

Van with a plan

With MOT pass rates for light commercials still underwhelming, Steve Banner looks at practical inspection and maintenance regimes that could make all the difference

Any category of vehicle suffering MOT failure rates as high as 50% is sure to attract the attention of the enforcement authorities. Yet that is the situation light commercials grossing at 3.0–3.5 tonnes, and therefore subject to Class VII MOT tests, find themselves in.

So van operators need to address this growing problem sooner rather than later. Failure to do so could result in legislators dropping the O licence threshold down to 3.0 tonnes – a move that would come as an unpleasant shock. Equally unwelcome might be a move by the authorities to subject all Class VII vehicles to annual MOT tests from new and/or 12-weekly safety inspections.

The unacceptably high failure rate appears to be due to a combination of intensive use – given that 3.5-tonners are regularly deployed on home delivery work – and, at times, slipshod management. Such vans may, for example, be based at local stores and depots around the country, a long way away from fleet managers in head offices with nobody taking day-to-day responsibility for maintenance or, for that matter, for compliance.

This may explain why Class VII MOT failures are often down to minor faults that could easily have been rectified – such as broken headlights – says Mark Cartwright, head of vans and light commercial vehicles at the FTA (Freight

Transport Association). “In all too many cases nobody bothers to look at these vehicles before they are presented for test,” he adds.

Truck operators also running light commercials will be well aware that they do not have to be specified on their O licences. If vans repeatedly fail their MOTs, however, DVSA and ultimately the traffic commissioner may conclude that maintenance of their heavier vehicles may be substandard, too.

PRAGMATIC APPROACH

So how can operators drive down light commercials’ MOT failure rates – especially of vehicles based off-site?



“Drivers of these vehicles are likely to have been issued with PDAs, and they should use them to carry out daily walk-around checks to pick up obvious defects,” answers Kwik Fit fleet director Peter Lambert. Findings should be sent straight to the fleet manager, with drivers unable to receive their delivery lists for the day until checks are completed.





Another solution might involve technicians being sent out once every three to six months to examine all vans. They should carry out visual inspections of everything from the tyres and brakes to the lights and mirrors, also checking – and, where necessary, topping up – fluid levels. That would increasingly also involve topping up the AdBlue reservoir on Euro 6 LCVs.

Audits should then go to fleet managers who will need to run systems that ensure all reported defects are dealt with, whether they result from quarterly analyses or daily walk-around checks. Such schemes work both ways: if drivers know their vans are going to be regularly audited, they will, at the very least keep them clean and tidy.

Either way, dealing with defects promptly is essential, agrees BT Fleet director of garage services Mark Wolfe, who is ultimately responsible for the maintenance of some 85,000 cars, vans and trucks. His organisation has 66 depots and makes use of third party workshops as well. Making that work involves what he refers to as daily clinics, which involve inspecting depot-based



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vans for minor problems – such as worn wiper blades and damaged tyres – and ensuring they are fixed. “High mileage vehicles receive safety checks every 12 weeks,” he adds.

“Van operators should also consider doing what heavy truck fleets do,” suggests Kwik Fit’s Lambert. “Get each van into a workshop and submit it to a pre-MOT examination before it is presented for the test itself.” And note: that is a practice already endorsed at BT Fleet. “That’s one reason we achieve a 97% MOT pass rate,” comments Wolfe.

STRETCHED SERVICING

While light commercials should be serviced in line with manufacturer recommendations, that is also often the minimum that needs to be done. As Lambert and others recognise, one of the difficulties here is the extent to which service intervals have been stretched.

Vauxhall’s Movano, for example, is at two years or 25,000 miles – the point being the marketing and sales benefits derived from the cost saving and on-the-road benefits. Hence the need for interim inspections, especially if duty cycles are arduous. “You have to take into account what the vehicle is actually doing,” suggests Wolfe.

“I believe long service intervals are paradoxically having a negative impact on operating costs because they mean items that would otherwise be attended to aren’t picked up,” says Marcus Bray, head of sales at Fleet Service GB, which has 2,300 light commercials on its books. “If a service interval is, say, 20,000 miles, there should be a wheels-off inspection at 10,000 miles,” he advises.

That said, telematics look set to play a more important role, with remote monitoring of vehicle condition, says Wolfe. “It will give us notice of what is wrong with the van and tell us when it needs servicing,” he observes. Link

it to an onboard TPMS (tyre pressure monitoring system) and it would allow fleet managers to check that tyres are being kept at the correct pressure.

Who should be doing the inspection and maintenance? The availability of independent service workshops, plus operations such as Kwik-Fit and ATS Euromaster, mean van operators without their own facilities do not need to rely solely on franchised dealer networks. Nevertheless, the ability of the manufacturer’s network to look after light commercials should be a consideration when a make and model of van is being selected, advises Jack Ball, commercial vehicle manager at Activa Contracts.

As well as offering a fleet management service, this company supplies light commercials on contract hire and is responsible for a fleet of more than 1,700. “Ask yourself if the network is more car- than van-oriented, and if all their dealers are able, for example, to get high-roof vans on to their workshop lifts,” he suggests. The nearest workshop with that basic capability may be half-an-hour’s drive away.

At the other end of the spectrum, some franchised dealers look more than capable of managing a van operator’s maintenance requirement. Mercedes-Benz dealer Rygor, for instance, recently opened the first dedicated managed workshop for Asda – at Heston in West London – and is initially responsible for looking after 50 of its home delivery vehicles. Longer term, this unit has the capacity to maintain at least 200 vans and LCVs.

“It’s a key element of our overall fleet management strategy,” says Asda’s senior manager for national fleets, Sean Clifton. “I’m looking forward to seeing it deliver exceptional results.” Similar approaches could make all the difference to vans’ parlous maintenance reputations. **TE**