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The next step in VOSA's testing transformation?

ATFs (authorised test facilities) – the Vehicle and Operator Services Agency's controversial approach to outsourcing one of its core functions – appear, ever so slowly, to be catching on. We're seeing growing numbers of mostly large, established truck and van workshops announcing their intention to sign up.

It can't be an easy decision for these businesses, particularly given the scale of up-front costs, the conditions to be met and the limits (on the face of it) to their ability to earn short-term payback from what amount to quite meagre pit fees. Hence, in part perhaps, the DfT's (Department for Transport) relatively modest aspiration of 40 new ATFs by 31 March 2011. And hence also its failure to reach the target set for 2010: against a goal of 33% of commercial vehicle tests to be carried out at non-VOSA sites, the final percentage reported was just 27.3% (page 16).

Many among the operator community will, we know, welcome such slow progress: particularly those already facing extended distances to their nearest testing station when the local VOSA site closes down. It's hard for anyone to justify the cost of additional incurred downtime against a supposed upside of maintenance, pre-testing and testing, all at a single location. Even more so when R&M contracts, preference, or custom and practice indicate the use of service providers that have, as yet, neither the inclination nor business reasons to become ATFs.

However, 'as yet' may be the operative words here. With the coalition government's rush to slash somewhere between 25 and 45% from the budgets of non-protected departments – and as quickly as possible – the word from the wise is that the DfT could be looking for ways to shed more VOSA stations. So ATFs might yet go on-stream much faster than most currently imagine.

DfT certainly isn't saying so, but one way to make this happen would be to revise the ATF contract such that workshops charge closer to the existing VOSA fee scale, instead of the pit fees. To make that happen – and even more radical – DfT might opt for privatising the majority, maybe even all, of VOSA test stations, along similar lines to existing passenger car testing.

For workshop owners, that could change everything. At a stroke, they would no longer need to make difficult assumptions about potential additional work, resulting from their investment in ATF equipment – in the form, for example, of additional PM (private maintenance) inspections and pre-MOT assessments. Instead, there would be a clear new revenue stream, muddied only by a possible rush of others to jump on the bandwagon.

Meanwhile, for fleet operators, it might solve the problem identified above, of distance to their nearest test station. Indeed, an upsurge in private commercial vehicle testing might recreate something better than the historic situation, and probably with lower costs and the advantage of on-site repair.

As for mechanics, supervisors and, yes, VOSA accredited testers, the improved potential, not only for career progression, but also the spreading of best practice, would be welcome.

Dare we say, it might even stimulate first-time pass rates and so further improve safety for all road users. Now that would bring a whole new meaning to VOSA's widely criticised 'Testing Transformation Project'.

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