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Colin Barnes, Engineering Director, Lothian Buses

Digitisation Drives Fleet Reliability and Safety at Lothian

Lothian Buses, the 2024 Bus Operator of the Year and the UK’s largest publicly-owned bus operator, is deploying the latest digital technology to maintain its high level of safety and reliability across its fleet. Running a fleet of 730 buses in Edinburgh and the surrounding areas, Lothian carries around 110 million passengers a year; the busiest UK bus operator outside London.

For maintaining their fleet, Lothian had been using a legacy system that was no longer being developed and was becoming outdated. After thorough assessment of Freeway’s suitability to underpin a major transformation to digital working, Lothian embarked on a 3-phase roll-out for Freeway. Phase 1, now completed, involved stores and purchasing. Phase 2, underway now, sees digitisation across all workshops and finally, Phase 3, involves the digital capture and reporting of driver defects.

In stores, Lothian first undertook a major rationalisation of thousands of parts, reducing the number of bins. Freeway software was used to rationalise over 25 years of inventory data from the legacy system and the system was then rolled out across at multiple locations. In addition, there are ‘virtual stores’ in different departments that are involved in purchasing such as head office, communications, IT and facilities management.

Freeway has helped automate many of the tasks that previously involved paperwork. All parts on the system with bin locations and parts issued are recorded and auto-replenished so out-of-stock occurrences are avoided. Purchase orders are raised on Freeway with pre-set authorisation levels to ensure sign-off requests are only sent to the appropriate supervisor or manager. Freeway has also been integrated with OpenAccounts for quick and easy reconciling of invoices and PO’s.

“The initial implementation of Freeway in stores has been a real success as we’ve streamlined everything and it’s much easier to manage,” says Colin Barnes, Engineering Director, Lothian Buses. “The whole purchasing process is also much better especially as Freeway’s handy app means we view everything, from anywhere and anytime on a smartphone.”

Phase 2 of the implementation of Freeway has seen engineers equipped with mobile devices at the Central Lothian Bus depot in Annandale Street. The devices run Freeway’s mobile WebApps software that provides digital versions of job cards, inspection sheets, and all other paperwork. Roll-out of Freeway to the remaining Lothian garages is on track to be completed by the start of next year. On completion, Freeway will also automate Lothian’s Earned Recognition submissions to the DVSA with software that provides user-friendly pre-submission compliance audit functionality.

Freeway eliminates laborious tasks such as form-filling, data transcription and time spent trying to locate information held in filing cabinets. On the mobile devices, the software guides the users through a step-by-step process with drop-down lists to, for example, ensure the correct parts are used. Engineers can also see maintenance histories to check things such as previous tyre pressures and to identify recurring defects.

“Digitisation is by far the most exciting development,” says Barnes. “For the first time we are not only getting real-time updates from the workshop but the data is always complete, consistent and accurate. Freeway ensures best work practice and that’s important for meeting our objectives of continually improving safety and reliability.”

“Freeway gives us full 24/7 control and as we begin to collect more and more data digitally, we’ll be able to generate increasingly useful reports and take advantage of the AI and the Business Intelligence tools Freeway are developing. We’ll increasingly be able to predict issues and move toward much more preventative maintenance that will help us further improve vehicle reliability.”