

Results driven

As MOT failure rates continue to fall in the HGV market, why are the figures for LCVs staying stubbornly stable and what should operators be doing about it? John Challen investigates the next steps for fleet managers to help gain higher levels of roadworthiness

A quick glance at the 2009–2010 Effectiveness Report from VOSA (the Vehicle & Operating Services Agency) shows that the recession in recent years led to a significant shift in fleet operations. The overall number of HGVs dipped below 450,000 (from 462,820 in 2007–2008), with the initial and final failure rates also falling (to 27.4% and 15.5% respectively).

This may be – as noted by Andy Cattell, head of large vehicle policy at VOSA – a “very good news story”. However, it is not a trend repeated for Class 7 vehicles – those goods vehicles with a gvw of between 3,000kg and 3,500kg. Here, initial fail rates

over the same period increased from a poor 49.3% to an abysmal 50%, continuing an upward trend that dates back over several years. In volume terms, these figures mean that more than 10,000 vehicles checked by VOSA during the period 2009–2010 did not make the grade at the first time of asking.

While VOSA’s Cattell remains relatively happy – “Vehicles are generally passing MOTs, therefore reducing risk [of injury and failure], and we should be shouting about it from the rooftops” – there is clearly a great deal of work to be done, if the industry wants a cleaner bill of health.

One of the problems is that cash constraints are leading many recession-hit operators to hang on to

Looking for a van upgrade?

For those operators in the market for a van fleet upgrade, a look towards Ford could be a step in the right direction. The company used the CV Show to give the 2012 Transit its public debut – with features including a new generation of Duratorq TDCi engines and optional ECONetic technologies, such as auto start-stop and speed limiter systems.

The 2.2-litre Ford Duratorq TDCi engine, designed to power all Transit

derivatives, regardless of driveline configurations (front-, rear- and all-wheel drive), features higher pressure common-rail direct injection, new variable nozzle turbochargers and an improved exhaust gas treatment, via a new EGR (exhaust gas recirculation) system and cDPF (coated diesel particulate filter) unit.

The commercial vehicle manufacturer says these technologies have been added to help meet the stricter Euro 5 emission levels. New measures, such as an additional engine top cover and cleverly designed cold air duct, also contribute to greatly improved sound and vibration levels. And Ford points to more ECONetic technologies, including: smart regenerative charging; advanced battery management system; and an optional ECO Pack, with the above-mentioned switchable auto-start-stop and 110km/h speed limiter function, available for most powertrain combinations.

Unsurprisingly, lower cost of ownership and better sustainability are also key claims for the van, which uses a six-speed transmission as standard, with longer gearing to aid both lower noise and fuel consumption levels.

And power isn’t compromised: front-wheel drive versions will be available with 100, 125 and 140bhp, while, for rear-wheel drive derivatives, the most powerful engine will deliver 155bhp. What’s more, torque has been increased, such that even the 100bhp entry-level engine delivers 310Nm, while the 155bhp rear wheel drive version delivers 385Nm.

“The new Transit ECONetic FT280 is set to emit up to 16g/km less CO₂ than its already impressive predecessor,” states Christine Lund, the van’s chief programme engineer. “This clearly means an improvement to both the environmental performance and operating expenses, since it cuts fuel costs by up to 10%.”





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Andy Cattell, head of large vehicle policy, VOSA

vehicles for longer. Others, for a range of economic reasons (including driver availability and wages), are also downsizing from larger commercial vehicles to vans and/or other LCVs – effectively taking them out of the regulation (and protection) afforded by operator licensing. As a result, we can surmise that the population of vehicles in this broad bracket is rising at a time when the industries they serve lack the resources to look after them properly.

So can the van-operating community learn from those running and maintaining heavy trucks patently so much better? Cattell maintains that education throughout the transport industry is one of the keys to progress.

“I’ve spent an extraordinary amount of time with dealers, manufacturers and service providers educating them. I told one large operator that I could reduce their headlamp aim failure, for example, by 50% overnight. I suggested that, instead of having all of their 14 technicians set the headlamp aim, they just had one person checking that aspect. When they adopted that approach, the result was indeed a drop in failures by 50%.”

While headlamp aim may not be such a problem at the lighter end of the transport sector, the principles of proper maintenance and inspection processes, and attention to detail, remain. “Clearly, it is not just the role of VOSA that is making a difference [to failure rates], although it would be

great if that was the case,” states Cattell, referring to the still improving HGV figures.

“Maybe it is the way that we educate or the fact that we have put our manuals online, so people now know what they are failing and passing for. Now, instead of relying on their memories, fleet managers or technicians can go back to their operator’s manual and see exactly what needs to be fixed for their vehicles to pass first time.”

Product placement

Approaches such as Renault’s iCare package (launched in 2010) are, however, set to raise standards – something well overdue, according to the French manufacturer’s director of fleet and commercial vehicle operations, Darren Payne.

“This latest research by VOSA is rather disconcerting for the industry,” he says. “It would indicate that van fleet operators, maybe in part due to the recession and cutbacks, are disregarding mechanical defects and the need for regular maintenance checks on their vehicles.”

That is plainly not what responsible operators should



Overloading hurts van users

One area that van and light truck operators are being urged to review, in order to improve MOT pass rates, is that of overloading. According to tyre safety organisation TyreSafe, many operators may be compromising safety and wasting money by dangerously overloading their vehicles.

The UK organisation points to an increase in van overloading prohibition rates, from 66.9% in 2008/09 to 72.7% in 2009/10. As a minimum, it warns that, if operators fail to compensate for heavier loads by increasing tyre pressures to the recommended levels, tyres will wear more quickly, fuel use will rise and safety may be a problem. It also notes that some of the effects of overloading and tyre under-inflation are similar: particularly heat build-up, which increases the potential risk of a dangerous blowout, especially on high-speed motorway journeys.


be doing. Payne believes that, if this situation persists, action will have to be taken. "We suspect it won't be long before new legislation is introduced to uphold [van maintenance] standards," he states. In the meantime, iCare promises to co-ordinate the management of vehicle servicing and MoT requirements. By monitoring the vehicle age and

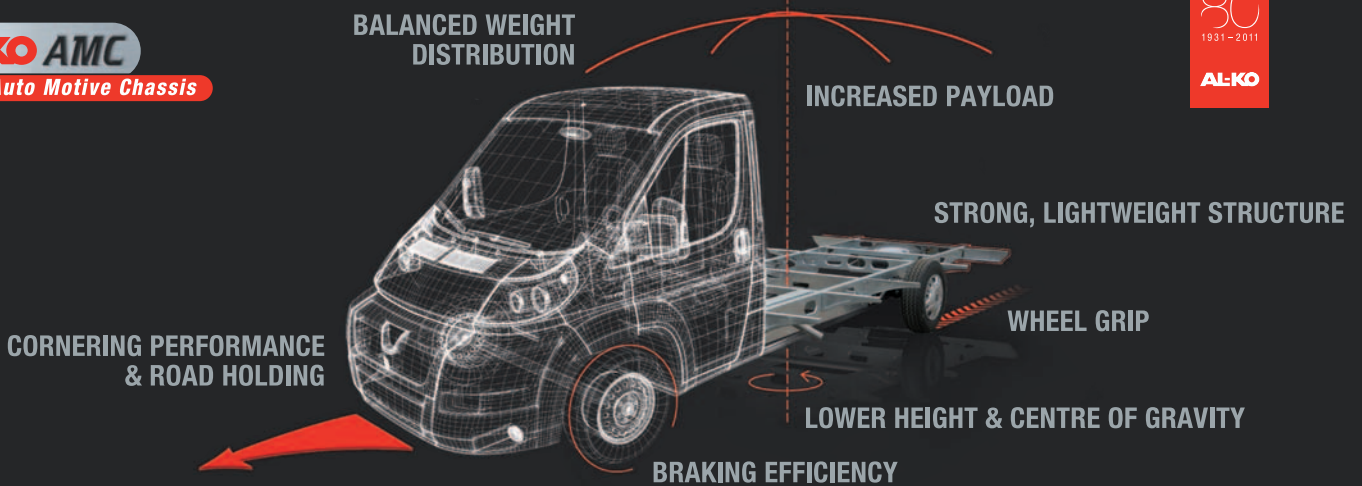
mileage, servicing and MoTs are arranged automatically by the system with the nearest Renault dealer.

Excellent development?

The recent CV Show provided a further opportunity for operators to learn about how to manage their van fleets better. Witness the launch of a comprehensive guide to successfully running a van fleet, from the FTA (Freight Transport Association). Part of the association's van excellence initiative, the new guide will enable van fleet managers to improve operating standards, as well as the overall image of the sector.

"There has been a massive growth in van use in recent years, and the large number of liveried vans on the road means that the way in which they are presented, driven and operated can have an important effect on the reputation of a company," comments Mark Cartwright, project manager for the FTA's van excellence scheme.

Beyond van maintenance and inspection, the FTA's new publication also covers areas such as vehicle condition, safe working, driver licensing, compliance and training, and will be regularly updated to keep track of developments. 



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