

Workshop audits

As IRTE and FTA come together to implement a scheme that will assess and accredit commercial vehicle workshops, Brian Tingham talks to the instigators

Within the next few months, IRTE intends to have the first independent workshop accreditation scheme for the UK. The aim, it says, is to give operators peace of mind that vehicles are being professionally maintained.

Ian Chisholm, head of operations at SOE (Society of Operations Engineers, the umbrella organisation for IRTE), explains that the move follows approaches from senior managers representing about 10% of the road haulage industry – namely Wincanton, C Butt, DHL and Sainsbury. “The operation of HGVs is highly regulated, robustly policed by VOSA and overseen by the traffic commissioners,” he points out. “That’s fine, but while operators may be subject to severe penalties, if found to be non-compliant in any area – and that includes maintenance – no form of regulation applies to third party maintenance providers who carry out much of this work.”

Ensuring professionalism

Keith Tress, head of engineering at DHL Supply Chain, Engineering and Fleet Services, cites problems with MOT figures, dealers only sending pass certificates, but no PRS notifications (meaning OCRS scores may be skewed without operators’ knowledge) and unacceptable roadside prohibitions. “We can, and do, monitor standards by policing our suppliers, but what about smaller independent operators? How are they supposed to ensure professional maintenance?”

This state of affairs has not gone unnoticed, and Chisholm speaks of “considerable apprehension” throughout the transport industry, in relation to the “differing and unregulated standards of maintenance”. He also confirms that, at a meeting with senior

traffic commissioner Philip Brown, concerns were highlighted.

And hence the representations to IRTE. As Dave Rowlands, technical services director at Wincanton, puts it: “IRTE is a reputable name and already has experience of operating a register, through the irtec technician licensing scheme. Also, its maintenance supplier assessment document already provides a good basis for the standards.”

As for the benefits, Rowlands concedes that, like DHL and many of the big boys, Wincanton audits its suppliers, so already has that advantage. But he insists that the new scheme won’t just help smaller operators. “Our engineers already check suppliers ... but that’s all duplicated effort around the haulage companies. An accreditation register would work for us, too.”

Tress agrees: “From DHL’s point of view, this will help with contractor compliance. We will be able to build up our portfolio of suppliers accredited for everything, including tanker maintenance, hot works etc.” Additionally, both believe that the IRTE scheme will raise standards. As Rowlands puts it: “When they’re measured, standards always improve, so we can all expect a better quality of maintenance and repair work – and consistent management information.”

Everyone accepts that the details are yet to be finalised, but, with news from April’s CV Show that FTA (the Freight Transport Association) has signed a memorandum of understanding, under which its assessors will carry out the audits to IRTE standards, all now expect events to move swiftly.

It can’t come a moment too soon. As Gary King, logistics operations support manager with Sainsbury, says: “The industry needs a common means of assessment to ensure that everyone is getting the quality of maintenance we all need.” **TE**

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