

Leading the way

Terri Vogt, head of CSR at FirstGroup, explains how sustainability sets the company's rail division apart from other operators.

A recent sustainability report produced by EIRIS has ranked FirstGroup as the top company for sustainability in the UK, and second best in the world. Just one other transport provider, the UK's GoAhead Group, made the list.

So what does the company do to set itself apart on sustainability?

Director of CSR, Terri Vogt, answered RTM's questions. "A key reason why we scored well is transparency – the assessment was based on publicly available information and we are very open about how we're performing – we clearly set out our main sustainability commitments in a number of publicly available policies," she said.

Vogt stressed that FirstGroup was the first company within its sector to publish a climate change strategy, back in 2007. The company has since updated its strategy as its understanding of the complexity of the issues involved has improved.

"The biggest pressure on the industry at the moment is to reduce cost and inefficiency. In many ways the two areas are inextricably linked – improving efficiency and sustainability invariably leads to cost savings."

She explained that while the company had seen a steady increase in total carbon emissions, within the rail division, this was primarily due to the growth of the business – running more trains. However despite this the company has achieved significant reductions on emissions per passenger kilometer – down 17% since 2006/7.

Emissions and efficiency

"This shows we've been carrying our passengers more and more efficiently," Vogt said. "That's partly because we've successfully attracted more customers on to our trains and partly because we've been investing in the fuel efficiency of our vehicles."

This includes the installation of Driver Advisory Systems (DAS) on First Great Western's HST fleet, with trials suggesting between 8% and 15% improvements in fuel efficiency are possible, depending on the route used.

FirstGroup is now looking at the business case for rolling this out to all of its train operating companies.

DAS are automated systems which help drivers to drive trains as efficiently as possible for particular conditions, adjusting speed and coasting to meet the timetable whilst reducing emissions.

The version of system used in First Great Western HST cabs, for example, shows the current time, time due at the next station and an ETA in the bottom left of the screen, the next station/timing point, type of train and current location in the bottom right, and gives advice to the driver in the main part of the screen.

The specific system used on FGW's HSTs, called EnergyMiser, is produced by Australian company TTG.

The system had earlier undergone extensive trials on First Hull Trains' Class 180s.

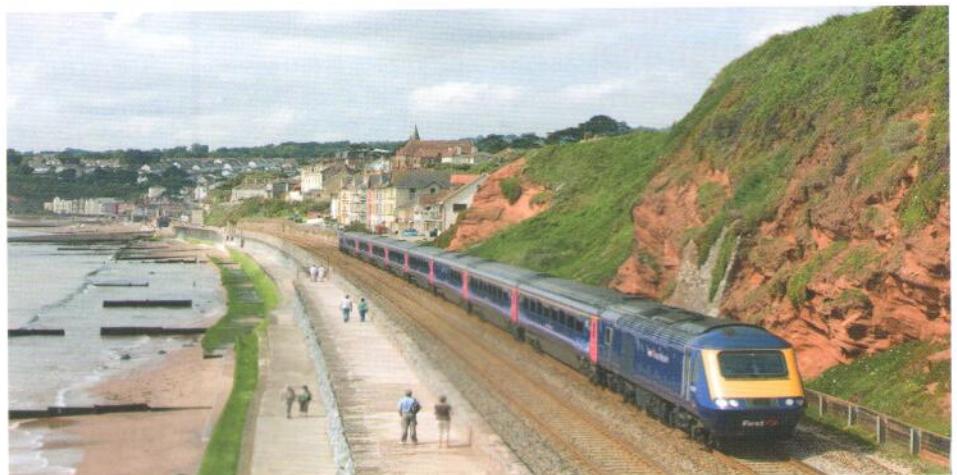
Measuring the impact

Vogt went on to describe the benefits of installing electricity meters on electric rolling stock. This will aid efforts to use less electricity, she explained, "simply because we know how much we're using."

Currently the industry lacks adequate motivation to try to reduce emissions from electric trains, given the absence of measurement and lack of financial incentives. However, this is something the industry is working towards, Vogt suggested.

"There's a little way to go for the industry as a whole before we move over to metering in general, which will provide operators with a much bigger incentive to reduce electric energy usage."

While sustainability may be dismissed by critics as an additional complication, Vogt argued that it is an integral part of improving efficiency and saving costs.





"The biggest pressure on the industry at the moment is to reduce cost and inefficiency. In many ways the two areas are inextricably linked – improving efficiency and sustainability invariably leads to cost savings. And given fuel is one of the industry's biggest costs, it makes good business sense to use it as efficiently as is possible. I think for the industry in general, and certainly at FirstGroup, reducing cost and increasing efficiency is treated as one and the same."

Financial barriers mean that some of what could or should be implemented is not always practical. "We'd like to do more as an industry. But as is the case in any sector there are barriers –

technology, people, resources and finance are not always as readily available as we would wish."

A sustainable future

She added: "Overall as these things develop and evolve they will increasingly demonstrate cost savings. That will help attract the investment needed to further progress and improve."

"Going forward much of our success in terms of sustainability in the rail industry is about sharing best practice and learning. We want to make sure people in the industry can learn from each other."

The future for sustainability

includes longer franchises, new fuel sources and maximising capacity, Vogt said.

"If you look at the proportion of emissions that rail contributes to the UK, as a whole, it's very small. When compared to the car for example trains enjoy significantly better statistics in terms of emissions. There is no doubt that trains are a hugely efficient means of transporting people, particularly if you can optimise the number of passengers travelling."

Finally, when asked about rail's reliance on diesel, Vogt said:

"Ultimately the rail industry will need to address the question of fuel source and move away from its reliance on diesel. Rather than environmental factors, it may, admittedly, be other factors such as availability and cost that drives the industry to other fuel sources, such as electricity."



Terri Vogt

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