

Delivering efficiency

The fleet measures more than 2,500 light commercial vehicles, almost all Mercedes-Benz Sprinter chassis cabs with PanelTex box bodies. Four-fifths of those are used to deliver shopping for Ocado Retail, a joint venture between the supermarket and Marks & Spencer; the rest support supermarket Morrisons' delivery network, explains Ocado service delivery general manager Neil Cottam, who is responsible for the truck fleet and fleet services team. (Ocado was the only major UK supermarket willing to speak about its delivery fleet).

Ocado's chassis-cabs operate out of one of 23 distribution centres, each of which are managed by a day-to-day operations manager. They might do two or three runs per day - two in the morning shift, one in the afternoon - averaging 20 drops per run. In addition, with some 200 tractors, the organisation feeds those sites, as well as running a cross-dock operation.

Ocado head of fleet, Stuart Skingsley, says: "Because we have an O-licence, we don't distinguish between the trucks and the vans; we run the same regime for servicing." That means a schedule of 17-week inspections and regular servicing for the delivery vehicles, whose

Over the past two decades, supermarkets have perfected a new intraurban duty cycle, for delivery vehicles. They are worked hard: driven up to 18 hours per day, every day, by a small army of drivers. Will Dalrymple learns how Ocado organises its operation



frequency was devised by Mercedes-Benz to optimise oil change and consumable part wear rates.

That work is mostly carried out at Ocado premises by staff from the Mercedes-Benz dealer network, governed by a service level agreement. Skingsley explains how it came to be: "Early on when we were starting up, we had lots of things to concentrate on, and made a decision to leave maintenance to the experts. We have had some good offerings from Mercedes, which has a comprehensive network. From an economical, practicality and safety perspective, it made good sense. We have reviewed it a few times along the

way. But given the geography, and the fact that we're expanding to two-thirds of the UK, there isn't one workshop group that is going to do it."

SPECIFICATION

Ocado has standardised on a medium-wheelbase, 3.5t chassis with semi-automatic gearbox. The first delivery vehicles in the early 2000s were specified with a demount box system, but payload constraints forced a shift to a conventional box body with side-entry door and two refrigerated zones. In fact, Skingsley points out that the box continues to get lighter, because successive generations of Sprinter chassis have put on weight to comply with increasingly strict emissions requirements.

The head of fleet says that the duty cycle remains a challenge for a light commercial vehicle chassis: "We struggled to find a manufacturer that makes them durable enough. They operate for five years; that's optimal, or at the upper end of optimal. So long as





FRESH IN AT TESCO

IVECO has been supplying vans to Tesco's home delivery fleet for over a decade, with some 900 Daily vehicles currently residing on the fleet. In total, since 2010, Tesco has operated 5,144 Daily chassis cabs fitted with climate-controlled bodies. This year, 45 IVECO Daily chassis cab entered service via Guest Truck & Van in February. A further 600 will be delivered through 2021.

Tesco's new Daily 35S14 HI-MATICs are powered by its Euro VI-D, 2.3-litre F1A turbo diesel fitted to eight-speed HI-MATIC automatic gearbox. Further options fitted include the Digital Pack including reverse warning alarm, 7" HI-CONNECT touch-screen infotainment system with DAB, Bluetooth, and smart-phone mirroring allowing navigation services, as well as IVECO's connectivity box (see also pp15-18).

Tesco operates its vehicles for up to five years dependent on their mileage, and it expects the new Daily units will clock up around 30,000 miles each year.

Before entering service, Solomon Commercials will fit the vehicles with its low-height, 'Slipstream' body, including fridge units to keep groceries at the required temperature.

Also, across the entire fleet, the supermarket is fitting driver aid Lightfoot to reduce CO2 emissions (and to conserve fuel consumption). Matt Rhind, distribution and fulfilment transport director for Tesco says: "We make 15,000 delivery journeys every day. The Lightfoot app gives every one of our home delivery drivers real-time feedback on their driving style so they can make immediate improvements and reduce their emissions on every trip they make."

they are well-maintained, they do what we need."

A key focus for Ocado is the top 10 defects. "In recent times, one of the most niggling type of problems has been warning lights, because with stricter emissions standards, there are more engine management lights, and we can't ignore them; there is a legal responsibility."

As part of the contract, the head of fleet has a monthly meeting with the Mercedes-Benz key accounts team at its UK headquarters in Milton Keynes. Since last year, parts availability has been a worry; more recently, Ocado has also been affected by global shortages of electronics and controllers, though Skingsley blames COVID and Brexit for that, rather than the vehicle brand.

For tyres, Ocado has arranged a national contract with Bridgestone and its network of independent fitters. (the vans are fitted with a four-season tyre to reduce the need for changes.) And although Ocado uses Mercedes-Benz's breakdown service, accident recovery is handled by local companies.

DRIVERS

"If there's an accident, we look at the cause, and external factors - the season, traffic - and consider those as well. We don't sack people because they had an accident," affirms Skingsley. Not that accidents are common. Cottam says that vehicle damage rates are not significantly worse than on tractors, despite the fact that delivery drivers are not recruited specifically for their driving ability.

Elaborates Skingsley: "There is a skill element that we train in heavily. These people need to be safe and good ambassadors of the brand. They have to be looking after the vehicle, and provide a good image."

Management tools include smart driver cameras and telematics. Adds Cottam: "We have lots of trigger

mechanisms for picking up those people who are a concern, and we use them. It's easy to dismiss drivers, but the first protocol is to intervene and rectify the situation before we do anything else." For example, a red line in company policy is the no-distractions rule - no mobile phones, no smoking - which is enforced 'religiously'.

Another mandatory process is vehicle check-out and check-in. At the start of their shift, drivers are given the location of their assigned vehicle, inside of which is the pre-start sheet for daily checks. "They post that document before they leave the site. It says, 'this is the condition of the van now'. We collect those documents and enter them into the system. It sounds involved, but if there's any damage, then we know who is responsible," Skingsley points out. At the end of their shift, they complete a walk-around with a member of the marshalling team, where any damage or defects in safety-critical aspects, such as lights, is noted.

In terms of future vehicles, Ocado is working with German factories on a battery-electric e-Sprinter specification, and with other manufacturers too. In fact, Ocado operates 17 Fiat Ducatos converted to battery-electric by BD Auto. "That ticks the boxes, and has proven durable," judges Skingsley. Another 15 are due next month. But that's a tiny fraction for such a large operator. He concludes: "We're frustrated; we'd like to be further ahead, but all we can do is wait until the OEMs get there." **TE**

