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Is the rolling stock cascade in disarray?

New trains are on order, others are being refurbished but some are being scrapped. Recent decisions suggest all is not as it should be.

Back in PTm, I drew attention to the rolling stock problems facing the railway and suggested that we need better coordination to ensure that we make the best of the trains we have. After all, achieving more capacity is related to the number and design of the trains that operate the services. A huge merry-go-round of rolling stock cascades takes place once some new trains arrive somewhere on the network but it appears that with each operator making decisions in isolation, coordination is being undermined. While some stock with plenty of life left in it is reallocated for use elsewhere, other trains which might be of use are being scrapped. Some recent events suggest that all is not as it should be.

Going Great Western

The re-scoping of the Great Western electrification scheme has much wider implications than for travellers from London Paddington. Most of the Great Western Railway's current diesel stock has been refurbished at least once and the electrification scheme requires new trains to replace those which have been in front line service for decades. The intention was to release a significant fleet of diesel units for use elsewhere. While a Scottish home is likely to be found for some of the High Speed Train units, 40 years old but cleverly designed, the hoped for availability of units for secondary and local services is now compromised. The timescale for relocating some of these

to places which have become unwillingly dependent on Pacer units and other aging vehicles is now in doubt. Politicians have been quick to announce that Pacers are to be removed from the network; the realities are of course much more complicated as anyone in the industry knows. It is increasingly likely that by the time trains become available from GWR, they will be in a relatively poor state and unlikely to bring relief and additional capacity where it is needed now. Recent refurbishments of Class 158 units, for example, has shown that the utility of older rolling stock can be prolonged, but a shortage of suitable units remains a problem.

Elsewhere, the new Northern Electric services are using former Thameslink Class 319



Greater Anglia will replace its entire fleet by the end of 2020

units which are fast and offer more capacity than the trains they have superseded. There remains resentment that some passengers benefit from new rolling stock while others have to make do with cast-offs, but this cascading has been a feature of the railways for decades. Merseyrail has decided on its next generation of electric multiple units which include features suited to where they will be running; there may be design considerations that could be of use elsewhere.

Reusing good designs

There is a history of a lack of coordination which should have been overcome by now. A few years ago there was the hope that the cross-Channel Nightstar sleeper cars would have a role, but by the time they came off the production line, they were redundant and were instantly available for sale. This was a disgrace and although some found use overseas, taking them from the factory to the scrap line should have served as a lesson never to be repeated. The Regional Eurostar sets of high speed electric trains were another casualty of politics and lack of coordination, the influence of HSi being more confined to the South East than planned.

Although Mk3 carriages are now 40 years old, they are still recognized as being an enduring, safe and appealing vehicle for operators and passengers. It would seem short-sighted to remove them from the network despite needing alterations, the cumbersome doors and non-retentive toilets being their weak points. However, Chiltern Railways is using refurbished Mk3s on its locomotive-hauled London Marylebone to Birmingham Moor Street services with driving van trailers at the other end of the train. The coaches have been updated with door controls and new toilets and the customers appear to like them. However, there appears to be a desire to remove Mk3 coaches elsewhere, notably with the withdrawal of the Class 442 units used most recently on Gatwick Express services but previously on SouthWest Trains' Bournemouth mainline. Having been adapted for Gatwick Express, they are now sitting around, some in warm storage with an occasional foray onto the network to keep them serviceable; others are less fortunate. These units have electric doors and driving cabs at each end of a five car set. We learn that

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some could be used as a stop-gap in Wales because 442s can be locomotive-hauled in a push-pull arrangement. Although they are a main line design with a limited number of doors, they are available and they work well. Perhaps there should have been a bit more thought about what to do with them and how to match them up with routes where additional capacity is needed.

Wholesale change

While there is some prejudice against having recycled rolling stock, with a bit of attention it can be upgraded for productive use. With a design life of at least thirty years, it is reasonable to expect that not every operator will have new trains all the time. This brings us to Abellio Greater Anglia which will be replacing its entire fleet as part of its franchise commitment.

This should release a huge number of trains including some weary Mkjs and many electric multiple units with plenty of life left in them. In total, 1,043 new carriages will appear by the end of 2020, a combination of products from Bombardier (Derby) and Stadler (Switzerland) to provide a major increase in capacity. However, experience from South West Trains, which upgraded much of its rolling stock fleet and re-cast its entire timetable, proved that this is no guarantee of running a reliable service. Properly marketed, there is an opportunity to sell the ‘new’ Greater Anglia network to potential users to justify the massive cost and operator’s commitment.

This influx of new vehicles has generated an interesting problem of where to put them all while the existing rolling stock is on the network. An estimated 35 miles of siding space is needed, an opportunity to clear some space in a multitude of locations. As the Great Western plans have proved, aligning new trains with new infrastructure is difficult and there has been much criticism of the Department for Transport by Parliamentary watchdogs about decisions regarding rolling stock specification as a separate project to infrastructure decisions; the railway is not joined up. We are likely to see more reinventing of the wheel when procurement of new East West Rail rolling stock takes place. Additional trains also need that additional depot space which is another aspect of rolling stock procurement that presents significant constraints and considerable cost which need



to be thought about well in advance of the trains’ arrival.

Avoiding profligacy

We may not be making best use of what we have. It emerged that Eurostar is shedding some of its original rolling stock. While of specialist design and not particularly adaptable, it could be used on our electrified main lines. Several of the original Eurostar Class 373 units are being scrapped, a process which seems to be causing some embarrassment. They are being taken to the breaker’s yard in the West Midlands where the contractor has piled shipping containers around its site to prevent people seeing what is going on. The first unit went under its own power to St Pancras International before being towed under cover of darkness on its final journey. Scrapping trains on the one hand while buying new ones on the other is a costly way to manage a railway. It is a sad reflection on the thinking behind Eurostar that relatively modern trains can be thrown away (but unsurprising given the experience of its Waterloo International terminus lying idle for years, only to be resuscitated at great expense). If everyone disposed of trains once

they reached 20 or so years, we would really be in trouble.

If each rail franchisee is pursuing its own course over rolling stock acquisition and renewal, then we are bound to have an uncoordinated railway. Perhaps a proper plan would help with a policy of transparency, an emphasis on reusing stock whenever possible rather than replacing it and linking rolling stock much more closely with infrastructure upgrades. Value for money is unlikely to be achievable with the current arrangements. ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

The Transport Planning Society provides professional development, a meeting place for all those working in the transport sector and leads the response to emerging policy issues. See www.tps.org.uk for further information. Nick Richardson is Technical Director at transport consultancy Mott MacDonald, a Director of the Chartered Institute of Logistics and Transport (UK) and Chair of PTRC Education and Research Services Ltd. In addition, he has held a PCV licence for 29 years.