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A chance to look back over five years

Having contributed thoughts on various issues over the past five years, looking back at what may have changed can be instructive

My first piece in this esteemed organ appeared in May 2012 and I have shared my views about quite a lot that has happened since then. Many challenges have arisen in the world of transport planning and passenger transport. The agenda continues to change constantly which is good for stimulating debate and here I take the opportunity to consider what has changed over the period.

Dealing with successful growth

The growth in the demand for rail travel that we have experienced wasn't expected. The result is that the whole industry has had to think about how it deals with a success story rather than managing decline in the way that had become familiar. Rail is hugely prominent in the national psyche in a way it has never experienced before and customer expectations are greater than ever. There have been some serious knocks - the West Coast Main Line franchise debacle, the damage to the network in many locations from storm events and the return of the old-fashioned industrial dispute. That in particular has left large swathes of Southern territory without any meaningful service. The reputational risk which I explored back in 2012 still lurks behind any high profile operator which puts a foot wrong.

Refocusing on the key issues

In contrast to rail, buses haven't been fulfilling their potential apart from a few bright spots where there has been innovation, effort and

engagement, with consequent growth in passenger numbers. We have seen demand patterns change widely and rapidly with some of the traditional customer base now doing something other than using the bus. Alongside this, the evidence shows how our national attachment to the car is waning but buses haven't picked up this new generation of travellers. Changes to the funding of buses have meant that, despite the warnings, the network has readjusted in response to market conditions but has been adapted in ways that have been unpopular and destabilising. A contributory reason might be that national agencies defy change by perpetuating the methods that they have always adopted,



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ignoring historical precedent, wavering in political winds and failing to understand where the best investments should be. The recent pronouncement by government that there isn't any money for buses sums up what has been going on in recent years and while the debate continues about how services are provided, the number of users continues to drift downwards. It should all be about demand and the industry really does need to understand what drives demand and what will happen next in the market.

Moving forwards

We have seen limited enthusiasm for light rail apart from the eventual opening of part of the Edinburgh tram scheme after near-terminal cost overruns, plus limited extensions to the Midland Metro route. Notable successes include Nottingham Express Transit's latest routes and the continued expansion of Manchester Metrolink. Elsewhere tram-train isn't being revolutionary just yet and Leeds will not host a new generation of trolleybuses. Hopefully tram-train will fill a gap in the way that it does beyond our shores provided we can deal with all the paperwork that is apparently necessary. In terms of buses, the creation of busways has set a new standard in Cambridgeshire, Luton Dunstable and Leigh-Salford-Manchester. For bus propulsion, there have been some decent strides towards something new with natural gas power, electric vehicles and more, all steps in the right direction now we know the negative impacts of diesel engines.

On the payment front, progress is being made with mobile phone ticketing and contactless payment but smartcard systems are now looking a bit dated. The impact on the ground has been patchy but hopefully the time will come when I can renew season tickets on line or use contactless universally and not carry loose change around because I don't know the fare in advance. Progress has been slow compared with other retailing activities. Untangling the web of rail fares may eventually happen now there is universal acknowledgment that no-one understands the current arrangements.

Many transport providers are waking up to the benefits of diversity in the workplace and customer involvement. Restructuring the workforce so that it better represents



The South Yorkshire tram-train pilot has had a lengthy gestation period, but services into Rotherham are expected to commence next year for an initial two-year period

the customers is becoming essential. Finding out what travellers want and keeping them informed shouldn't be too difficult and it's much easier to deal with problems if passengers understand the situation. The same is also true for the poorly-informed decision-makers who would really benefit from sound evidence and advice rather than making it up as they go along in isolation of everything else.

There have been some minor successes: Virgin West Coast Trains and First Great Western/Great Western Railway and now Southeastern have turned more First Class carriage space into standard class as I have advocated for some time. On a larger scale, progress is being made on East West Rail while High Speed 2 continues to divide opinion and consume funding like never before. Chiltern Railways and ScotRail have both created new routes (to Oxford and the Borders Railway respectively), exploiting opportunities and securing much community support. Crossrail, a.k.a. the Elizabeth line, will be open for business soon. Meanwhile, the rail upgrades proposed to link the 'Northern cities' are slowly taking place but with some uncertainties remaining. There is clearly a very large amount of funding available for certain projects so the government's claim that buses won't be funded is disingenuous at best but more likely staggeringly myopic.

There have been some good innovations such as online parcel collection points at railway stations, on-demand bus and taxi services and successful integration of cycling with buses and trains. Alongside this has been the onward march of technology applied to the digital railway ticketing and service information in all its forms. More recently there has been lots of excitement about autonomous and potentially driverless vehicles. This has generated all sorts of predictions, some plain daft and others more guarded given that passenger transport is about transport for people with differing incomes, expectations, needs and experiences. Other good ideas such as road user charging don't get any closer despite the technology being available to make it happen.

Making simple things difficult

In 2013, I featured our institutional and regulatory arrangements which ensure that it takes many years to deliver major schemes. Devolution was moving rapidly but is now in a state of confusion with a total lack of consistency, clarity or direction apart from the election of several metropolitan mayors. Not a lot has been said about rural communities and the emphasis has been very much on city regions (or, arguably, selected city regions). Themes based around successful partnership

working and integrated delivery arrangements continue to crop up indicating that we haven't yet got it right. Alongside this, there has been more effort to consider the customer's point of view although it has proved difficult to sustain continuous improvement.

Funding lies behind many transport decisions but the debate about who holds what budgets rages. The role of municipal authorities continues to take a battering and the shift from traditional delivery agencies to emerging and relatively inexperienced organisations is largely unchallenged. One area in which circumstances have changed is the planning agenda. The previous complex set of rules has been swept away in favour of a presumption in favour of development. The result has been that planning agencies find it hard to resist inappropriate development which is often notable for its absence of effective passenger services. The claim by large housebuilders that the planning system delays completions is simply untrue and the pendulum has swung too far in the wrong direction. The same basic rules apply as always - plan around passenger transport rather than cars to achieve truly sustainable communities.

Some pointers to the future: clearer direction and leadership would be a good idea, working alongside a consistent funding programme and clear accountability. If we are to enjoy a sustainable future then quite a lot must change. There is also value from learning by experience - having a good knowledge of what has gone before is invaluable to consider what to do next. Looking back five years illustrates how looking forward five years is fraught with the difficulties of predicting the unknown, but change is definitely on the way. ■

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 30 years.