving."

Even armed with Lao Tzu's calming words, nothing is more frustrating than being unable to get from A to B. Which brings me to the endless weekend closures of the Jubilee line and the fact that the same will happen to the Northern line next year.

The Jubilee line has been closed at weekends for months now, for signalling upgrades. On some weekends, the over-ground lines and parts of the Metropolitan line have been closed too. The result is that people simply can't get around and many have had to give up their weekend plans.

Local businesses in areas like West End Lane have suffered a significant decline in weekend trade too – the last thing they need at a time of economic difficulty.

To top it all, we now hear that the Jubilee line weekend closures will continue until Christmas. In the 21st century, this just isn't good enough.

But let's not kid ourselves: the upgrade work to the signalling is needed. I have looked at the underground's signalling equipment firsthand.

I visited the Northern line's Golders Green depot recently and, every day when I've travelled on the tube since then, I am amazed that it works at all.

The whole signalling system at Golders Green is run by a 1970s punch-card computer. As trains move along, a drum with the punch cards rotates.

The signals are actually operated by a lever system dating from the 1920s. These were designed to be pulled by hand but have now been hooked up to the 1970s computer system via a series of pistons.

If you can imagine a signalling system designed by Wallace from Wallace and Gromit, it would look something like this.

So it's clear that the upgrade work is needed. But how can we avoid the disruption?

Some people have proposed a total seven-day-a-week shutdown for six solid weeks to get the work done. This idea is well-intentioned, but sadly misguided. It would leave thousands of people simply unable to get to work. Alternative transport routes just don't have the capacity to accommodate all the Jubilee line's passengers on a working day.

Some years ago, the Northern line in our area was shut completely for some weeks due to an accident. Total chaos ensued. A complete line closure for several weeks is not the answer.

To find solutions, we must start by asking why this chaos has happened in the first place.

The work is being carried out by private operator Tubelines. They have consistently failed to meet their deadlines and have now asked to have until after Christmas to complete their work. They are responsible for a grotesque failure.

Tubelines is operating under the Private Finance Initiative. Personally, I question whether PFI really works.

Gordon Brown (as Chancellor) forced the PFI scheme through against opposition at City Hall.



Chris **Philp**

VIEW FROM THE CHAMBER

I am deeply sceptical that PFI works for this kind of undertaking. The tube is a natural monopoly, so there is no benefit from competition.

Using a PFI contractor simply increases the cost to the public through their profit margin (£73million last year, in Tubelines' case) and their higher cost of borrowing.

Another upgrade project was quoted at £7.2billion by Tubelines. TfL estimates that the cost should be £4.1billion.

Any idea that an operator like Tubelines does a better job is blown away by the current fiasco.

I can't help but think the whole thing was conceived as a con to keep the cost off the public balance sheet.

Local transport users are now paying a price through increased inconvenience. Our children will be paying the financial price for many years to come through higher fares and taxes to pay off the PFI bills.

What can we do? Firstly, I now believe that Tubelines should be massively fined for the disruption that they have caused.

This will at least encourage them to sharpen up their act when it comes to the Northern line upgrade next year. When the contract comes up for renewal, we should also look seriously at ending the PFI arrangement.

Secondly, it seems unnecessary that almost the whole Jubilee line is closed all weekend. This coming weekend, Stanmore to Waterloo will be shut. Surely a smaller part can be closed while work is done just on that part.

Finally, closures on other parts of the transport network – such as the over-ground lines – should be timed so that they do not coincide with tube shutdowns. This is a simple failure of co-ordination and turns an inconvenience into nightmare.

What Lao Tzu would make of all this nobody knows. But next time you are stuck somewhere on a journey, call to mind his words. They certainly help me calm down.

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