



Rail Replacement Tracking Business Sector: Transport



First Group

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John Batchelor

In September 2017 First Group won a Department for Transport tendering competition to operate the rail network south of London Waterloo known as South West Trains but rebranded to South Western Railway (SWR).

Project Objectives

Customer needs:

- ✓ Live tracking

Project Outcomes

Provide tracking for at least
75%
of planned rail replacement services

One of the committed obligations is to provide live tracking for at least 75% of planned rail replacement services. These services operate at times of planned engineering work and consist of buses or coaches serving the affected routes and stations. Inevitably this results in extended journey times and potential confusion of passengers. Live tracking is required to provide certainty that a service is running and what time it can be reasonably be expected to turn up.

Challenges

Vehicle tracking within the bus and coach industry is fragmented with many operators still not seeing its benefits. The major bus companies including First use either Greenroad or Ticketer to track their vehicles and FTS have been able to obtain links to access their data. Those smaller independent operators who do have tracking tend to use a myriad of different products most of which FTS could not get links to.

The percentage of journeys being tracked by these systems was around 25% and it proved impossible to increase this without thinking of other methods. Invisible Systems presented their tracker solutions to FTS in early 2018 but this went no further largely due to cost which needed to be picked up by SWR. Other initiatives were tried including the FTS tracking app which is downloadable onto mobile devices. This is unpopular with drivers who do not wish to use their own devices or data. We also involved a company called Nine Hundred Communications who pitched suitable products to us but then were unable to deliver.

Given the pressure being put on SWR from the Department for Transport to deliver on their committed obligation FTS decided to again involve Invisible Systems and it was agreed to purchase 50 fitted and 50 portable trackers.

Progress and Results

The operators who most frequently operate rail replacement work for SWR were engaged with to determine their response to using these new trackers and whether they would prefer to use fitted or portable ones. Fortunately, there was a lot of positive response and trackers were quickly despatched and used. A pool of portable trackers has been retained to be used by operators in areas where work is very infrequent and will be dispatched and returned as required.

The trackers have proved to be very reliable and are providing the increase in tracking data that is required by SWR who are very happy with the results.

FTS use a system called Ground Transport Information (GTI) to manage the tracking data and an API was provided by Invisible Systems to transfer the data between the two systems. This data was subsequently transferred to SWR's systems who used it to develop a customer and employee app. This app provides location, tracking and expected timings of rail replacement services. This is particularly useful for passengers waiting at unstaffed stations or at bus stopping places away from the stations. It is expected that this information will soon be available on customer information screens on stations.

Progress and Results

The app is obtainable in the usual ways but will only show rail replacement information when there are planned operations. To access this information passengers, need to click on 'information' then 'travel information' and finally 'check rail replacement services'.

On the right is a photograph of how the information looks on the app.

Conclusion

FTS are currently hitting and often exceeding the required amount of tracking data. Without Invisible Systems products this would never have been achieved. SWR are the first Train Operating Company (TOC) to have achieved this level of tracking and what is a ground-breaking app. There is every possibility that other TOCs included GWR, TPE and Hull Trains who are current clients of FTS to wish to emulate these achievements. Should FTS be tasked with providing similar systems in the future I am sure that Invisible Systems would be their preferred partner again.

Below is how the tracking is presented on GTI. This is from Bear Buses who used a portable tracker on 24/05/19.

