



Operators, workshops and even technicians themselves are still falling foul of safety inspection issues. Brian Tinham talks to the FTA's Andy Mair about what's going wrong

So, what are the top three issues keeping fleet engineers and managers awake at night? According to Andy Mair, head of engineering at the FTA (Freight Transport Association), they should be: the proficiency of their drivers' walk-around checks; appropriateness and due consideration around inspection frequencies; and (related) the robustness of safety inspections. And with hard data to call on from the FTA's own VIS (Vehicle Inspection Services) inspection and maintenance auditing programme, he of all people ought to know.

Taking them in order, Mair first makes the point that DVSA's (Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency) stats for roadside prohibitions remain stubbornly disappointing, with almost half down to defects that should have been picked up by drivers before leaving the yard. Why so poor? "Driver walk-around checks are very difficult to manage without quality procedures in place," he says. "But the starting point has to be driver training in line with DVSA's revised Guide to Maintaining Roadworthiness."

Remember: daily driver checks are a legal requirement, and DVSA's guidance does offer useful examples and a checklist, so there's no excuse.

Driver CPC (certificate of professional competence) training could also be directed to help with training and to reinforce correct procedures. But the bottom line, insists Mair, is that drivers must always be considered an integral and essential part of any maintenance system - for the driver and the company's sake, as well as that of the public.

"If DVSA picks up a defect that the driver should have reported and it is serious enough to result in an immediate prohibition, then it's not only the driver that gets a fixed penalty," he warns.

SERIOUS REPERCUSSIONS

"That prohibition will be 'S' marked, indicating a significant failure of the maintenance system has occurred, and the impact on the organisation can then be massive." Its OCRS (operator compliance risk score) points will be impacted. Additionally, the likelihood is that the traffic commissioners will be notified. Furthermore, you can expect DVSA examiners to come knocking, wanting to carry out a fleet check and a full review of your maintenance systems. It's unlikely to be pretty.

Moving on to truck inspection frequencies, Mair agrees that fleet managers may be quite right to

consider extending periods beyond the conventional six weeks, particularly given the enormous improvements in vehicle reliability in recent years. Everything depends on the operation: trunking artics on motorway work five days a week is one thing; tipper vehicles working in arduous conditions is quite another.

However, aside from informing DVSA and the traffic commissioners, it is critical that due consideration be given to the ramifications beyond vehicle capabilities alone, he warns.

"When you look at trunking operations, tractor units and semi-trailers are generally travelling long distances, so it may well be sensible to allow inspections to go beyond recommended mileages and timeframes. Experienced operators have been doing this for some time, moving out to eight, 10, even 12 weeks. It obviously improves efficiency and saves money. But you need to be very confident that there are no negative impacts on vehicle maintenance."

If technicians aren't going to see vehicles as frequently, then the only eyes available to pick up on faults are those of your drivers. For Mair, that means your driver defect reporting system needs to be extremely robust and responsive. No surprise then that DVSA's Guide to



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Maintaining Roadworthiness suggests that only experienced operators are likely to be able to tailor their inspection frequencies to their operation, taking into account all factors.

In addition, fleet engineers need to look at the vehicle manufacturers' recommendations in terms of wear tolerances and service intervals, including aspects such as oil changes, and be confident that nothing will be compromised. And, if the goal is to increase efficiency, including in terms of getting as much life out of vehicle components as possible, then think carefully about that.

The point: if you move from a six- to a 12-week inspection cycle, when vehicles come in technicians should no longer think in terms of checking to minimum MOT standards. The mindset has to be ensuring that the vehicle can remain safely in service for the next 12 weeks - and that might entail changing out components earlier than you otherwise might.

"The first thing to do is conduct an audit to see if you are in a position to extend inspection frequencies on some or all of your fleet. Look at your records and analyse defects found during routine

inspections, for example. Then review your driver defect reporting system and do some sampling. Maybe gate checks, ideally using a third party, to ensure that drivers are doing their checks properly. If there are holes, you need to instigate training and then check again."

Moving on to the third issue - the adequacy of safety inspections - brings us back to the MOT and Mair reiterates that this should not be regarded as the pinnacle, but the minimum standard.

FALLING FOUL

"Too many operators, workshops and even technicians themselves still fall foul of regarding the annual MOT as the benchmark for vehicle safety condition. It is not. It is a snapshot on the day of the absolute minimum legal requirement for the condition of a vehicle. So that means if your safety inspections are moving from six, to eight to 12 weeks, then the standards applied need to be higher."

Examples include tyre tread depth and condition. It may pass the MOT as the minimum legal standard, but is that tyre going to last the next six, eight or 12 weeks? If there is any doubt, then action has to be taken to avoid any potential for safety issues, VOR (vehicle off road)

incidents and, again, prohibitions. And the same applies to braking components but also others, including those without prescribed minimum limits, such as kingpins.

"The Irtec technician accreditation scheme has addressed this aspect well and, as a result, inspection technicians today are much more aware. That's why the FTA is 100% behind Irtec. And the same goes for the IRTE's Workshop Accreditation. But the fact remains, we still go into operators under our VIS programme to carry out inspections, say, three or four weeks after the MOT, and find defects that would lead to a prohibition. Safety inspection standards need to be much higher in workshops."

Incidentally, on a related topic, it's worth sparing a thought for C&U (Construction and Use 1986) regulations, notably around bodywork and additional truck-mounted equipment, such as loaders and tail-lifts. An MOT pass is not necessarily indicative that a vehicle is fully compliant with legislation, because the entirety of C&U is not part of the annual vehicle test. So when your technicians are carrying out safety inspections, be sure they are also inspecting for roadworthiness and operational safety. **TE**