

Episode 7 Transcript

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Juliette Maxim: Hello and welcome back to Life on Rails. I'm Juliette Maxim.

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Lucy Wright: And I'm Lucy Wright.

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Juliette Maxim: We work in Greater Anglia's PR department and host this podcast exploring one of the UK's largest train companies.

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Lucy Wright: In this episode, we speak to Steven Crocker, CEO of Norwich Theater.

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Stephen Crocker: It's amazing to look at the city and I just think it's got an incredible vibe to it. It has grown and developed but it's managed to keep its quite feisty independence, but also it's blended that old and the new really incredibly well here.

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Lucy Wright: Our resident fares guru, Ken Strong.

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Ken Strong: Flexi season tickets are a relatively new product and what they are is a bundle of eight tickets which can be used for a day within 28 days.

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Lucy Wright: Sharon Arnold, Greater Anglia's Rail Replacement Manager.

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Sharon Arnold: I receive passenger loading data and that gives me a very good idea if there's 20 buses coming off the train or five buses worth of people coming off the train.

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Lucy Wright: Addie Quinnier, who works in our control center in Romford.

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Addie Quinnier: Clyde, the tortoise, sticks in my mind. He was a giant African tortoise that had got onto the railway. We were, what we call job stopped, which means that no trains can move in that particular area.

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Lucy Wright: And Brett Chorkley, Redelivery Project Manager for Greater Anglia.

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Brett Chalkley: Everybody focuses on the new trains coming in, but the projects are re-delivering over a thousand vehicles to four owners is a sizeable task and one that has to be managed in minute detail, as well.

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Juliette Maxim: To kick things off though, we're going to speak to Steph Evans, our Environment and Energy Manager.

In this episode's Greener Anglia slot, we're going to talk about air quality at stations with Steph Evans. Hi, Steph.

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Steph Evans: Hi.

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Juliette Maxim: Thanks for joining us. So we're currently taking part in a pilot to monitor air quality at some of our stations. Can you tell me a little bit about it?

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Steph Evans: Yeah, sure. So Greater Anglia, got five stations taking part in the Air Quality Monitoring Network, which is a program which has been funded by the Department of Transport. And it's, basically, monitoring various key environmental pollutants that relate to diesel exhausts, including nitrogen dioxide and particulate matter. It's the first in its kind for rail industry and it's the first real look really what stations look like in terms of air pollution, and RSSB are collating this data to provide an evaluation of where their levels are.

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Juliette Maxim: And the RSSB, that's a national body, isn't it, a rail organization?

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Steph Evans: Yes, they're the Rail Safety Standards Board and they help to provide advice to the rail industry on safety but also environmental matters. So there is a project leading on air quality which this feeds into.

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Juliette Maxim: So why nitrogen dioxide? What's so wrong with nitrogen dioxide?

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Steph Evans: So nitrogen dioxide is one of the key greenhouse gases and it is particularly related to exhaust and diesel exhausts. So it is a good indicator if you've got nitrogen dioxide present that you have got diesel emissions.

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Juliette Maxim: Some pollution?

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Steph Evans: Some pollution from diesel emissions. Exactly right.

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Juliette Maxim: So it's a national project. And so which stations are taking part in it and why did you pick them?

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Steph Evans: We've got five stations, that's Norwich, Ipswich, Cambridge, Ely and Stansted Airport and they've been picked due to the trains that go there. So the majority of them have bi-mode, which is a train that's got two types of power. So they can be powered by

electric if there's overhead wires, or diesel. Obviously, the key thing we're looking for is potential pollutants from diesel. The other reason they're picked is due to the difference. So you've got Norwich, which is enclosed station and we've got Ipswich platforms that are open. So it gives an idea of the differences between open, closed and what, potentially, might be there with regards to the trains that enter the platforms.

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Juliette Maxim: So they're like different controls, aren't they, in a big experiment?

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Steph Evans: Exactly. And in some of them we've also got the monitoring placed outside. So you've got difference between the station environment and an outside control variable.

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Juliette Maxim: So is air quality actually a problem at our stations then?

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Steph Evans: So we don't believe it is, but this is part of a wider sustainability strategy in the rail industry looking at a range of topics, air quality being a key one of them. I suppose it also links into other things such as the de-carbonizations looking at carbon reductions. So if you can improve air quality, it also helps improve other aspects, such as reducing emissions and reducing perhaps noise, as well. I think the reality is this is the first of its kind, so it's to find out what the levels are and then the idea is then targets will be put in place. If it's found that there are issues, then improvement plans will be put in ... Look at ways to improve it further.

I think the important thing to remember is that traveling by train is one of the better forms of transport. The only thing that's better for the environment is walking or cycling. So it's really important to remember that.

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Juliette Maxim: So how long is this pilot and what happens after that?

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Steph Evans: It's expected to carry on for two years. So it started in January, but you really do need at least a year's worth of data before you can really make any adjustments just because you get seasonal variations, obviously hot temperatures that are likely to impact on that. But the data will then be looked at and if there's areas across the rail network, if they decide that some areas need more attention, they may look at putting different sensors in that may get different pollutants. Obviously, the ones we've got there, they look at nitrogen dioxide only, but there are other elements they might want to monitor. So that's it at the moment.

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Juliette Maxim: So how are you actually monitoring the air quality? What do you do?

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Steph Evans: We've got a number of, they're called diffusion tubes, which are a way of monitoring air quality. They've been used for quite a long time. They have a mesh in the tube and, basically, it reacts if nitrogen oxide is available. So they're put out and changed approximately every four weeks by station staff and then they're then sent to a lab for

analysis and then the RSSB, who I mentioned earlier, then collating this data and evaluating the results from it.

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Juliette Maxim: All sounds really interesting and, once again, like you said, this isn't anything for people to be alarmed about. We don't think the air quality is really bad in our stations. We just want to make our industry even greener than it is already.

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Steph Evans: Yeah, definitely. And I think environment is more higher on people's agenda than it perhaps previously was. And definitely looking at ... If you look at sustainable rail strategy and where it's looking, it's focusing on a lot more areas such as air quality, noise, carbon reduction, and I think this is just one area that helps demonstrate that the more that's going on to reduce and be aware of people's impact.

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Juliette Maxim: And Greater Anglia, of course, has made great strides with different cleaner trains, haven't they? Our new trains are definitely cleaner than the old trains.

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Steph Evans: Yeah, definitely. So the bi-mode obviously means that if there's electricity available, the bi-mode can use electricity rather than diesel and that means that then trains aren't idling in stations and a diesel engine ... That whereas years ago, they would've been. So that's definitely a case to say that that will have helped.

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Juliette Maxim: Okay. That's brilliant. Well thank you very much for explaining all about the pilot and we'll have to come back in a year or so and see where we are then. Thank you, Steph.

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Steph Evans: Thanks.

00:07:11

Juliette Maxim: I'm here with Ken Strong as it's time for fares guru and in this episode we're chatting about Flexi Season tickets. So Ken, how are you?

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Ken Strong: I'm very well. Thanks for having me back.

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Juliette Maxim: Oh, no problem. Always good to hear from you. So what can you tell us, what are Flexi Season tickets?

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Ken Strong: Well, Flexi Season tickets are a relatively new product. They've been around for two or three years now and they were brought in because of the growth of part-time commuting which, even before the pandemic, was on the rise, and now, of course, it's very much part of many people's working lives. And what they are is a bundle of eight tickets which can be used for a day within 28 days so you can travel on eight days within 28.

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Juliette Maxim: They're actually on a smart card, aren't they?

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Ken Strong: That's right. You can get them on a smart card, on a physical smart card, or you can also get them on the GA app and validate them either by tapping your smart card on a reader or authenticating the ticket in the app. And once you've done it once for that day, that's it. You tap it the once or validate it the once and you can use it as many times as you like during that day on your chosen journey, including break of journey. So if you've got Chelmsford to London, you can go back and forwards and stop off if you wish.

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Juliette Maxim: It's eight tickets for the same journey to be used within 28 days. Can you only buy one Flexi Season ticket per 28 days or can you buy more if you run out?

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Ken Strong: No, I mean, if you go three times a week and so you would use them up within a couple of weeks, then you can buy another lot straight away. You can use them as often or as sparsely as you like as long as you use them all up within the 28 days. So, I mean, 28 days is four weeks, so that's based on an average of two journeys per week. If you do more than that, you'll use them up more quickly. If you only do one journey per week, it's probably better just to stick to buying a day return.

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Juliette Maxim: And what is the saving with the Flexi Season ticket?

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Ken Strong: The saving is up to 12 and a half percent and in most cases on GA it's 12 and a half percent off the Anytime Day return. Some cases it's slightly less, and in a few very long distance cases, London to Ipswich and beyond, it can be more.

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Juliette Maxim: So, basically, it's cheaper to buy a Flexi Season ticket than to buy eight Anytime Day returns?

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Ken Strong: It certainly is in all cases. There is a season ticket calculator on the GA website which you can put in and work out what the best ticket for you is.

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Juliette Maxim: So who is the Flexi Season ticket best for?

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Ken Strong: The real target market is your traditional short to medium distance commuter market. So the likes of Chelmsford to London, Harlow to London, Bishops Stortford to London, short to medium distances. As the distances get longer, the difference between the season ticket and the Day Return varies. So it may be worth buying the Flexi if you're going twice a week. But as you go to longer journeys, if you're going three times a week or more, the weekly or monthly season ticket would be better value. Whereas for shorter journeys such as Chelmsford, Harlow, Bishops Stortford, the Flexi Season is better value for three days

a week and sometimes even for four. But you need to work out the journey that you're making and work out what's best for you.

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Juliette Maxim: And that's easy to do, isn't it, with a season ticket calculator?

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Ken Strong: It's very easy to do, yes.

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Juliette Maxim: Perfect. And I would just like to add, as well, of course, there is a comparable ticket for parking, as well, isn't there? There's the flexible parking season ticket. So get your Flexi Season ticket, get your flexible parking season ticket, and if you're traveling into the office only a couple of times a week, that's going to be your best bet.

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Ken Strong: That's right.

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Juliette Maxim: Okay, well thanks very much Ken and thanks very much for joining us again and we look forward to the next episode of your next tip on how to get a great value fare from Greater Anglia.

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Ken Strong: Thank you.

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Juliette Maxim: It's time now for me to member of staff, and in this episode I'm talking to Control Manager Addie Quinnier. Welcome, Addie, and thank you for joining us.

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Addie Quinnier: Thank you for having me.

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Juliette Maxim: And we're actually in the control room, which is an incredibly impressive building. Can you tell us a little bit about it, please?

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Addie Quinnier: Yeah, so control is based at Romford. We sit alongside the train lines, we can see them out of our window behind us. We are overseeing the whole of the Anglia network. We're in here with Network Rail.

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Juliette Maxim: It's just an incredible building, a sea of screens in this big central room. So you're Control Manager. Can you tell me a little bit about what that entails?

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Addie Quinnier: Yeah, so I'm one of five in a team. We work opposite shifts, so we're never on shift with each other, but we oversee the running of the control for Greater Anglia. We have a counterpart with Network Rail, which is their route control manager. We work hand in hand with them to make sure that we're giving the best possible service to our

customers, that we handle any disruptive incidents as best we can and resolve them as quickly as possible.

And there's a real mix in this room of who we have doing certain jobs and my role is to oversee all of that and make sure the right decisions are being made, seeing the bigger picture, for not just the immediate moment, but the future and how it's going to impact the next day. We want to make sure that whatever's going on doesn't continue to carry on and we're making quick, short, sharp decisions.

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Juliette Maxim: So is that a 24/7 job then?

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Addie Quinier: It is, yes. You get us for 12 hours a day during the day and then overnight and at weekends, bank holidays, Christmas, Easter, we're always here.

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Juliette Maxim: Greater Anglia has really redoubled its efforts to make its service as punctual and reliable as possible and that includes dealing with disruption and getting out of disruption as quickly as possible. So presumably you've actually played a key role in that. Can you tell us a little bit about that please?

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Addie Quinier: Yeah, absolutely. We have what we would call a contingency plan for incidents and that's based on the location of an incident and the severity. So if we take this location here at Romford, we've got four tracks available to us, two tracks that we usually use and two tracks the Elizabeth line uses. We have access to swap over if necessary. So if you had an incident that was affecting only two lines, two tracks, we would be able to work with Network Rail on the Elizabeth line and reduce our train service slightly to share the access of the other tracks. And they're the kind of things that we would work through. You might have an incident that actually blocks all of the lines, so you have a completely different plan that you have to bring in based on the infrastructure that's available to you and that varies across the network depending on where it is and, like I say, the severity.

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Juliette Maxim: Which of the incidents that you've dealt with that people might have heard of?

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Addie Quinier: There's not many I haven't dealt with, unfortunately. I've got a bit of a jinx reputation. But the most frequent are things like points failures, it might be damage to overhead wires either through vegetation, that's trees that are too close to the railway, or be that a train issue. Yes, we do have the instance where, sadly, people are hit by trains. That's obviously quite disruptive to our service and to the people involved. So that takes a lot longer to resolve.

But then, like you say, we have to do our future proofing, as well so we know that there's engineering works coming up, we're looking at the plans that if there's going to be any issues with that, if there's any hint of any overruns that everyone's heard of, we have a plan to deal with that as it happens and we will work on an hour by hour basis, if necessary. So we are all very involved in all kinds of incidents.

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Juliette Maxim: So what incidents do you really remember?

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Addie Quinnier: I think recently Clyde, the tortoise, sticks in my mind. He was a giant African tortoise that had got onto the railway and, unfortunately, was struck by a train and quite badly injured. And our driver was able to actually spot Clyde as he was approaching and stop the train, wasn't able to pass over the top of the tortoise. So we were-

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Juliette Maxim: He was huge.

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Addie Quinnier: Absolutely.

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Juliette Maxim: We saw pictures of him.

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Addie Quinnier: We were, what we call, job stopped, which means that no trains can move in that particular area. So we did have passengers on board, a train that couldn't go anywhere, they weren't within a station so we couldn't get them off the train and they just had to wait for the rescue team to come and rescue poor Clyde and give him the help that he needed. That was quite an interesting one.

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Juliette Maxim: It certainly sparked worldwide interest. It kept the media team extremely busy. So much interest. Not every day that you have to stop a train because of a giant tortoise.

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Addie Quinnier: Absolutely.

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Juliette Maxim: I'm glad to say that he seems to be doing well.

And what's the key to doing your job well? It sounds, to me, you definitely can't panic.

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Addie Quinnier: No. My dad always described me as a swan, really calm and serene on the surface, but kicking like crazy under the water, and that's definitely how I get through my shifts.

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Juliette Maxim: Recently you dealt with Operation London Bridge, which was the giant planning that went on to support the nation mourning Her Majesty the Queen. Do you want to talk a little bit about that?

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Addie Quinnier: Yeah, I definitely came in at the end of it all. Obviously, a lot of the hard work had already been done by our planning teams and everyone around, and my part was just making sure the trains ran on the days that they needed to run. I think probably for the first time we ran trains 24/7, which was really interesting, and I loved seeing the

passenger numbers that we actually had, the amount of people that we had coming into London throughout the night.

So I was on the night shifts running up to the day of the funeral and we did have some disruptive incidents, so it was our priority to make sure that those that did want to travel, continued to travel. And I feel I played my part a little bit in making sure that everybody that wanted to be in London for this time was able to do so. So I've got a little bit of pride in that.

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Juliette Maxim: And I've seen some fantastic comments on social media just praising Greater Anglia for running those night services so it's not gone unnoticed.

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Addie Quinmier: It is great, yeah.

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Juliette Maxim: Well, Addie, we could talk forever. It's really interesting. It's an amazing environment and you're doing a great job, and thank you so much for agreeing to be on the podcast.

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Addie Quinmier: Oh, you're welcome. Thank you for having me.

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Juliette Maxim: We're back with our regular mythbusters slot and in this episode I'm sitting down with Sharon Arnold, who's Greater Anglia's Rail Replacement Manager. Hi, Sharon, how are you? Thanks for joining us.

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Sharon Arnold: Hi, Juliette. It's nice to be here. Thank you.

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Addie Quinmier: So Rail Replacement Bus Manager, is that your job? What does that entail?

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Sharon Arnold: I manage the rail replacement contract. We have a third party supplier who actually actively delivers and procures our buses for us. But what I do is I work within Greater Anglia to ensure that they meet our requirements.

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Juliette Maxim: And I've used the rail replacement bus service and it always seems like a very slick operation. You get off the train, there's people showing you where to go, it's easy to find the bus stops. How does it actually work? And do we have extra staff, for instance, at stations when it's rail replacement?

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Sharon Arnold: We do have additional rail replacement staff at key stations. We don't have them at every station, but what we will usually have is where someone transfers from a train to a bus, there will normally be extra rail replacement staff there to help.

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Juliette Maxim: So we try and make it as easy as possible with the least amount of traipsing around.

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Sharon Arnold: Absolutely.

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Juliette Maxim: And one thing people might not understand is sometimes the rail replacement route is different to where the engineering work is. So, for instance, you might have engineering work between Marks Tey and Chelmsford, but the rail replacement is Colchester to Ingatestone. Why is that?

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Sharon Arnold: Well, that's a really good example, Juliette. So the reason for that is the size of our rail replacement operations. A lot of people don't realize we may have hundreds of buses over a weekend or a single day and we have to have ... When we're planning, we need to look at the space that's available at the stations that we're using to run the quantity of buses that we need for the numbers of passengers.

So the example that you gave, Juliette, Chelmsford is very limited because we're using a bus stop outside the station because there isn't a suitable car park for us to use and we can't physically get enough buses through one bus stop for everyone that needs to catch a rail replacement bus. Whereas at Ingatestone we take the entire car park when we're running rail replacement and that gives us a lot of space to stack buses up so that we can load those buses safely so that we can have some extra standbys available.

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Juliette Maxim: It takes over 20 buses doesn't it to replace one 10 carriage train? So how do you know how many buses to get?

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Sharon Arnold: That is a large part of my job and sometimes it can be quite difficult, particularly more recently when passengers have been traveling for different reasons because of the impacts of COVID and we were still running rail replacement through COVID. But we have a very set system. After I receive passenger loading data ... And just to explain what that is, for every bus that we use where we have got rail replacement staff, they record how many people are getting on that bus and that gives me a very good idea of how busy that route is. And that gives me a very good idea if there's 20 buses coming off a train or five buses worth of people coming off a train. And on top of that we always have some extra standbys out in case there are extra people than we expect.

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Juliette Maxim: And some people, I think, think that Greater Anglia has this huge fleet of buses on hand when we've been talking about planned engineering works, but when a tree comes down or the overhead lines come down and you've got to put some buses in place pronto, do we have this big fleet of buses and how easy is it to get a bus, say, at two o'clock on a Monday afternoon?

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Sharon Arnold: I wish we had depots full of buses that were doing nothing but, unfortunately, that's not the case. Greater Anglia and our supplier do not own a single bus. Actually what we do is we use a fleet of currently 115 bus operators within the Greater Anglia and wider

area and, basically, our supplier contacts them and finds out what's available. Because we're dealing with existing bus companies, they have their own work and a lot of that work is around private hire or event travel.

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Juliette Maxim: School buses, as well, of course.

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Sharon Arnold: Yeah. A lot of our bus companies do have school contracts, as well, as you quite rightly say. So it can be difficult, the morning peak and the early afternoon or mid-afternoon to get buses, because a lot of those buses are out doing their school runs. It would be very difficult at the top of the hat to find 50 or 60 buses, which is ideally what we'd be looking for if one of our bigger lines or routes was affected by disruption.

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Juliette Maxim: And just one more reminder, can you take a full size bike or an e-scooter on a bus or a coach?

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Sharon Arnold: Thank you, Juliette, for bringing that up. I'm afraid that you can't, so you cannot bring a full size bike on rail replacement buses. So no e-scooters and no e-cycles. That's a bus industry standard that we align ourselves to. It's about space and safety.

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Juliette Maxim: Thank you very much for joining us, Sharon.

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Sharon Arnold: Thank you, Juliette. It's been a pleasure. Thank you.

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Juliette Maxim: To get new trains, you have to send old trains back, but they can't go back as they are. All branding posters, stickers and even some modifications have to be removed first. And these are called dilapidations. Brett Chalkley's our Re-delivery Project Manager and he's here to tell us all about it. Hello, Brett, thanks for joining us.

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Brett Chalkley: Hi, Juliette. Thanks for having me.

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Juliette Maxim: So tell us a bit about where do the old trains go?

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Brett Chalkley: They go back to their owners. We don't own our trains. Our trains are leased by leasing companies and at the end of that period, the trains will then go back to the owner.

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Juliette Maxim: What do we have to do with the trains before they go back then? What is this process of dilapidations?

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Brett Chalkley: So the lease with a train is very much the same as a lease if you rent a car. It's just a legal formal agreement and there's specific conditions laid down in there about how we need to give them back. Most of that is ensuring that there's continuity of service for following on operators so that they can use the train straight away. So we have to hand the trains back to the owner in the condition that they're clean, they're tidy, they're free of defects, they're up to date with their maintenance, there's no vandalism. And we also have to remove things like our branding and operator specific stickers and so on and so forth so that they can go onto a new operator and go in service straight away without delay because the whole process is about ensuring that they can transfer out of one operator on one day and into the newer operator the next, as far as reasonably practicable.

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Juliette Maxim: Some of the trains that we've had, some of our old trains, we've refurbished them, we've put in modifications so that they perform better in autumn or that they're better, they have better accessibility. Do we have to strip all of those out and put them back the way they were?

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Brett Chalkley: In most cases when you do a modification, it will stay.

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Juliette Maxim: Now, we are getting 191 new trains, new longer trains with longer carriages and more seats. And that's replacing how many trains? How many trains are you having to send back?

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Brett Chalkley: So we're sending back 216 trains and 13 sets of coaches that we used on the Norwich to Liverpool Street line. So in total there's well over a thousand carriages that are going back and it has to be planned meticulously. The number of stagnant spaces in the facilities we have available mean that that plan has to match the incoming trains perfectly to ensure that we don't run out of space and run out of facilities. It's a monumental task. It's one of the largest fleet replacement programs, and everybody focuses on the new trains coming in, but it is one of the largest new fleet introductions. It's one of the largest old fleet replacements, as well.

So the project for re-delivering over a thousand vehicles to four owners is a sizeable task and one that has to be managed in minute detail, as well. We have a limited amount of space, we have a limited amount of infrastructure and facilities, so the plan for trains going away needs to match the plan for the new trains coming in absolutely perfectly.

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Juliette Maxim: And so at the same time we've had our technicians and engineers at depots working on routine maintenance for the trains that are in service, getting to grips with the new trains, but they've also had to be getting the old trains ready to go back. Sounds like a huge task for our staff?

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Brett Chalkley: Absolutely. We've also had specialist companies come in and assist us with things like painting and interior repairs and so on to try and facilitate this workload. Certainly in the early days there was an awful lot of work that needs to be done in a very short period of time.

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Juliette Maxim: And just to say, so you just mentioned people helping with painting, so some of the stuff that you've had to do is, first of all, make a log of everything that needs doing and then you've got to clean trains, get rid of scratches, clean carpets, that's the sort of thing that you've had to do?

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Brett Chalkley: Absolutely. I mean, it's the exactly the same process if you gave back your car. A specialist company will come in that's employed by the owner, if the owner doesn't do it themselves, and they'll audit the trains down to individual chips on individual panels and we'll have to prove that we've repaired them. And there's a large paperwork exercise, as well in making sure that we're recording each of those defects and repairing them and agreeing that condition with the owner.

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Juliette Maxim: Okay, well thanks very much, Brett. I should imagine you are quite pleased that the end is in sight?

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Brett Chalkley: We're getting there. We're getting there.

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Juliette Maxim: Thanks very much for joining us on the podcast.

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Brett Chalkley: Thank you for having me.

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Lucy Wright: It's now time for travel surgery and today we are sat on the incredible main stage of Norwich Theater Royal because we're speaking with Stephen Crocker. Stephen is Chief Executive of Norwich Theater and leads all aspects of the organization's work, both artistic and commercial. Norwich Theater covers Norwich Theater Royal, the Playhouse and Stage Two. Stephen began his career as a professional classical singer before entering the cultural sector, and prior to his move to Norwich in 2016, spent nine years at The Larry, latterly as Deputy Chief Executive.

Hi, Stephen. Thanks for joining us today.

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Stephen Crocker: Hi, thank you. It's lovely to welcome you here to the Theater Royal stage. We don't have an audience other than my colleagues who are cleaning up after last night's show, but we'll try and keep them entertained.

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Lucy Wright: Of course. Now, you've been Norwich since 2016. What is it you like about the city?

00:29:03

Stephen Crocker: The city is amazing and I think the city is what sold me to come here, as well as this amazing set of venues. I remember reflecting at the time when the privilege of taking on this job became a reality. I came to Norwich to re-familiarize myself. I'd been a number of times over the years and we'd had family holidays in Norfolk on the Broads, but I never really knew it, and certainly with the life experience I had at that point, it was

amazing to look at the city and I just think it's got an incredible vibe to it. It has grown and developed, but it's managed to keep it's quite feisty independence, and I use that word really purposefully. There is that sense of real independence, but also it's blended that old and the new really incredibly well here.

And, I guess, one of my favorite views of Norwich is when you stand with The Forum to your left and St. Peter Mancroft to the right and the city hall and then the Guild Hall, you've got almost nine centuries worth of people's imprint on this city. And my own organization, Norwich Theater, with this venue, this venue's been here for more than 250 years through to the Playhouse (inaudible) our newest family of venues staged, we've got that, as well. There is that sense of continuity but development at the same time. That's what I love about the place.

00:30:20

Lucy Wright: What do you think of the art scene here?

00:30:22

Stephen Crocker: It's incredibly vibrant and incredibly varied too. I mean, the history of culture in this place is what struck me. So we are sitting today on one of the oldest Theater Royal stages in the country. The notion of a Theater Royal was a permanent license from the monarch to put on shows. Over recent weeks when we've seen the passing of Her Majesty the Queen, we felt a real responsibility to pay that back and that's why we screened the state funeral in this building because our original purpose was to bring people together. And on that day we had a thousand people here experiencing that togetherness.

We take it very seriously but, at the same time, we want to drive the place forward. We've recently launched a new four year strategy that's all about new and ambitious work, about doing things differently, about making the work that we do have a different impact in a post-pandemic world and in a world that's facing a cost of living crisis. I don't see the arts as something that can be cut off or something that can be abandoned. The arts are more essential around our mental health and wellbeing, both individually and collectively now than ever before.

00:31:36

Lucy Wright: And what have you got coming up that you're looking forward to? What are your plans for the next few years?

00:31:40

Stephen Crocker: Well, over the next few years we've set quite a bold new strategy. And when you set any strategy, it's as much about what you keep the same as what you do that's different. So there'll be lots of things that people know and love of these venues that will remain the same. We've just come out of four weeks of Les Miserables on this very stage and those big musicals that draw huge crowds will be a staple of this program going forward. And more new and emerging musicals at the Playhouse, comedy, music, those big shows, those really popular dramas. And, of course, our Christmas program, which centers on pantomime here at Theater Royal, which is going to be a spectacular one this year. So that continuity's really important.

But going forward, I think we're more committed than ever before to international work. It's something that is quite important to me that we celebrate diversity through internationalism and you'll see that through circus, dance and music in particular. We produced our first ever large scale show with Cuban dance legend, Carlos Acosta, last year and there are lots more projects in the pipeline from that stable, as well.

We're also really keen to support the origination of stories that come from the region, both our city, our county and from the east and to support artists wanting to tell those stories. It's wonderful to be a big presenting house and be a conveyor belt for work coming through, but we'd also like to put work onto that conveyor belt, as well and send it out from this region with great pride around the country, as well.

00:33:11

Juliette Maxim: Do you feel a responsibility to uplift people? I mean, the arts is tremendously uplifting. Do you feel a responsibility to put on positive pieces?

00:33:21

Stephen Crocker: Yeah, that's a really interesting question. I think it struck me during COVID, in the early days of COVID, which was a very difficult period for arts and culture, in general, and certainly for this organization. I think when we'd spent such a long time talking about our physical health and being instructed to stay away from each other, it was very clear to me that the mental health toll, the cost of that to our mental health was just stacking up and this organization received quite significant funding from the government to stay alive and come through the pandemic. And I've always felt quite deeply that it's our responsibility to pay that back by keeping going and providing those opportunities for distraction, for entertainment, for thought provocation, for collectiveness, for conversation, all of which, in any tangible and intangible ways, helps support better mental health and wellbeing for communities.

00:34:23

Lucy Wright: What a lovely answer.

00:34:23

Juliette Maxim: So in this slot, we want to recommend somewhere on our network for you to visit if you get any time off. And it sounds like you are incredibly busy. What do you like doing in your spare time?

00:34:32

Stephen Crocker: I think my partner and I are quite good explorers. Since we moved to Norwich we've enjoyed the coast, we enjoy the countryside, but I quite love that trail of market towns that you find, and we'll often just stop off somewhere just to look and see and be. I think when we moved here, as well, it's a very practical point, we moved from an apartment in Manchester city center to a house that suddenly we had rooms that we needed to put things in. So we did quite a lot of shopping and try create a home for ourselves. So we've become quite the connoisseurs of the very best kind of antique shops and charity shops. We've spent hours pottering around those places. Have an encyclopedic knowledge of charity shops in north (inaudible).

00:35:16

Juliette Maxim: Oh, only in the north area. Well, I think we need to expand your horizon somewhat.

00:35:20

Stephen Crocker: Okay.

00:35:21

Juliette Maxim: I think Woodbridge sounds like a fantastic-

00:35:26

Stephen Crocker: Ah, yes.

00:35:26

Juliette Maxim: ... place for you to go in Suffolk. Not too far away.

00:35:29

Stephen Crocker: Ah.

00:35:29

Juliette Maxim: It's a really lovely little town between Ipswich and Lowestoft on our East Suffolk line, which is very scenic and it sits on the River Deben. And I recommend it. It's somewhere I go all the time myself-

00:35:42

Stephen Crocker: Okay.

00:35:42

Juliette Maxim: ... to visit those damn charity shops. They are brilliant. I have picked up some amazing bargains there. But there are also some antique shops. And you're a musician. There's a fascinating workshop where they make violins, and brilliant cafes. And if you want to walk off the amazing cake, and I would recommend the coffee and cake, there's a lovely walk along the Deben, as well.

00:36:04

Stephen Crocker: Ah, okay.

00:36:06

Juliette Maxim: And it's not too far away on our East Suffolk line.

00:36:08

Stephen Crocker: Yeah. Ah, I would love that. Actually, I've never been, so that's a fantastic recommendation. I know that friends over the years have either been to or worked at the school there, as well. It's very famous for that, isn't it? Well, I will take up that offer and gladly go and explore.

00:36:27

Juliette Maxim: Brilliant. Well enjoy it. Well worth the walk around.

00:36:30

Stephen Crocker: Absolutely.

00:36:31

Juliette Maxim: Well, thank you very much, Stephen. It's been an absolute pleasure and a privilege to be on stage recording Life on Rails. So thank you very much.

00:36:39

Lucy Wright: Thank you.

00:36:39

Stephen Crocker: Absolute pleasure. Thank you so much for coming in.

00:36:44

Juliette Maxim: And that's the end of this Life on Rails episode. We hope you've enjoyed learning new things about Greater Anglia.

00:36:49

Lucy Wright: If so, send us a tweet @greaterangliapr and leave a rating or review on your podcast platform.

00:36:55

Juliette Maxim: Life on Rails releases every other month. So we'll be back soon for episode eight.

00:37:00

Lucy Wright: While you wait, follow or subscribe to the podcast and visit our website at greateranglia.co.uk/podcast for more information.

00:37:08

Juliette Maxim: Thanks for listening.