

Published by: The Society of
Operations Engineers

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MIRTE FCILT

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The Society of Operations Engineers is
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Council

Registered in England:
Company No. 3667147
Registered Charity: No.1081753
A Company Limited by Guarantee

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Publisher: Peter Knutton

Transport Engineer is the official
journal of IRTE.
Produced on behalf of IRTE and The
Society of Operations Engineers by
Findlay Media Ltd, Hawley Mill, Hawley
Road, Dartford, Kent DA2 7TJ
Tel: 01322 221144
Fax: 01322 221188
www.transportengineer.org.uk

Transport Engineer is distributed free
of charge to SOE members, dependent
on membership sector. For non-
members, the annual subscription rate
(12 issues) is £66 UK and EU, or £68
airmail outside EU. For other SOE
members, the discounted rate is £26.

Printed by: Holbrooks Printers Ltd,
Portsmouth ISSN: 0020-3122

Views expressed in Transport Engineer
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What lies beneath the EC's emissions edicts?

There is one key aspect of the EC's drive to reduce emissions from vans, but in particular trucks, that few in the corridors of power seem able to bring themselves to admit, much less discuss. It is that, in the legislators' disjointed haste to bear down on emissions of harmful NOx and particulates, not only are they jeopardising the industry's scope to cut equally important carbon dioxide emissions (to which European member governments are committed), but also almost inevitably racking up the cost of new vehicles, potentially beyond the ability of most current operators' capacity to pay.

Estimates of the additional on-cost of Euro 6 compliant vehicles vary widely, but, suffice to say, we're not talking a few hundred pounds; it's more likely to be several thousand. Why? Because it's not just about the major international manufacturers throwing millions of euros, krone and dollars at engine development, crucial though that is.

It's also about significant work on new chassis and front-end designs – within existing dimensional constraints – in order to cope with the greatly increased heat rejection required to make the EGR (exhaust gas recirculation) component of these new engines function anything like as efficiently as they already do at Euro 5. And it's about that massive spend probably having to be amortised over fewer vehicles purchased over fewer years. Even in emerging from the global recession, new truck purchases remain stubbornly low. Meanwhile, the EC's track record suggests that it can't be long before the words 'Euro 7' are being uttered, and manufacturers will be into the next, even more costly, cycle of development.

Why are so few people who could wake up the pen pushers prepared to put their heads above the parapet? Possibly, it's because they are concerned about being labelled environmentally unfriendly. Not good for brand image, that. Or possibly it's because they recognise that, as the world's obsession with climate change quite rightly continues to accelerate and the deadlines for truly massive CO₂ reductions draw closer, something, somewhere, is going to have to give. Although it seems unthinkable now that the specification for Euro 6 might yet be softened, when hard realities start to bite, who can predict what aspirations might take a tumble?

But there is another possibility, too. It is conceivable that technologies other than those associated with the diesel engines that have served us so well may come to the rescue and ameliorate our troublesome emissions loadings. Quite when is an open question. And at what cost (financially and environmentally) is another. However, hybrids are proving their worth in the bus and coach sector, and MAN, Mercedes-Benz and others are already proving the technologies' potential, if price and performance can be improved.

Last month, LowCVP (the Low Carbon Vehicle Partnership) recognised Iveco, Commercial Group, TfL London Bus Services, Greenery International and Oxford YASA Motors, among others, for their work on carbon-reducing technologies and services. The hunt is now on for next year's winners. Maybe no one is going to have to blow the whistle on the mutually exclusive dictats of Euro 6.

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