

The tiger's tail

MOT first time pass rates for vans in the 3.0–3.5 gwv range are getting worse, not better.

Steve Banner examines the issues and potential consequences of further failures

The figures are stark and alarming. Just over 50% of light commercials grossing at 3.0–3.5 tonnes failed their Class 7 MOT test in 2013/14, according to statistics compiled by DVSA (Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency). This dismal performance was marginally worse than the 49.7% and 49.8% recorded in 2012/2013 and 2011/2012, and is far poorer than any other class of vehicle.

Not that the failure rate among sub-3.0-tonne Class 3 and 4 vehicles is anything to be proud of. In 2013/14 it was 40%. However, it should perhaps be noted that this figure includes cars and passenger vehicles with up to 12 seats, not just vans.

So what is going wrong? Most believe the numbers reflect the absence of a structured approach to inspections and maintenance – the sort of discipline imposed by the O licence system. “The operators concerned should learn from their industry colleagues who run trucks,” states Mark Cartwright, head of vans and light commercial vehicles at the FTA (Freight Transport Association), who is closely involved in its Van Excellence programme.

“It should start with drivers taking responsibility for their vehicles and carrying out daily walk-around checks before they go out on the road,” he continues. “They should be checking the lights, tyres, wipers and bodywork – all

the stuff that can easily be inspected.”

But beyond that, a mechanism should be in place to ensure that any defects are immediately reported to the transport manager. And, ideally, that mechanism should involve hand-held devices, such as smartphones with apps.

“These enable the manager to see precisely when the check was carried out and by whom. And the driver can use the phone to send a photo of any significant faults,” explains Cartwright. And he adds: “Drivers may care to bear in mind that they are the ones who will be penalised if their van is stopped by the authorities with two bald tyres.”

SERVICE INTERVAL

It’s a common theme and the best go even further. “Some operators who employ mobile engineers ensure they cannot receive their list of jobs for the day until their daily checks are completed,” offers Tony Grove, LCV manager at leasing specialist Arval. And as for those who bleat that carrying out daily checks means drivers are unable to make as many deliveries, Marcus Bray, head of sales at fleet management firm Fleet Service GB, suggests that’s a price that has to be paid.

Meanwhile, with an eye to boosting market appeal, van manufacturers have progressively extended the intervals between services, with 25,000 miles/two years no longer uncommon. It would, however, be an irresponsible operator

who failed to ensure that interim safety checks were carried out – particularly given the hammering so many light commercials receive.

“We like to see vans put on a ramp in a workshop and examined by a technician at least once every 26 weeks, or 13 weeks if the duty cycle is arduous,” says Grove. And Eddie Parker, fleet LCV consultant for UK fleet services at lessor GE Capital, says: “A six-monthly or quarterly inspection makes sense.”

Such examinations should form part of a planned maintenance schedule that reflects the usage pattern of the vehicle. Vans on home delivery work, or run by civil engineers, lead a harder life than those operated by carpet fitters that remain parked outside houses all day.

As part of a two-year contract signed with Sainsbury’s late last year, Fraikin ensures that each of the supermarket giant’s 3.5-tonners on home deliveries in southern England is maintained every 12 weeks. Meanwhile, Fleet Service GB client Amberon, whose activities include providing temporary traffic lights, has its 330 light commercials serviced every 15,000 miles regardless of manufacturer recommendations. Interim inspections are also carried out.

“Remember that if a van breaks down because it hasn’t been properly looked after, it can cost the operator as much as £5,000 a day,” warns Cartwright.

Major fast-fit chains are among those offering safety checks covering various



Illustration: Ely Walker

aspects of light commercials. In June, ATS Euromaster launched MasterCare, which involves regular pre-emptive inspections of tyres addressing everything from visible damage to tread depths. An electronic report is generated covering the condition of each tyre, any work carried out during the inspection and any remedial work anticipated in the near future.

Kwik-Fit will carry out a regular check of a van's condition with the emphasis on safety, including topping up fluids, if required. This, too, is followed by a report to the operator. "In many cases, companies allocate a van to a driver and do not see it again until it is due for replacement," comments Kwik Fit fleet director Peter Lambert. "If a driver knows that somebody is going to inspect a vehicle and produce a report, he is more likely to look after it. And such inspections do help employers fulfil their duty of care obligations."

But planned maintenance involves garages being proactive, too - not

waiting for the operator to book in a van for its scheduled inspection. "This means contacting the customer, telling him that his vehicle is due to be seen and asking him when he is bringing it in," suggests Grove. To make life easier, many workshops already offer timed servicing slots, allowing drivers to bring vehicles first thing in the morning or during the evening. "You can bring a van in at 8.00am and get it back by 9.00am, and it is worth noting that out-of-hours servicing does not cost more than maintenance during the day," he adds.

CHECK LIST

Mobile servicing has an increasingly important role to play, too, especially when it comes to simple jobs, such as replacing bulbs and wiper blades at the operator's premises.

Van manufacturers are aware that the MOT failure rate is unacceptable, with Citroen among those offering fixed-price service and MOT packages for vehicles over three years old. Many of its

new vehicles are supplied with an extra-cost, four-year/60,000-mile Upgrade to Business Class package, which includes an annual service plus roadside assistance.

That said, one reason for the high level of Class 7 MOT failures appears to be a woeful absence of checks prior to vans being presented for test. "We ensure that a thorough pre-MOT inspection is carried out and that anything likely to result in failure is dealt with," states Fraikin operations director Mark Newnes. "As a result, Scottish Power's vehicles are achieving a pass rate in the high nineties per cent."

Whatever the causes and solutions, if MOT Class 7 pass rates do not improve, will the authorities drop the O licence threshold to 3.0 tonnes? "At present they do not appear to have any plans to do so," says Cartwright. However the industry should not be complacent, he advises. "If you keep pulling the tiger's tail, eventually he will turn and bite you," he observes. **TE**