

SERVICE WITH

Maintenance and inspection of vans and LCVs under 3.5 tonnes are coming under increasing scrutiny, in spite of manufacturers' claims over service intervals. Steve Banner reviews the issues

Van manufacturers proudly publicise the steps they have taken to extend service intervals, with gaps of two years or 25,000 miles by no means uncommon. But is it really wise to stretch intervals to such an extent, given the arduous working lives so many light commercials endure? Not everyone is convinced that it is.

"There is a strong argument for saying that vans should be thoroughly inspected every 26 weeks, as a minimum, and that van operators should import as many truck-style operational practices as possible," insists Tony Grove, light commercial vehicle manager at contract hire specialist Arval (part of BNP Paribas, with 26,000 light commercials in the UK). "I'm thinking, for example, of drivers being obliged to carry out daily walk-round safety checks and report any defects. Do it electronically and you can prevent them from logging on to work schedules until the check is completed."

But who should carry out the inspections and undertake rectification work? For Grove, a key concern is how far away a workshop is from the operator's premises. "Ten miles may not sound that far, but it can take ages in a busy city, and then you've got to drive back," he observes. The workshop has also got to give commercial vehicles priority over cars, he adds, because they are working tools, often specially equipped for their tasks and must get back to business as soon as possible.

Note that he doesn't say the workshop should be operated by a franchise dealer. Indeed, he believes a competent non-franchised workshop may be capable of doing just as good a job, if it follows the manufacturer's service and repair recommendations and fits reputable parts. The only caveats: franchised dealerships always have the latest diagnostic and software updates for the make they represent. And: "Remember, there are good and bad dealers in all networks."

That's music to the ears of Kwik-Fit fleet director, Peter Lambert. With some 600 outlets nationwide, Kwik-Fit is targeting the van market in a campaign spearheaded by its Kwik Fit Plus locations, which are capable of servicing light commercials as well as

fitting tyres, exhausts and batteries. In fact, all are now equipped with 5.0-tonne lifts and can undertake Class 7 MOT tests.

"We'll have 25 open by this summer and plan to have 175 in three years' time," he says. "We've also got some of the latest diagnostics equipment and technicians trained to use it." They can also service all makes, and are open seven days a week. By no means all van dealer workshops are open on Sundays, or on Saturday afternoons, although those attached to heavy truck franchises may well be – and may remain open round the clock.

Open all hours?

That is certainly the case with Mercedes-Benz dealers. "There's a Mercedes commercial vehicle dealer offering 24/7 servicing within 15 to 20 miles of most places and we see a lot of Sprinters being serviced at 2.00am," states David Joyce, customer service director at the manufacturer's newly-created van division.

That said, most van operators do not require workshops to be open 24 hours a day: they just need them open later in the evening. That's something recognised by Ford under its Transit24 programme, says customer service director Jon



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Wellsman. Outlets that carry this designation offer late-night appointments at least once a week, are mandated to respond to online service booking requests within 20 minutes and offer while-you-wait servicing. "We've got 88 Transit24 locations thus far and our target is 200," he says – adding that Ford is also rolling out 100 Transit Centres across the UK, all of which should be in place early next year. Each will be expected to meet Transit24 requirements.

Aware of the perils of vans not visiting workshops for months, Ford dealers are also offering interim safety checks at one year or 15,000 miles. "They're relatively inexpensive because all you're talking about is half an hour's labour," says Wellsman.

Roving technicians

But what a growing number of light commercial operators also want is for technicians to come out to them, rather than having to despatch their vehicles to a workshop. "There's increased interest in mobile servicing," observes Mark Lovett, head of commercial vehicles at LeasePlan, which is responsible for 35,000 vans. "Customers want to minimise downtime."

Going out to vehicles is something ATS Euromaster is certainly willing to do, according to head of national accounts Simon Tattersall – at least for interim safety checks. If an operator has a lot of vans at one location all parked up on the same day, an ATS technician can inspect them and generate a report on tyres, lights and wiper blades, among other safety-related items, he says. Also, if a van gets a flat tyre, there's the company's roadside assistance to fall back on. "It operates round the clock and we've got 827 mobiles," states Tattersall.

There is, however, a limit to the work that can be done at a customer's premises – especially if the van needs to be hoisted up on a lift. That's why Renault offers what it calls a pit stop service for vans in its network's workshops. "With a maximum two-hour turnaround, this can include everything from oil and brake pad changes to air conditioning re-gassing," says Renault head of network quality and training Steve Whitcombe. "And any work done in our dealers' workshops carries a 12-month parts and labour guarantee."

While non-franchised outlets may be happy to stand behind their labour, the parts guarantee they offer is likely to vary depending on the supplier. Further, their coverage may not be UK- or indeed Europe-wide. Also, what Kwik-Fit and ATS Euromaster cannot do is handle warranty work. That is where franchised dealers come into their own.

"We give a four-year or 100,000-mile warranty and, if any warranty work takes more than three hours to complete, we will arrange a like-for-like replacement for your van," asserts Whitcombe – although that might be a challenge where vehicles are fitted with special kit.

And another point: "The more you use our network for servicing, the more you are likely to benefit from goodwill support should you have a problem once a vehicle is out of warranty," says Kevin Rendell, head of service and parts at Volkswagen Commercial Vehicles. His dealers operate 100 workshops nationwide and, although they are all independently owned, the manufacturer publishes hourly rates for servicing and the replacement of wear and tear parts that are agreed nationally. Rendell also says that, because warranty work and non-warrantable repairs can be carried out at the same time, the dealerships act as one-stop shops, with no need to go anywhere else for, say, an oil change.

Incidentally, the number of common platforms around means that it is increasingly easy for dealers to service vans that wear competitor franchise badges. "A Renault dealer is as capable of servicing a Mercedes-Benz Citan as a Mercedes dealer, because Citan uses the same platform as a Renault Kangoo," observes LeasePlan's Lovett.

His advice: the dealership that is closest and can do the job most efficiently and cost effectively should get the work, regardless of whose sign it hangs out. 

