

Self regulation

In comparison with HGVs, van operators get off lightly when it comes to legislation and regulation. Yet increasingly, they are choosing to become accredited to the Van Excellence scheme. Laura Cork finds out why

Van Excellence, a scheme launched by the FTA (Freight Transport Association) in 2010, has been steadily gaining traction and now boasts almost 100 accredited operators with, between them, 120,000 vans. That may seem a drop in the ocean compared with the more than 3.2 million vans on UK roads. But the tide is turning: FTA says a further 80 operators are already preparing for accreditation this year.

A dedicated website (www.vanexcellence.co.uk) sets out the scheme's aims and contains links to information on accreditation, the Van Excellence code – against which operators are audited – industry events, and more.

The scheme was developed primarily to recognise best practice and drive up standards, according to Mark Cartwright, FTA's head of vans and LCVs. The organisation worked with industry to establish a framework for van operations and from that came the code under which operators are audited. If they pass, they can display the Van Excellence kitemark and are then reassessed annually.

There are, says FTA, five benefits to accreditation:

- It provides confidence for you and your customers that your operation is compliant with current legislation and best practice
- It reduces corporate and operational risk
- You can achieve cost savings by adopting best practice procedures
- Operational efficiency is improved, with increased driver competence
- Your image is enhanced – accreditation enables

operators to promote industry and customer recognition.

“Fundamentally, it's about having an independent pair of eyes looking at your systems, with a view to recognising and validating good processes – and, where necessary, improving ‘less good’ processes,” explains Cartwright. “Van Excellence provides operators with independent advice to remedy any shortfalls, ensuring they are compliant, and that their operational standards and processes meet industry minimum standards on a day-to-day basis.”

Imposing standards

The Van Excellence code covers areas such as vehicle condition, working environment and fleet administration, as well as driver licensing, competence and behaviour. The charge is a flat fee per audit, irrespective of whether you are a member of the FTA and of fleet size, with the 2015 price fixed at £592.

“It's a procedural audit so fleet size doesn't make much of a difference,” states Cartwright. “We also took an early decision not to differentiate on rate between FTA members and non-members, as we see this as an industry-wide scheme.”

So how does it work? When Nick Webb, fleet manager for catering equipment service business Millers Vanguard, joined the business last April, he wanted to impose the highest possible standards on the firm's 230-strong van fleet. That meant working with 100 vehicles operating from its base in Bury on planned maintenance work for catering equipment at

Millers Vanguard's fleet manager Nick Webb wanted to mirror the standards applied to HGVs across his 230-strong van fleet

Spreading the word

As interest in the Van Excellence accreditation scheme has grown, so too have other initiatives, all designed to boost standards in the van sector.

These include the Van Excellence Conferences, which FTA launched in 2013 and which took place at three locations around the country last year. These offer van operators – accredited or otherwise – the opportunity to gain valuable best practice insight from experts and peers. The 2015 dates have yet to be announced.

However, dates have been released for two operational briefings: 24 March at Mercedes-Benz World, Brooklands, Weybridge; and 27 March at the National Motorcycle Museum, Birmingham.

Delegates will hear from Adrian Long, DVSA's director of policy and stakeholder management; chief inspector Paul Keasey of West Midlands Police; and Tim Ridyard of Woodfines Solicitors. Several Van Excellence industry partners and FTA policy experts will also be on hand to discuss the latest issues affecting fleets of light commercial vehicles. For more details, see www.vanexcellence.co.uk.



major supermarket chains, as well as 130 more located throughout the UK, handling call-outs.

All his vans are Mercedes Sprinters and Vitos on three-year contract hire deals, with full R&M (repair and maintenance). The company also operates a handful of larger vehicles: two 18-tonners, three 7.5-tonners and four Lutons – also all Mercedes.

“My background is more the O licence side of transport,” recalls Webb, “and I was aware that we don’t have the same legislation-driven controls for LCVs as we do for HGVs. I wanted to bring that corresponding level of excellence into our business.” So he began to look for best practice guidance and came across Van Excellence.

Comprehensive process

“I realised that what I wanted was already available and I could see this would support my plans for the business,” he comments. So Webb submitted his application in October and the process was underway. “Before the audit, the FTA provides a lot of support, explaining the audit process and making sure you are fully informed and prepared,” he says.

The first step is to provide the FTA with a list of vehicles and drivers. On the day, the auditors take a random sample of each – in Millers Vanguard’s case, this involved 10 drivers and 10 vehicles. “For drivers, they audit the induction and training processes, check licence compliance and verify all policies, such as health and safety and risk assessments,” Webb explains. And for vehicles, too, he says, the audit is rigorous: “They check everything: defect reporting, servicing, repairs, cleanliness and roadworthiness... No stone is left unturned.”

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Nick Webb

A full audit report is then produced and sent to the operator, with one of three findings: “These are: you comply and are accredited; you almost comply but need to address some issues; or you don’t meet the standard,” says Webb. “I’m pleased to say we had zero areas for improvement and FTA told us this was one of the best audits they’d undertaken.”

Clearly, his determination to implement and document best practice paid dividends. FTA’s Cartwright warns that lack of preparation can be frustrating for all parties. “On occasions, we’ve had fleet operators who don’t provide the evidence we need,” he says. “We may be confident they are carrying out the right procedures, but they can’t provide the evidence.” And that includes obtaining vehicle repair and maintenance documentation, if this is carried out by a third party.

“Preparation, preparation, preparation,” is Cartwright’s top tip for success. “Our ability to carry out an efficient audit is entirely dependent on the operators. All are made aware of our standards and the levels of evidence required for the audit team’s assessment. The better prepared they are, the easier the whole process is for everyone.”

Back to Millers Vanguard, and Van Excellence accreditation delivers on two counts: public image and financial benefit, according to Webb. “It reassures customers, other road users and the public that we are operating our commercial fleet to the highest standard,” he explains.

“And it makes good financial sense to apply best practice throughout your fleet, as this delivers greater efficiency, preventing unnecessary downtime and, in turn, higher costs.

“Across our business, Millers Vanguard is focused on exemplary service – we want to be the standard that others aspire to... When it comes to our fleet, that’s what Van Excellence allows us to do.”

Van Excellence is about professionalising the UK’s van fleets. Move over White Van Man.

The numbers game

3.2 million vans in use across the UK

100 Accredited operators within the Van Excellence scheme

120,000 Vehicles within the Van Excellence scheme

80 Van operators currently preparing for accreditation

£592 Fee for Van Excellence fleet audit