



CV operators are constantly required to improve service levels and efficiency, but what if your fleet's performance, availability and maintenance are a matter of life and death?

Toby Clark talks to fleet managers working in the emergency services

Emergency operators have to meet formidable performance targets for availability and response. As Mick Sweetmore, head of fleet engineering services at North West Ambulance Service, says: "Targets are currently eight and 19 minutes for 'Red' [life-threatening] calls. So the fleet team has to ensure sufficient resources are available and that they are safe, legal, reliable and roadworthy."

According to Sweetmore, the key principles are ensuring "a planned preventative maintenance system, daily VOR [vehicle off road] monitoring and a proactive response to returning vehicles to duty". He also suggests that close liaison with operational teams is essential, along with advance planning and notification of maintenance requirements. "Don't leave it until the last minute," he warns.

To him, liaison means precise communication: "Don't leave anything to assumption or supposition," he advises. "We operate a fleet maintenance plan that identifies the key people and their responsibilities, and this is supported by a service level agreement that identifies minimum standards and requirements."

Bill Brewster is head of engineering at East Sussex Fire and Rescue Service (ESFRS), which places similar emphasis on planning. "Each FRS [fire and rescue service] is responsible for its own vehicle

maintenance," he says, "and FRS engineering teams are also responsible for maintaining all specialist operational equipment." That's anything from a fire appliance to hose-cutting apparatus.

How it's done, however, varies: "Across the country, there's a mix of in-house or outsourced workshop facilities, or collaborative working with other agencies, such as the police or county council departments," explains Brewster. What matters, though, is best practice – which is why he sits on the FTA's south-eastern council. "We can learn a lot from our commercial colleagues." He also has a national position at the Chief Fire Officers' Association (CFOA), whose transport officers group developed a guide to maintenance requirements, often used in contracts. "It's a good document and very robust," asserts Brewster. "It has the input of an awful lot of people."

Right first time

For Brewster, best practice starts with procurement, and getting that right is about defining the job, accessibility and functions. "All equipment is in our vehicles for a purpose. So for a pumping appliance we create a user requirement, then write a spec and go through weighting factors, warranties, etc."

Sweetmore adds other factors. "The base vehicle of choice must be supported by proven aftermarket



cover and a breakdown assist package. There must also be good dealership coverage across the operational boundaries to provide 24/7 assistance. The appointed conversion agents and bodybuilders must, as part of the original tender agreement, be able to provide 24/7 maintenance support, including mobile field support for the life of the vehicle [up to seven years]. This is to ensure that minor issues don't render a VOR for extended periods."

Some equipment is procured through national systems: ESFRS uses the police framework to purchase cars, for instance. Here, whole life costs are also increasingly important, with North Yorkshire Police improving the resale value of cars by specifying silver rather than white paint, and mounting lightbars with straps rather than drilling holes.

The National Association of Police Fleet Managers (NAPFM) has a vehicle benchmarking initiative, which seeks to deliver "continuous, measurable improvement" by establishing standard KPIs (key performance indicators) for authorities to monitor. The scheme started in 2003 and most UK forces are involved – resulting in significant improvements in fleet availability, reliability and cost effectiveness.

For Sweetmore, KPIs include vehicle availability, daily VOR reporting and exception reports for VORs in excess of three days (including reasons). Another is monthly service maintenance performance (planned versus actual), which must be at least 80% of target.

One former police head engineer (who didn't want to be named) agrees all that is key, but warns: "Having said that, things fail. Emergency vehicles tend to hit speed bumps hard and there are lots of things you can never predict."

ESFRS operates 173 vehicles at 24 fire stations. Four workshops attached to fire stations also deal with operational equipment, such as breathing

apparatus. In many ways, ESFRS operates like a well-run private fleet, and indeed Brewster points out that he has commercial constraints too, although priorities differ. "For example, our asset replacement programme drives our budget," he says.

"We might not have to worry about tachographs and O licensing, but that doesn't mean we are not subject to ensuring our vehicles are safe and compliant," he continues. "Maintenance is done to the highest level, and our standards are met by ensuring we have highly trained staff." The service uses the irtec scheme for licensing its five technicians, with two apprentices on a scheme designed in conjunction with IRTE.

This fire service also outsources 30–40% of its maintenance work. "It makes good commercial sense, and it builds in resilience. The more people skilled in our work, the better," explains Brewster. Sweetmore agrees, but insists that service suppliers and third party agents also provide maintenance support 24/7. Third party checks are also vital, says Brewster: "We use the FTA to audit our vehicle fleet to ensure those standards are maintained. They can randomly pick a vehicle, so it's a true audit. It's a healthy place to be."

Fleet management matters

Other authorities have outsourced fleet management altogether: the Metropolitan Police employs Babcock to manage its 4,000-strong fleet. Babcock's own ALCAMiE asset management software produces daily reports on fleet performance and availability. Meanwhile, ESFRS has some 25,000 operational assets, and uses the TRACE fleet and asset management system with VMRS (vehicle maintenance reporting system) codes to schedule maintenance and testing. Firefighters can undertake equipment tests and submit results electronically.

Our unnamed ex-police engineer says: "A lot of people rubbish their fleet management systems, but they aren't using them properly. You need to know whether they are putting the right data in." Coding must be done in a timely manner, he warns: it needs to be checked, and it needs to be right.

"VMRS tells us all sorts of historical data, but experience will tell us that, too," comments Brewster. "We constantly monitor for issues because those are in your face. We start with a very robust planned maintenance programme, designed around our operational commitments. There's an absolute requirement for us to go out to a call, so in some ways that makes it easy."

Is there a golden rule? "Ensure a robust planned preventative maintenance system, with quality controls to ensure excellent standards, underpinned by a proactive daily vehicle check regime," advises Sweetmore. "Also, identify issues early and quickly to ensure they don't develop into a safety-critical defect." **TE**