

# ANGLO-SCOTTISH DEBUT FOR ORION

## FIRST SERVICE PLANNED FOR SEPTEMBER START



Logistics unit: Orion's No 768001 on display at Daventry International Rail Freight Terminal on 8 July 2021. Philip Sherratt

**ORION HIGH** Speed Logistics is aiming to launch its first service between London and the Scottish central belt towards the end of September. In mid-July the operator was in the process of signing contracts with a customer for a Mondays to Fridays service.

Orion is a subsidiary of Rail Operations (UK) Ltd, and is converting Class 319 EMUs to carry parcels and light freight. The company's fleet will have a mix of EMUs and bi-modes (the latter are undergoing Porterbrook's 'Flex' conversion), all with modified interiors. In a change to the original plan, the EMUs will now be known as Class 326s and the bi-modes as Class 768s, the reclassification being a requirement for the units' use on non-passenger workings. The expectation is that the bulk of running will be under electric power, but with the diesel engines used for last-mile operation on short non-electrified stretches and within terminals.

Full detail of the first service was due to be confirmed once contracts had been signed. After that, Orion is working with a parcels courier which has never used rail before, and the intention is to carry out static loading trials at the Hams Hall terminal in the West Midlands during August. This



Stripped out interior: inside No 768001. Pinned to the window is a visual of the Class 93 tri-mode locomotive design parent company Rail Operations (UK) Ltd has ordered from Stadler. Philip Sherratt

will be followed by main line running trials between Hams Hall and Mossend, with the aim of launching commercial services in October.

As sister company Rail Operations Group is an established operator, Orion is partnering directly with logistics providers to run services. Initially ROG drivers will be used, but in time the company aims to establish a pool of drivers dedicated to Orion services.

Orion's original ambition was to start with a London Gateway to Liverpool Street service, but that has since been overtaken by the Anglo-Scottish flows. The Gateway service is different to the others in that the train will convey goods for multiple

customers, rather than one customer making use of the entire formation. Orion has paths for the Gateway to Liverpool Street service from the December timetable, leaving Gateway at 04.25 and arriving into Liverpool Street at 05.10, before returning at 05.50. However, the service may not start immediately in December, depending on customer requirements and availability of units.

### EMUs AND BI-MODES

Orion's ambition is for a fleet of 19 four-car units – 10 Class 768 bi-modes and nine Class 326 EMUs, which can be used in combination depending on customer requirements. First to be converted was demonstration

unit No 319373, unveiled last year at Eastleigh, and a second unit is midway through conversion at Arlington Fleet Services. Two further units are stored at Arlington in preparation for conversion, and a fifth at Crewe. Further '319s' will be selected for conversion in consultation with owner Porterbrook.

In terms of bi-modes, No 768001 (recently renumbered from No 769501) has undergone its Flex modification at Brush Traction at Loughborough, involving the fitting of diesel engines beneath the driving vehicles, and its interior modification at Eastleigh. The second '768' is currently at Brush and the ambition is that it will be ready for service in September. Sufficient diesel engines have been purchased to enable conversion of a further eight units to '768s' – these had to be delivered to the UK before the end of 2020 due to a change in emissions regulations. The impending closure of Brush by owner Wabtec at the end of this year means that on later units this work will transfer to Wabtec's Doncaster site.

Maintenance of the converted Orion fleet will depend on the routes on which the sets are used, but Orion is in discussions with various providers across the length of the West Coast main line.

### INTERIORS RECONFIGURED

The interior work on the units, carried out by Arlington Fleet Services, has involved removal of luggage racks, partitions, seats and toilets, while equipment boxes such as for the On-Train Monitoring Recorder (OTMR) are being relocated from the floor to the roof. Orion says customer feedback indicates cages are more likely to be used than pallets, but it can configure interiors to suit customer requirements. Orion is also fitting an ethernet backbone to the units so customers will be able to track the progress of their goods, while another innovation is an intelligent platform which will enable Orion to fill empty space on partially loaded trains, based on yield management.

The operation with '326s' and '768s' is based on conveying high volume, low mass goods, with a payload per vehicle of 12.5 tonnes. Orion has been in discussions with a drinks manufacturer, but heavier goods such as this do not suit the converted EMUs as the load would not be efficient space-wise. Parent company Rail Operations (UK) Ltd has ordered Class 93 tri-mode locos from Stadler, which could be used to haul heavier loads.