



Body of work

Given the costs and downtime involved in putting right a crashed van, truck, bus or coach, it is critical that repairs are carried out fast, but without impacting quality or safety. Steve Banner reports

Already well established as a cost-effective means of rectifying minor damage to steel and aluminium panels on passenger cars, so-called smart repair techniques are starting to become more prevalent in commercial vehicle accident repair operations. So says Fran Johnson, bodyshop manager at Market Weighton, East Yorkshire based Britcom International.

"We've just invested in a Miracle Panel Repair System from Power-Tec," he reports. "We use it whenever possible and we've used it to particularly good effect on Mercedes-Benz Sprinter vans. There's a double-skinned section on the lower rear corner of the body that's vulnerable to damage," he continues. "We weld a series of attachment points to it, link the system to them and then use it to pull the section straight."

Typically, he's only talking about 10 or so small, single-sided spot welds. As a consequence,

anything that has been attached is easy to remove, once the panel has been straightened. Then all you need to do is sand it off and fill where necessary.

"Depending on the repair, an alternative approach is to glue a hook to a damaged panel, use the system to pull the dent out, then remove the hook using a releasing agent," says Johnson. Employing this sort of technique means that there is no need to go to all the trouble and expense of taking off a dented section and possibly replacing it with a new one. "People are repairing parts whenever possible these days, rather than replacing them, in order to keep costs down," he says.

Weight problems

On the face of it, using such an approach on trucks could prove problematic, because they contain heavier-gauge steels than vans and these require more effort to pull them back into shape. However, Britcom has successfully used Power-Tec's

package on truck cab door skins, according to Johnson, and would happily use it to rectify cab roof damage, too, if the occasion arose.

“Remember that we’re talking about repairs to panels, rather than structural repairs, and the steel used for door skins is about the same as the steel used on vans,” he observes.

Being able to repair skins can be invaluable, says Johnson, given that not all manufacturers supply them these days. “They want you to take the entire door instead and that’s obviously expensive,” says Johnson.

And metal panels are not the only ones being repaired more frequently, if at all possible. Bodyshops are becoming increasingly familiar with the use of hot staplers to repair broken plastic body components, explains Johnson. Using this approach has allowed Britcom to avoid having to replace whole panels on a number of occasions.

Meanwhile, something that is certainly working on trucks and trailers, so far as chassis repairs are concerned, is the use of hot, rather than cold,



straightening, advises Paul ‘Toby’ Talbot, accident repair centre manager at Keltruck’s West Bromwich site. The Scania dealership, which also operates a repair centre at a site in Newark, has started using an induction heating system, sourced from Josam, to help bring chassis back into line.

“You can do the job more quickly; less pressure has to be applied than is required if you used cold straightening; and there’s usually no need to strip everything off the chassis,” states Talbot. “Repairers doing the work have to be pretty skilled, though.”

Josam offers a variety of induction heaters.

Designed for heavy-duty work, its water-cooled JH1300 can assist in the straightening of axles, as well as chassis. The heat it generates can be applied to lock nuts and pins, too, in order to loosen, adjust or straighten them.

But putting the chassis and panels right is only part of the story, particularly if a truck has been involved in a serious collision. Close attention has to be paid to ensuring the CAN Bus wiring system, and all the key components attached to it, still function properly. “Fortunately, we’ve got our own service department, so we have appropriately-trained technicians we can call on,” states Britcom’s Johnson. “If you haven’t got that ability, then life can get rather more difficult.”

Used spares

Another point: pinched margins mean that some operators, especially those with a high excess on their insurance policies, are attempting to save money by fitting recycled parts – used spares stripped from trucks that have been earmarked for disposal – where it is safe to do so. The savings can be substantial. For example, while the brackets used to attach a cab to a tractor unit may cost £400 each new, they are a fraction of the price, if purchased second-hand.

Keltruck alone sells over £1m worth of recycled parts annually. As well as being cheaper than new items, they are instantly available – which means less downtime for the truck concerned.

Yet, while every repairer has a horror story to relate of having to wait for key items for weeks on end, new replacement parts for trucks do arrive quite quickly in the majority of cases. Sadly, the same is not necessarily the case for bus and coach spares. “Some suppliers in the passenger transport industry take a more relaxed approach and assume that delivery in 10 days’ time is okay,” contends Johnson. It isn’t.

That said, how much a repair costs seems to be more important to some operators today than how quickly they can get their vehicles back on the road again, according to Bob Cartwright, general service manager at Adams Morey. The DAF dealership operates bodyshops in Southampton and Portsmouth, with the former boasting a Blackhawk chassis straightening jig.

“Price often matters more than speed in the current economic climate, because they may have other trucks standing idle,” he explains. They can use one of those, while they shop around for the most attractive repair quote and then wait for the damaged vehicle to be fixed.

Nor are they likely to be too worried, if the insurer decides to write it off. “The way things are at present, they may prefer to have the cash,” reveals Cartwright. “There seems to be less of a desire to have trucks repaired than there was.” TE