



Bullwell Trailer Solutions' general manager Ian Ashman believes that operators could do more to help themselves with first-time MOT pass rates. Most of its operators are on fixed-price contracts with a target FTP rate. "To date, Bullwell has never fallen below the target level," he says.

PASS or FAIL:

Common sense, attention to detail, and robust contracts and vigilant operators are the keys to improving first-time pass rates, says Robin Dickeson

Latest data from VOSA (the Vehicle and Operator Services Agency) shows that 75.8% of trucks, 81.6% of buses and 82.7% of trailers passed their annual MOT tests first time. By comparison, only 50% of vans did so. Superficially, all but the van figures seem quite good, but look at them as failure rates and the results are dismal.

MOT tests aren't simply a matter of passing; vehicles need to pass first time for operators to get the thumbs up from VOSA. Even more importantly, they need to be capable of passing at any time. So, with over three million vans on UK roads and two million over three years' old (subject to MOT tests), by that measure more than one million are neither safe, nor roadworthy. Why? Van users enjoy a much more relaxed compliance regime than heavy vehicle operators, with a first test at three years, no regular safety checks and no 'O' (operator) licence to lose.

Maybe we need some changes to van operation and testing? VOSA boss Alastair Peoples is crystal

clear. "If your commercial vehicle can't pass an MOT test on every day it's in use, you are breaking the law. Roadworthiness is not just for one day a year."

For transport operators, there's a real imperative. Those MOT results, be they first-time passes, PRSs (pass with rectification at station) or, worst of all, fails, are serious. They all find their way onto your OCRS (operator compliance risk score) with which VOSA targets the 'bad guys' and takes some of the heat off the good ones.

High scoring dealers

UK franchised truck dealers are now getting average first-time pass (FTP) rates in the "low 90%", according to John Davies, head of UK service and support for MAN. He also leads the SMMT (Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders) commercial vehicle aftermarket group, which works increasingly closely with VOSA to improve truck maintenance and safety standards, and points to the fact that just a couple of years ago those dealers' FTP rates were

five or six percentage points lower. However, Davies and his competitor peers are far from complacent. All aim for 100%, but they calculate that, without their dealers' consistent performance, the national average FTP rate for trucks might be 10% worse.

But Davies believes high pass rates rely on little more than common sense and attention to detail. "Too many people put off rectification work until just before an MOT," he observes. He makes the point that workshops need time to check and prepare any vehicle. "It's better to check brakes early so that, if they need new disc pads, there is time for them to bed in before the test."

That said, overall the trend is moving in the right direction, as dealers "obsess over FTP rates," according to Ian Chisholm, head of operations and communications at the IRTE (Institute of Road Transport Engineers). All aim to avoid damage to their customers' OCRS. However, Chisholm feels that operators can help themselves here by being more careful with third party maintenance deals.

"It's important to know that the right people in the right workshops are doing your work," he says – adding that the IRTE's workshop and technician accreditation schemes define standards that

performance you can get, rather than just enough to scrape through a test," advises Mair.

Peter Spraggs, managing director of Pro-Cut, which sells on-wheel lathes that recondition vehicle brake discs, agrees that attention to detail is the key. Specifically, his engineers always recommend people to check the freedom of calliper movement on disc brakes and look for corrosion, seizing etc in the units. "Also, check the air pressure, as well as the brake adjustment," he suggests. Trailers that spend a lot of time parked up are particularly vulnerable.

So, what next? Annual MOT tests are already way more complex and searching than when they were introduced, and there is every reason to expect that they will become more so. So passing those tests first time and properly maintaining vehicles between tests will be increasingly demanding. The 90%-plus FTP rate from franchised truck dealers shows that success is possible, but there is no magic in this.

What about VOSA? The trade associations are generous about the agency's pragmatic approach. The organisation clearly listens and tries to help whenever it can, they say. But there are still concerns about inconsistencies between VOSA's test stations and its examiners. Many in the industry agree that

it's up to you

"deserve wider recognition". Beyond these, though, Chisholm, like many others, wonders how many operators look at the MOT data available from VOSA – or, for that matter, at its Testers Manuals.

And VOSA executive director Alex Fiddes agrees. "Operators can motivate their maintainers by having a contract in place that rewards good first-time pass rates or even one that punishes poor performance," he adds. And despite the widely-held view among operators that VOSA could do more, the trade associations agree that some operators should be acting smarter.

Andy Mair, head of engineering at the FTA (Freight Transport Association), points to common problems. Headlamp aim is still the prime cause of truck and bus MOT failures, he says, but too many technicians simply set them near the top or bottom of the band. "Set the beam in the middle, and you're less likely to get affected by suspension system movements and more likely to pass," he suggests.

Brakes, too, are right up there for truck and trailer operators. So, along the same lines, setting brakes to just 1% above the minimum is asking for trouble. "Brake performance will only go one way. It makes much more sense to adjust for the maximum

VOSA should now concentrate on enforcement, letting its increasingly successful ATF (Authorised Testing Facility) initiative run its course, fully privatising all commercial vehicle MOT testing.

And those one million unsafe and unroadworthy vans? Expect VOSA to act, working with trade associations and those van operators that take their responsibilities seriously. The aim will be to find ways of spreading best practice to the firms that run the million or more failures. April's new registration figures from the SMMT show that the nation's van fleet is growing faster than any other vehicle group. So the pressure for action can only go one way. **TE**

Pro-Cut, which supplies lathes for brake disc reconditioning, recommends checking the freedom of calliper movement on disc brakes and watching for corrosion/seizure

