

In lieu of legislation

The FTA's Van Excellence scheme is picking up momentum. But, with van operators' statistics for roadworthiness and compliance still at record lows, Dan Gilkes suggests it's time to put up or shut up

The van market continues to go from strength to strength. Burgeoning demand for LCVs, particularly at 3.5 tonnes, is being driven in part by the continued boom in internet sales and corresponding growth of home deliveries - leading to more than 3.4 million vans operating on UK roads.

But all is not well. According to the DVSA (Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency), an incredible 85% of vans stopped at the roadside in 2013-14 were overloaded, while 54% received PG9 prohibition notices. Even more worryingly, 50% of vans currently fail their pre-arranged MOT tests.

Such a level of non-compliance is not sustainable and continued flouting of the law will inevitably result in regulation looming for van operators. Hence the importance of the FTA's (Freight Transport Association) Van Excellence scheme, the industry-led initiative that aims to improve operator and driver professionalism. Though only launched in 2011, this initiative has become the accepted reference in the LCV world.

And with more than 100 members running in excess of 125,000 vans, Van Excellence is working to raise the profile of best practice for van operators.

What's more, it is not simply open to larger operators. While Van Excellence lists DHL, BT Fleet and Balfour Beatty among members companies, it also includes smaller firms running a handful

of vans. Indeed small operators may well stand to benefit most from Van Excellence. While larger fleets tend to have fleet managers, smaller companies often tack such responsibilities on to HR or similar functions. So Van Excellence is ideally placed to help them make an informed difference to operating standards.

Gaining accreditation is surprisingly simple. Firms complete an application form, pay £580 plus VAT and receive an audit guidance pack. The payment and audit can be made for a complete organisation, or for a specific van operating division. The FTA will then request a list of vehicles and drivers, and arrange a date for the audit to be carried out.

Having clear, well-kept records provides much of the paperwork necessary for the audit process - though companies can also apply for a copy of the Van Excellence Code for guidance. But Mark Cartwright, head of vans and LCVs at the FTA, is reassuring. "The majority of operators are actually far better than they think. Plus, we are not



Mark Cartwright (left) with 2015 Van Excellence driver of the year Dave Lucas, of London Borough of Redbridge



Van Excellence aims to enhance professionalism through shared best practice

looking to fail people during the accreditation process. We're trying to find ways to recognise the good things they are already doing."

A range of operating aspects is examined (see panel). In each case the fleet manager or company representative should be able to demonstrate a clear, company-wide policy backed by written evidence of compliance.

VAN EXCELLENCE GUIDE

A Guide to Van Excellence is also available from the FTA, providing best practice advice. Operators can also find free legal, operating cost and fleet management information at www.fta.vanfleetguides.co.uk.

Meanwhile, for fleet businesses not confident of passing the accreditation process straight away, probationary membership is available. The probationary period lasts for three months and provides a window of time in which to find all relevant information

and to ensure that your operation complies with the demands of the independent audit.

Having completed the audit, successful businesses will be accredited and receive a welcome pack from the Van Excellence scheme. Unsuccessful applicants are given the option of a re-audit process.

Accreditation is valid for one year, after which time companies are invited to apply for a further audit. Successful applicants receive a Certificate of Excellence and can use the Van Excellence logo in their marketing material and paperwork. The Van Excellence logo can also be displayed on the company's vans.

"Van Excellence is about more than accreditation though," insists Cartwright. "It is about improving the industry as a whole." It was designed, he explains, from the ground up to raise standards and improve the perception of van and light commercial operators.

Firms that become members are demonstrating to their customers and to the public that they share a commitment to safer, more efficient and increasingly sustainable light commercial vehicle transport. Additionally, however, the best practice procedures, documentation and processes involved in achieving Van Excellence accreditation should result in cost and safety benefits.

The scheme is not limited to the audit process either. Van Excellence puts on conferences throughout the year. It also runs a driver of the year competition, which is open to all member companies' people and aimed at recognising and rewarding skilled van professionals. Indeed, the FTA is now also offering a Van Excellence Certificate of Driver Competence (CPC) qualification, in response to industry requests. Its new CPC carries a three-year validity and further enhances professionalism within the van operating industry. [TE](#)

Van Excellence audit focus

Vehicle Condition: Firms should have a roadworthiness process in place that applies to all vehicles in operation, regardless of ownership. Drivers should be trained to carry out checks and a competent person should assess and rectify faults, when required.

Vehicle Standards: Firms must demonstrate that vehicles are required to be kept clean and tidy. Appropriate processes should be in place to ensure that vans are also correctly taxed, insured, maintained and MOT'd.

Vehicle Administration: Appropriate records should be maintained for at least 15 months and must be available for viewing.

Safe Working: The company must show that the use of vehicles, all associated equipment and working practices have been subject to a documented risk analysis. This should include a vehicle manifest identifying the exact loading specification of tools and materials carried.

Driver Identification: Companies must show that they have a system to identify the driver of each vehicle and that this process is documented and retained for at least six months.

Driver Licensing: There must be a system in place to ensure that drivers are appropriately licensed to a minimum legal standard. This must include licence checking and written driver declarations.

Driver Competence: The company must show that there are processes in place to ensure that drivers are competent to carry out their roles. All new drivers should undergo an assessment relevant to their role. Processes must be documented and retained for at least the duration of the driver's employment.

Driver Behaviour: Applicants must show that there is a system in place to identify, log, investigate and document any incidents, and if necessary discipline or re-train drivers.

Driver Compliance: A system must be in place to ensure that drivers comply with all relevant legislation, including drivers' hours and working time regulations. This includes complying with speed limits, vehicle loading, use of mobile equipment, towing and job-specific legislation.