

Find your fleet

As operators strive to cut costs, many are procuring LCVs, instead of going for larger vehicle options, while conversions are also being carefully considered. Keith Read rounds up some of the developments



Operators have a wide choice of vans from the likes of Volkswagen, Mercedes-Benz, Citroën and Peugeot

A relentless drive for greater efficiencies from their LCVs, by fleet engineers and owner-operators, has led to a dramatic increase in demand for specialist bodywork and bespoke vehicles from conversion companies. Additionally, there is an increasing expectation of new, higher-capacity, ultra-efficient models from OEMs. As a result, even the familiar Luton – essentially unchanged for years – has been redesigned.

Halesowen-based bodybuilder Bevan Group unveiled its new breed of Luton at April's CV Show, with impeccable environmental credentials and a market-leading payload of more than 1,200kg. The Bevan Icon's modular design was developed in partnership with aerodynamics experts from Cranfield University and Hatcher Components. They used computational fluid dynamics (CFD) to simulate road conditions, as well as scale models to hone the final shape in a wind tunnel.

They also went for lightweight, recyclable composite GRP for the body panels – moulded cab deflector and collar, side walls and roof.

The first production Icon appeared on a Mercedes-Benz Sprinter chassis cab, meaning it was also compatible with Volkswagen's Crafter, which is built alongside the Sprinter. However, the design is currently being adapted for other vehicles, including Ford's Transit.

Elsewhere, there is interesting news from Supertrucks for operators wanting high payloads

and/or to maximise volumes. As a result of Plymouth Community Homes seeking a very high payload LCV, the St Helens-based manufacturer of specialist conversions is currently building a Fiat Ducato 160 MultiJet-based version of its Space Van, originally launched on a Relay – Citroën's version of the same LCV family.

"Plymouth manufactures its own windows and doors for the homes it takes care of," explains Andy Geoghegan, director of truck conversions at Supertrucks. "They currently run panel vans, but just cannot get the payload out of them. As a result, we're doing the conversion on the 3-litre, 160bhp Ducato, for its increased carrying capacity. We're building one to start with and that will be followed by two more."

Geoghegan says the conversion is much the same as that on the Citroën Relay. "Only Fiat offers a 4-tonne rated model. And with the specialist drop-down chassis from AL-KO, that has been uprated to 4.5 tonnes gross. Our customer is looking more for payload than for volume, because the doors and frames contain a lot of steel reinforcing. They need 2 tonnes, and we're able to give them 2.1 tonnes with this conversion."

Incidentally, if maximising volume had been the criterion, the conversion offers a massive 22.29m³, coupled with walk-in, walk-out access. With weight being the issue for Plymouth, however, it has also specified the Axtec on-board axle load indicator, to monitor axle weights and avoid overloading. Prices

for Supertrucks' conversions vary depending on fitments, but, as a guide, Geoghegan says the Ducato-based package will be around £28,000.

More popular choices

Meanwhile, some of the more popular conversions, once available only by purchasing a van or chassis-cab and going to a bodybuilder, are now being included in OEM line-ups. And, as a result of collaboration between vehicle manufacturers and their suppliers, fleet managers can now get a one-stop-shop, with warranties to match.

Citroën was one of the first to adopt the concept

requirement, to ensure that everything is in place well in advance of the deadline.

Colin Wilde, technical manager at the SMMT (Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders), explains that the Single Vehicle Type Approval (SVA) scheme is being replaced by the Individual Vehicle Type Approval (IVA). "Vehicles can be registered under SVA until April 2013, but you can also get individual vehicle approval. The requirements are different – similar, but different. The SVA is a UK scheme, while the new IVA uses European Directives – plus it brings in a lot more areas that need to be inspected."



and its Ready-to-Run range is one of the most comprehensive in the UK, says commercial vehicle operations manager Scott Michael. "It includes nine conversion types, from tippers to minibuses, dropsides, glass-carrying vans, temperature controlled vans, Luton vans and high-cube low-loading vans, as well as dual-fuel vans."

He points to the 40-plus temperature controlled vans, with six different glass carriers as indicative of the sheer scale of options. "That's a terrific choice for fleet managers," Michael says, adding that the Ready-to-Run programme has been developed with multiple specialists, according to their functions. "We've worked with the best specialist converter in each field, rather than getting one or two to create everything," insists Michael, "and all Ready-to-Run converters warrant their products to match that of the base Citroën vehicle. One of the main elements of the programme is that we ask the converters to specify the body to include the most commonly sought-after options, such as rear parking sensors on the Lutons. This means the customer gets a highly specified vehicle at a very competitive price."

Incidentally, Citroën still has its Relay Specialist Model programme, which includes tippers, dropsides and Lutons, but, in this case, all covered by the Citroën factory warranty. And for those concerned about full European type approval (ECWVA) for specialist and converted LCVs, Michael points out that a number of Citroën's converters are now working towards the

How different? "IVA is what it says – an individual vehicle approval for low-volume, one-offs and special-purpose vehicles. Where LCVs are converted by bodybuilders, they will probably go for the National Small Series approval. This has limits on the number that can be made in a year, but the requirements are not as stringent as for ECWVA. However, it is national, and you can only use the vehicle nationally. If you go for ECWVA, there are no limits and you can register the vehicle throughout the whole of Europe."

The SMMT has produced a series of handy, web-based guides to all the type approval changes, requirements and deadlines for those in the conversion business and for LCV operators who want to bring themselves up to speed.

Cold calling

One of the key areas witnessing a big increase in the market is for refrigerated vans. Chris Berridge, managing director of Hull-based Paneltex Group, one of the leading producers of refrigerated vans, says demand has been driven by supermarkets and big retailers focusing on the operational efficiency of these vehicles and their drivers. All want to increase the quantity of goods any one driver can deliver per shift, but all are also focusing on LCVs under 3.5-tonnes to avoid O licence requirements and, to a lesser extent, tachographs. Crucially, they also want to employ drivers having ordinary driving licences.

However, as well as seeking specialist,



Scott Michael,
commercial vehicle
operations
manager, Citroën

refrigerated LCVs, operators are increasingly asking for bespoke versions of the standard ranges. "There are two drivers for this," explains Berridge. "One is the weight of the base vehicle has increased, so we're having to be more imaginative about finding ways to reduce the weight of the conversion so that payload isn't compromised. The other is that many customers are looking for three weight regimes – frozen, chilled and ambient – all on one vehicle."

But there is another factor – and that is cost. Because of the typically high price of specialist bodies, Paneltex is one converter that frequently refurbishes and remounts conversions on new chassis-cabs when the original vehicles are pensioned off. However, in a fresh look at the demountable body system it introduced more than a decade ago, the firm is currently working with Roadload and its U-Tail system, which allows refrigerated container-type bodies to be pre-loaded.

"With more than one body, operators can make best use of the chassis and the driver," asserts Berridge. "Rather than have him waiting around while the vehicle is loaded, he can simply drop one body and pick up another that has already been loaded."

Returning to conversion re-use, however, a scheme claimed to save operators up to 60% of the original capital investment per vehicle, is now being trialled by ING Car Lease. Dave Freeman, head of ING's LCV division, explains that, with an average life of just 48 months before resale, disposing of conversions is a contentious issue. "So we are now working closely with QI Van Systems and a public sector utility to refurbish conversions and fit them to new vehicles in the fleet after four years, and again after eight years," he says.

Evidently, the customer in question is taking 400 LCVs from the Vauxhall range with QI conversions. To avoid compromising residual value of the vans when they are sold after four years, the conversions

are also being installed using Vauxhall's fixing points, rather than drilling new holes.

Vauxhall has also recently added three new factory-built derivatives to its award-winning Movano range – a 17-seat Minibus, and six- and nine-seat Combis. The new Movano Minibus is powered by a Euro 5-compliant 2.3-litre CDTi (125bhp) engine, available with either manual or Tecshift transmission. Vauxhall's ESP (Electronic Stability Programme) with traction control also comes as standard.

Meanwhile, the new Combis will prove useful to fleet managers involved with transporting personnel. The six-seater is powered by the 100bhp variant of the 2.3-litre CDTi engine and the nine-seater has a choice of 125bhp or 150bhp outputs.

Citroën powers forward

As for new vans, Citroën recently launched its most powerful LCV models yet – the Euro 5 Relay 35 HDi 180 in six-speed manual panel vans and chassis cabs, which went on sale last month. Following introduction of the Euro 5 Nemo range earlier this year, this new Relay engine is being hailed as the next stage in Citroën's programme of lower emissions and more fuel-efficient Euro 5 HDi engines across its entire LCV range.

The Relay 35 HDi 180 replaces the previous 35 HDi 160, now with a new 3-litre HDi Euro 5 180bhp engine, delivering a 12.5% power increase with peak torque unchanged at 400Nm, but developed at just 1,400rpm – 300rpm lower than the HDi 160 engine. Fuel consumption is reduced by 9.2% and CO₂ emissions are down 9% at 224g/km.

And, finally, just arrived in the UK is Volkswagen's latest Crafter. It's five years since VW unveiled the Crafter range, with its powerful 2.5-litre five-cylinder engines, at the 2006 CV Show. But today's line-up comes with 2-litre, four-cylinder engines that are up to 33% more fuel efficient, cost 25% less to maintain and – critically for most operators – carry much more. Payloads are up by 83kg for panel vans and 98kg for chassis cabs.

Three power outputs are available: 109, 136 and 163bhp, the latter achieved via a bi-turbo engine. All three newcomers match the power output of earlier equivalent five-cylinder engines. That said, torque – while the same at 300Nm for the 109bhp unit – is higher on the 136 and the 163bhp BITDI models. Also, unlike their forebears, the New Crafter Euro-5-compliant engines do not require AdBlue treatment to reduce emissions.

The other good news for utilities and operators of specialist-body vehicles is that all the new 2-litre engines can be fitted with a PTO, while a user-programmable interface allows for customised options for controlling electronic functions. **TE**