



A key part of a bodyshop technician's job is looking after vehicle structures, appearances and running gear – not only post-incidents, but also for change of use and modernisation. Steve Banner talks to those in the firing line

A refreshing

Tough times in the economy mean that operators have to husband their cash carefully. Vehicles that, in an ideal world, would be replaced are often having to stay in service for longer before disposal time rolls around. They may, however, as a consequence, need refurbishment, if they are to be kept reliable – and a tatty-looking fleet is a poor advertisement for any operator in what remains a competitive market.

"We're receiving a growing number of enquiries about refurbishment work from businesses that want to extend the lives of their vehicles," says Fran Johnson, bodyshop manager at Market Weighton, East Yorkshire-based Britcom International. "It seems as though a lot of people have been putting off deciding whether to change their vehicles or get them refurbished, but have now concluded that they need to do one thing or the other," he adds.

It's a similar picture at Eastgate Coach Trimmers. "We've refurbished the interiors of a lot of buses and coaches recently, re-trimming the seats, the sides and the ceiling," says director Neil Fowler. "In one or two cases, the work has involved replacing the floor itself, not just the floor covering, because it had gone completely rotten."

Nor is it solely small operators that are choosing the refurbishment route. "We recently had a semi-trailer in from one of the big supermarkets with a floor that we were asked to sort out, because it had started to lift," states Johnson. "In the past, that trailer would have been packed off to auction, but not in the current economic climate. The supermarket opted to extend its life by two or three years with us instead."

Britcom's refurbishment activities include carrying out welding and fabrication work to repair areas on the vehicle that have deteriorated, shot-blasting the chassis – "that costs £1,500 or so" – and repainting the chassis and body, as required. "Depending on what you have done, you should be able to extend your vehicle's working life by a good five years," comments Johnson.

Double-deck dilemmas

Although there can be issues with certain double-decker buses, especially towards the rear, bus and coach chassis do not usually require shot-blasting as part of a refurbishment programme, says former coach operator David Simonds. David and Karen Simonds set up Banham, Norfolk-based bodyshop Full Circle 11 years ago.

"You don't tend to see a lot of chassis rot these days," says Simonds. "Instead, the work usually concentrates on the body and involves, for example, replacing stretch panels and any sections of the frame that may have deteriorated, as well as a repaint. Depending on what you want done, and the standard you want it done to, it can cost you anywhere between £5,000 and £15,000, or more."

However, he has yet to see a major influx of requests for refurbishment quotes. "I thought we might have seen this happen by now, but I suspect that many operators are waiting to see what the full impact will be of government spending cuts on the economy before they make any decisions," he comments.

Those operators who do opt for refurbishment may take the opportunity to alter or upgrade



Refurbishment of commercial vehicles goes well beyond the surface. Structural repairs are essential to maintaining quality

change

specifications at the same time. "For example, we replaced the plywood floor overlaid with chequer-plate in the aforementioned supermarket semi-trailer with a Wisadeck floor [ply flooring coated with a slip-resistant phenolic resin] instead," Johnson reports.

Fowler reveals some cases where customers have specified refurbishment with two-tone leather seat trim. Surely that is a little over the top on a vehicle that, by definition, will already be several years old? Not really, he replies, because the price has to be viewed in the context of what it might cost you to acquire a new or late-registered second-hand similar vehicle instead. "The £4,500 to £8,000 you might pay for an interior refurbishment – splash out £10,000 and you'll get something that will really transform the vehicle – has to be viewed as money well spent," he comments.

"Furthermore, you're spending it on a vehicle you already know," continues Fowler. "Replace it with a second-hand one and you may inadvertently end up acquiring a whole load of problems. Nor is it a lot when you consider the cost of replacing an engine." A remanufactured engine can cost £10,000, while a remanufactured gearbox can add a further £1,500 to £3,000 to the bill, depending on exact specifications and whether it is a manual or a full automatic.

One recent example of an operator that has opted to refurbish seven-year-old vehicles, rather than replace them, is Veolia Transdev Harrogate & District. This operator is in the process of completely revamping 14 Wrightbus-bodied Volvo B7TLs, used on its prestige Route 36 linking Harrogate and Leeds. "Normally, we would change them every five or six years, but, when we looked around, we saw

nothing that represented a big improvement on what we'd already got," says the company's sales and marketing director Nigel Eggleton. "So, given that a new double-decker costs approximately £200,000, we decided to spend around £80,000 on each of our existing buses instead."

That expenditure includes replacing the engines, changing the five-speed automatic gearboxes to six-speed boxes, for better fuel economy, and swapping the suspension's twin-deck air-bellows and pedestals for single-deck, larger-diameter bellows and pedestals to provide a softer ride. The driver's compartment has also been strengthened with extra steel supports in the front screen and bulkhead area to give the occupant better protection in a collision.

Legislation in mind

When opting to refurbish, operators have to decide whether it makes sense, in light of existing and likely legislative changes. Spending a lot of money sprucing up a Euro 3 18-tonner may not be a wise investment, if you regularly deliver to locations within the London Low Emission Zone, given that it will attract a penalty charge from January 2012, unless you have budgeted for the £4,000 to £5,500 needed to fit a suitable particulate trap.

Over the next few years, some transport companies may also start to wonder if it makes sense to spend money on their existing 13.6m semi-trailers, given that 14.6m and 15.65m semi-trailers will be undergoing trials.

Incidentally, decisions to refurbish seem to be taken when a vehicle is around seven years old, but occasionally much older vehicles are given a full revamp. "We were recently asked to shot-blast and repaint the chassis of a 17-year-old, eight-wheel tipper," says Johnson. "Although there was some corrosion on the chassis inside edge, I'd seen worse and, because the truck had been refurbished mechanically quite recently, from the operator's viewpoint the exercise was worth it.

"Remember that, despite its age, it will earn the same amount of money as a brand new one." 