PROCESS LEADER

As Veolia prepares to bring in 67 full-electric RCVs in London in 2023, UK and Ireland fleet director Gary Clark explains how it manages the largest fleet of RCVs in the country

What with cars, vans, yellow plant vehicles (700) and HGVs, the entire fleet of resource management company Veolia stretches to more than 8,600 vehicles, including more than 2,000 RCVs – said to be the biggest in the country. Ultimately in charge of all of them is Gary Clark.

Having begun as an apprentice in 1980 within Howells Waste Control, he jumped ship when Howells was sold to Biffa in 2003. He moved to a new position managing the Greater London municipal fleet of Veolia predecessor Onyx, which had grown piecemeal, contract by contract, across the city, amounting to some 700 vehicles.

Clark recalls: "It was a crucial situation for Onyx, because there was very little, if any, [RCV OEM] dealership network in the M25. If you operate a sizeable fleet – as we did then – the necessity is to have your own maintenance facility. I was brought in to be a transport manager, but also to make sense of the maintenance facilities within the M25."

He adds: "There were five contracts at that time. They were all working in arguably a dysfunctional way: no focus on tools or equipment, no focus on quality of work, no focus on efficiency and quality. I brought those together in a very different way for Onyx, as one collective unit."

Improvements included creating standard processes for inspections and any remedial work required. It involved, he continues, learning from the very presence of remedial work, "understanding whether it was driver defect-able, so then we could escalate that; if it wasn't, challenging the PMI [periodic maintenance inspection] process to make sure that we're not capturing lots of defects at MOT preparation; understanding that if the vehicle was on the road it might have roadworthiness defects that would cause problems.

"The process was the key part of that, and quality-checking after the MOT preparation. Then everyone could see that we were going from a relatively average position – if not poor – to a constantly improving position. And then starting to score the locations to make it competitive, and before you knew it, we had that one conquered, and everyone was taking it seriously and taking pride in what they were doing to get a situation that was positively impacting their roadworthiness score." It is a metric still closely monitored to this day; he reports that in 2022, Veolia's company average first-time MOT pass rate was 97.8%.

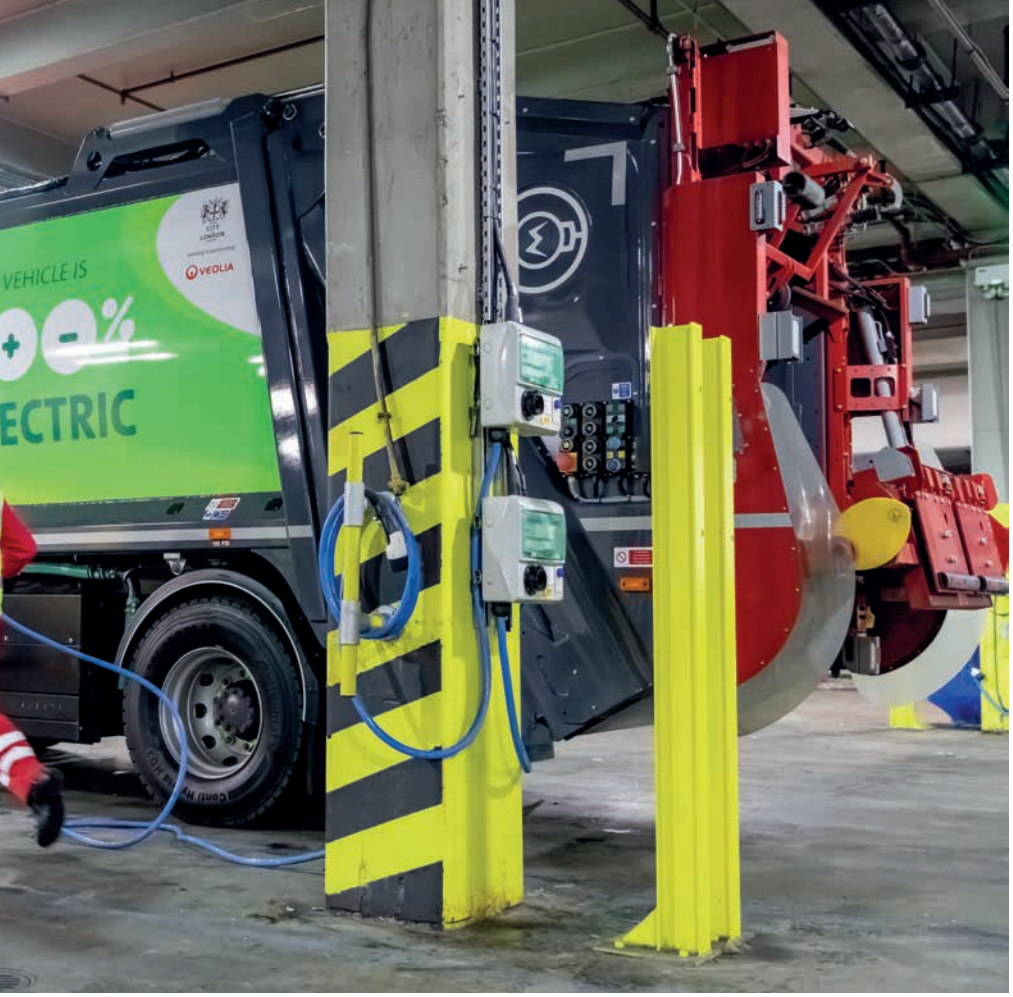
This achievement comes after eight years as UK and Ireland fleet director, a promotion that came after the company's rebrand to Veolia, as well as taking on Brambles' Cleanaway business, which doubled the fleet. In any case, he has continued to lead from the front, while keeping a weather eye on the bottom line.

BUSINESS FOCUS

In that new role, he continued to lead change. Recalling the time, he says: "I then took on responsibility regarding all fleet purchasing, maintenance, budgets, bringing the [43] workshops together in one cohesive unit."

"In the Veolia fleet organisation, we were focused on buying new trucks and managing fleet compliance. My view is, if fleet management is going to be successful, you need to look at all aspects: the effectiveness of the workshops, the availability of the fleet and the utilisation of the fleet when it comes to maintenance cost and budget."

When he came into the position, he felt that the business culture was overly simplistic about the fleet. Since



then he has brought a much more sophisticated understanding of the business value of fleet management and fleet engineering. The fleet director explains: "Clearly there's some efficiency in the workshops being modelled properly so we're not spending too much money; clearly there's benefit in making sure we replace the fleet at the right time so the fleet profile is right, and also, if the fleet has useful life, we continue to use that useful life. It's a blend of all of those things that makes a contribution to the net position of the business."

He continues: "If you look at fleet workshops, sometimes you can have a workshop and it has people in it, but there's no metric of the hours and the number of people [compared] to the workload that you have. You could have a workshop with not enough people in it, and your maintenance standard isn't very good and you're subcontracting lots of work. Conversely, you can have a workshop with too many people in it, and you're not covering the hours properly and you are sucking money away from the business. In the financial model that I put forward and that we work to now, the P&L model for the workshops, the plan and the leadership expectation is that we bring those workshops back to zero [variance] on a P&L perspective. The reason for that is that it evidences to the senior levels of the business that we are managing maintenance effectively."

APPLYING UNDERSTANDING

Clark adds: "We take a discerning view now in terms of understanding the metrics that lead to maintenance costs. If you have a truck and use it for one, two or three years, lo and behold, things are going to go wrong. There's no point in being reactive about that; the best position to be in is to be proactive; map out what you think is going to happen, and then you can set that expectation with the business unit so they know what is going to happen."

In addition to having a detailed understanding of lifetime vehicle service requirements, Veolia focuses two types of repair: preventative maintenance – stopping things from going wrong – and condition-based maintenance – which assesses how much a component or aspect of the vehicle has been used but still is in tolerance or road-legal. Observes Clark: "If you get preventative and condition-based maintenance right, you reduce the amount of failure maintenance, when things go wrong unpredictably, and most importantly when vehicles break down at the roadside. We have a good formula to avoid that. But I'm not saying that we don't have any roadside breakdowns, because we do, especially when the vehicles start to get older."

A great help with not just ageing but all aspects of fleet management is a good relationship with the vehicle OEMs (it runs a multi-branded fleet), according to the Veolia director. This he calls a partnership approach, in which effort is required on both sides. "We have our set of problems, and when it comes to resolving those problems, we need to work together. That could be technical training in the workshops; it could be product problems in the field; it could be demand on vehicles that we have from that OEM. We need to come together, we need to discuss and have open and honest conversations, and we need to know exactly where we are without any false steers."

To manage such a wide-ranging role over a huge fleet, Clark leads a team of four in the company, each with 'head of' status (and that means that they cover a division, not a geographical territory): municipal and workshop development; industrial water and energy; fleet driver training and compliance; and fleet commercial and treatment (which covers waste transfer stations). Below them, a larger team of managers and wider teams of technicians and apprentices extends outwards.

SKILLS AND COMPETENCIES

Veolia employs 220 technicians. Recruiting and retaining them has become more difficult after Brexit, COVID and the war in Ukraine. "We have seen a reduction of people in

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the UK working in these roles," the fleet director observes. Add to that the way that UK residents' career aspirations have evolved away from apprenticeships: while Clark recalls his own parents being 'elated' at his securing an apprenticeship place, he admits that by the time his own children were of age they went to university.

How does Veolia counter these issues? He says: "If you go to university, it costs a fortune. If you start an apprenticeship, that's a core qualification, and we show them what they can do after." Technical qualification in the company doesn't end there; promising employees will be brought up into master technician roles, which are called 'top tech', and then into supervisory and management roles.

Five or so years ago, the company was running a decentralised apprenticeship programme, working with two or three service providers around the country. It wasn't ideal. He complains: "The quality wasn't the same; the output from the individuals wasn't good and we weren't retaining staff." In response, the company worked with S&B Automotive Academy to re-engineer the apprenticeship programme. "We wanted them [S&B] to be part of this; we didn't want to say, 'You have the contract, give these apprentices the education.' We engaged with trainers, and talked about the syllabus, and changed it, incorporating a battery-electric vehicle module, plus lots of attention on soft skilling, hard skilling, vocational licences, health and safety, diagnostics training."

Alongside this, Veolia has also developed an upskilling programme, where it recruits light goods vehicle technicians, and takes them on with the condition that they complete an HGV diploma. As of mid-March, six technicians were being upskilled, and another cohort is waiting.

Another part of technician training is on battery-electric vehicles. Veolia has appointed Autotech to administer an IMI EV diploma. He adds: "It will take these ICE [internal combustion engine] technicians and over the summer give them the academic [education] and product understanding to move to become BEV technicians, so that we can start to internalise, using our own workshop locations, the maintenance of large BEV vehicles.

"Our fleet is multibranded; it's as diverse as you can imagine. If we relied on OEMs for our maintenance, we could have four looking after one truck. That would be expensive; that's one reason why we want to be successful with internalisation." But, he points out, there are indirect costs, too, in terms of loss of vehicle availability and productivity. Independence, he says, is now being seen as crucially important as part of transiting from ICE to BEV so it can retain the benefit of internal maintenance.

THE NEW FLEET

This is because of Veolia's coming fleet of 67 full-electric 26t Dennis Eagle eCollect RCVs, which are due to arrive in London depots this summer. Workshop upgrades, including grid connections for charging points, are currently underway. The RCVs will be maintained in specially equipped bespoke bays.

Initially, the OEM will provide a repair and maintenance package. But, Clark emphasises, that is planned to tail off, "once we've got the skillset." He elaborates: "We will establish, in partnership, what we should do ourselves, to start. We will agree that, we will monetise that, we will take that off of the R&M contract and then we will start to do [it]. So we will work very progressively but also very cautiously to make sure that we completely understand what we're doing and the circumstances that we are dealing with as well."

The fleet director concludes: "Right now we are at the beginning of the story; our apprentices are still upskilling; the next tranche of the activity is in transition, but [eventually] the programme will fully encompass, from an internal perspective, all aspects of the vehicles." TE