



# Could do much better

The Freight Transport Association's Van Excellence scheme is beyond reproach. But the sheer numbers not participating and their appalling MOT failures leave Robin Dickeson wondering about the future for legislation

The Freight Transport Association's Van Excellence scheme, launched at the 2011 Commercial Vehicle Show, got off to an encouraging start. Within two and a half years, it has notched up an impressive 100,000 vans under the control of independently accredited operators – names including Amey, Balfour Beatty, Bott, British Gas, BT, Clancy Docwra, DHL, Electricity North West, HSS Hire, Menzies Distribution, Morgan Sindall, National Blood Services, Network Rail and Sainsbury's. And there are some 150,000 more vehicles pending, run by firms in the provisional (awaiting standards confirmation) category. ATS Euromaster, Finning, Kerry Foods, National Grid, Speedy Hire, Tesco and Thames Water are among them.

However, given that the UK van fleet numbers some 3.7 million vehicles (up from 2.5 million in 1992), that leaves nearly 3.5 million out there about which we know precious little. Other than the fact that some 50% routinely fail their MOT when it falls due. And that, among the relatively few vans DVSA (Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency) pulls over in targeted enforcement checks, the most common cause of prohibitions (75%) is overloading.

Why the van numbers and the lack of legislative oversight? In the last 20 years, annual van registrations have surged from some 100,000 to peak at more than 300,000 in 2008 – and, as the

economy recovers, over 270,000 last year, according to SMMT (Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders) figures. That growth was due partly to changes in driving licence law in 1997, which meant that newly-qualified car drivers could no longer operate CVs heavier than 3.5 tonnes – so making previously favoured 7.5-tonne distribution vehicles increasingly difficult to staff.

An unintended consequence, if you like, but increasingly van popularity was also the result of the internet, which simultaneously massively expanded the home delivery market while opening opportunities for tradesmen and women, needing mobile workstations, to sell their services across whole regions, not just local towns.

## Power of 3.5

N1 category vans (less than 3.5 tonnes gww) don't demand specialist driving licences and training. Nor do their operators need 'O' licences, and the associated bureaucracy, to run them. Combine that with the ability of a 3.5-tonne van to carry nearly the same cube as a 7.5-tonner, and the rest is history.

As for the lack of legislation, it's probably the case that mandarins at the DfT (Department for Transport) were as surprised as anyone at the rate of van growth. But while they may have worried about what to do, they seem to have done very little. And now the government mantra is all about cutting red tape,





**FTA Van Excellence manager Mark Cartwright: reverse accreditation is the way forward**

not adding to industry's legislative burden.

Hence, in large part, the motivation for Van Excellence, which is a serious attempt to get this burgeoning van cohort to comply with roadworthiness and operational standards similar to those of the licensed truck and bus sectors, but without additional regulation.

Essentially a code of conduct club that commits its members to minimum, best practice safety and operating standards, it is open to operators across the UK, whether or not they subscribe to FTA. Wannabe members are independently audited to assess their standards, in terms of: vehicle roadworthiness; safety standards; and driver training and compliance. Under roadworthiness, for example, members are required to ensure that regular pre-use defect checks are carried out, with drivers recording defects that have to be assessed by a competent person and rectified, where appropriate, with a clear audit trail underpinning the process.

Sounds a lot like the 'O' licence-mandated driver walk around check? It is. And similarly with inspection and maintenance: for companies to wear the Van Excellence logo, they must assess and stick to 'appropriate maintenance cycles' that cover both the vehicle and any ancillary equipment, specifically taking into account the demands of their operations – not just the manufacturers' recommendations. Again, a fairly direct lift from the regulated truck and bus industries. And why not? Operators subject to the 'O' licence record first-time MOT pass rates way better than those commonplace in the van market, with dealerships regularly priding themselves on percentage scores in the high 90s.

It's much the same for vehicle operations, with vans used as mobile workshops required to carry a manifest indicating detailed loading information, and all vans having to conform to load restraint, racking and bulkhead protection standards. As for van administration, it's all about proper record-keeping, which is open to investigation, while driver management requires nothing more than any

competent business should aspire to – proper training and procedures that enforce compliance around drivers' hours (in line with the Working Time Directive), speed limits, vehicle loading, etc.

What does it cost? The half-day audit is priced at £495 and the process has to be repeated annually. Once past the audit, member companies get enrolment certificates and public and industry recognition for their demonstrably safer and compliant van operations. FTA also offers half-day training courses costing £149 and is to run two more Van Excellence conferences this spring – one on 8 April, at Elstree, and the other on 10 April, in Manchester.

**Over their heads**

But therein lies the problem. The relatively small numbers of big fish, with very large fleets, are far more likely to sign up than the small fry, having five or fewer vans. If nothing else, the big boys are motivated by fears over public and employee liability, and brand reputation. Not only are the hundreds of thousands of smaller van operators unlikely to see the value of stumping up £500 to get a Van Excellence logo, but for tradespeople who don't see themselves as van operators, the whole campaign is over their heads.

What matters to these mostly small firms and self-employed individuals are the qualifications that relate to their jobs. Yet, while their vans do low mileages, working as mobile toolboxes, many get rough treatment and are bound to feature in DVSA's MOT failure statistics. As Laura Moran, commercial vehicle director for Hertz UK, puts it: "Drivers may be entitled, but that doesn't make them qualified to [drive and operate] vans."

Mark Cartwright, who heads vans and logistic buyer relations for the FTA and manages the Van Excellence scheme, reckons the solution is "reverse accreditation". Persuade customers to demand that their suppliers sign up to the Van Excellence scheme and, over time, attitudes will change.

That is going to be a long haul. Yes, it offers customers some protection from litigation, in the event of a serious accident, by demonstrating that they expect their suppliers to adopt best practice in all they do. And, yes, it can help van operators show their customers that they take a responsible approach. But will it bring White Van Man to heel?

Many in the transport industry think not. Given the parlous state of LCV MOT statistics, vans specifically may yet need regulations similar to those imposed on 3.5-tonners and above. And although the DfT is currently wedded to deregulation, it's not beyond the bounds of possibility that legislation may yet be extended down to, say, 2.2 tonnes. Certainly, if Van Excellence proves that, while good in aspiration, it isn't quite good enough to enact a sea change in van operator thinking nation- and industry-wide. **TE**

