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How does rail replacement work?

There are two types of rail replacement work – emergency and pre-planned.

With emergency work, a TOC places an order with FRS & requires resources immediately. This could be as little as one taxi, or up to a hundred coaches. A job is created in the system, assigned a vehicle and tracked. The Control function manages all jobs from start to finish.

Pre-planned engineering work however is a whole different ball game. Following notification from infrastructure operator Network Rail, train planners at the relevant Train Operating Companies (TOCs) work out where they can operate trains to – either side of a blockade for example. Bus running times are then drawn up using a system called Voyager Planner, which has bus running times built in.

First Rail Support (FRS) area managers work with the train planning teams at the TOCs. Journey times can be adjusted, subject to feedback.

Train planners will be aware of the average loadings, enabling them to specify vehicle requirements and vehicle types, be it coach or bus, single or double decker.

FRS builds up a vehicle plan using its Diagramming Team, which sometimes goes back to a TOC to be verified.

Upon a status change in the IT system, the FRS Coach Recruitment Team resource the vehicles, which includes agreeing rates paid to operators. The team also compiles the individual driver information packs.

Simultaneously, manpower plans are submitted to the Co-ordination Team, which manages FRS' on-site staff.

Now complete, the information is passed to the Control Team to manage on the day, and is tasked with ensuring the service continues to operate as planned and to deal with any problems arising. In addition to liaising with FRS on-site staff, which include supervisors and co-ordinators. This team also calls drivers up to 20 minutes before hand to check they are on site & similarly at the end of the day to stand vehicles down.

Last is the Finance Team, which invoices the TOCs and paying bus and coach operators.



Above: First Rail Support in action. Left: Managing director Maurice Duckworth. Right: Richard Kirk, area manager south with Gareth Mead, commercial & project manager.



Right on track

CBW's Gareth Evans goes behind the scenes and meets the team of people behind First Rail Support, First Group's rail replacement arm

To operators and drivers rail replacement is rather like Marmite – you either love it or you hate it.

Having driven rail replacement services in a previous life, met some entertaining characters and gained a broad range of experiences along the way, I must say I often wondered about the people I spoke to both at the other end of the phone and on the ground. Indeed, as a passenger too, I gained a number of varied experiences.

Therefore, I jumped at the opportunity to gain an insight into 'behind the scenes' of a rail replacement co-ordination company in the shape of First Rail Support (FRS), part of First Group.

Based at Simonstone, Lancashire, FRS was founded in 2004 as a business unit within First's UK Bus division to provide emergency and planned rail replacement transport to Train Operating Companies (TOCs).

In his youth First's UK Bus commercial director Leon Daniels had turned out 'shoulder to shoulder' with his mentor Peter Newman at Ensign Bus in numerous railway emergencies. Soon after Leon had led a management buyout of his company, Capital Citybus, the IRA bomb went off in Docklands. He sent some buses in anticipation of the need and they operated every day for weeks. Emergency work was a cornerstone of the success of the company which went on to be sold to First in 1998.

In later life, at First, he found a friend in Maurice Duckworth, who had led a parallel existence turning out on rail replacement when others were 'too busy'.

FRS provides buses, coaches and taxis for its customers through its control room, which operates twenty four hours a day, seven days a week. In addition to this, a nationwide network of highly trained customer service staff provide information, assist passengers and control vehicle movements.

FRS has also developed First's service offering to event planners and

has worked at such prestigious events as Farnborough International Airshow.

The team

Managing director Maurice Duckworth is perhaps best described as a character. A man with a wealth of experience, and tales to boot, Maurice comes across as a typical northerner – straight talking, yet easy to get on with. Like me, his interests include beer and canals.

"I gained my PSV at the age of 21 with a little firm called Eagle Coaches. The firm evolved to become the Fraser Eagle that we know today. I later worked organising and driving coach trips. One day, I could tell you some tales," smiled Maurice.

In 1996, he had a brainwave that became Fraser Eagle Rail Replacement. Eight years later, whilst sharing experiences with Leon Daniels, they resolved to join forces and he moved to First and set up FRS in 2004.

"Rail replacement benefits the bus and coach industry. The real cream is in emergency work. When it happens, the railways may want 40 coaches there and then. It suits everyone to get it all moving – the railways want to move passengers from A to B, while technically those 40 coaches may be standing around doing nothing, so the coach operators can earn money from their assets.

"Our people are geared up to move fast. We want to sort out our customers' problems. Operators that are slick will earn money. I call it the fire brigade turnout," laughed Maurice.

"We cover a massive patch. Our customer base includes Northern, London Overground, Trans Pennine Express, Manchester Metrolink, First Great Western, First Capital Connect, ScotRail and Hull Trains."

FRS has two other directors – operations director Chris Coleman and finance director Julia White.

"A big word for me is relationships," said Chris. "We understand the value of a great relationship with TOCs

Meet the Team

FIRST RAIL SUPPORT

and operators. The other thing is experience. I think we've got a great balance between rail and bus/coach knowledge here. Flexibility is the key and similarly responsiveness."

Chris joined FRS in July 2008 from Virgin Trains, where he was regional director north.

"I've got experiences of managing on-board staff, drivers, train managers, caterers, station staff and relationships with external stakeholders like MPs and local authorities.

What attracted him to FRS?

"It's interesting, exciting and it's got a great feel," replied Chris. "The people and their enthusiasm - they're really good at what they do. I felt I could add some value to that by bringing my knowledge and experience.

"Safety is our number one priority here, ensuring we operate a safe business. I work with the FTA (Freight Transport Association) to carry out safety checks and we also undertake our own operator compliance checks - we've got systems in place to ensure we work with safe and competent suppliers. After all, we have to be safe and responsible."

His responsibilities at FRS include operations and safety, which includes the Control Team, Pre-Planning, Diagramming, Station Co-ordination and a team of Area Managers.

Having previously held a number of senior positions in the hotel and leisure industry, Julia joined FRS in 2005 and is responsible for overseeing all financial aspects of the business. She ensures that the firm's financial approach is not only robust but also ensures that it operates in a manner that delivers mutual best value for FRS, its customers and suppliers alike.

Commercial and projects manager Gareth Mead's responsibilities include managing the commercial strategy and delivering solutions to help grow the business.

"Maurice will come up with an idea and I'm tasked with finding a solution," said Gareth. "One of the problems with rail replacement is driver route knowledge. We've been doing a lot of work on developing a programme to feed routes into satellite navigation devices that will take drivers on approved rail replacement routes. Another benefit will be the ability to highlight hazards. I believe we're streets ahead on that front.

"Ultimately we hope to deliver it over the web. 'Training & assessment' is the fancy railway term, but we prefer

to call it making sure people know where they're going!" laughed Gareth.

Gareth joined FRS in 2005 from First South and Wales, where he held a number of operational and project positions, latterly being responsible for all real-time passenger information systems and service punctuality for First's operating companies in the south west of England.

A team of six area and assistant area managers cover the UK. Area manager for the south is Richard Kirk.

Having joined FRS from National Express Group, Richard has over 15 years of experience in the bus and coach industry. After cutting his teeth with Travel West Midlands in a variety of supervisory roles, he headed the growth of the company's Private Hire unit at Hockley Garage, which co-ordinated all rail replacement work carried out by TWM.

Richard explained the duties of an area manager: "We're rather like account managers in that we manage relationships with the TOCs and bus & coach operators alike.

"An awful lot of preparation work goes in before a bus or coach turns

MAURICE WILL COME UP WITH AN IDEA AND I'M TASKED WITH FINDING A SOLUTION

up on a station forecourt. We carry out risk assessments, which include whether a route is suitable for double deckers. We also undertake follow up reports, which examine whether we could improve next time. That might include using fewer vehicles for example. We also play our part in operator compliance & performance. It's unfortunate that some drivers turn up to work wearing jeans and refuse to help customers with luggage. However, we want to work with smart, professional operators."

Based in Glasgow since April 2008, Ian Jeffrey manages the First ScotRail business.

A true railwayman, he spent 23 years in the rail industry in positions which included regional customer relations manager for London Midland, to Intercity marketing manager for



Stuart Jopson & Michelle Demain (above); Service with a smile - shift supervisor Shakil Akbar (top).

AT A GLANCE

COMPANY:
First Rail Support

STAFF: 60 full-time, 200+ casual

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Scotland, while his executive posts included head of marketing and sales for Gatwick Express.

The Control Team is headed by Shahid Ullah, who was not present on the day of my visit. The desk operates 24/7 using four teams, each headed by a supervisor.

Assistant manager of Control Arif Hussain was one of the first controllers to join the team back in 2005.

"It's an awful lot busier now," he laughed. "From having one person on Control, we're now up to six at weekends."

Shakil Akbar, shift supervisor on Control was smiling, despite the increased workload thanks to adverse weather. "When I first started, we were booking out 10 to 20 coaches per day on emergency work. Yesterday we had 185 out," said Shakil.

The Pre-Planning section is headed by coach recruitment manager Michelle Demain. Having had ten years' experience with another rail replacement operator, she holds responsibility for recruiting all FRS' bus and coach operators.

"We can have anything from 500-1500 coaches out at any one time," explained Michelle. "We use a combination of First Group vehicles and independent operators - we've up to 2,000 on our database. We have some operators who work for us on a seasonal basis and others who work all the year round. Rates vary up and down the UK."

Heading up the Diagramming team is diagramming manager Janet Duckworth, wife of MD Maurice. Janet leads a team of three schedulers, which include Gerry Barker, who's responsible for ScotRail, Andy Procter, who deals with First Capital Connect and London Overground and Mark White, who works with Northern. Janet is responsible for First Great Western and Trans Pennine.

"We have to have intricate knowledge of drivers hours regulations. Likewise, our Control Team because they sometimes get drivers calling up to say they need a break for example. We've all been through a lot of training," explained Janet.

The schedulers use computerised software to generate the running boards.

"This is a critical stage - if an error occurs here, it could potentially affect the whole chain."

As she said that, I couldn't help but remark on Jerry's level of concentration, as he was manually checking a running board. However, just then, he burst into life and banter was momentarily the order of the day. "We're a pretty lively up here," laughed Janet.

The Co-ordination Department is headed by Co-ordination supervisor Jason Bridge, the team that resources FRS' on-site staff.

"We've currently got 300 casual co-ordinators and are constantly recruiting. We're normally pretty good - we've got a staff response rate of an hour."

Jason has worked in rail replacement for ten years, having previously worked for another supplier.

"We have a continuous training programme - it's all done in-house and to Group standard. It starts off with a

core safety briefing, which includes such matters as vehicle movements and the injury prevention programme. While they are covered in the core briefing, we're currently giving in-depth training on conflict avoidance and manual handling.

It is here that FRS ensures members of staff are supplied with the correct equipment. For example, if they're working for First Capital Connect (FCC) they'll be wearing an FCC-branded high-visibility jacket and a radio-controlled watch.

Having completed their initial training, a co-ordinator spends eight

Director Julia White & Chris Coleman (below); Right on schedule - Gerry Barker, Janet Duckworth & Andy Procter (middle); Jason Bridge, Wayne Berry & Brigitte Buchan (bottom).



hours with an experienced co-ordinator. They then reach the grade of independent co-ordinator, but they are closely monitored.

"Our management structure is such that we're very hands on. We've also got someone on-call 24/7," continued Jason. Our business has grown to such a level that what we used to do in a month we now do in a week."

Last but by no means least is the Finance Team.

"We try to lead the way in accounting terms. I can honestly say the biggest delay is the time bus and coach operators take to turn an invoice

OUR BUSINESS HAS GROWN TO SUCH A LEVEL THAT WHAT WE USED TO DO IN A MONTH WE NOW DO IN A WEEK

around," laughed Michael Davies, financial controller. "We receive around forty thousand invoices per annum - a fair few to get through."

Of the team, three deal with querying, reconciling and clearing invoices from coach & taxi operators, while another three handle FRS' sales side - i.e. the TOCs.

"One of Maurice's big things is prompt payment," explained Gareth Mead, Commercial and projects manager.

Michael added: "It's a two-way street - if we want the best prices, we've got to pay promptly. Our normal payment terms are via BACS and we aim to pay all invoices within 14 days of receipt on pre-agreed rates."

Of their partnership Maurice Duckworth and Leon Daniels both say the same thing: "It's the best thing I did!"

Conclusion

I enjoyed my day with FRS. Maurice is not wrong when he said: "It makes a difference when people enjoy what they do."

FRS clearly benefits from a staff who can draw on experiences from both sides of the modal fence, which in turns helps them to establish the all-important relationships with their partners in both the rail and bus & coach industries.