



FIRE INSIDE

Although emergency fleets are legally exempt from O-licence requirements, ECFRS's fleet services department maintains its 87 fire appliances and 33 specials according to, or to tighter tolerances than, DVSA's Guide to Roadworthiness, explains assistant engineering manager Matthew Parsons. "Working in fire and rescue, these vehicles have the blue lights on and are manoeuvring through traffic in some difficult circumstances to make progress. We need to do everything we can to make sure that they get to an incident safely," he says.

This means, for example, commercial vehicle tyres are changed at 3mm tread depth rather than the industry-standard 1mm. Brake, steering and suspensions are also high-priority maintenance.

ECFRS operates 50 fire stations, each with at least one or two fire appliances. Most are so-called B-types, mostly 18t Scania 4x2s with a fire rescue ladder on top, a water pump at the back and lockers and equipment on the sides. In addition are specials, such as 26t aerial

Essex County Fire and Rescue Services's fleet services department has won the Society's 2021 employer of the year award. It's no surprise, then, that the 46-employee unit is the only part of the county's fire emergency services to hold ISO 9001:2015 quality management system, or Investors In People

ladder platforms with 32m-extending booms, off-roader 6x6 sprinters for rural response, as well as support vehicles such as hooklifts with containerised welfare, environmental or foam pods on the rear. And then there is the light vehicle fleet: workshop service vans, stores vans, vans to maintain hydrants, vans for fire prevention outreach, and passenger cars for fire response, pool cars and more.

Back in Colchester, at ECFRS's central 14-bay workshop, every vehicle and piece of equipment has one major service a year. From a maintenance perspective, the fleet is divided between support vehicles and operational ones (fitted with blue lights). The latter

undergo an additional six-monthly safety inspection, whether recommended or not by the manufacturer. On top of that, commercial vehicles have a quarterly (12 weeks) inspection, following DVSA guidance and in accordance with the National Fire Chiefs Council best practice manual for fire service vehicles, which is currently under review with the NFCC National Transport Officers Group. Equipment used for lifting and working at height gets six-monthly inspections, following Lifting Operations and Lifting Equipment Regulations (LOLER) guidance. Other equipment – such as small petrol-powered flood pumps – is serviced every two years.





plus another two on reception. The workshop runs an MOT lane, so members of the public do come on site. In addition is the equipment shop, whose team comprises seven technicians and a supervisor. They are responsible for ladders, hydraulics, hoses, working at height equipment, lifting equipment and pumps: more than 9,000 pieces of listed equipment. A separate technical division covers breathing apparatus, fire gear and PPE equipment. Yet another function is equipment R&D and procurement.

"It is quite diverse. We have a lot of skills in many areas. No one person knows it all. That's why teamwork is important," observes Parsons.

IRTEC AND MORE

Parsons is also responsible for maintaining the ISO 9001 quality management, and training too. "There is constant training to make sure people have the skills and are competent."

As far as vehicles go, CV technicians are accredited against the irtec inspection technician standard – although Parsons admits he aspires to advance them to the next higher level, service and maintenance technician. It is also a user of IRTE's Workshop Accreditation scheme. Passenger and light vehicle technicians are accredited to IMI's ATA qualification.

While the operational vehicles won't chalk up the road miles the way trucking tractors might, they are still used intensively. Parsons explains: "They are driven, from cold, straight out of the station, to an incident. Normally they have to get there in 15 minutes – 10 if life-threatening – and then are static at the incident. Then they might be pumping water at 2,500rpm [via the power take off], pumping 3,000lpm out the back. Then, after the incident is over, they return to the station at normal road speed, parked up, and are possibly not used for some time before the next shout. It is unpredictable. What is predictable is that crews will do their checks every day."

All drivers, not just firefighters, do daily checks. Every vehicle has a logbook, with drivers signing off daily checks by hand. Any defects are reported through an online portal that sends the issue into the fleet management system. Parsons is an administrator of that, which is really the brain of the entire operation, in some ways, as it covers jobs, stores and vehicle asset records. "There's a massive amount of information to hold on to."

Fleet services includes fleet management of course, which covers 11 vehicle technicians, a senior technician, and a vehicle supervisor and workshop manager. It also has its own stores – the responsibility of two staff members –

What's more, they are given the respect of a proper title, too. "We call our engineering staff technicians; not fitters or mechanics. A fitter just fits. Our team does diagnostics; they are problem-solvers. That technical role is important to us to identify. It's about pride in their work," adds the assistant engineering manager.

In terms of training, the department has to strike a fine balance between skills resilience - in case a member of staff is off sick or leaves - and individual competence, given the diversity of the vehicles and equipment it runs. "If we have five vehicles of one type, and we train 10 members of staff to work on them, then we need to give them opportunities to work on them, or that training will fade. It's a fine balancing act to share the work around. It's easy to pigeonhole someone: 'we'll give this job to you, because you're really good on it'. But then no one else has had the experience of working on that."

The fleet services department has provision for an apprentice, but it is currently vacant - not because of a lack of applicants, but a lack of courses, Parsons states. "Our apprenticeship is five years. In the first three years, they move through Level 2 and Level 3, and then they do Level 4. But our provider in Leicestershire has stopped offering that [Level 4] course, and I can't find another." (Up to Level 3, the apprenticeship is with training provider Remit and Scania's training centre in Loughborough.)

That specific issue is just one example of a much larger problem. "There's a massive awareness about the problems caused by driver shortages - no turkeys at Christmas - but for a long

time, we've had a technician shortage. When we recruit, we put an advert out, and we get only a few applicants. And being in the public sector, we can't necessarily compete on wages with private companies."

However, once people are in, they stay. Four employees have accumulated more than 40 years' experience, and the average employment term is 19 years. Fleet services engineering manager Peter Warner is only the third fleet engineer at Essex Fire since the end of World War II. Such expertise, it says, provides real value for money to the public of Essex.

Reflecting on the Society award, Parsons concludes: "The award means a lot, and it just shows that everything we do on a daily basis is heading in the right direction. Our strapline is 'excellent today, better tomorrow'. This shows that we're all trying to achieve that. And it is what we do: we support each other; we work as a team. We all want to develop and grow as a team." **TE**



PREVIOUS WIN

Three years ago, the organisation won the Sir Moir Lockhead safety award for developing a way to use breathing cylinders to inflate the tyres of fire appliances, rather than installing expensive compressors across the county. It worked with forecourt pump supplier Pneumatic Components (PCL) to develop a prototype. The final unit, about the dimensions of a sack barrow, is powered by a rechargeable battery, and provides pressure up to 145psi (10bar). It is still available. See also www.is.gd/agageh.

