



Barking – Gospel Oak Line Electrification – The urgent need for 4-car trains

Introduction

1. This paper raises the Barking – Gospel Oak Rail User Group's (BGORUG) concerns about the planned delay between completion of the electrification of the Barking – Gospel Oak line and the introduction of electric trains. It takes account of discussions between BGORUG and Transport for London (TfL) on 10th March, a public statement by TfL at the Waltham Forest Transport Liaison Consultative Group on 15th March, and the answer to London Assembly member John Biggs' question at Mayor's Question Time on 16th March.

The problem

2. The Barking – Gospel Oak line (BGO), part of TfL's London Overground network, is being electrified and station platforms are to be lengthened. This will enable its present 2-car diesel trains to be replaced by 4-car electric trains. Network Rail, as owner of the infrastructure, is carrying out the work and BGORUG hugely welcomes the fact that TfL has secured funding for them to do so.
3. On behalf of passengers we accept that there is a price to be paid in terms of major closures to enable the work to be carried out. Weekend closures have already started. It is then planned that the eastern half of the line (South Tottenham – Barking) will be closed every day from June to September this year. During this same period the whole line will be closed at weekends, and then every day from September to February 2017. Thus most passengers will suffer major inconvenience for the first four months, and then all passengers for the second five months.
4. Disruption on this scale for a United Kingdom electrification scheme is highly unusual. This makes it all the more important that passengers gain the benefit of the longer and faster electric trains as soon as possible after the work is completed. Neighbours along the line would also benefit by the reduction in pollution from diesel engines.
5. Surprisingly, on present plans this will not happen. Once the line re-opens, Network Rail will take from March to June 2017 to commission the new electrification equipment ready for service. This seems rather a long time, but for present purposes we can let that pass. The fundamental point is that from June 2017 the BGO will be ready to take 4-car electric trains, so passengers should at last be able to say farewell to the grossly overcrowded 2-car diesel trains which they have suffered in some form or other for more than ten years.
6. However, the actual position is that whilst TfL has ordered new 4-car electric trains for the line (Class 710 – part of a larger order for other London Overground lines), the first of these will not be delivered until December 2017. The time taken to test and commission this new design means the trains are not scheduled to enter service until May 2018¹. BGO passengers will therefore continue to suffer their inadequate 2-car diesel trains – and see the £130m investment in their line lying idle – for almost another year.

¹ TfL Finance & Policy Committee paper – London Overground Train Operating Concession – 2 March 2016 – para. 4.15
<http://content.tfl.gov.uk/fpc-160302-15-london-overground-operating-concession.pdf>

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2-car diesel trains – unable to cope (1)



2-car diesel trains – unable to cope (2)



2-car diesel trains – unable to cope (3)

What can be done?

7. If new trains are not available when an electrification scheme is completed then the obvious answer is to see if older trains are available for use temporarily. There is nothing unusual about such a solution. It is precisely what is being done in Scotland, where the Edinburgh – Glasgow line will be electrified by the end of this year but its new trains will not be ready for service until late 2017. To bridge the gap, existing electric trains will be borrowed from elsewhere in Scotland, a move facilitated by the transfer of trains which are currently surplus in the London area.
8. It is BGORUG's contention that similar arrangements could be made to provide electric trains for our line as soon as the electrification works are completed in June 2017.
9. The key to this lies in TfL's own hands. In May 2015 TfL took over operation of the Liverpool Street – Shenfield line as the first stage in its ultimate incorporation into Crossrail. This line is presently operated by Class 315 trains and their replacement by new Crossrail trains is scheduled to start in May 2017. There is no immediate use for the displaced trains, which appear to be suitable for the BGO and which would most likely otherwise be placed in store. Although built in 1980-81 and thus some 35 years old, they are in good condition because since taking them over less than a year ago TfL have invested substantially in technical reliability improvements and internal renewals².

² See Appendix to this paper for details of the Class 315 refurbishment carried out by TfL in 2015

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TfL Rail Class 315 Train



TfL Rail Class 315 Train - interior

TfL's position

10. This matter was briefly discussed when BGORUG representatives met with TfL staff on 10th March. Their position was that examination of the use of Class 315s on BGO had so far shown it to be unviable. They maintained this stance at the Waltham Forest Transport Liaison Consultative Group meeting on 15th March, but made it clear that the idea remained under consideration.

11. Before these meetings, London Assembly member John Biggs had tabled a question on the matter at Mayor's questions on 20th January, to which the reply was:

“.....It is not financially viable for TfL to lease other electric trains to cover any gap from the completion of electrification and delivery of the new trains.”

12. In the hope of obtaining some more detail, and perhaps some figures, Mr. Biggs tabled a follow up question on 16th March, viz.

“Could the Mayor please explain why it not viable to lease electric trains to fill the gap between the completion of the electrification and platform extension projects in mid-2017 and the arrival in passenger service of the new Class 710 electric trains in April 2018?

Class 315 electric trains on TfL Rail duties will be replaced by new Crossrail Class 345 trains from early 2017 and the Class 315 trains are not currently designated for any further use. Could not the lease of ten of these Class 315 trains be extended for 10-12 months to enable them to be transferred to the electrified Barking - Gospel Oak route so enabling the eight 2-car diesel trains on the service to come off lease instead? This will end the appalling overcrowding at a stroke and allow 8 desperately needed modern diesel trains to be transferred to another train operator”

The Mayor replied:

“Class 315 trains will not be available from the TfL Rail route until late summer 2017, and the new Class 710 trains will start to be introduced on the Gospel Oak to Barking route from December the same year. Transferring Class 315s to the Gospel Oak to Barking line would be expected to bring significant costs in terms of the lease extension, driver training and solving the logistical issues of maintaining and stabling the fleet. Given the short period of time the trains would be in service on this route, this would be unlikely to provide value for money.”

13. The statements made by TfL on 10th and 15th March, and the categorical reply to Mr. Biggs on 20th January that “..... *It is not financially viable*” clearly suggested that calculations had been carried to assess the costs and benefits of transferring Class 315 trains to BGO in June 2017. It is therefore of concern that the 16th March reply fails to provide any concrete information about either the expected costs or the benefits. Indeed it seems to back track, because it now says that the proposal “..... *would be unlikely to provide value for money.*”

14. Also, the reply seeks to mask the apparent duration of the hiatus between electrification and introduction of electric trains by erroneously stating that Class 315 trains will not be available from the TfL Rail route until late summer 2017 and that new Class 710 trains will start to be introduced into service from December the same year. The actual position is that Class 315

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trains will start to become available from May 2017 – slightly before the BGO electrification is completed in June – and the Class 710 trains will not be introduced until May 2018.

15. BGORUG can only conclude that in reality TfL has made a list of issues that would have to be resolved and, possibly without giving detailed consideration to possible solutions, just made a qualitative judgement that the costs would exceed the benefits.
16. We recognise that in today's fragmented railway even apparently simple changes can become complicated. However a major reason for the success of London Overground has been the refusal of its management – both in TfL and in LOROL as the operating company – to be beaten by the negative forces which sometimes come into play. We hope that TfL can continue to take a positive approach to solving any problems in this case.
17. We note that when making the case for ordering new trains for the BGO line, TfL stated that

“The Mayor strongly supported the case for electrification of the Gospel Oak – Barking lines from an environmental and economic perspective and TfL is part funding the scheme alongside the Government. The route will be electrified by mid-2017 and TfL’s reputation could be damaged if diesel trains continue to operate on this route for any significant length of time after electrification. In addition, as extra capacity is needed on the route, purchase of four car electric trains will provide much needed capacity compared with the existing two car diesels.”

BGORUG fully agrees with this and suggests that running 2-car diesels instead of immediately available 4-car electrics for almost a year represents a “significant length of time” and that doing so would definitely damage TfL's reputation.³

Where do we go from here?

18. Despite our concerns that TfL may not have taken this idea seriously so far, BGORUG believes we should accept that TfL is willing to give it further consideration. We therefore put forward the following summary points for discussion and consideration -
 - Many BGO passengers suffer the worst overcrowding anywhere on the British rail network.
 - All BGO passengers will face much slower and inconvenient journeys for many months whilst the line is closed for electrification works.
 - The purpose of these works is to enable the operation of electric trains with nearly double the capacity and to provide quicker journeys.
 - It would be quite wrong, without exceptionally good reason, to repay BGO passengers for the inconvenience they are going to suffer by making them wait almost another year for the benefits of the scheme – and see a £130m investment in their line lying idle.
 - It would be no less wrong to deny potential passengers – who currently cannot use the line because the trains are full – the benefits of using it as soon as possible.
 - More broadly, introduction of 4-car trains at the earliest possible date would support some of the policy goals of the Mayor's Transport Strategy, viz.
 - support for economic development and population growth

³ TfL Finance & Policy Committee paper – Procurement of New Rolling Stock for London Overground – 17 June 2015 – para. 3.7
<http://content.tfl.gov.uk/fpc-20150617-item16-part-1-lotrains.pdf>

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- improvements to transport opportunities for Londoners
 - enhancements to the quality of life of Londoners
- The issues so far raised by TfL – train lease extension, driver training and logistical issues of maintaining and stabling the fleet – need to be fully examined with a “can do” cast of mind. In doing so, account should be taken of the benefits of releasing the existing trains for the earliest possible transfer to one of several parts of the country which are crying out for additional diesel trains, and also of the possibility of using the service suspension period as an opportunity for staff training.
 - On the questions of maintaining and stabling Class 315s, experienced railway people within BGORUG will be more than happy to offer constructive suggestions as to how these tasks might be organised, if needed.
 - Thought could also be given to the possibility of retaining Class 315s on the BGO for longer than the first year, so that new Class 710s can be introduced sooner on the Enfield / Cheshunt / Chingford services or the Euston – Watford line (with the latter enabling the earlier introduction of more frequent trains on the North, West and East London lines).
 - Extending the use of Class 315s would obtain additional value/payback from the internal refurbishment and reliability modification works carried out in 2015. Without further use, the first units displaced by the new Crossrail trains from May 2017 would mean this extensive work having a life of only two years.
19. It is right that the scheme should be assessed for value for money in accordance with normal TfL criteria. However any decision should include recognition of elements which are not easily quantifiable – elements which at the end of the day may quite rightly be judged by political as well as numerical considerations.
20. This last point can be summed up in the terms regularly used by a former LUL Managing Director – “*Think what your decision will look like when it becomes a headline in the Evening Standard*”; or as a recent Transport Commissioner has put it - “*If it looks stupid and it is stupid, it's something we should not do.*”
21. BGORUG believes that to continue for nearly a year with 2-car diesel trains, packed to the gunwales and leaving people behind, when 4-car electric trains are there for the asking, must come high on the of list things that should not be done.

Conclusion

22. BGORUG looks forward to TfL taking a positive view of the points made in this paper and we hope to have constructive discussions to take matters forward. All the line's passengers expect and look forward to travelling on 4-car electric trains just as soon as the electrification works are completed.

31st March 2016

Appendix

Class 315 refurbishment carried out by TfL in 2015

Electrical and Mechanical

Reliability improvements

Interior

Lighting - replacement of lighting tubes with the effect that interior lighting emits a uniform colour with no differences across the Class 315 fleet.

Seat covers - replacement of existing seat cover moquettes with a new design

Replacement of glass with etched graffiti, and application of antietching film to all glazing in the passenger areas

Repair of damaged areas of floor covering

Recoating of all grab rails, grab poles and seat back handles

Repairing internal surfaces of passenger doors and other interior panels, as required to make good and eliminate patchwork paint on previous repaired panels

Re-colouring of the 'pink' laminated panels, using a combination of panel replacement, repaint and/or vinyl overlay

Repainting internal surfaces of passenger doors and other interior panels, as required to make good and eliminate patchwork paint on previously repaired panels

Exterior

Heavy deep clean

Repainting doors