

Tough but fair

How has one traffic commissioner in particular risen to such prominence after just one short decade in post? Brian Tingham talks to the North West's Beverley Bell

The traffic commissioner for the North West has a singular reputation for being tough, but fair. More than that, the individual concerned has earned near universal respect among truck fleet engineers and operators across the transport industry spectrum, as well as the enforcement officers at VOSA (the Vehicle and Operator Services Agency) and the DfT (Department for Transport) itself. For someone appointed by the Secretary of State for Transport essentially to sit in judgement on drivers and operators running HGVs and/or buses and coaches who fall foul of the UK's transport regulations, that is quite an achievement.

“I come across mechanics who've never been on a single engineering training course and that cannot make sense: they need training and accreditation”

All the more surprising then to learn that this person is not only a woman – indeed she was the first female traffic commissioner in the land – but also a former solicitor (albeit with a background in transport law) in a position reputed hitherto to be reserved for senior establishment figures, such as retired (male) Air Vice Marshals. We're talking about the north western traffic commissioner Beverley Bell, who has now been in post for 10 years.

One of the reasons for her popularity, however, is immediately apparent. “Traffic commissioners are not here to punish either drivers or operators,” she says. “We're only here to ensure compliance. We can reduce operators' fleets and we can revoke their licences to operate, but we try not to. We would rather work with them in whatever way might be necessary to help them resolve a situation. In fact, most of the time my work is about putting operators back on the straight and narrow. But for those that are never going to get it right, I will disqualify them from ever running trucks.”

In this context, Bell raises another point – fairness. “Of one thing they can be assured: they are going to get a fair hearing, because traffic

commissioners are independent of VOSA and independent of government. We also have no targets to meet for so many prohibitions and vehicle off the road. If we disagree with VOSA, for example, we will say so. Also, where upcoming regulations are concerned, we will always look carefully at interested parties' views – such as the FTA, RHA and IRTE. Our goal is to regulate with a light touch. For example, if we believe that industry needs some time to meet new requirements, we will agree that and then only get involved where we see failure to comply. Similarly, where Europe is involved, we'll look at how regulations are being applied in other member states. We want fair competition, too.”

It's hard to argue with any of that. So how does she apply her approach to transport engineers? “In terms of engineering, the most obvious point is that, where operators' maintenance systems have been shown by VOSA to be falling down, I see my role as to work with them to put that right, if at all possible. It may be they got the budgeting wrong and the income isn't currently there to stay on top of the job one hundred per cent. Or maybe technology has moved on and their processes are no longer adequate.

Maintenance and testing

“Often, the real issues I see are caused by maintenance and testing practices that are simply much too old fashioned. For example, I come across operators who think that just driving trucks and trailers around and then slamming on the brakes, to see if they stop, is good enough for brake testing. They need to get into the 21st century and understand that they have to go through the proper procedures and use certified rolling roads not only for brake testing, but also the safety of their drivers and the general public.”

Bell insists that her starting point is wanting operators, regardless of size, scope and industry sector, to succeed. “I want them to see that, by complying with the regulations, not only will they not have to see me again, but they will also see the benefits of compliance. When I see a failing



Photo: Dean Smith, Camera Crew

operator six months after our first interview, I want him to tell me, 'You were right: I've retrained the drivers and our mechanics and now the bottom line is up and we've got no vehicles off the road'. For me, it's about seeing them raising their game."

What about OCRS (operator compliance risk score), VOSA's rating system that enables the enforcement agency to focus roadside checks on vehicles most likely to be non-compliant? Bell agrees that it's a useful targeting tool, as it provides a concise view of operators' roadworthiness and traffic enforcement history. However, she adds that shrewd operators would do well to consider their score as a useful organisational health check.

"I say to operators that, if their OCSR is becoming a problem, then use that information as

a prod to do something about it. For example, they can write to the traffic commissioners and ask for their help. Maybe they need six months to put some improvements in place. If an operator says to me, 'I've discovered I'm red on maintenance, so I'm going to run an audit on our workshops, or our suppliers, and make the necessary changes I see from that', I would leave them alone. Traffic commissioners only have to take action when operators don't help themselves."

Best practice

Bell also professes herself passionate about promoting best practice throughout the transport industry. She refers to the North Western Goods Vehicle Maintenance Liaison Committee, at which she is a regular, and its 'Roadworthiness: Industry Best Practice guide', first published by IRTE in 2005 before being updated in 2007. "I'm prepared to work hard with the IRTE, the industry and the technical guys on that committee to produce guidance at that level. Before it was published by IRTE, we just had the VOSA industry guide, which indicated minimum standards. Now, the transport sector has very comprehensive industry best practice guidance."

Ultimately, for Bell, it's about changing behaviours where they need to be changed, and she cites training for technicians and mechanics as key to making sustainable grass roots improvements. "I come across mechanics who've never been on a single engineering training course and that cannot make sense. They need training and they need formal accreditation. The IRTE has picked this up and has worked hard to make it happen – through its irtec scheme, as well as through membership and registration with the Engineering Council. Technicians need to see this as I do: it's about being able to demonstrate professional engineering competence, but it's also about putting pride back into their jobs and the industry they serve."

Bell is unequivocal in this regard, as with much else that affects the transport industry. She believes that the irtec scheme is "absolutely vital" and adds that technicians and fitters should not think of themselves as just that, but also as key components in the smooth and safe running of their transport organisation and the sector as a whole.

These are lofty goals and Bell accepts that minds are not going to be changed overnight. Nevertheless, she is urging transport engineers to take note and, if they're not doing so already, start getting more involved. "There is a lot more scope for dialogue between the enforcement agency, for example, and the operators themselves. Everyone would benefit from better information interchange. It would lead to better testing, better safety standards and better profits for operators." 