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Gary Bulley

Century celebration

Despite industry criticism of ATFs, the 100th site opened its doors this summer and many more are planned. John Challen talks to VOSA and to some who have taken the plunge

Eighteen months ago, VOSA chief executive Alastair Peoples was putting the finishing touches to the draft contracts for ATFs (authorised testing facilities). The idea – part of VOSA's Testing Transformation crusade – represented the biggest change to commercial vehicle testing ever witnessed and to say there was some opposition to the plans would be a major understatement.

Talk to Peoples now and much of the CV industry's resistance has gone, replaced with optimism, in part thanks to the successful establishment of more than 100 of the new-style facilities around the country, he says. “I am very pleased we have got some traction on ATFs,” states Peoples. “[In the beginning] I felt I was trying to fix a problem that the industry didn't recognise it had, with a solution I hadn't yet developed. So to have 100 ATFs in operation is fantastic. Having haulage associations saying it is business as usual at these sites is also very welcome.”

One happy customer is Bullwell Trailer Solutions, which became the proprietor of the 100th ATF when it opened its doors for business in mid-July. In its first week, the site tested 42 trailers, including 16 on the first day of operation. An outstanding first few days then, but, for Gary Bulley, managing director at Bullwell, the decision to move to an ATF had to be carefully considered. “The ethos was to bring some quality to the testing business, and my business partner – a qualified accountant – and I decided an ATF was a good route to take,” he explains.

“One of our largest customers dictates that the roller used for the vehicle brake testing is the same roller used for the MOT, which meant that I needed four tractor units to do the trip to achieve just eight trailer MOTs a day. When you look at the cost of fuel, drivers' time and waiting time, it was quite an inefficient way of working, compared with today's business practices. Also, as we already had the workshop, with three full-length maintenance pits onsite, it made sense to go for an ATF and offer



Mobile technology transfer is integral to the success of test site efficiency

maintenance, preparation and testing all on one site.”

Before committing to an ATF, Bulley got three quotes for the build programme and test equipment. In the end, the centre, at the company’s HQ in Lichfield, was specified with vehicle testing equipment from Gemco – including a state-of-the-art BM brake tester – and a bespoke Premier Pits-supplied pit. The latter item was of particular importance and, despite the extra cost, Bulley maintains it will pay dividends in the long run.

Best way forward

“At a meeting with VOSA, Gemco and Premier Pits, we discussed which would be the best way forward and what equipment should be used,” recalls Bulley. “We decided on an 18m pit that gives us the ability to test tractor and trailer, running it as a three-man operation, if we need to. We’re only scratching the surface of what we can get out of it,” he states. Bullwell is counting on its 5,000-strong trailer fleet to fill up capacity at its new Lichfield ATF, but the company has also already witnessed members of the public making use of the test lane, with camper vans, trailers and horse boxes.

“VOSA was very keen to make it happen and the individuals [from the agency] directly involved in our project were very supportive. They assisted with the design and we built what they suggested,” says Bulley. Such support is of the utmost importance when it comes to establishing an ATF, says Peoples. “We’ve worked very closely with each ATF and hand-held them along the way,” he says, but also concedes there were teething problems with new staff on site and some individuals that were

struggling with different approaches to testing.

Bulley says he often wonders why he didn’t do this sooner, when thinking about the decision to go to an ATF. According to VOSA, he is not alone. Nestlé is of the same opinion, having opened an ATF lane in March. “We wanted to be in control of our own destiny, and decide when and where we could get our vehicles tested,” explains Graham Lyon, Nestlé Logistics’ LGV fleet manager. He maintains that the decision was not born out of a desire to make more money [“our primary business is making chocolate”], but was arrived at simply because it made good business sense to be able to test on-site.

Unlike most other test lanes, Nestlé’s, in York, is drive-in, reverse-out, the only possible configuration, due to the building’s location and space constraints. Not that this is a problem, according to workshop manager and ATF coordinator Ralph Defty. “Our technicians have perfected the turnaround process and we’re matching the test times of the VOSA test station,” insists the Nestlé man.

And he adds that, in the first three months of operation, savings of around £14,500 have already been made, due to reduced labour hours spent taking vehicles to and from the former VOSA test station and the resulting reduced fuel bills. “It used to take four and a half hours to get one trailer tested,” says Defty, “Now we can test six in roughly the same time.”

For Bulley, the savings from Bullwell’s £173,000 investment are even more impressive. “We average around 14 to 16 tests a day with our own lane, which means we can save in the region of £60,000 per year and make a return on our investment in three years,” he says, also mentioning fleet-wide reductions in CO₂ emissions of around 1.7 million kilograms per annum.

“We’ve also become busier and now offer another service to our customers,” he explains. “We are a trailer company, but all our engineers are HGV-trained, and we have just invested in some diagnostic equipment to look at tractor unit problems as they are going through the test lane.”

Building the ATF network

TIP Trailer Services has also reaped the benefits of housing an ATF. “Nuneaton was our first site to be converted, in April this year, and productivity has shot up,” comments Karl Davies, the company’s services and marketing director. “In March 2011, we were testing 700 axles during a five-day week. By June, that was up to 900. Third party work over the same period has also risen – from 40% to 55%.”

TIP’s Felixstowe facility became an ATF in June, and Davies says the company’s sites in Manchester and Liverpool will follow in Q3 this year, with Leeds coming on stream in Q4. “It forces us to get better,” he says. “We are providing more services, and

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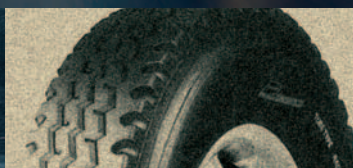
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around 30% of our business is now maintaining and working on trucks that aren't ours. We are lucky, because the ATF model fits well with what we do. VOSA wants good quality ATFs and we are happy to provide them."

Toe in the water

Not everyone has experienced an entirely straightforward shift to ATF status, though. MC Group, for example, had its hand rather forced when its DP (Designated Premises) in Southampton was affected by a change in pit size regulations. "The bay that the DP was in turned out to be 3/4in too narrow, so, because VOSA wouldn't change its stance, we gave up the DP and started using the local test station instead," recalls Peter Booth, the company's financial director.

Nevertheless, ultimately that decision has worked in MC's favour, says Booth, with the company having just opened a new ATF facility in Southampton. "We feel this site adds value to customers, and enables us to generate additional work, be more flexible and provide the one-stop shop we crave," he says.

Everything changed when the new regime at VOSA came in, he explains. "VOSA was being a bit more flexible. They were fantastic in going through

drawings and saying what needs to be done. So we were able to put the investment in... We spent £45,000 getting this site up to spec, so we could become an ATF."

And the result is a clear winner for operators in the region: prior to opening its Southampton ATF, Booth says the alternative for most testing was a costly trip to Salisbury, which took about an hour and a half. Indeed, with this success under MC's belt, Booth says he's considering another ATF between Newark and Nottingham, where he believes demand is likely to be high enough to warrant the scale of investment.

However, in general he remains unconvinced by the financial aspects, believing the benefits to be "stacked in VOSA's favour". In fact, he says that the other DPs in the MC Group will remain, because "there is less risk for us in running a DP than an ATF". Why? In the end, it's about the DP's 'per axle' test rate, as opposed to the fixed day fee allowed with ATFs. "If we only put half the ideal number of axles through our DP, then it only costs us £400 a day, whereas an ATF will still cost us £800 for the VOSA tester."

Booth's view is something that VOSA's Peoples is keen to address. "We will guarantee [our testers] to come out to you, but we need to get a fixed fee. If you don't book enough tests to cover the retained fee, you have to make up the shortfall," he states. "There are two main reasons: first, I need to cover my costs; and, secondly, an element of discipline needs to be displayed. An ATF won't stay in business very long, if it is not fully loading the work or not promoting it."

A strong stance from VOSA, then, but Peoples is willing to help out those not at full capacity. "If an ATF operator is continually topping up the fee, we go and talk to them, and see what the problem is," he says. "We don't want them to fail, but some people are starting up, but then not loading the site. However, they shouldn't see it as just making a profit from testing. There are customer service, and maintenance and repair elements to the business."

Despite the slightly volatile situation, Peoples remains confident for the future. "We are in a different economic situation than when we started and we have to recognise there are early adopters in any scheme, but we have a target of 75 ATFs for this financial year and already have 42 signed up," he says. "I am hoping that early adopters will be successful, from the point of view of finances, customer services and improved first-time pass rates. It is not just about providing more facilities. It is about doing things better." **TE**

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