

Local authorities are turning to outside contractors to maintain their vehicle fleets. Richard Simpson finds out why

Rising vehicle complexity, the rise of electrical drivelines and perhaps most significantly difficulties in recruiting new staff are all leading local authorities to outsource their vehicle maintenance, contends Bob Sweetland, managing director of Specialist Fleet Services. Alongside contract hire, SFS, part of Paragon Banking Group, also offers whole fleet maintenance services to local authorities, covering everything from small equipment to heavy trucks, including around 800 RCVs.

"It's our role to make sure that the required number of vehicles are available to the contracting authority at the right time every day," Sweetland says. He explains that some local authorities are struggling to run their own workshops, with staff recruitment, training, and retention key issues. "Inflexible pay structures often don't reflect what good technicians can earn elsewhere," he says. "We can pay realistic rates, and we also are big fans of apprenticeships. We have some staff with 10 years or more service with us who started as apprentices, plus we also recruit technicians from franchised dealers' and manufacturers' workshops. Council outsourcing to us is driven more by our technical expertise than financial advantage."

SFS runs 12 workshops nationwide, including some local authority premises that it has taken over. Employees are TUPE'd over and retrained to SFS standards.

Specialist knowledge means SFS is well-placed to maintain RCV fleets, says head of engineering, Pete Lowe.



SHAKING OFF THE DUST

Scheduling is complex, because RCVs work far harder than the distances they cover might indicate. "PMIs take place every six weeks, but the service intervals for engines and bodywork have to be based on operational hours," Lowe explains. "Typically, the engine oil change interval will be every 600 hours of running. Body servicing, too, is hours based. A vehicle may only travel for two hours in a shift, but the body will be in operation for eight hours."

Electric vehicles are another challenge, says Sweetland. "Many local authorities have declared 'climate emergencies' and want to transition to battery-electric vehicles.

"But they struggle to get their heads around the recharging infrastructure, and that anyone involved with maintaining the vehicle will need training. Even if you aren't working directly on the high voltage side, you need to know what you can do without disturbing the HV (high-voltage) system,

and whether the batteries will need to be isolated or drained."

OEM VIEWS

At Dennis Specialist Vehicles, aftermarket director Geoff Rigg is happy to let the customers do what's best for them. "If operators provide their own R&M services in-house and it works totally efficiently, that may well be the cheaper option for them. There would be no point in them sub-contracting if it ran with 100% efficiency.

"But things rarely run smoothly, and those who come to us and ask us to take this function on are often those who have problems of some sort - normally problems with staffing, with costs, with compliance, or with existing contractors."

Dennis will take care of the whole fleet, maintaining everything from wheelbarrows to trucks. Rigg says: "We provide solutions. We aim to improve service levels and increase vehicle uptime, based on excellent

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Pete Lowe



WINTER SERVICE

Arguably, no one understands the fleet engineering challenges of winter better than Jonathan Lupton, director of operations at Econ Engineering, which not only manufactures gritting and snow-clearing kit, but also maintains a hire fleet of 1,000 vehicles.

“Peak season is from October to March, and we hire our trucks out for a minimum period of 26 weeks,” he reports. “But we can extend that, if we get a cold April, as we did in 2021.”

“When the vehicles come off-hire they are inspected unwashed (this make it easier to spot faults such as oil leaks), then given a full chassis-wash.

“Then they are over-maintained! Every brake is stripped, cleaned, inspected, lubricated and reassembled with new parts as necessary. Drivelines get a full service with every filter changed.”

Remedial paintwork is carried out, and the body, including the conveyor, spinner and pre-wetter, is serviced.

“The spreading mechanism has to be calibrated to road speed in much the same way as a tachograph is,” he says.

Tachographs themselves are recalibrated during the summer, irrespective of the vehicle’s ‘birthday’, as downtime must be minimised during the spreading season. A coat of grease is applied, the vehicle is put into storage, and the batteries are disconnected.

Recommissioning starts in August. This involves a road test, brake testing and a six-weekly inspection prior to departure. Any chassis manufacturer upgrades or recalls are also completed, and tyres replaced if they don’t have sufficient tread to safely complete another season. Regular six-weekly inspections are scheduled for the hire period, but otherwise the approach is to maximise availability in the spreading season.

of the municipal market, with the Econic RCV chassis being sold alongside Arocs, Unimog and Fuso. Ross Paterson is head of Mercedes-Benz special trucks and points out that all of Merc’s 74 British franchised workshops can handle the Econic. He says: “The electrics and electronics are common with the Mercedes A-series models, as are the drive axle, suspension and the 7.7-litre engine. The Allison transmission is pretty much unique to the Econic RCV, as is the cab, but apart from that, most systems are common to all Mercedes trucks.”

The biggest difference is how the vehicles operate, and this is reflected in the aftercare packages on offer. “Seven years of frontline service with the original operator is normal, and we can support the vehicle for up to eight years with a full R&M package, backed by a maintenance and inspection contract that will take it to 10 years.

“We believe the best place to maintain a Mercedes is a franchised Mercedes workshop with all the necessary tools, equipment and parts to hand. And we can include the collection and return of vehicles for service and inspection in the contract. If the customer prefers, we can take over their premises as a managed workshop facility and kit it out to Mercedes standards, but these arrangements can be quite complex.

“Mercedes would not normally repair specialist refuse bodywork, as the UK body specialists all have excellent service networks of their own. But we can carry out routine maintenance such as lubrication. We can bundle LOLER inspections for equipment like bin-lifts into our service arrangements, just as we do with tail-lifts on delivery trucks.”

Given the specialist nature of the vehicles, the Unimog network is smaller, with 24 service points. R&M contracts are still available for up to eight years, with a three-year warranty standard. **TE**

engineering and preventative servicing and maintenance. From our perspective, if our staff on the ground look after the engineering side of the operation, the balance sheet looks after itself.

“The main thrust of what we’re doing is to guarantee frontline vehicles. They must always be available for the start of a shift. When they need attention, our engineers stay and work on them until they are fixed, and if there is a problem we can’t resolve in time, we provide a suitable replacement vehicle.

“We have more than 80 field service engineers scattered across the UK. They also provide a valuable resource to draw on when there are staff absences, as there have been with people having to isolate throughout the pandemic. As the labour market has got even harder, we’re expecting more and more operators to turn to us. Recruitment, retention and training are a challenge for everyone, but with our resources and experience, we are in a position to take care of that and ensure there are always enough well-trained engineers to do the job.”

Of the mainstream manufacturers, Mercedes has one of the largest shares