

Built to last

SMMT's chief executive Paul Everitt wants his organisation to further embrace trucks and vans – and help to find engineering and legislative benefits for vehicles and operators, writes John Challen

While it might be heavily reliant on membership from the passenger car manufacturers, the UK's Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders (SMMT) is equally dedicated to servicing the freight industry. Involvement in recent debates on van CO₂, as well as the development and subsequent launch of SENTA (the SMMT European and National Type Approval guide), at the CV Operator Show, is testament to that fact.

Under the mission statement, 'To encourage and promote, in the UK and abroad, the interests of the motor industry', this trade body has vowed to fight the corner of the road transport business, according to chief executive Paul Everitt. And he has plenty of ideas for making that possible.

"We are supporting the road freight sector in the UK through our members," he says. "For many of these, their customers are big and small fleet operators, and we try to influence the debates and the broader environment. [Fleet operators] deliver products, or provide services, and we are trying to make the UK as much of an attractive location for those activities as we can."

Everitt concedes that vehicle operators wouldn't be target members for his organisation, but, rest assured, he and his team will fight your corner. "While vehicle operators are not our primary cause, we recognise that they are key people for our members, whether selling goods or providing services," he says.

"We are interested in working in collaboration with the IRTE, RHA and FTA to add our voice to shaping the environment in which they operate. The issues that are important to them are also important to us and we are trying to influence these. If operators feel unappreciated, or if the legislation is not helping their businesses, we want to help them in the work that we do."

Future impact of CO₂

Debates surrounding CO₂ are very familiar to Everitt, due to the all-encompassing emissions emphasis in the passenger car world. Indeed, he admits he could "talk for days about the subject". For Transport Engineer readers concerned with van and truck fleets, his message is: "We are now going through the process of discussing and agreeing [CO₂] legislation for vans. It is a bit more complex, because the choice of van is much more related to its specific purpose and there are multiple variations. So trying to get a singular approach to CO₂ targets is difficult [with vans]."

"But with these vehicles, we do need to reduce emissions and there will only be greater pressure to do so. It is difficult, but it is part of the environment in which we all operate. So our job is to ensure that, when legislators make decisions, they are well informed. We won't always agree, but we must suggest the right things to do and see what can be delivered over a time period."

That said, Everitt agrees the SMMT is on a learning curve where LCVs and CO₂ emissions are concerned, but asserts that, at some

stage, the organisation's remit will also cover the heavier end of the sector. "We're not looking into it at the moment, but it is on the agenda and it is inevitable that legislators will concentrate on that end of the market. But we accept this is a more complicated area, because, if vans and chassis cabs are complex enough, the configurations in the truck market are much more diverse."

Work is going on right now, though. For the van market, the SMMT has started to build up a CO₂ database and is working with the government on a number of legislative fronts. "We are looking at factors that will incentivise purchases of [more environmentally friendly] vehicles," says Everitt. "There might be some scope for biofuels, but there are other measures, such as improved aerodynamics, that might deliver results. We will then look to further plans that could incentivise the procurement process."

Everitt says he expects to be able to announce results within the next few months. "From a vehicle manufacturer perspective, we want to demonstrate we are on the case and find cost-effective solutions to deliver to the market," he states. "At a time when legislators are looking for something to do, we are looking to let them know about actions they can take to incentivise customers."

Type approval made easy

Type approval is also vying for attention as a key concern for fleet managers and the SMMT is well aware. The aforementioned SENTA, a web-based operation that helps make the type approval process easier, is "fabulous," according to Everitt.

Why? "Because everyone will have to deal with type approval, albeit progressively, over the next few years. We have experience, because on the car side, it has been part of what we do for a couple of decades. Now, we have combined the tacit knowledge that we have – about how the system works and the processes – with web technology. This makes it as easy as possible, for those that are new to the process, to work their way through it."

And if you're wondering about the softly, softly stance, it might help to know that one of Everitt's previous positions was at the British Road Federation, "a pressure group designed to make a lot of noise". At the SMMT, he quite deliberately takes a rather different approach. "It is not helpful for us to make accusations about people or policies, because we want government to see us as a key part of the chain."

Also, when it comes to goals, Everitt's may well echo many of those across the commercial vehicle sector. They include, he says, a broader public recognition of the role and importance of the industry, and bringing confidence back to the sector.

"We probably don't do as much as we could to demonstrate that this is what we are about," he agrees. "But, in the road freight sector, we are looking at what we can do to help kick-start demand and improve access to finance. Those two will be high on the list of priorities for discussions with the next government." 



Scrappage off the agenda

There has been talk of a possible scrappage scheme for HGVs, following the success the SMMT found with the recent programme for sub 3.5t vehicles. But such a system for anything larger is quite unlikely, says Everitt. "We haven't looked at a specific scrappage scheme, because there wasn't a great deal of demand for it. Last year, the market was suffering from an absence of demand, rather than people holding off because of the recession. Also, because it is a capital intensive investment, people are unlikely to be persuaded unless it is a sizeable incentive – which is unrealistic."