

The recent IRTE, FTA, IMechE forum on developing truck technicians for the future also revealed challenges for the here and now. Brian Tingham talks to VOSA's Alex Fiddes

New breed, new blood



Should we be surprised about the improvement in first-time pass rates recorded by VOSA (the Vehicle and Operator Services Agency) for trucks at the annual MOT – despite these vehicles' increasing complexity? Speaking at a forum organised by the IRTE (Institute of Road Transport Engineers), FTA (Freight Transport Association) and IMechE (Institution of Mechanical Engineers) last month in London – aimed at reconsidering qualifications for technicians, in light of advancing technology – VOSA executive director Alex Fiddes (pictured) thought not.

For the record, failures fell from 35.7% in 2000 to 22.4% in 2012, with the last three years seeing the greatest improvement. So is it reasonable to suppose that VOSA's statistics are a reflection of technicians bridging the clear skills gap and mastering the technologies behind newer, more sophisticated vehicles (in which case, why the conference)? Or is it indicative of improvements in truck engineering and manufacturing quality? Or the advent of VOSA's OCRS (operator compliance risk score) and a realisation by fleet managers that compliance has a direct impact on their 'O' licences and day-to-day operations?

Fit for purpose?

Fiddes is confident that the truth is inevitably a mix of the latter two points. That doesn't, however, alter the importance of ensuring that technicians are fit for purpose, he insisted. "Where your vehicles are repaired and maintained – at a dealership, a non-franchised workshop or an independent local garage – is irrelevant," he said. "But you need to be sure that the people doing the work understand how to look for defects and that they are competent. And that means looking at test history reports and satisfying yourself that their technicians are accredited to a scheme such as irtec [the technician licensing scheme]."

VOSA, he said, won't mandate that. But, for him, it's about due diligence when specifying third party maintenance contracts, so that operators – who retain responsibility for their vehicles' roadworthiness as a condition of their 'O' licences – can be confident that their vehicles will not let them down. And that's in terms of passing the MOT first time, retaining (or

building) a good OCRS and getting a clean bill of health at roadside checks.

"If you see irtec as a valuable criterion verifying competence, then specify that," he urged. And the same, he said, applies to the IRTE's new independent Workshop Accreditation scheme. But ensuring compliance doesn't stop there. VOSA's effectiveness report, available online, makes it clear that some 80% of roadside prohibitions should have been detected by drivers during their daily walk-around checks. The fact that they weren't indicates a general failure to adhere to process – by drivers, technicians and/or management.

"I would do some spot checks every now and again, so that people are aware that their duties are considered important. Even if drivers are doing what they should, you need to be certain that the person reviewing a defect report is competent to decide whether or not a vehicle can safely go out and be repaired later. If we find a problem at the roadside... Well, that's not where you want to be."

Talking of which, operators need to be aware that 'big brother' is watching them – and not just using automatic number plate recognition cameras or weigh-in-motion sensors. Fiddes pointed out that the OCRS mechanism is dynamic, and that inspectors unearthing unsuitable maintenance arrangements can be an intelligence trigger that changes your score and leads to more roadside checks.

That said, Fiddes made it clear that everyone is looking for advanced technicians, including VOSA. "We're looking at new ways of recruitment, including apprenticeships, second careers, but also seconding individuals for further education. We all have to consider how to develop the technicians we need for the future."

As Ian Chisholm, head of operations and communications at the IRTE's umbrella organisation SOE (Society of Operations Engineers), put it: "With advancements in modern vehicle technology, there is a very real need for the skill sets of technicians to evolve quickly. The technician of the future will not only need comprehensive mechanical knowledge, but also electronic and diagnostic skills to a new level."

The IRTE, FTA, IMechE London forum was sponsored by Goodyear and Mobil Delvac. 