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RAILWAY STUDY FORUM

Future of rail in an uncertain world

The Railway Study Forum had a timely talk on 21 May from Professor Paul Plummer, about the future of rail in an uncertain world. Paul is Director of the University of Birmingham Centre for Rail Research and Education (BCRRE) and lead for the UK Rail Research and Innovation Network. His key areas of research focus on the whole transport system from a customer experience perspective and the implications for policy.

Whilst positive about the future of rail, Paul is not complacent about the challenges. One such challenge is dealing with complexity in the industry. Whilst complicated systems can be reduced to constituent parts & connections, complex systems are more difficult to understand or predict. Splitting this out into different aspects of complexity: volatility can be addressed by having a clear vision, focussing on the purpose or goal; uncertainty can be helped by gaining a better understanding through feedback & perspective to refine the plan; complicatedness can be assisted by gaining clarity and creating an actionable plan; and ambiguity can be relieved by being agile, collaborative and goal focussed.

Vision needs to be built on the railway's 200-year inheritance, which should be cherished and developed while remembering that rail is only important for what it can do for our society, economy and environment. Paul highlighted that there is a broad consensus and referred to an illustrative set of 6 key objectives for rail: more reliable services; simpler, more affordable tickets; integrated, efficient services; improved service quality; accessible and safe services.

Understanding customers is key. Paul considered the Transport Focus report 'What matters to rail passengers in Great Britain 2022' which showed that price of train tickets was top, followed by reliability and punctuality, sufficiently frequent trains, and accurate and timely information about train times. Understanding growth scenarios is important, including the new post pandemic normal as part of wider mobility and communications. Understanding industry finances, can drive engagement and improve data quality. It is important to understand the network and assets to inform decision making and enable mobility.

Clarity on reform is critical, including consensus on a new arm's length body. Questions remain over how much longer this will take to establish, whether it will be empowered, whether it will empower, and the underlying system is still complex so expectations must be realistic. Detailed plans need to follow to enable a transparent rolling pipeline.

Agility through strategic thinking sounds obvious, but we always need to think about what we want to achieve, the bigger picture context, the competition, trends and different scenarios, risks and be aware of constraining beliefs, habits and traditions. Systems thinking builds on this by helping individuals see the big picture, understand interdependencies & make holistic decisions; it is widely recommended for rail projects/programmes, and is critical for design of contractual & the regulatory framework. Paul gave an agility example of collaboration by the UK Rail Research and Innovation Network, comprising in total over 20 academic partners and 20 industrial partners. Paul also discussed the importance of equality, diversity and inclusion referring to National Skills Academy for Rail (NSAR) data. ■

