

# Wrong kind of leaves, right kind of timetable

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## NEWS ANALYSIS 2: AUTUMN ALMANAC

*This year, train companies appear to have given up the battle with the wrong kind of leaves. After trying a multitude of devices and inventions, there's now a growing trend towards simply altering the timetable to allow extra time for journeys or for recovery. But is it a fiddle to make sure that the trains keep to the timetable and operators avoid fines? Peter Plisner investigates*

IT'S AN AGE-OLD PROBLEM THAT, UNLIKE SOME TRAINS, always seems to come at the same time. For train companies the first few weeks of the autumn are often the worse time of year when it comes to timekeeping. The dreaded 'leaf fall' season means plummeting punctuality on many routes and TOC's often face their heaviest fines. But this year has been different! Why? Because this time round many companies gave up fighting the problem and simply changed the timetable. The 'leaf fall' timetable was born and surprisingly, passengers weren't too upset about it.

For years, stories about the 'wrong kind of leaves' have kept headline writers on tabloid newspapers extremely busy. It's a phrase that seems to be used time and time again as ever more new inventions claim to have licked the problem, but sadly, on most occasions the leaves win and the trains slow down again. Here in the Midlands we've had our fair share of possible solutions. First there was the trusted old concept of cutting down trees close to the line, then a liquid solution made from oranges and lemons. Next came an old favourite revitalised with modern technology, in the shape of sand boxes triggered by satellites. This year it's laser technology. Last month Network Rail, no doubt anxious to show the autumn who's boss, unveiled the latest weapon. It invested £1.6 million in two multi-purpose vehicles (MPVs), which were been fitted with lasers to blast leaf mulch off the track. Another initiative is the three-times weekly forecast, provided by the Met Office, which indicates when trains are likely to have problems on the track with



low adhesion. In addition, Network Rail is operating its biggest ever treatment fleet, including 32 MPVs. They have been applying a sand-based gel called 'sandite' to the rails. The MPVs, which were out twice a day, also relied on very high-pressure water jets to force the leaves off the tracks. Robbie Burns, director of Network Rail in the Midlands said, 'Although we cannot control the elements, we are constantly striving to find new ways of tackling the leaf fall problem.' You can say that again!

It may sound mildly amusing, but the problem of leaves on the line is certainly no joke. The perennial problem of fallen leaves sticking to the tracks causes travel chaos and



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represents a serious safety problem. Leaves on the line are the railway equivalent of black ice on the roads. When crushed, they form a hard, Teflon-like coating on the railhead that causes train wheels to slip and slide. Some passengers have reported trains slipping through platforms unable to stop. Elsewhere, services have arrived hours late as adhesion problems mean that trains get later and later. This year one rail official told me that the problem has been particularly bad because the leaves have been particularly juicy. Whether you believe him or not, there's little doubt that it's a serious problem and one that needs to be dealt with.

But while the war was being fought on the tracks by engineers, in the boardrooms of the TOCs a timetable solution was being craftily cooked up. The answer was the leaf-fall timetable. It's been billed as a contingency plan to maintain the reliability and capacity of the Birmingham's Cross City Line through the peak of the leaf fall season. It involved adjusting the frequency of services from 10 to 20 minutes, allowing trains to recover from delays where rails are contaminated or slippery. Most trains were also doubled in length to ensure that the same number of seats as normal will be available at peak times. However, at the extremities of the line, namely Lichfield Trent Valley and Barnt Green, trains only operated hourly, with coaches replacing the missing half-hourly services.

Central Trains defended the changes. Commenting on the contingency plan, the company's head of West Midlands services, Nigel Pennington, said: 'By implementing this temporary timetable we were determined to maintain train reliability on the Cross

City Line, without reducing the number of seats provided throughout what is traditionally a difficult time of year for railway operations.' Surprisingly, passengers appeared to be fairly relaxed about the changes that, in the end, only lasted a month. Most seemed happy that trains were actually arriving when the timetable said they would. Even Centro, which funds local rail services within the West Midlands conurbation, and is not always totally satisfied with the way things are run, was in favour of the idea. Services director Robert Smith said 'We represent passenger interests and want to get the best service for them, so we have agreed to this plan as the best option available. Central Trains has assured us that this special timetable will enable passengers to have a reliable train service.' However he added: 'Both Centro, as the region's public transport promoter, and Central Trains, would like to see a long term solution from the rail industry to the leaf fall problem.'

All the indications are that the introduction of leaf-fall timetables has paid off and that trains have been more punctual than in previous years. It's clear that, given the choice, passengers would prefer that, even in the autumn, trains arrive when they say they will. This according to those I've spoken is far preferable to receiving compensation payouts when they don't. Although some have called the whole idea of leaf-fall timetables a fiddle, there are clear safety reasons why they make sense. And if it helps to keep providing a more predictable service for passengers, even if they are waiting on the platforms, it must be a good idea.

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