

Let's Talk Fleet Risk - Episode 10

TITLE

Lorna McAtear, National Grid

Simon: Welcome to Let's Talk Fleet Risk - a podcast for those who manage drivers and their vehicles and want to reduce road risk in their organisation.

My guest today is Lorna McAtear. Lorna is the fleet manager for National Grid – Hello Lorna and welcome to the podcast

Lorna: Thanks Simon. It's great to be here.

Simon: Since we started this podcast last year Lorna you were one of the people I really wanted to talk to, but before I say why, could you start by just giving us a quick overview of the size of the National Grid fleet and the types of driving your staff are engaged in.

Lorna: I joined National Grid 2.5 years ago – we had 3000 vehicles on the fleet, 1700 company cars – only 7 were electric vehicles, so we've been on a massive transition through that. We have over 1000 commercials of which 350 are 4 x 4 and more recently, part way through last year we merged with WPD, so in total now we have 9000 vehicles, of which there are an awful lot more 4x4s and a few helicopters, so the transition is a large fleet now to manage.

Simon: We're publishing this podcast in May 2022 and one of the reasons I wanted to have you on as a guest is that we're putting the spotlight on sustainability. Driving for Better Business campaign is promoting a series of resources as well as case studies of fleets that have reduced fuel use and emissions – through either reduced mileage, more efficient driving or electrification of the fleet. You're one of the best known advocates for electric vehicles and reducing emissions. National Grid as a company is aiming for Net Zero by 2050 – how does your fleet strategy fit into that?

Lorna: That was one of the first things I did – to design that fleet strategy and interestingly I was pushing the fleet strategy for a 2030 target when the legislation was for 2035 so there were a few challenges around why I was picking that date, but I think when you're close to the marketplace you can see where the changes are coming in. I put together the plan for the next 10 years – knowing what I can control within it. The 4x4s I mentioned, I know I can't do anything about that. I can retrofit but there isn't anything really, I can do for the vast majority on fleet, so it's planning for a date in 2024 or 2025 knowing when the changes are going to happen. So, what I had to do is work with the enablers – what were the education programmes I needed to put in, that whole communication piece around it,

which vehicles could I tackle immediately, which vehicles did I look at later – and just map out for everybody so we knew exactly when and where things were going to change. All I'm doing now as the years go by is sense checking into that original plan and working out whether I'm behind or ahead and is there anything else I can now do because of innovations that have come to market. Can I change some of my commercial vehicles earlier than I planned? There's a whole raft of things that went into that but the key was having the plan in the first place and getting buy in.

Simon: Are you trying to replace the fleet vehicle sin line with your natural vehicle replacement cycle?

Lorna – Absolutely. You don't need to get rid of the vehicles straight away. Just follow that replacement cycle so the whole plan was geared around that we mapped out every single replacement and some of them have got checkpoints on so the heavier the vehicle is or the more ancillary equipment it has, it just a checkpoint in time and it may be that actually we extend that vehicle because the different vehicle will come out later, so each time I have a replacement it triggers a conscious decision on are we replacing, or are we intending to do something different?

Simon – presumably helicopters present a challenge in their own right

Lorna – haven't got a clue on that yet!

Simon: From a driver competence point of view, I had a week in one as part of a campaign we were running and there are some obvious differences, such as what you would check, and the driving characteristics - there are some obvious differences involved in driving an EV from the pre-use check angle as well as driving characteristics. How does National Grid communicate these to drivers and how you liaise with colleagues responsible for driver safety on the training requirements for EVs?

Lorna: Stories are great aren't they. The one thing is obvious is they are automatics. The first time I drove an electric personally was a Peugeot van and I nearly stuck my bosses head through the windscreen because I never driven a automatic before, so you learn from experience, and you can use those stories to relate to people. Its's how you get that communication out there, and it's how you normalize things. There are a lot of things we do with our ICE vehicles that don't change even if you you're in an EV. You're still doing your normal drivers checks, tyres, make sure your windscreen wash levels are topped up, the FLOUR acronym, and we had some real challenges. Most of our EVs went onto the fleet during full lockdown during COVID so we had to do a lot of the driver education through peer to peer talks, through actually standing outside the vehicle and explaining things. There was a lot of online things because you're right, understanding that regen you really can't explain it to someone until they felt it themselves and they feel that vehicle so it's just trying to work out pretty much with the whole sustainability plan what can you do, when can y you do it, which drivers adapt easily, some of the drivers already had EV cars so an EV van wasn't a problem. So how do you identify your higher risk drivers and then make sure that each of the education pieces are there. What we did was a lot of hand holding to start with because it was new to us. It was new for us to educate others. We weren't sure what

education we needed. You've always got challenge – they can get uppity if you want to give them some education so it's how you go about that.

Simon: How do you deal with an incident like a breakdown, or a collision – when things are different with an EV. Unless you've been told you might expect to be able to do certain things...

Lorna: Again. Some of that is already in our policy anyway, some of the base policies – fleet managers should check all the base policies and reinforce those because you'll find an awful lot of it already covers those nuances between the EVs and you're using breakdown providers, they know what they can and can't do. So one of the things I did on that, when I was at Royal Mail and we're doing it here – when we're doing mass rollouts we notify the breakdown provider in that location so they can gear up to make sure that provision is there. But what I am finding is that they don't breakdown!

Simon: Well, that's handy

Lorna: They're far better – you have far less mechanical issues. Less moving parts, people drive them better, more cautious to start with as well, it's quieter so the indirect benefits are people's wellbeing. Drivers are less stressed out, the old fashioned 'white van man' goes, people are interested in how you're looking after the environment, so the public perception is better for the drivers as well, all those things make for a better wellbeing type of environment, and it all comes into how they driver the vehicle.

Simon: I was wondering if you'd seen any changes in collision levels with the EVs? Are drivers more prone to collisions, maybe as they get used to the vehicles, or have you not seen a difference? Sounds like you're not seeing that.

Lorna: We're not seeing that at all. It helps that you can't get a replacement EV so don't damage it in the first place! We are seeing drivers look after those vehicles better so we are seeing less incidents. Don't forget they come with a lot more safety features as well

Simon: They have pretty much a full suite of collision avoidance tech as a whole?

Lorna; Vans always used to be the poor relations to the cars, there's a lot of that tech coming in now – blind spot indicators, a lot more coming in to the vans with the EV tech.

Simon: One of the primary challenges with electric vans has been reduced load carrying capacity due to the weight of the battery, which can lead to over loading. Has that been a problem for NG?

Lorna: No, because before we put them in, we did that assessment of the specification and used it as an opportunity to reassess how you do the job. You're not taking what you did before and just replicating it. You're taking it as an opportunity to say what can I do differently. Can some of that kit come out because when you look at it you realise the kits has ended up in the vehicle over the years and it's become habit. When you go into it you don't need it – you find you've been hoarding stuff. So you just change the way of working

and have a look at the vehicle and go back to basics. Because we knew we could not get EVs in the larger sizes when we first started, we looked at the vehicles and said – what do you actually need? If we put the ladders the site instead, can you reduce the weight? There was a lot of work in designing specifications first to make sure that everything came in as it should.

Simon: It's a great lesson for any fleet – it illustrates the need for constant vigilance and management of what you're doing, not letting bad habits getting ingrained, or adverse trends become the norm. You want to keep monitoring everything you do, and go back to basics to keep it fresh and ensures everybody is on top of their game

Lorna: We've done that with the recent highway code changes as well, so the legislation changes on the mobile phones, the access ways with pedestrians we did a huge internal campaign. Every change gives you an opportunity to go back and re-educate or reinforce some of your key messages. I know with the mobile phones changes, all we're doing is reinforcing something we already had. Take very single change as an opportunity to just double check you're up to speed . For example we did it recently, we had the mini fuel crisis, driver shortages, we dusted ff the business resilience plans and there was no provision in there for EVs and we had ramped up that fast, when the fuel was running short, we didn't need to worry as much as we did before, because we had a lot of electric vehicles to use as shuttle vehicles or to do sme of the other jobs, we had different locations – so go and use their vans – so we ended up changing our business resilience plan to also factoring that we had EVs.

Simon: I watched the Transport session at COP26 in Glasgow last year where you were a panel member and you said you thought range anxiety had gone away, because the average range of an EV is now well over 200 miles, and the main concern now is charging anxiety. From a driver management perspective, any kind of anxiety can lead to a lack of concentration or distraction behind the wheel so does National Grid look at any of this from a driver wellbeing/confidence angle? How do you manage that? Have you go enough infrastructure.

Lorna: I think we have gone from range anxiety to charge anxiety and we're now into a space where there almost an etiquette that needs to come in. There are so many more vehicles charging – you're expected to move at 80% charge, but vans have less charge available to them and 90% is what's needed for them to finish their job for the day and there's an understanding creeping in. Car drivers – we are putting the infrastructure in and sorting out the depot charging for the commercial vehicles. We're providing some charge point cards and we notify the drivers where there public charge points are, so we are trying to help them in the same way that we would with an ICE vehicle. A lot of stuff managing risk, anxiety, driver wellbeing are already there – they might need the odd tweak so it's reinforcing it again.

Simon: You've still got a considerable number of ICE vehicles on fleet, petrol, diesel, as you work towards net zero, so you do you do anything around helping drivers use those vehicles more efficiently.

Lorna: Yes, we always do things like that – reducing high risk levels, increasing compliance, reducing accident rates – you’re always education people on driving better so you’re always reminding them that heavy right foot – trying to get from A to B as fast as you can, especially when you get emergency callouts – it’s reminding people that you drive like that, it’s different between electric cars and vans and once they’ve learnt that, some of that actually creeps back into their vehicles when they’re driving the ICE vehicles. We are seeing natural transitions, but we still go out and remind people. We have safety briefings, we’ve trained over 10,000 drivers in road safety in 5 years, we’ve checked over 50,000 licence checks and we’re increasing that again so it’s a continuous piece of work that you cannot afford to stop doing because you ever quite know what’s next. We have got all of these fuel concerns going on so it’s going back and reminding people how to conserve your fuel. Every one mile an hour over affects your MPG.

Simon: DfBB is primarily about communicating the business benefits of good management practice, vehicles or drivers, so could you quantify some of the reductions you’ve achieved in fuel use and emissions as you near your net zero target?

Lorna: Some of the initial targets were just how many EVs – of the 1700 cars 700 are fully EV. October last year, was the first time the number of pure EVs was higher than the number of ICE cars so we had tipped the balance. We have a bunch of hybrids in the middle. I’ve got less than 400 ICE vehicles on the car fleet. In terms of the commercials, what we’ve seen in changes there, it comes back to the point, when you’re educating the drivers on fuel consumption and everything else you are seeing the numbers go down, how we measure some of it – our average co2 per km is 55g now, which is one of the lowest going, especially if you haven’t got pure EVs. We are seeing fuel, economy, emissions but I’m also seeing reduction in my incidents, the number of things happening and where the fault is changing in the right direction. That awareness level means people are much more conscious now of how they drive. They are in the public eye more. If they burn that fuel they are damaging that air quality and that’s become something that people value.

Simon: More fuel-efficient driving tends to lead to safer driving – has this led to any reductions in collisions, or any other business efficiencies such as lower maintenance costs? You mentioned earlier less was going wrong. Less to spend on damage repairs? You’re seeing some string financial benefits and efficiency benefits?

Lorna: Yes – of course you use that at the beginning when you’re doing you’re total cost of ownership. We’ve all heard it – the upfront cost of these vehicles is more but if you use everything you said and factor that in your total cost of ownership very often is lower. The other thing we notice is that you can keep these vehicles longer if you chose to do so because there’s less to go wrong. The tech is there. You factor that into the total cost. Right now, personally, I would say it’s still a no brainer to go Electric Vehicles.

Simon: Excellent. Final question - What would be your advice to fleet managers, on where to start with the risk management, to other businesses who might be starting out on their net zero journey?

Lorna: I'm often asked this – and you talked about the risk management. You need to make sure you educate your drivers and you need to remember there's an awful lot you've already got in place so just go through your own policies and make tweaks to it. Don't try and reinvent the wheel. For anyone who's starting out, there are so many resources out there – National Highways have loads of resources – toolkits for drivers and risk so just take those resources and use them and adapt for your policies.

Simon: Lorna – I've really enjoyed that discussion thank you so much for being on the podcast