

**Construction of the Hinkley Point C power station entails moving a workforce of thousands to and from the site each day. Tackling the task is First Bus subsidiary Somerset Passenger Solutions. Richard Simpson meets the engineer who keeps the 145-strong fleet on the road**

**S**omerset Passenger Solutions was formed in 2016 as a joint venture between First Group and JJP Holdings, to serve the passenger transport needs of the largest construction project in Europe – Hinkley Point C. In October 2021, First Bus completed the purchase to take full control of SPS.

When complete, the two Hinkley Point reactors will produce sufficient electricity to power the equivalent of around six million homes, providing vital extra generating capacity to a grid which will need to supply increasing amounts of carbon-free green energy to enable the UK to meet its climate-change commitments.

Somerset Passenger Solutions takes almost all of a growing workforce numbering in the thousands to and from the site each day, with a network of routes covering a catchment area ranging from Bristol in the north to Minehead in the west and Taunton in the south. Around 22,000 people in Britain are now working on the project – with suppliers and contractors in every part of the country. The growing number includes 6,300 on site, compared to just 1,500 at the height of the pandemic last year.

This requires the operation of a fleet of 145 passenger-carrying vehicles, all of which are maintained in-house in a dedicated workshop run by head of engineering David Porter, a Scotsman long-settled in Somerset who has



worked his way up from a start in the industry as an apprentice bus mechanic in the 1970s through various senior positions inside and outside the First Group, but including an enjoyable period back ‘on the tools’ in 2009-10.

**IN-HOUSE**

Porter joined SPS last December, at the point when SPS was taking its maintenance in-house. His charges include 35 Wright Streetdeck double-decker buses, 54 Yutong coaches, 32 ADL E200 single-deckers, five Ford Transit minibuses and eight newly-arrived Mercedes Turismo coaches. All vehicles are of Euro VI standard, and their performance, and the performance of their drivers, is monitored by Webfleet telematics.

These are all looked after in a building specifically refurbished for the Hinkley Point C project in Bridgwater. The workforce of 16 technicians has remained stable: “We had to replace one position and recruit for another, but we have filled both positions without difficulty,” Porter says. Shift work to support the ‘around the clock’ SPS operation sees the workshop operate 24 hours a day, seven days a week, with 10 bays in total. Two of

them have inspection pits, and there are sets of mobile column lifts for the other bays. Fresh oils are held in a mixture of bulk-tank and drum storage, and piped across to individual workstations, with waste oil being tanked for disposal in the correct manner.

COVID has had an obvious impact on the workshop operation. As HPC was able to continue construction during lockdown, social distancing measures had to be immediately implemented. This meant each vehicle could carry fewer passengers. On top of that, SPS had to fit vehicles with screens and equipment to protect passengers and drivers. The restrictions on passenger capacity are now being eased.

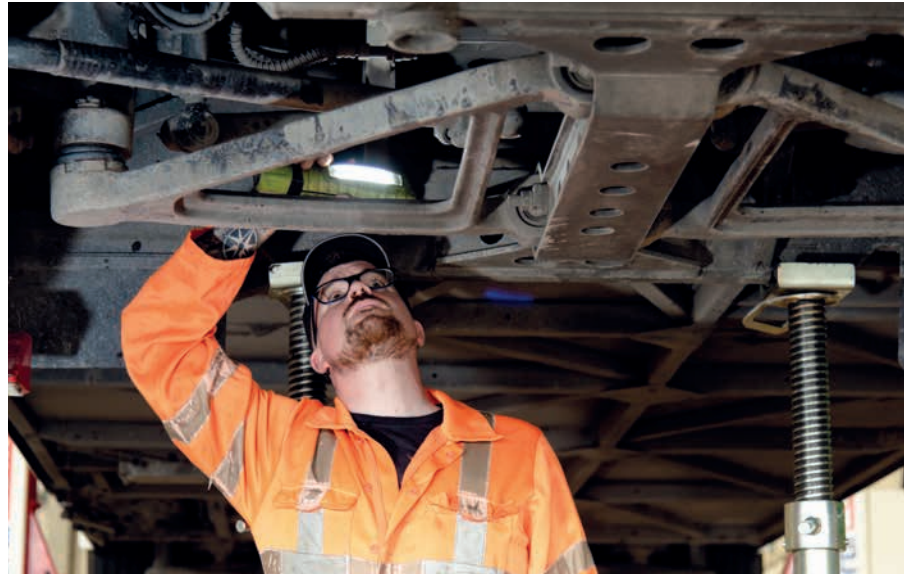
SPS’s diverse fleet includes the Yutong TC-9 and TC-12 coaches. With all the difficulties in manufacturing and







# POINT



Picture credit: EDF Energy

international logistics, has it been difficult to keep these vehicles on the road?

"The Yutongs are pretty reliable and have a European proprietary driveline, including DAF engines and ZF transmissions," Porter reports. "First had oversight of the build process in China to ensure that the vehicles supplied were up to scratch. There were some problems with the supply of parts because of the COVID crisis, but the importer [Pelican Bus & Coach] has now raised the level of stocks held in the UK. The sheer distance we are from China doesn't help: air freight from Europe means overnight; air freight from China can mean three or four days.

"It can take time to get full resolution with warranty issues. Failed components are usually replaced without quibble, but parts redesigned to prevent recurrence of the original problem can take longer.

"This doesn't involve any increased downtime when compared to European products, and the driveline is obviously as reliable on the Yutongs as it is on European makes. You can have problems with European vehicles too, and circumstances mean that all suppliers can have unusual issues at the moment... These often go some way

up the supply chain, even as far as the supply of raw materials.

"We hold stocks of parts for everything on the fleet. It's mostly the fast-moving stock based on usage and failure rates, but we have recently increased stocks as a precaution against further delays in supply."

Some bodywork parts are held. "We can replace painted panels in-house, but where processes like rubbing down are required, bodywork repairs are done by outside contractors: we don't have the facilities to deal with the resultant dust."

## TYRE CARE

Fleet tyre management is undertaken by Bridgestone. The tyre manufacturer's fitters are daily visitors to the site, changing tyres on loose wheels. SPS's own technicians tend to remove and



replace the wheels themselves, but outside tyre breakdowns are handled by Bridgestone at the roadside. Only new first-life covers are used, with Bridgestone taking back used carcasses for regrooving or remoulding for other customers. Air-con servicing is also carried out by certified external contractors.

The wider SPS company and its engineering division have built up a reserve of skills and resources that could live on after the HPC project is complete. The completed power station will have a continuing staffing requirement, and getting those staff to work in an efficient and environmentally friendly manner is an obvious role for a 'legacy' SPS operation to take on. Operating commercial services for the wider community might be another possibility. The workshop itself has obvious potential for taking on third-party vehicles.

"SPS has invested significantly in technology, processes and vehicles," Porter recounts. "We will continue to develop a team of highly trained, highly skilled and motivated staff in the south-west ready for the next step in their careers." **TE**