

# NEW TRUC FRESH THINKER

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Much has changed with the new-era Transcon, but FUSO continues to be the favoured truck brand – with the new Indian-built Enduro particularly well-liked

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Remarkably, Blake Noble had no trucking background when he bought Transcon four years ago. But he'd always loved trucks...and had already tapped the brains of some of NZ's most successful transport operators

**T**O SAY TRUCKING COMPANY OWNER BLAKE NOBLE IS A little bit different – even in an industry that's jam-packed with individuals – is one of those ridiculous understatements. Seriously. Ridiculous.

So here's a guy who, at 38, is running his own 16-truck transport operation. So far, so...well, interesting. Unusual. But probably not unique.

Not until you take account of the fact that he's now just four years into trying to breathe new life into an old trucking company...a business he bought despite having absolutely no previous experience to speak of with trucks or the road transport industry.

So, no – this was not one of those classic family trucking business succession deals, whereby Mum and Dad bow out, and one or more of the kids take it over.

Yes...he was formerly a partner and shareholder in a successful family business – but that happened to be a medical supply company (which he worked in for 16 years).

And when he bought the then Wellsford-based Transcon from founder and longtime owner Ian Ward in 2015, he was giving up the comfort of a good salary and a shareholding in the Noble family's Allied Medical...and stepping instead into the largely unknown.

The closest he'd come to any hands-on experience with trucks was when the family business went on its annual roadshow – with Blake hiring a light truck to shift its products around the country for two weeks...and happily volunteering to drive it.

Plus there were the days when he'd hire a truck – not to cart anything, just so he could drive it around for the day.

As all of that strongly hints at, here's a man who's had a

passion for trucks since he was a kid. Who's always harboured a burning desire to one day run his own trucking company.

The Blake Noble path to becoming a transport operator is even more remarkable because of the way he enlisted the help of some giants of the industry to help him get started.

See, Blake has this belief that what the trucking industry really needs is a bunch of young operators with fresh ideas. Yep, people just like him.

And because this young, go-get-'em entrepreneur wasn't afraid to put that concept to the test with some of the industry's most successful execs and owners, he's enjoyed the benefit of their insights and advice in achieving his own ambition.

In the past four years at Transcon he's had the chance to put the results of that – his philosophy and some of their thinking – into practice.

Transcon, with a fleet of 16 trucks, was a straight-up-and down, old-school, smalltown trucking business, specialising in livestock and general freight. A company too that was very much in the image of its creator, Ian Ward.

Transcon's former owner was, as writer Bob Pearce put it when *New Zealand Truck & Driver* profiled the business back in 2001, "very much a man of his district" – a ruggedly-built young Northland rep rugby prop who was told at school that he was "a dumb bastard"....

But who was big and strong and well-suited to the old-fashioned hard yakka and long hours involved when he switched from motor mechanic to truck driver...and then, in the early 1970s, to transport operator, with the purchase of an old Leyland Comet tipper.

Blake, on the other hand, had a very different background:



One of the company's FUSO HD Euro tractor units pulls out of local customer OOB's property with a load of produce

He'd gone straight from school in Auckland to work in the family's business – initially as a technician, working with the company's mobility products...then progressing on to manage that side of the business. Eventually he became the company's business development director.

He also indulged his passion for things mechanical, as assistant editor of *NZ Performance Car* magazine, in his spare time. That along with mentoring standout tertiary students.

But busy and rewarding as all of this was...it still wasn't enough. Wasn't achieving his lifelong dream. That reality hit home during a month-long execs' programme he did at the University of Michigan's School of Business in 2013.

He explains: "There was a group of successful GMs and CEOs (all on salaries – not running their own businesses)...from around the world, mostly in their 50s. And every one of these guys had the regret that they'd not done their own thing. They were now stuck in a rut.

"I came back, knowing that my time was up and if I didn't get on with it, there was never going to be a better time: I didn't get into cars or even a wife at that stage.

"So I started looking. I didn't tell anyone because I was sceptical that I'd go through with it!

"The business I was in with my sister and Dad was awesome. We did a really rewarding thing (personally and financially) but I guess I just decided I was too young to be comfortable!"

Even so, a move into buying and running a transportation company still seems a big stretch – particularly with zero experience to draw from: "I guess I was a little delusional. I was into wheelchairs..... They did have wheels," he laughs.

"I got my class 2 licence at age 19, without any specific reason

to have it – other than wanting to drive trucks for fun."

Hiring a truck for the company's annual roadshow became "a highlight of my year. Returning the truck was always a sad day!"

He even hired trucks for a weekend – "just to be able to spend more time driving." It helped that a friend who worked at TR Group made sure he got behind the wheel of increasingly bigger trucks as he gained his next licence class.

And his office was filled with model trucks – so "it was pretty evident that trucks were going to feature at some point. I got excited about trucks.

"But for me, the real excitement is about them being the conduit for businesses: We take raw products into local businesses and then (once they're made into something) we help take them to market – whether that's South Auckland or South America."

Still...a young director of a medical supplies company – with no trucking experience – becoming a transport operator?

Okay, so Blake had done some very important planning – and over an extended period: "I spent probably 10 years, prior to owning the business, going to meet (trucking) business owners from all over the country – to get a business insight as to what's behind it.

"The first guy that I met was Jim Ramsay at TIL (he's executive director of TIL Group). Jim at the time didn't know me from a bar of soap – I just emailed him and said I was a young person in business and wanted to talk about transport and stuff.

"I flew down (to TIL HQ in New Plymouth) for the day and he gave me four or five hours and we just talked. That's basically it, to be honest. I was like 'shit, you're a good rooster!'

"Jim was really upfront about the fact that this is a brutal

*Top, from left to right:* The new catchphrase for Transcon reflects the Blake Noble approach - running a local business to service other local businesses....he reckons "the real excitement" about running trucks is that they are the conduit for some great local business ventures

*Bottom left:* A Transcon FUSO Fighter's curtains serve as a billboard for local business Daily Organics

*Bottom right:* Transcon set up a semi-trailer refrigerated container unit so it could cart blueberries and ice cream for one local company....and then door-knocked Biomarine and now also carries its live oysters to market



industry. It's hard, but he said: 'You'll get out what you want from it.' Jim is a guy I still see a couple of times a year.

"I've been very fortunate - there's been some really significant guys who have given me a lot of their time. But that's what this is about: There's a lot of talk about a driver shortage....but shit, there's also an operator shortage!

"Because it takes such a long time to come through, everyone in the industry is ageing. And I don't say that in a bad way - it's just the reality of it.

"So, I think as a result, some of these guys were pretty keen to do what they could to encourage someone young to get into the industry."

Among the "these guys" he's talking about are more big names in the industry: "Someone who I've been fortunate to spend a little bit of time with is Scott O'Donnell (former MD and current director of the giant HWR Group).

"He's been incredibly generous with his time in helping me get established."

"Through my involvement with National Road Carriers, I've spent a lot of time with Calven Bonney (former Road Transport Forum NZ board chairman, longtime NRC stalwart and owner of Auckland tanker and container specialist LW Bonney & Sons), who has worked so tirelessly for industry - more than we realise.

"Bruce Plested, at Mainfreight (the co-founder and current board chairman, in fact) - I've had an afternoon with him.

"Someone else who's been instrumental in building my confidence and giving me some perspective on progress

- including setbacks and so on - is Jeff Smith at Swanson Transport." He and Blake catch up for a beer every month to keep in touch.

This kind of mentoring is, Blake clearly believes, how it should be: "Leaders of industry need to be looking at how they can engage the next generation of operators.

"And it has been good. The industry has a bad rep about being cut-throat and how everyone cuts each other's lunch. Sure, there are people at that level - but there are people at that level in every industry. They just don't get it."

The reality, he reckons, is that there are actually "also a lot of collaborations and partnerships and people who do want everyone to succeed - 'cos it wouldn't work without it. That's the bit that I see."

That trickles down to day-to-day operations: At Transcon, for instance, "we don't do all of our own work - and a lot of the work we do is subcontracted from other carriers who can't service this area....in the same way that we can't service an area that they operate in."

Transcon has a history that dates back to the late 1980s. Although former owner Ian Ward started out in trucking 18 or 19 years earlier, it was around 1989 that he and local contractor Alister Mason amalgamated their businesses, bought out Warkworth Transport and adopted the Transcon name.

They divvied the business up again a few years later - Ward retaining the Transcon name and concentrating on general freight and livestock cartage for the Warkworth and Wellsford areas.





When Blake Noble started looking for a transport company to buy, Transcon was one of 13 he checked out: "This is the first one I looked at and thought 'shit that looks like hard work!'"

"But when you looked at the others and came back....actually it's not that bad. It was a tired business. The owners had done 45-years of it. They'd been trying to sell it for a while – the GFC (Global Financial Crisis) came along and they couldn't sell it.

"They'd had it for about five years longer than they'd probably wanted to, so I guess I saw an opportunity to come and kick it in the guts."

It helped that Blake already knew the area: His family had a holiday home nearby, so he'd spent enough time locally to know that the area has plenty of potential.

He explains: "I guess the opportunity with this business is that it's in an area that's got great organic growth. The population's growing, industry's growing, so the company's new tagline, 'Growing Places,' sums it up nicely."

So how does someone entirely new to the industry, let alone the business, go about settling into a long-established – and well-known – company?

Says Blake: "Fret, to be honest. It was pretty surreal – coming into a new business that was already running. I would liken it to buying a house and moving into it....but the old owner's still living there and carrying on!"

"You spend 15-16 hour days, seven days a week for the first six months trying to figure out what's what, who are you, what do you do, where are you going and how does that work.

"I was hanging on for dear life, but you just hang on for the ride. It was a stagnant business.

"It was a business that was (and still is) run on relationships. But previously, through the rugby club on a Friday night. The world has moved on.

"Operationally, Ian (Ward) was excellent – all about the design of the trucks and specifications, axle and loading weights....

"That's not me: That's what I rely on other people's skill and resources to do. The financial operations and customer success side of the business – that's my gig.

"So I guess the first six months was getting out and meeting customers, finding out what the customers actually do – what could they be doing and what could we be doing for them."

So, understanding what he'd bought was paramount – but what was the first big change, or breakthrough?

"It was a fluke phone call actually. About two months into owning the business, out of the blue someone rang from a big nursery in Kaiwaka. It's a nursery that runs its own trucks.

"One of the directors from there said they needed help with some of their winter overflow movements and was it something we'd be interested in? I knew nothing about much to be honest, so I went and saw their operation....

"And before we knew it, we had frames built to go inside an existing curtainsider truck and we had a truck out delivering trucks to big planting sites at motorways and infrastructure sites.

"And that work's carried on. Now, over winter we have work. That I guess changed our thinking – so when someone knocks on





Blake Noble reckons that Transcon's business opportunity is in its location..... "in an area that's got great organic growth. The population's growing, industry's growing, so the company's new tagline, 'Growing Places,' sums it up nicely."

our door, we're more likely to try and find a way of scoping up the opportunities.

"The other significant thing that happened was that when I was out meeting customers, I met with OOB (Omaha Organic Blueberries). They do ice cream and pre-packed berries.

"I thought 'this is weird – they're a significant brand, but we do very little work for them.' Turned out that, in 14 years, they'd never met anyone from Transcon – so they didn't realise what we did.

"Off the back of that, we set up a trailer that's got a generator on it and we now do refrigerated containers for them and use that for other businesses too.

"We've tried not to say no to things. It's about doing – saying 'shit! If we're doing this for one customer, who else can we find in that area that we can be doing the work for.' "

As an example, he adds: "We knocked on Biomarine NZ's door and now we're moving live oysters."

It helps, he says, that when the opportunity's been put in front of them, the area's local businesses have proven keen "to use local carriers too. And it's that 'local' thinking that had us move the main hub of the business (from its former Wellsford base) to Warkworth. It's where the majority of our work had refocused."

Noble has taken this personalised and targeted approach further still: "We started looking at new business opportunities near existing clients' locations.

"Customer demand has meant that we now have a couple of trucks based in Auckland, which has increased time efficiencies. Also, we look to get more work from the same people. When we're looking at what we're putting into businesses, we see if we can be pulling stuff out at the same time.

"Plus, we're loading up the trucks. So before trucks would probably go down (to Auckland) 60% loaded and come back 60% loaded. Now the focus is around maxing them out – doing roughly 60% more work with the same fleet numbers...with a different fleet composition from when I began though."

The fleet that came with the business comprised 16 trucks, all but three of them FUSOs/Mitsubishis. The fleet's still the same

size, with just one mid-1990s Volvo FH12 (due to be replaced soon) the only exception to the FUSO rule.

And, in spite of the fact that Blake says he never was much of a fan of the Japanese make (he has a personal liking for Macks), he's not only carried on running many of the FUSOs that were part of the Transcon deal...he's also continued to buy the same brand.

For that he credits "the guys at Keith Andrews Trucks," the Northland FUSO dealer, for being so good to deal with. Plus, of course, there's his strong sense of loyalty...and they're local.

So now the Transcon lineup includes nine Fighters, ranging from early 2000 models to two late-model versions – a mix of curtainsiders and tractor units that work with container swinglifts, plus one that totes a demountable swinglift. There's also a near-new FUSO Enduro, one mid-2000s Shogun and four HD tractor units that work with container skeletons. An 8x4 FUSO HD truck and a new four-axle trailer will soon replace the old Volvo.

Having such a predominantly local operation means that the Transcon trucks run relatively low kilometres. They also cart many loads that are relatively light, like the capsicums and other produce – thus putting less stress on the machinery.

Thus Blake is happy enough to opt for some secondhand trucks as fleet replacements – although the Enduro is now seen as a more attractive alternative: "The Enduro is a Mercedes model that comes from a production line in India. It's an older-style model, but still a Euro 5 – so AdBlue – and being \$50k cheaper, it will allow us to put more new trucks on more frequently.

"Secondhand trucks are getting harder to source too, so the Enduro is a brand-new truck that's warrantied and looks the part...for what's not a significant premium over a secondhand vehicle. For us, it will be a 15-year truck because of the mileage (we do).

"The thing that really appeals to me about the Enduro is where it comes from. (It's built in India in a state-of-the-art Daimler factory). Maybe access to technology and support isn't that high there, so to me it's naturally a more durable vehicle. It's all steel – no plastic or fibreglass bumpers. It doesn't come with all the new driver aids. It's got modern technology but it doesn't have



Blake Noble says he went into the business with no particular liking for FUSO/Mitsubishi trucks....but that happened to be what most of the Transcon trucks were. He's stuck with the Japanese brand simply because the people at longtime Northland dealer Keith Andrews Trucks "are so good to deal with"



all the stuff that the equivalent Fighter would have – but we don't need that. So, fit for purpose. It's ideal for us: The trucks are not doubleshifted, they'll run for 10 hours a day, with light weights and in the local area."

Don't get the idea though that the new-era Transcon doesn't embrace technology in its operation. In fact, it's something Blake has focused on from the start.

"Ian (Ward), to his credit, had spent and worked extensively on a mobile dispatch and job solution. But it was all server-based and very reliant on connectivity in the area – and unfortunately Wellsford is poorly serviced.

"The system (TDS) was also limited in development due to the number of users. We have moved to ICOS, which is a locally-developed, web-based dispatch system. It's not perfect, but it has resolved a heap of the reliability and portability issues that we had.

"Biggest thing for us is we've been able to interact with customers in a way we couldn't previously. A huge number of customers can directly enter their jobs in and it's got automated tracking and delivery. All the trucks have tablets and sign-on-glass PODs.

"It's more professional from a customer point of view, less administration for us and better for the drivers. It's reduced their

workload – all they have to do is supply logbooks and timesheets.

"The accountancy platform was changed early on – we use Xero – and for the trucks we use EROAD." The electronic RUC management and fleet monitoring system is, he says, "outstanding: They get what their customers are up to. I've dealt with them across the board and the depth of talent and knowledge they've got there is phenomenal. They know what they're about.

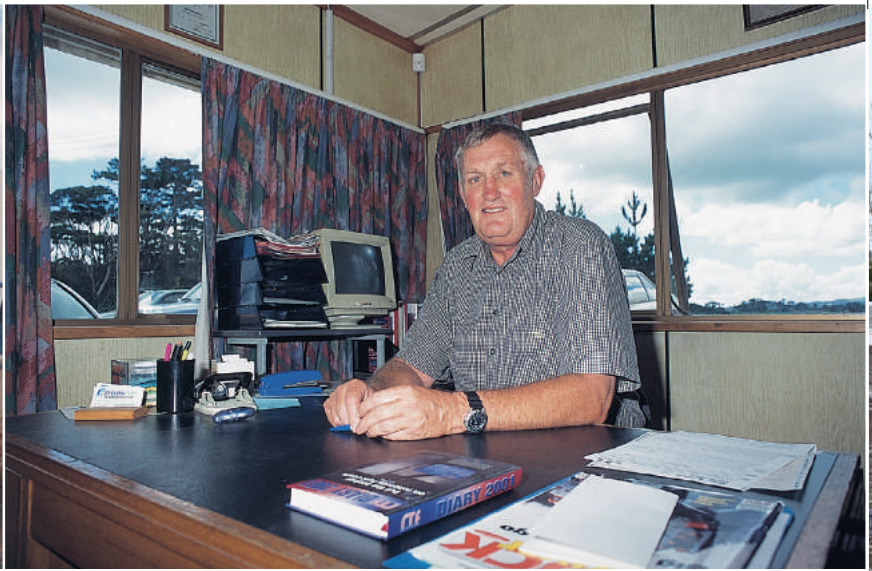
"A big catalyst for me to move to EROAD was compliance and driver involvement. They have a leaderboard where they benchmark your fleet and operators against fleets across Australasia, and we've put in place an incentive programme for our drivers to reach a certain level of achievement on that.

"I can only give credit to the drivers and the way they've engaged with it. All of them have demonstrated improvement – from idling time...to visibility on things like hard braking, cornering, max speeds, over-speeds. We can even self-impose speed limits on sites.

"Before, we'd have drivers idling for a couple of thousand minutes a month – now it's around 20 or 30 minutes a month."

EROAD delivers other pluses: "Its maintenance management is awesome. All three of our service providers are feeding data into the system, updating information and planning the next service





A flashback to Transcon, version 1: Co-founder Ian Ward (*top right*) started out in the early 1970s with an old Leyland Comet tipper (*right*). Ward was known for pioneering ideas in terms of his trucks – like the 210hp, V8-engined Leader (*top left*) – an expensive truck back in 1978, but one that broke new ground in the lower North....because its power enabled it to haul a trailer up to airstrips that no-one else could get into



interval.

“We’ve also put together a dashboard that pulls together data from ICOS, from Xero, from EROAD and from our payroll system, and aggregates that into a dashboard so I can quickly get a snapshot of the business performance, revenue and expense.

“Not only for me though – it’s good for the team (now 22-strong) to know where they should be focusing.”

Speaking of the Transcon team, Blake is keen to recognise the work and support of a crew that’s grown – out of necessity: “The team I have are all new. I’ve been through some pretty tough times in the business. Very challenging.

“The business was tracking in the right direction, but it was taking all my energy and when a dispatcher went off on ACC for eight months, I had to step into that role too.”

He pauses, then reckons: “If someone had written me a cheque for the business back then – it could have had ANY number on it – I would have walked away.

“Something had to give, so I gave myself a pay cut and I brought in an operations manager and lucked on a guy called Karl Middleton, from a transportation company in the area. He gets it and seems to be awake at all hours. He’s been awesome and enabled me to worry less about the day to day and focus on building and shaping the business....and getting some enjoyment back out of it all.”

As well as Middleton, other key Transcon personnel include Don Watson, who manages container operations, and freight operations manager Joe Oliver.

Unshackling Blake from the dispatch desk has allowed Transcon to flourish. The company has virtually doubled its turnover since

he acquired it and he spends his working week focusing on growing the business and fully embracing the industry – the latter including taking a seat on the National Road Carriers Association board.

He explains that in June last year “I got myself nominated for the... board. I was told it would be highly unlikely I’d succeed in getting voted on, but at the AGM I actually won a vote and took a position!

“I’m pretty passionate about advocating for the industry. I’m chairing the port committee for NRC – so heavily involved with the ports and container operators.

“And I guess, although I don’t have the industry background, I actually see this as advantageous, as I’m not dyed in the wool, I’m not blinded by what’s been before. I’m there to challenge things that maybe others have just rolled with.”

What – like rail? “In my opinion, rail is a partner. There are a lot of transport operators that rely on rail – a lot of the containers we move are coming on and off Kiwirail.

“But it’s got to be a team effort. Politically what frustrates us is that we’re played off against each other rather than seen as being in tandem. A train is never going to come to a blueberry farm and pick up blueberries to take them to the supermarket – and nor are we (the trucking industry) ever going to be the most efficient means of moving certain commodities.”

Back to Transcon: What does he see now as issues for the business? “The driver shortage is always on my mind, but I think what may come from that will be innovation.

“I don’t think robots, as where we service is still some ways off autonomous vehicles. But something will evolve. EVs I see, in



*Above:* A Transcon truck picks up a load of beer from customer Sawmill Brewery, at Matakana

*Right:* Blake believes in everybody in the Transcon team knowing how the business is performing, so they can focus on what's necessary



good time, and probably hydrogen.

"I'm probably never going to be an innovator on the truck front. It's just not me. The efficiency, the compliance and the legality of it all matters to me a lot – and to the industry.

"But, based on this operation in particular, we're a pretty conventional operation. The nature of the things we do and what I foresee we will do is not pushing the bounds of weight or volume – it's just not where we are."

Clearly, the last four years spent running Transcon haven't been easy. So, how has his family viewed his business decision – to leave them for trucking? Says Blake: "My Dad is probably the business hero in this. He left school at the age of 15, with no qualifications – but demonstrated to me that if you want something bad enough and are prepared to work hard enough it'll stick...and customers and the team will see that.

"He epitomises that stuff. My Dad now waves at every

(Transcon) truck and is super proud. When we got our first new tractor unit, I took it around to his house and let him drive it. I've never seen him smile so much. The whole premise of one...driving the truck, but two....that it was his son's."

So what's ahead for Blake Noble's lifetime-dream trucking company? "Transcon, by my own desire, is never going to be a monster fleet. If it got to 25 trucks I'd be rapt with that – and organically I think we'll tend towards that in the next five to 10 years.

"But I'm pretty keen to give this a crack somewhere else. I'm still young and see the opportunity of doing this elsewhere: That's what excites me.

"It's painful as hell going through it (the startup process), but I love the customer part of this business. It's a great industry and on the whole people in transport are good for what they say."



*Above:* An important part of the new-era Transcon has been a very effective rebranding exercise. The old Mitsi Shogun still carries the livery of the old company

*Right:* The employment of key operational staff, like freight operations manager Joe Oliver (pictured), has freed Blake up to focus on growing the business...and improving the trucking industry



A day spent with Blake lays bare his passion for this business and its clients – from servicing the seemingly ever-expanding needs of Southern Paprika, with its 22 hectares of glasshouse growing space...to delivering Biomarine NZ's live oysters.

From picking up OOB's berries and ice cream, to handling Matakana Botanicals' natural skincare products...and the craft beer produced by the Sawmill Brewery.

He clearly pays very close attention to what each of his clients do – and, just as importantly, how Transcon can make a difference in assisting them.

It's comes across strongly as he speaks warmly about them, their products...and the loyalty they've shown him.

"I expect and want our customers to be loyal to us, so we try to show the same loyalty in return. And that's across the board – with as many of the suppliers that we can."

His keenness for the industry shines through despite the fact he's a little bleary-eyed the day we spend with him. Last night was a late one – a big night. Not having fun, not driving a truck, nor sorting out some transport problem or other....

But launching a not-for-profit network for young, emerging community and business leaders. Yep, his NEXT creation is for people just like him.

He explains: "I was looking, as a younger business owner, for a network of like-minded people who were into both community and business – learning from one and other and also from business leaders around you.

"I've always been active...getting out and meeting people that I'm inspired by. And so I have met a lot of community and industry leaders and members of government.

"I was like 'shit, it would be really cool to turn this into something I'm sure other people would be into.' I looked at Rotary Clubs and it was just that 'pale, male and stale' gag."

His quest for a like-minded organisation that would support such a concept eventually led him to Auckland's North Harbour Club – a charitable trust with a strong record of fostering leadership development and peer networking.

Says Blake: "But it also supports excellence in sub-25-year-olds. It tries to tap into young leaders as they're growing and developing. So it's supported people like Lydia Ko, Eliza McCartney, Lorde, Tom Ashley – people who have gone on to Olympic or global success...in arts, innovation, music, education and sport."

He realised that here was a really good organisation "for us to try and tack this onto." He duly approached the club in early 2018 with his idea – "and it turns out that they'd been waiting and hoping that something like this would emerge.

"And so, for the last 18 months, I've been working on that concept and last night was the official launch of it. NEXT is literally about the next generation. We are next."

It's a programme that seems to fit perfectly with Blake Noble's own experience – and his philosophy for fostering the next generation of transport operators. As he sums up: "I've been lucky – so many operators have shared their time with me. And that's what we need to do more of.

"To me, it's not just a driver shortage, it's an industry interest shortage that needs to be fostered both from within and outside. Fresh thinking and new ideas. And let's face it – shit, who wouldn't want to be around a truck?" 