



There are some obvious and other much less obvious routes to maximising workshop performance when it comes to the bus and coach sector. Steve Banner reports

# STEPPING UP PERFORMANCE

**A**s with any vehicle, when technicians are tasked with servicing or repairing buses and coaches they need all relevant information to hand. None should have to waste time hunting down dog-eared and possibly out-of-date manuals or awaiting access to the one workshop PC - in the supervisor's office.

That's why Go-Ahead is subscribing to Huddle, a cloud-based collaboration service, to enable technicians to access data using their tablets. As well as searching manufacturers' manuals and

technical bulletins, they can view videos showing them how to tackle tasks and can engage in web-based tutorials. All information is updated regularly and technicians can take photographs of problem vehicle components to share with colleagues at other depots.

But it's the speed of data access that makes the difference: quite simply, it means buses can be back on the road faster, says Go-Ahead IT director Enrique Fernandez. "It has transformed the way our engineers work, shifting people to a paperless environment that improves safety compliance while

ensuring that everyone works from the most up-to-date documents," he explains.

Although Huddle delivers data, it doesn't tell Go-Ahead what it is costing to keep buses and coaches on the road. One way of achieving this is to install a transport management package sourced from a specialist such as Freeway Fleet Systems. The package captures all fleet costs, including labour, replacement parts and fuel. It allocates them by vehicle, by route and by period, also capturing any reported defects.

Tower Transit took this route to manage its 600 buses on 24 routes in London, as well as Impact Coaches, with depots in Perivale and Croydon, and Swavesey, Cambridgeshire-based Whippet Coaches. "It's easy to drill down and analyse all the data," comments Eddie Street, engineering systems manager.

He points to the software's procurement function, which automatically checks to see if parts are available at the workshop location, or other depots run by the operator, before generating purchase orders. If parts are needed, it also obtains authorisation before emailing an order to the supplier. Freeway's ability to integrate with an accounts package means that items are only processed once, he says, so eliminating the need for accounts staff to spend time matching purchase orders with invoices or re-keying information.

With a fleet 180-strong, including hybrids and biomethane buses, Reading Buses also likes Freeway. "Good maintenance is all about knowledge and managing risk," opines chief engineer John Bickerton (main picture, page 29), explaining that brake pad wear rates, for example, are faithfully recorded to manage swapping intervals. "But if a bus comes in for its six-weekly inspection and the pads may last a further two weeks, they are changed," he adds, "to avoid taking the bus off the road again."

Common sense and pragmatism ultimately prevail, but with the emphasis on safety and continuous improvement. "At present we drain the engine oil every 12 weeks, with only the hybrids going to 16 weeks," Bickerton reports. But all lubricants are then analysed for performance, the goal being to extend the interval to 24 weeks. Additionally, his latest acquisitions are subject to remote condition monitoring,



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*John Bickerton*

automatically checking for vehicle and component performance on the road. "The response we often get from drivers is that buses are performing fine," he explains. "However we might see, for example, that the engine coolant is heating up, which could spell trouble."

**WINNING PERFORMANCE**

But good maintenance is not just about systems and processes. Many problems buses encounter involve nothing more than side body panels collecting the odd dent as drivers clip street furniture. "We've been working with a theatrical company to develop a rubber and epoxy skirt panel that shrugs off minor damage," reports Bickerton. "It's twice the cost of an aluminium panel, but should last twice as long in service."

What about people? Good technicians are never easy to recruit and

do not come cheap. "We're in the shadow of London and that affects pay rates," observes Bickerton ruefully. So Reading has responded by setting up its own apprenticeship programme. "We developed it in-house with academic content provided by S&B Automotive Academy," he says. "We'll take on one, maybe two, apprentices this year."

One result: Reading Buses has achieved a 100% first-time MOT pass rate for several months. "Unfortunately we had a bell-push issue last October which rather spoilt things," he remarks. "We've looked at installing our own ATF [authorised testing facility], but decided that the cost of upgrading our test lane was too steep," he continues. "Our nearest ATF is only two miles away."

But no matter how good you think you are, external monitoring of standards, procedures and systems by a reputable and independent third party can still make sound sense, according to Thamesdown Transport head of engineering David Spencer. "We use Lloyd Morgan and in our view the standards set by the DVSA [Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency] are the minimum that should be met," he says.

Based in Swindon and with 83 buses in service, Thamesdown has since invested in a WheelRight tyre pressure monitoring system that fits flush to the workshop floor. When a vehicle drives over, an automatic check is performed to ensure that tyres are correctly inflated. The results are sent to the transport manager by email or text.

"It's working well," he says. "It improves safety and means we spend less time dealing with punctures that can occur when buses are out on the road. We're about to trial its ability to measure tread depth. If that is proved to work, then it too will help to save many hours of labour." And, of course, also downtime. **TE**