

Managing any commercial vehicle fleet requires time and attention to detail, if you want to keep customers, VOSA and company directors happy. Alan Phillips looks at how to save money

Quality control

In these austere times, is cutting back on quality monitoring of your vehicle fleet the way to go? In some instances, it just might, but, for the vast majority of operators, now, more than ever, it most definitely is not. If quality procedures are relaxed, how do you prove compliance with vehicle maintenance requirements when VOSA comes knocking or you are called before the traffic commissioner?

MoT first-time pass rates may fall, due to relatively minor faults. Roadside checks, too, might take a hit, as a result of small defects, such as poor headlight aim or blown side marker lamps. Or more serious defects may be found, if sub-standard parts have been fitted or wear is allowed to progress beyond service limits. But being able to provide reports detailing areas of concern and actions taken shows at least that attempts are being made to comply with the dictates of O licensing.

Quality monitoring does not have to be carried out by independent third parties. Although this may be a requirement of the traffic commissioner at public inquiries, in-house quality monitoring can be just as effective – sometimes more so. You know your business better than anybody else – mileages covered, type of terrain travelled, loads carried, speeds etc.

But are such factors being taken into account when looking at inspection frequencies? Or has a six-week period been accepted throughout, because that is what is expected?

If you run with light loads, cover low mileages and travel on normal roads, you may be able to extend inspection intervals to eight or even 10 weeks – provided your vehicles remain in a roadworthy condition. But, if your vehicles consistently run at maximum payload, cover high mileage and regularly travel over rough terrain, such as construction sites, inspection intervals may have to be reduced to, perhaps, four weeks, so as to ensure that vehicles remain roadworthy.

Quality monitoring by independent third parties, although having a cost implication, does have its upside. Their independence means they have nothing to gain by providing less than honest reports. They may also be able to provide valuable information that cannot, or would not, be shown on in-house reports – such as vehicle inspection reports completed incorrectly, vehicles repaired to incorrect standards, etc. μ

Time can also be freed up for transport managers, allowing them more space to carry out their daily duties. For example, nobody likes driver checks, so third parties are an excellent way to delegate this responsibility. By using a person independent of your organisation, and unknown to drivers, watching them carry out daily vehicle checks and monitoring their tachograph charts for irregularities, in-house confrontations can be avoided.

Remedial action will still be required to areas of concern found. That may involve further training for staff, more frequent driver spot checks or simply putting vehicle maintenance files into chronological order. Yes, there is a cost to all of this, but, by carefully shopping around, real value for money can be found. And the plain fact is that having robust maintenance systems and practices in place, as well as good MoT pass rates, clear roadside checks and drivers complying with driving hours, breaks etc, saves money and reputations.

Further, by keeping vehicles well maintained, they remain reliable, can be on the road for longer and may cost less in parts replacement. Drivers will also be happier, driving vehicles they know are dependable – meaning they are less likely to complain and/or produce unnecessary defect reports.

With the authorities clamping down on poor operators, being able to show that your maintenance systems and driver procedures are compliant is a smart move. **TE**

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