

Let's Talk Fleet Risk - Episode 15

Matthew Neale, Platform Housing

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 Matt Neale who is Group Fleet Manager for Platform Housing. The group manages 47,000 social housing properties and Matt looks after a fleet of 500 LCVs to allow employed tradespeople to maintain these properties.

Matt - welcome to the podcast.

I wanted to get you on the show as we have just published a really great case study on the improvements you're making at Platform Housing and the business benefits you're seeing as well, and I wanted to dig a bit deeper into some of those. Can you just give us a brief summary of your role and your responsibilities?

Matt: I have been here since September 2021. I've worked in the industry for about 18 years. My responsibilities are the maintenance and repair of 500 commercial vehicles while also managing the driver's downtime to support in the wider operation of the repairing of tenants' properties. I also look after EV infrastructure throughout the organisation, and driver training.

Simon: You've been at Platform Housing for just over a year now and I've got a two-part question to start with:

- How long did it take you to get to grips with the existing state of driver and vehicle management?
- And, what did you identify as the biggest challenges you were going to need to address?

Matt: To get to grips to start with it was quite easy. Being an experienced fleet manager, I was able to come in and know what I wanted to do. As part of my interview process I understood what the challenges were so I had an idea as to what I wanted to do. It didn't take long to get to grips with that – I managed to get lots of stuff done in the first month actually, but throughout that first month I identified a plan as to what I saw as the bigger challenges moving forward.

We detailed about 20 different projects and the main one was that we had no system so every vehicle was managed off a spreadsheet - so that will be the driver allocation, the

maintenance, the buying management, damage management end of contract, vehicle replacement programme – so that was my first challenge. I refused to manage a fleet off a spreadsheet bearing in mind the information was out of date as soon as you put the data into it.

Second biggest challenge was the management of our accidents – we had quite a high accident ratio in the organisation – I say accident ratio, it could be vehicle damage ratio – a prang or something - things like reversing into stationary object, however I didn't like the idea of our insurance company managing their own work so we looked to introduce an accident management company to support us with that.

Simon: You've been working with partners such as Fleetcheck to implement fleet management software, FMG for accident management. How have you worked with them to get the data you need in a manageable format, and to be able to make good use of it?

Matt: So, Fleetcheck has allowed me to have a confidence in the data that I am managing. Because a lot of our workforce is hybrid working – since the pandemic, 90-95% of our workforce is hybrid. All my team work from home so it's impossible to manage from a spreadsheet so implementing Fleetcheck allows us to work remotely while still having access to the same information. Fleetcheck is now my one version of the truth when it comes to anything to do with management of our systems. When we look to partner with others – FMG – we will go on to talk about Lightfoot later – but Fleetcheck has to integrate with them otherwise I don't partner with them because I want one version of the truth as to where the data stems from,. I don't want to create additional work for my team when updating vehicle allocations or driver allocations in the system so Fleetcheck has allowed me to have more of a detailed overview and I mentioned in my recommendation for them that they actually reduced my stress levels as a fleet manager so it's definitely a worthwhile move for us to partner with Fleetcheck.

Simon: A key part of that is the ability to improve your vehicle checking & maintenance regime, isn't it? What was that like when you came in and what does it look like now? Have there been significant improvements in that area?

Matt: Yes – Fleetcheck also allowed us to adapt the vehicle inspection profile – a driver app allows all our drivers to do a weekly vehicle inspection and it has a fall-out which means any defects that are reported come through to us and we can manage that maintenance a lot more pro-actively. Prior to having Fleetcheck the check data went into a group drive so somebody had to physically check every single PDF to see if there was a defect in there and then report it, so by implementing Fleetcheck we have saved half a day's job for somebody, so it's savings in other areas of the business and it's allowed us to manage the vehicle and the safety of the driver as well, bearing in mind some of the defects maybe safety related.

Simon: Does that have an impact on any other incidents you see where mechanical faults with the vehicle were a problem. Have you seen any reduction in incidents related to that?

Matt: Yes definitely. Again, it's important if they have a warning light on a vehicle it allows us to book the vehicle in proactively. If a vehicle has an amber warning light it allows us to get the vehicle straight into a dealer and we can arrange for a swap out of the vehicle which reduces the downtime of the operative. Leaving it often results in the vehicle breaking down

and that can cause a knock-on effect and further damage to the vehicle which we can then become liable for. It also supports the downtime of the driver to get them back on the road a lot quicker through the effective management of doing these vehicle checks through Fleetcheck. Without it we were waiting for the vehicle to break down and being reactive which isn't how an effective fleet manager should be working.

Simon: You've done a trial with Lightfoot to try and improve driver behaviour which yielded some fantastic results and projected annual savings of over £1m which should grab anybody's interest. Can you tell us more about that?

Matt: It was something that the business openly adopted really – when Lightfoot approach you they come forward with some shocking proposals – shocking reductions, they say they can save you this, this and this. It almost sounds too good to be true – and you're rather sceptical about it – but they do offer you a free trial, so we took the free trial and the figures – the data that came off the back of it, backed up their claims. The majority of our savings naturally came through fuel, with safer individual driving, allowing the fuel cost to be reduced dramatically. **On average it saved us about £30 per vehicle per month on fuel.** In addition to that, with the drivers driving a lot safer in the vehicle and not having so many harsh braking events or harsh cornering events or harsh acceleration events – it means that over the period of time – we set 5 years in our trial – it meant that we could save in other areas like accidental damage and in downtime which is really important. **I would really urge all fleet managers to look at the true cost of downtime so the business can really understand it** – it's not just the vehicle and somebody's hourly rate. It's the fleet managers time, the fleet team's time, and of course once you've driven the vehicle to the end of its lease you need to consider the end of lease charges that might result from abusing the vehicle over a number of years so by driving the vehicle in a safer, more safety efficient way it actually generates a considerable amount of savings. That's how we got to the £1million saving over 5 years through those 4 main elements. In our first year it was about £180,000 and then it escalated over the next few years – but it's not just financial. There are other benefits as well. As we are a charity, we receive grants from Homes in England to support our tenants in the social housing sector, we do have to offset our carbon footprint to meet ESG and CSR targets, so by going with Lightfoot, we not only make the fuel reduction but it will allow us to save 1.4 tonnes of carbon as well. It further supports the wider business, and the environment.

Simon: Yes, I think the environment and the downtime savings are two of the things at top of the list for most experienced fleet managers at the moment aren't they – an experienced fleet manager understands how much time that unplanned mechanical failure, unplanned downtime can cost. So, to any new fleet managers its one of things they need to be managing isn't it – the amount of downtime in the business.

Matt: Yes definitely – it doesn't matter whether you manage a commercial fleet or a vehicle fleet – downtime is always going to be an issue. If someone is not able to perform the duty they are employed to do – in our line of business we deal with social housing and we have vulnerable tenants. If we can't get out it has a knock-on effect – the tenants wellbeing - so the downtime of the vehicle and the driver is paramount. It plays a huge part in our organisation and that's a consideration we take when we invest in products and partners. It's all about improving the downtime of our operatives to improve our service to our tenants

Simon: Yes, I guess one of the benefits is an improvement customer service and that's an important point.

Simon: One of the things we try to demonstrate with Driving for Better Business is that improvements, and therefore savings, can be made relatively quickly and start to pay back quicker than you might expect. Can you talk us through the returns you've seen versus the time and investment that have been made.

Matt: I am an experienced fleet manager but anyone joining the role or new to managing fleets – one of the main things – I have always been taught to save my salary so I become a benefit to the business. So that's the first thing I do – I have a small team of 3, but I task them with generating savings as well. It's simple things like challenging invoicing. Naturally in our organisation suppliers may have got away with more than they should while there wasn't a fleet manager here, so we've generated £200K savings by challenging different costs with different suppliers. It works 2-fold – it makes you an asset to the business and not a cost burden, but also if you save money through challenging, you can say can we now look to invest other areas – like technology – it gives you a stronger case for board members. I've saved this but I've generated these savings – so that's how I work when I am presenting proposals to the organisation – how I can generate savings. If I can save x amount of downtime hours for the operation – it has benefits to the business as a whole, it's not just financially led.

Simon: When you first came into the business there hadn't been a fleet manager - and you saw what needed addressing, what was the support like from senior management in the business? Could they see the benefits that were going to come or was that a difficult sell?

Matt: My boss is the Employment Director, and his direct line manager is the CFO. I couldn't ask for 2 better people to be honest. The support I get is phenomenal. They always support what we are doing as a team. Fleet often gets left behind – I think that happens in lots of businesses – but by me raising areas of concern, showing where there are risks to the business, whether that be financial or reputational or in other areas, they fully support that and fully understand what I'm looking to achieve – and they go on to support me when I am presenting to the board for other investments so I've always had a positive experience.

I know some others don't – all I would say to them is make sure you present the full facts and don't just look at financial. Look at the operational benefits as well and look at your audience. I work for a Chief Financial Officer, so she's very interested in the financial benefits. So that's my audience and I'll show where those financial benefits are. I also report to the Operations Director in my role and his main focus is the downtime of his drivers so I adapt the way I present to him so the benefits are not all around costs but how he is going to be able to improve aspects of the operation so our tenants have a more positive experience.

Simon: That's a brilliant segue way into my next question. You mentioned at the start that you co-manage the workforce, alongside their direct line management, so how have you managed to work with other people in the business with different focus to balance the need to get the job done quickly, with the need to get to and from the job as safely as possible?

Matt: Yes definitely. The key thing when I first started and sat down with the senior leadership team and service managers, the thing I made clear, **before they're an engineer or an electrician or a plumber, or a multi-skilled tradesperson, they are a car driver or a van driver – they get in my vehicle before they become that tradesperson. It's my job to get them to their location safely to complete the job they've been employed to do.** I got a positive response to this as they often see vehicles being a necessary evil. I spun it around to say our job is to get you there safely. I regularly talk to the senior teams in property care and the service teams to support the downtime of the operatives to make sure they go about their business in a safe manner – that's my job.

Simon: That's something that Driving for Better Business supports – **these guys are highly skilled and professional at their trade – and driving is a part of that so it's about getting them to view driving with the same professionalism as they do their normal work.**

Matt: Yes. You're a driver first – I do Toolbox Talks and I jump on a 'Your Voice' forum so operatives can talk directly to me and raise concerns – it allows me to have one to one conversations and smaller group conversations to show them benefits – Lightfoot offers them initiatives directly – they reward them each month just for driving safely – so it's important to communicate with the driver.

Simon: My final question for you, Matt. Every successful fleet manager I speak to says you can never rest on your laurels and that the job is a continuous learning curve and journey of constant incremental improvements. Looking to the future, how are you planning to build on the improvements you've made in the past year.

Matt: You can't rest on your laurels – you need to be more and more proactive by investing in systems and technology that allows you to do that. We also make sure we are moving forward with the times – we've purchased 40 electric vehicles, now getting wraps & livery, so we can distribute them to our drivers. We purchased direct rather than through a leasing company. We can borrow money cheaper as we get preferential rates, and it allows us a greater ownership of the downtime of the vehicle so we can do what we need to get the vehicle back on the road. So, if it means spending more money because the driver is back on the road faster or bringing in different parts – recycling / green parts etc we have more control.

We are moving to an outright purchase model. We have another 25 vehicles on order which gives us a lot of advantages in supporting Platform on downtime. We are going to purchase pool vehicles so if a vehicle goes down we can get a fully kitted vehicle to the driver so they can carry with their day. We move the other vehicle into a repair shop and get it sorted – it's an investment but it means we don't rely on trying to procure hire vehicles and it allows us to manage our operation more effectively.

Simon: This fits in perfectly with our theme of Safer Vehicles - they look like initiatives to maintain your vehicles as safely as possible and get the vehicles back on the road in the quickest time.

You can get more details of these initiatives in the Platform Housing case study on our website at drivingforbetterbusiness.com

Matt, thank you very much for being my guest on this episode of 'Let's Talk Fleet Risk'

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Simon: If you manage drivers and their vehicles, and you face similar issues to those discussed in this podcast, there are links in the show notes to some useful resources on the Driving for Better Business website. And these are all free to access. If you enjoyed the conversation, please don't forget to hit subscribe - so you know when the next episode is released. And please also give us a 5-star review, as this helps us to get up the podcast rankings, and makes it more visible to others who might also find it useful. You can follow us – that's Driving for Better Business on Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn. And most importantly, please help us to spread the word. All our resources are free for those who manage fleets and their employees who drive for work. Thank you for listening to Let's Talk Fleet Risk, and I look forward to welcoming you to the next episode.