

Loopholes in the way Whole Vehicle Type Approval is administered are leaving some converters free to bypass safety checks and undermine those who play by the rules.

Robin Dickeson reports

On the surface, the bus and coach sector is looking good. It appears to be recovering well from the recession, with data from the SMMT (Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders) giving cause for optimism – although the society does warn that it's going to be tough to maintain progress through 2013. But look below the surface and the picture is much less rosy, particularly towards the smaller end of the market where converters putting third-party bodywork on chassis are having a hard time.

prepare, communicate, administer and understand each other's objectives. "Many firms were caught out," agrees Mike Jones, production director at Kent-based accessible bus converter Euromotive. His firm was one of the first in the UK to jump through the Type Approval hoop, doing so well ahead of the deadline, while it was an option, rather than a legal requirement.

"We learned a lot from that. We had to work at it, and it wasn't easy." Jones uses the Individual Vehicle Approval scheme, designed by the DfT for firms with

Trouble on the

Why? Well, several reasons. First, there is a clear trend away from converted buses to purpose-built vehicles – a move that's almost total with heavier vehicles. That's because bus operators have found to their cost that converted vans, or vehicles based on van drivelines and running gear, don't stand up well to PSV (public service vehicle) duty cycles. "The Optare Solo is a good example of the trend that has practically wiped out the converted bus market," says Bob Davis, the SMMT's bus and coach manager, now retired.

That's not been too much of a problem, since for minibuses the story is different, with the vast majority still successful conversions. That's partly because their duty cycles are generally less punishing than bus operators' – typically, these vehicles do charity or welfare work, for schools, the disabled and elderly. But it's also because they are run by small organisations, and converters have to cater for a bewildering array of requirements and specifications.

So far, so good, and these used to provide a happy hunting ground for small, specialised converters. Then Whole Vehicle Type Approval (WVTA) started to bite the bus sector in October 2010 and sank its teeth more deeply at a second stage in October 2011. The original aim was a Europe-wide level playing field, so that a vehicle made in one country could be sold anywhere across the EC. It's been working well for cars for years.

In practice, however, these entirely sensible ideas seem undermined by failures of both the industry and particularly the DfT (Department for Transport) to

virtually no series production. "Everything now runs smoothly and we have very few failures. But many other bodybuilders left it too late and are struggling."

Which brings us to the second problem. Several years ago, industry pundits warned the DfT that there were loopholes in its plans for WVTA that would allow unscrupulous operators to prosper – at the expense of the good guys and potentially also the public. At its simplest, converters could merely register a vehicle, in this case a panel van, and then convert it to a minibus. The authorities would be none the wiser. The converter would save on the testing and paperwork, undercutting competitors – but with a vehicle that might miss more safety standards than it met.

Keeping up standards

The DfT's initial response was essentially, 'people wouldn't do that: it's illegal'. But for those pundits, that merely illustrated how little the DfT understood the workings of the industry it was trying to help. Things have changed, but not enough. Indeed, many of the UK's minibus converters feel that the DfT still has a lot to learn.

Andrew Wallis, a director at wheelchair accessible minibus conversions specialist Warnerbus, is disappointed that the DfT shows no sign of preventing what he sees as unscrupulous converters robbing him of business by dodging Type Approval and cutting costs by between £1,000 and £1,500 per vehicle. Like Euromotive's Jones, he is also dismayed that the accessibility requirements of Type





buses

“Many firms were caught out [by Type Approval],” Mike Jones, production director, Euromotive

Approval now mean that a standard accessible minibus can only carry three, rather than six, wheelchair passengers. This, he says, has exacerbated an already lively demand for older minibuses, already registered.

“The way the law works now creates a lot of business for the cowboys who dodge Type Approval,” explains Wallis. “A cowboy converter applies for a Certificate of Initial Fitness (COIF) for the vehicle, which you can only get for a minibus that is already registered,” he explains. “That certificate lasts for the rest of the vehicle’s life. It means the cowboy can convert it and put a sub-standard vehicle onto the road much more cheaply than a properly Type Approved vehicle.” And he makes the point that in 2011 the authorities issued more than 300 COIFs. The year before, the figure was 23. “That shows the scale of the problem, but still the DfT won’t act.”

He and others believe that the failure to plug this ‘Type Approval bypass’ is damaging the conversion industry, but also creating a growing road safety risk. They also reckon that, if the DfT, VOSA (Vehicle and Operator Services Agency) and the VCA (Vehicle Services Agency) worked together, they could solve the issue. They could demand that, when a vehicle is presented for MoT, it is accompanied by the necessary paperwork to support any change in specification, before it is passed as fit for the road. But nothing has happened.

Transport Engineer asked the ABI (Association of British Insurers) what it thought about the risks, but the organisation said it wasn’t aware of the problem.

We also asked both VOSA and DfT for comments on the Type Approval bypass. VOSA said it has no power to act and referred us to the DfT. The short version of the department’s answer is that it doesn’t think there’s a problem.

The future for the conversion business seems bleak – or sunny – depending on perspective. Warnerbus is considering leaving the “toothless SMMT”, as it believes the society has done too little to convince either the civil service or the politicians of the need for action on Type Approval.

Stephen Moore, at wheelchair accessible converter Minibus Options, isn’t happy either. He says the SMMT minibus data isn’t worth the paper it’s written on. “It relies on V55 data, but a very high volume of vehicles are incorrectly registered,” he contends. “There is no mechanism to report this and we can’t rely on any figures.”

The data point may explain why the DfT is reluctant to act on the issue. Both Moore and Wallis agree with an earlier SMMT prediction that, once WVTA began to bite, the UK bodybuilding industry would reduce by 90%. That same forecast also suggested that, while the number of bodybuilders would drop dramatically, demand for bodybuilding wouldn’t. In other words, the few remaining minibus converters should grow.

There are signs that this is beginning to happen. But for the good guys to make the most of the opportunities, they need to survive the next few years. And for that, most feel they need action from the DfT on the Type Approval loophole.

