

Meeting accessible challenges



The high profile case in the Supreme Court has heightened awareness about wheelchair accessibility and some operators are responding with further public information campaigns.

Steve Banner reports

NOT everybody who relies on a wheelchair and needs to travel by public transport is as self-assured as Doug Paulley. When he was prevented from using the wheelchair space on a bus operated by First he took his case all the way to the Supreme Court; and won.

Stagecoach East Midlands has been busy reaching out to people in wheelchairs who may not share his confidence when it comes to boarding and alighting from vehicles and may as a consequence be excluding themselves from bus travel. Earlier this year it joined hundreds of businesses eager to demonstrate the accessibility of their facilities to those with restricted mobility as part of Disabled Access Day.

It did so through an event in Lincoln which it billed as 'Try a Bus Day'.

It parked a bus in the city's Cornhill Quarter in a bid to demonstrate how easy it can be for wheelchair users to get on and off. They were able to do so in an atmosphere free from pressure and time constraints and Stagecoach staff were on hand to listen to any concerns.

Retailer Eden Mobility was present with a range of wheelchairs and mobility scooters as were representatives from the Alzheimer's Society. Impaired physical mobility is by no means the only challenge a passenger may face.

"It was a great opportunity for our team to spend time in the community, learning from the people

we serve while also educating and reassuring passengers about our services and showing them what we can do to help those with disabilities," says Stagecoach East Midlands managing director Michelle Hargreaves.

Steps that Stagecoach has taken include producing Journey Assistance Cards which customers can use to let drivers know about any extra help they may need. It has also set up a disability helpline which provides guidance if, for example, you need to access its buses using a mobility scooter.

Doug Paulley's court case centred around how a bus driver should respond if a wheelchair space is taken up by somebody who is able-bodied but refuses to give way to somebody who has a legitimate right to it.

But what happens if the space is already occupied by a passenger in a wheelchair? Or if there is a fault with the wheelchair access ramp and it cannot be deployed?

Go-Ahead subsidiary Brighton & Hove has come up with an answer. It offers a Wheelchair Taxi Guarantee Scheme.

If a wheelchair user is unable to board one of its buses for any reason then the driver will alert the control room so that an accessible taxi can be summoned. It will take the user to his or her destination free-of-charge with Brighton & Hove picking up the bill.

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Reducing fuel consumption and increasing load capacity carrying are a prerequisite in the design and construction of the modern bus. Consequently, suppliers of components to bus builders should seek to ensure the manufacture of their product is based on **intelligent design, weight down processes and component integration** with the use of **lightweight materials**. Achieving a weight reduction, however big or small, should also strive to improve **reliability and performance**.

Engineering design, lower-mass components and systems are at the core of Compak's **CP5UG-NG** all-electric, single platform, lightweight ramp where a **weight saving of 30%-34%** is achieved!

Weight savings in of themselves have no value if the nett result doesn't also improve reliability. Statements attesting to weight reduction are easily substantiated either by the manufacturer or an independent organisation. Not so **reliability**; which is often considered subjective! The **CP5UG-NG** and **CP5UG-NG2** addresses this issue by offering a **five-year warranty**!

Compak achieved weight saving and reliability by **minimizing the components** necessary to accomplish the basic requirement of extending and retracting a ramp without compromising on quality or performance.

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To augment the five-year warranty Compak has appointed **Douglas Park**, its' former Production Manager (Ramps), as **After Sales Manager** reporting directly to Lee Allen, Compak's Managing Director.



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There is certainly no lack of ramps and lifts designed to make life easier for individuals in wheelchairs to get on and off buses and coaches with Compak and Palfinger among those companies vying for access business. Last November's Euro Bus Expo show held at Birmingham's National Exhibition Centre saw Mobility Networks subsidiary PLS - Passenger Lift Services - unveil no less than four new ramps for buses including manual and power-operated models plus a minibus access ramp.

They were exhibited next to four passenger lifts for coaches. The PLS line-up includes the mighty i6-H Mega Coach Lift which can hoist up to 500kg; a capacity which reflects the rising weight of many powered wheelchairs.

In passing it may be worth remarking on the number of former Palfinger Ratcliff executives who have joined Mobility Networks in recent months.

The roll-call includes ex-managing director, Wayne Harmer, who has become Mobility's group managing director. Former head of sales, Giovanni Vullo, has become business development manager while ex Palfinger tail-lift European head of marketing, Gill

Prates, is now busy helping to develop the group's three brands: Mobility Networks, PLS and Italy's Caroil Systems.

PLS is still perhaps best known for its GNX-Access two-piece fully-automatic cassette-style lift which fits into the foot-well of a coach's front passenger entrance. When combined with a PLS Magic Floor it enables somebody in a wheelchair to rise from the pavement to the level of a coach's passenger saloon.

While minibus access ramps such as the one referred to above remain popular, some vehicles are fitted with lifts instead.

In February, Unwin launched the BraunAbility Q-Series, a 400kg-capacity inboard-mounted passenger lift for minibuses which the manufacturer claims does not clank, rattle or clonk in transit. Last year saw the introduction of a 350kg BraunAbility cassette-type minibus lift which tips the scales at a comparatively-modest 130kg.

Once a wheelchair passenger boards, the next issue is securing the wheelchair and Q'Strain has

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had a good response to its Quantum device. This enables users to secure themselves safely and easily using an automatic swing arm system and a single touch of a button.

Q'Straint claims that there are added bonuses in that there is less likelihood of travel sickness since the wheelchair is firmly gripped, and also the installation of Quantum makes it more obvious that the space is designed for wheelchairs, thus reducing the conflict with buggy users.

Ramps and lifts need periodic servicing and safety inspections. How this task is approached may differ according to the type of vehicle the equipment is fitted to, says Compak.

It has recently delivered training to technicians working for Keolis in Denmark which has acquired a number of articulated hybrid buses. Work on powered ramps fitted to hybrids and you have to observe a number of safety precautions that do not apply to diesel-powered vehicles, Compak points out; the same goes for working on electric buses. Ignore those safety rules at your peril.

Compak is also busy developing a market for its products in Iran and recently followed up a trade delegation with attendance at the International Conference of Transport in Technology Engineering in Tehran.

At the event, Tony Rodwell, Compak global sales & marketing director met national and local government representatives as well as bus builders, disability groups and bus operators.

"There is an appetite for European and specifically British products in Iran which is not being exploited by UK manufacturers who are dissuaded from doing so by the reluctance of many UK banks to deal with their Iranian counterparts," says Rodwell.

Compak has appointed a representative in Iran to liaise with local organisations and establish its brand in the country.

"The British Iranian Chamber of Commerce and its counterparts in Tehran, both of which we are members, has been extremely helpful in providing guidance and great resources, adds Rodwell, "as has the UK embassy to Tehran".

Compak is now responding to requests for quotations from Iranian bus builders, although Compak managing director Lee Allen says he does not underestimate the challenges this burgeoning market presents: "We're looking at a variety of options on the logistics of supplying products, including local manufacture under licence".

Some manufacturers supply doors as well as ramps and lifts. Spain's Masats is a good example.

At last year's Euro Bus Show it exhibited electric sliding and in-swinging doors alongside manual and electric ramps and a wheelchair lift designed for inter-urban buses. UK service support is provided by Warwickshire's Air Door Services.

Faiveley Vapor Ricon Europe is hoping to make fresh inroads into the door and wheelchair access sectors too. It was previously known solely as Vapor Ricon Europe; the name change has occurred in the wake of Vapor Ricon's acquisition of US rail business Faiveley Transport.

UK demand for electric bus doors remains modest despite the rising number of all-electric buses now in service says Transport Door Solutions (TDS) managing director, Paul Rossington. Pneumatically-operated doors continue to dominate.

"Electric doors still attract a price premium and as yet there are not enough volume sales to get the cost down," he observes. "On the other hand pneumatic cylinders are manufactured globally and in significant quantities so they are not expensive.

"Pneumatic doors are pretty efficient, operators have a lot of confidence in them and buses are of course fitted with air systems anyway."

With minibuses the situation is different. Doors are electrically-actuated because they do not have air on board and operators by and large have no wish to go to the expense of having it installed.

Anybody who wants to see electric bus doors



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in operation in Britain might care to take a ride on one of the 51 all-electric 12m ADL Enviro200EVs in action with Go-Ahead in London. Operating on the 507 and 521 routes, they are fitted with a BYD drivetrain and batteries.

"The doors were supplied by Ventura Systems of the Netherlands and they're working fine," says Rossington. Part-owned by Ventura and an OE supplier to Optare among others, TDS is the Dutch company's UK service agent.

No matter whether they are pneumatic or electric, UK OE demand for bus doors is fairly flat at present, he says. However there is no let-up in the demand for replacement parts and TDS has managed to build up a substantial all-makes domestic and global spares business over the years.

It now has over 1,000 regular UK customers, Rossington reports.

TDS' catalogue embraces upwards of 2,300 items including everything from top bearings, spindles, cranks and pivots to pneumatic valves, seals and brushes. Manufacturers (some of whom are no longer trading) whose products are supported include Deans and Peters as well as TDS' and Ventura's own line-ups.

The fall in the value of sterling in the wake of last year's vote in favour of Brexit has helped boost TDS' parts exports.

"We're quite high profile on Google so we get a lot of international as well as domestic enquiries," Rossington says. "They generally turn into orders."

Some of the overseas orders are from people

who run buses that were shipped over from the UK he says and from operators who are willing to consider competitively-priced good-quality alternatives to OE-branded products from the vehicle manufacturer.

TDS is also willing to design and build low-volume doors for specialist automotive applications.

"Other door manufacturers are not usually prepared to tackle such projects," says Rossington. "But we will."

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