

SOE president Chris Grime talks to John Challen about industry and technology challenges, and the importance of teamwork in achieving better transport solutions

**B**efore becoming president of the SOE, Chris Grime spent his entire career in fleet engineering. Ever since his first workshop foreman's job, he, like many others, aspired to having the letters IRTE after his name. And now, despite also having responsibility for IPlantE and BES sectors, he retains a special bond with road transport engineers.

He believes that, by working together to tackle engineering issues, all three sectors can make a significant contribution to operations, industry-wide. "Success is all about teamwork, and our trustee board, head office staff, and professional sector councils and committees will collectively meet the society's goals – including being recognised as one of the top engineering institutions in the country."

#### VOSA ATFs

In his day-job, Grime is responsible for Lancashire County Council's fleet engineering division, a role that puts him in pole position to see the issues first hand. So it's no surprise that a key concern is VOSA's decision to close the testing stations in Manchester and Llandrindod Wells, as well as its plan to cease operations at the Steeton site in March 2010. VOSA's strategy has been met widely with withering criticism, but Grime takes a more measured approach: "I am worried about VOSA closing testing stations, because of the impact on distances and hence costs for operators," he says.

"There is also an issue with availability of test slots: VOSA is closing stations at a time when it is difficult to get a slot, which, to me, defies logic. But you have to look at costs and also understand how many vehicles are now parked up, or SORNed? How many vehicles are now being tested?"

The fact is that, by closing the Steeton site alone, VOSA will save £61,000 a year. Set that against a facility that's seen a drop in testing of 20% over five years, and the picture becomes clearer.

Meanwhile, VOSA is encouraging operators to become approved testing facilities (ATFs), where firms can conduct tests on their premises, and Grime admits that Lancashire County Council is now looking at this option. "The principle sounds good, and we've already got a similar setup with designated premises, where people can take vehicles for test on days when the VOSA examiner is there. By encouraging operators to take up that role it could become more convenient for them and easier to get an

# Presidential



## About Chris Grime

Since starting life as an apprentice mechanic, Chris Grime has experienced fleet engineering at private companies (Reed Transport, Crown Paints and Wastedrive Manchester) before arriving at Lancashire County Council in 1987. Today he is responsible for the operational and financial management of the County Council's group of workshops, which operate with an annual turnover of £5 million.

Despite a tough work schedule, and a staff of 60, Grime maintains his door is always open. "The biggest lesson I have learned is the importance of listening to people, especially when they have different views to my own. You learn things when you listen – and some of them might just surprise you, and open your mind to new ideas and better approaches."

# address

appointment than it is with current VOSA test stations,” reasons Grime.

Beyond that, his next big issue is biofuels – and Grime is very keen to influence not just improvement, but a final resolution here. “We need to know how to address the problems associated with even 5% biofuel and its effects on vehicle systems, fuel lines, injector systems and fuel filters. Currently, it’s all gone quiet in the biofuels industry and the government has backed off its earlier targets for biofuel use.”

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But Grime is not for backing off. Instead, he’s issuing an invitation to all parties to work together towards a solution. “We have never managed to get manufacturers, fuel suppliers and the IRTE in the same room at the same time on this subject. We all need this to happen. We need an open debate on the causes of the problems and how operators should be preparing themselves. The fuel suppliers say you may need a separate tank, and that tolerances may be too tight. But I wonder, have we got the right standard of fuel through the pumps?”

### Missed opportunities

On a separate point, with the growing need for improved efficiency in workshops, Grime is keen to pass on his experience, using his own county council’s RAMP (Repair and Maintenance Program) workshop management computer system. “RAMP takes live data from everything we do in our six workshops, which are all computerised,” he explains. “It calculates labour hours and parts needed on all the jobs; it costs each part separately; and it charges the correct money for each job.”

Grime says the software gives him a profit/loss record of every workshop on a daily basis, as well as displaying how efficient each mechanic has been. While he admits his system could be better, he is keen to see RAMP and similar systems used nationwide in HGV and LCV workshops.

“I am often surprised when I look around other organisations. When I compare what we have with others’ workshops, I see so much room for improvement in terms of efficiency, and health and safety. I’d be quite willing to share what we’ve got, if other transport engineers thought that might help.”

Grime talks a lot about people, and the importance of collaboration – particularly on technical issues – to improve the transport industry. He is also keen to see development of individuals, as well as the technologies they use. “From a health and safety perspective in the workshop, we need to ensure we produce the right end result – which is having safe and efficient vehicles on the road. But securing the health and safety of our employees has also got to be paramount in any workshop manager’s mind.”

He also stresses the importance of diagnostic testing equipment being available to all, making the point that, while it might be a valuable resource to the fleet manager, it is also vital that adequate and state-of-the-art equipment is on-site for technicians. “[Lancashire County Council] has invested in up-to-date equipment from Texa, for example, which lets us diagnose faults and fault codes on the vast majority of our vehicle range.”

### Professional engineering

Finally, Grime returns to the subject of people and the importance of IRTE membership – both to society as a whole and to individual transport engineers. “Last year, the SOE registered more EngTechs than any other institution in the county. That’s good for all of us, including the SOE itself, because it improves our standing within the Engineering Council,” he insists.

“Our ongoing liaison with manufacturers and their apprenticeship schemes – and approving those for SOE IRTE membership and registration with the Engineering Council – is critical. It is also important that we support the irtec licensing scheme, which demonstrates the competence of those involved through independent assessment. These are the routes to encouraging the next generation of transport engineers. Success breeds success and the starting point is a quality qualification that’s recognised throughout engineering.” **TE**

### Centre point

Chris Grime is putting his support behind IRTE Centres, which he insists provide an important opportunity for members to share ideas and contacts. “Many members may feel that you don’t always need to go and see people to talk about technical issues. That’s true, but I still believe that our centres will continue to thrive, because, in the end, you can’t beat face-to-face discussion – and you should never underestimate the value of networking,” he says. Find your local centre by going to [www.soe.org.uk/soe-network](http://www.soe.org.uk/soe-network)

Photo: Dean Smith, Camera Crew