

SAFETY NET

A breakdown is never good news, but the provision an operator has in place to deal with these occurrences can make a huge difference to the amount of downtime and cost incurred as a result, finds Lucy Radley

First on the list comes those solutions offered by the truck dealerships and manufacturers themselves. All seven OEMs have a scheme of some kind, and one of the best known and regarded is DAFaid. But what happens where an operator has a mixed fleet, and the one that breaks down isn't a DAF? "We will attempt to assist any make of vehicle," says Simon Gardner, DAF's service operations manager. "The only requirement for using the service is that the operator has an active trading account with a DAF dealer. Obviously we are specifically trained and equipped for the DAF product."

While 24-hour mobile service is provided directly by the DAF dealer network, recovery itself is often performed by specialist local agents, and for tail-lift repairs DAF's preferred agent has been Marshall Fleet Solutions for many years now. Tyre breakdowns can be covered, too - DAFaid currently uses a small number of third-party suppliers for this. "We are, however, close to partnering with a single national tyre provider very shortly and so keen to expand this offering," Gardner says.

One common criticism of modern dealerships is their unwillingness to attempt repairs without first having the vehicle towed in, which can both be costly and increase waiting times. In DAFaid's case, minor repairs might be carried out roadside, but this is solely at the discretion of attending technicians, who must assess each situation to

ensure the safety of themselves and other road users. Where a truck is at its home depot, or a customer's premises, however, repairs will be made on the spot if possible. "This is increasingly common," Gardner explains, "although at very busy times priority might be awarded to roadside situations."

Finally, the most important question - how much will a call-out set you back? DAFaid's standard charge, Monday to Friday 8am - 6pm is £183.62, with a subsequent hourly rate of £88.94. This rises to £208.62 for nights, weekends and bank holidays, but that figure includes the first hour of assistance. Inevitably costs are around £30 higher for call-outs from London dealerships however, and recovery and parts are invoiced separately in these cases.

INDEPENDENT SOLUTION

While the dealers may be the obvious choice, there are several independent breakdown providers as well. TNS365 is one of these, covering the full range of goods vehicles from small vans through to tractor units and trailers, including tyre breakdowns. It offers services nationwide, maintaining a network of subcontractors who actually attend call-outs on its behalf.

"We tend to avoid the larger commercial workshops to work with smaller local engineers, which means we can often get someone out to a breakdown where others cannot attend," director Adam Drake explains. "A lot are chosen via recommendations, or we work with engineers who have



left larger companies and set up on their own. We keep a lot of smaller companies in business." One effect of this policy is that the towing of vehicles before commencing repairs is the exception, not the rule.

"We always try to do a repair roadside; we would rarely need to recover the vehicle unless it has heavy damage," Drake states. Mostly this means effecting a temporary repair, so the vehicle can get to a more suitable area or workshop. "Recovery is such an expensive thing - we try our best to avoid this for us and the customer," Drake says. "If it's roadside on a motorway, we can often still attend, however most drivers will 'limp' to the next junction or services and then phone in the breakdown."

TNS365 charges by incident, and costs obviously vary hugely, depending on what needs to be done. But if a vehicle is repairable roadside the bill would usually be around £150 per engineer call-out, which includes travel to site and an hour of labour. "Most attendances can be repaired roadside if it needs just small bits," he adds. If major parts are needed, and are not in the



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engineer's van, then a temporary repair can be made to get the vehicle back to a depot. "Then we can either order parts, or usually the customer has their own local workshop to follow up on repairs."

ALL INCLUSIVE?

One glaring gap at the heavier end of the market is the kind of insurance-based, all-inclusive membership provision available for cars and small vans. An exception is the RAC, which will cover vehicles right up to 44 tonnes, with a number of add-ons to a basic policy available. These include the ability to recover trucks to a destination of choice, within either a 40-, 100- or 200-mile radius of where they break down.

Cover can be provided either on a pay-per-use basis, subject to an annual admin fee (from around £44 a year), or operators can choose an annual subscription policy. These can cover each truck for up to four breakdowns a year. Cover can include roadside assistance (including roadside fixes), at home/at a business premises assistance and recovery. "Where this cover isn't appropriate (for instance, due to a larger fleet size or the nature of the

vehicles that need covering), we have a bespoke commercial team that devises solutions based on needs," a spokesman says. "We service a number of major corporate clients with large fleets."

In the RAC's case, a mixture of service providers are used, depending on the customer's needs and the nature of the assistance needed. In some situations work can be completed by RAC patrols, while in others the company will appoint one of its specialist approved subcontractors. "Recovery isn't inevitable," it says. "We have mechanics that can attend at the roadside and complete fixes there, depending on the nature of the breakdown and what a customer's requirements are." Non-starts and tyre-related problems, for example, can often be dealt with there and then.

If, however, a mechanic attends an operator's premises, or if the vehicle is at a customer's depot, the RAC will attend,

but even subscription-based policy holders are only offered this service on a pay-per-use basis. Unlike the other two providers, however, it was unable to give us any kind of a ballpark figure as to what this might cost, although it does offer breakdown policies for truck insurance customers, too. And that is probably the key thing to remember here: lovely though it would be to have car-style breakdown insurance for a fleet of two dozen 44-tonners, that is precisely what this would be - insurance, with all the limitations, exemptions and exclusions that go along with it.

Whether the RAC's unwillingness to share numbers is sensible prudence on its part given the varied nature of haulage operations, or a red flag warning potential customers to check the small print very carefully, is a matter for others to decide. As ever, the best advice seems to be 'buyer beware', regardless of which type of provider readers choose to approach. **TE**