



# A test of success

**T**he unfortunate scheduling of two separate announcements – planned test station closures and early details about the new ATFs (Authorised Testing Facilities) respectively – led to VOSA (the Vehicle and Operator Services Agency) coming in for a certain amount of bad press during the second half of 2009. Wrongly perceived to be directly related, the two events were actually part of a bigger picture that is looking to change the way the agency operates – for the better.

So says Alex Fiddes, VOSA's chief operating officer. And with the ATF contracts now announced, and figures showing improvements in compliance and roadworthiness rates, he is preparing for better times ahead. Fiddes has reason for such optimism: MOT fail rates have fallen ("but we must do better," he says), and the ongoing issue of sideguards has been resolved, after agreement for them to be checked to type approval standards.

This latter development brought to a satisfactory end months and years of discussion between the transport industry and VOSA. "The industry perception is that we try to make things hard," says Fiddes. "But regulations are clear about the requirements and, in this case, the work that members of my team have done is very positive. [The sideguards agreement] has worked better than a compromise, because the point that VOSA and the industry were working towards was overtaken by the two aspects we were going to compromise on being submitted to the directive framework."

Fiddes picks up on a cause for concern at VOSA last year when a National Audit Office report, regarding VOSA's enforcement targets of a 75% uplift in CAT 1 prohibitions, deemed them unrealistic. "In setting that target, I wanted to shift the emphasis away from every type of defect to one where all staff were focusing on the sharp end of enforcement," he explains.

"We set the target high for a reason. We wanted to concentrate on people who were operating potentially dangerous vehicles." Despite conceding that the target was tough, Fiddes remains defiant. "In a typical week, I will get at least two vehicles that have been stopped that were so dangerous they would have caused an incident," reveals the Yorkshireman. "I still think it was the right target to set and we

**In an exclusive interview with Transport Engineer, Alex Fiddes, COO of VOSA, talks to John Challen about why MOT pass rates will continue to fall – and his concerns over ongoing prohibition notices**

are now seeing compliance levels improving – which I think justifies the approach."

Next year, Fiddes reveals, he will set a different target, aimed at examining the condition of the fleet nationally. "We have issued 100,000 prohibitions [this year], which sounds terrible, but it doesn't fairly represent all the vehicles in good condition that are still out in service. Future targets need to represent a more realistic and true picture of what the country's fleet is like."

## **Prepared for change**

Fiddes states that he would like to be remembered as the VOSA man who helped the transport industry get testing close to the point of repair and who made step changes to the image of the organisation.

"I'd like transport managers and operators to see that VOSA is here to help them run a safe and reliable industry – and not for people to think we just want to catch them out," he says.

"I don't consider seeing a prohibited vehicle a success [for VOSA]," explains Fiddes. "Seeing 20 prohibited vehicles at a checkpoint alarms me, because there are 20 vehicles not earning. They're also inconveniencing the driver and transport manager, and disrupting the supply chain, because the goods onboard aren't going where they need to be."

How will Fiddes, and indeed VOSA, change perceptions? The secret, he enthuses, is relationship-building, starting with single-vehicle operators that now account for 50.4% of the country's fleet. "It is a tough job for me to get to that end of the market," he says. "It's much easier to go and see a transport manager at an operator who has 30 vehicles or more. Clearly, with the ATFs, we will be working much closer [to them] and will have a different relationship with the industry."

Well aware that the contact between operator and VOSA can be just one meeting every 12 months, however, Fiddes is putting the emphasis on test centres to create the right impression. "When you look at the single-vehicle operator end of the market, the MOT failure rate is 40%, which means four out of 10 people will not think positively of VOSA. We want to engage with them and let them know we are here to help. The attitude of the tester and how they deal with the individual is our key enabler for changing the system," he insists.

**“I’d like transport managers and also operators to see that VOSA is here to help them run a safe, reliable industry”**



Meanwhile, although pleased with the falling MOT failure rate, Fiddes also believes it is a case of ‘must try harder’. “For first year test vehicles, the failure rate is 18%: that should be a single figure number. Five-year-old vehicles post failure rates of 33% and, if we could halve that number, the benefit to the industry would be immense.”

#### **Cost of failure**

Fiddes believes that if operators and managers looked more closely at the true cost of a failure, not just the re-test fee, attitudes might change. “If we reduce failure numbers, I can do more testing, and if there are fewer re-tests, I can put my resources to better use,” he says. “I’m not sure everyone puts a value on how much a failure means. It is more than an inconvenience: there is also the cost of being deprived of that asset. If they considered that, I wonder how much harder they might try [to pass].”

That said, Fiddes commends those franchises that supply pass and fail rates to all their dealerships, thereby creating competition. Some, he notes, have gone on to achieve pass rates of beyond 90%. “If they can do it by being incentivised, then other people should follow that lead,” he argues.

But there is another aspect to this: Fiddes points to the front line of schemes that improve the

standards of technicians maintaining vehicles. He cites irtec as a clear example. “I’ve been monitoring irtec’s progress and I’m impressed with what it is trying to achieve,” says the VOSA man. Although his organisation stops short of endorsing specific courses, Fiddes is full of praise for the IRTE-backed voluntary assessment. “It’s a really good scheme. Everything I have read about it is improving roadworthiness, which complements nicely what we are trying to do.”

As for the future, Directive 2009/40 is looming large on Fiddes’ list of priorities and he is determined to execute the legislative changes that derive from it, with maximum efficiency. “The new testing directive is going to challenge VOSA to deliver changes in a very small timescale, at a cost that fits within our budget controls,” he says.

“One of my main aims is to keep compliance cost neutral. So, when introducing legislation, we need to make sure that there is good road safety reasoning behind it and that it doesn’t impact costs,” he adds.

Beyond that, VOSA is anticipating a conclusion of the consultation into legislative changes to plating and testing exemptions, which, Fiddes believes, could increase VOSA testing by up to 10%. Suddenly, ‘putting resources to better use’ becomes a much higher priority for the agency. **TE**