

Who's looking after your fleet?

Euro-6's implementation has ratcheted up the technical skillset needed to repair and maintain fleets, but it is still possible for fleet operators to do it themselves. **Andrew Don** reports

Euro-6 became mandatory in the European Union for new trucks registered for the first time from the end of 2013 – the latest step in the battle to curb harmful exhaust emissions.

The new requirements have made it harder for fleet operators to handle their own repair and maintenance (R&M), but it is certainly not impossible.

Keith Child, Isuzu Truck (UK)'s marketing director, says: "We have to face it that a truck is now a computer on wheels" and the right training and diagnostic equipment to ensure a vehicle operates at its optimum is required.

"It is a highly technical piece of equipment with numerous sensors fitted to ensure that emissions, for example, are at the levels they should be," he explains.

Tony Davis, aftermarket director of Volvo Trucks, does not believe Euro-6 marks the end of fleet operators doing their own R&M.

However, he notes a greater risk to expensive exhaust after-treatment components such as diesel particulate filters (DPF) and catalytic converters if the required maintenance is not carried out correctly and on time.

An incorrect oil, fuel or AdBlue specification can also damage these components, he adds.

Davis says basic servicing has not changed greatly from Euro-5 vehicles. However, specialist cleaning of DPFs will be required periodically depending on operation.

Matthew Lawrenson, regional director of Imperial Commercials, R&M Workshop of the Year in the 2014 Motor Transport Awards, says Euro-6 does not prevent operators choosing to do their own R&M, but it is true to say that several have reflected on the increased vehicle complexity and decided to have their trucks maintained by a franchised dealer.

Complex technologies

"Preventative maintenance inspections and regular servicing needn't be much more complex but, of course, the latest trucks do include numerous new systems and technologies that are best maintained by technicians with the correct skills, training and tools," he stresses.

Graham Hunter, MD of Pullman Fleet Services, says: "At Pullman, we have seen a growing demand for R&M services in maintaining Euro-6 fleets. Due to the complexities of the new technology, it has been necessary to respond with investment in the training of



our technicians, which together with the latest diagnostic equipment provide the platform on which we repair and maintain all vehicles.

"However, this will not necessarily mean a real decline in fleet operators conducting their own in-house R&M, providing they have prepared correctly with the necessary training and equipment – the transition is very much an organic one, rather than a major step change. Initially, fleet operators were restricted by legislation that stipulated that vehicle manufacturers were required to ensure clean emissions for the life of the vehicle, but these regulations have been relaxed to enable third parties to carry out the checks. This has created a more level and fair playing field for fleet operators to provide R&M."

Gregory Distribution has had to invest in its people and associated hardware, especially in vehicle technicians' product training.

MD Andy Walker says: "We are still finding that the best cost option for truck maintenance is our own workshops. However, for operators with much smaller fleets, the business case to invest in the required training and hardware may not stack up."

Keith Sims, group operations director of HRVS Group, another previous MT R&M Workshop Award winner, believes even Euro-5 was a step too far for the traditional fleet garage.

He says: "Euro-6, without a vast amount of training and diagnostics equipment, but most importantly familiarity and day-to-day experience, has made the maintenance of certain engines just too advanced to realistically expect a traditional technician without manufacturer training to undertake."

Euro-6 vehicles are complex and, more often than not, fleet technicians are "aiming at a needle in a haystack".

Sims says in-depth knowledge of electrical and IT skills is needed, as well as mechanical knowledge.

"The worst-case scenario for a dealership is someone attempting a repair, failing and a dealer then picking up the pieces," he says.

Ian Wrench, commercial aftersales director of Renault Trucks UK, points out that, with an increasing number of vehicles supplied through contract hire or lease packages, operators are already incorporating R&M into deals, only too well aware of the complications and investment required to carry out in-house maintenance.

"There are some very good independent maintenance providers that already work to a high standard based on the legacy ranges for all manufacturers," he says.

"However," Wrench adds, "by using the manufacturer's approved network, the operator benefits from a direct link, not only with fully trained technicians and the complete suite of latest tools and equipment, but also with direct access for system updates and any product recalls or enhancements, which may be missed by in-house operations."

Wrench believes that this undoubtedly helps prevent future problems and is key to keeping vehicles on the road.

Sam Whittaker, director of customer services and operations, truck at Mercedes-Benz, says that as comfortable as his company is with customers looking after their own vehicles, it is natural for Mercedes-Benz to provide its customers with the latest vehicles supported

by comprehensive servicing options.

"Our R&M penetration rate is above half of our vehicle pool, so this suggests that operators are moving towards, and more frequently, using R&M packages," he says.

Best options

MAN Truck and Bus UK's head of service John Davies says his company's franchised network is the "only option on offer" when it comes to buying a new truck with an R&M package.

"For our own, and our customers' peace of mind, it has to be that way – it's the only way we can hope to maintain the quality of the service offering and all that means in terms of our uptime guarantees and customer satisfaction," he says.

MAN centrally monitors every one of its vehicles that goes into unscheduled downtime and has a specialist team working 24 hours a day to deal with any issues.

"That, for us, is the only way we can deliver the levels of service to our operators that we feel they deserve," Davies says.

He warns that if operators choose to look elsewhere, they need to be very sure their investment will be properly looked after: "Anything less could prove to be an extremely expensive exercise."

HVRS Group's Sims adds that everyone has a choice. "If you purchased an expensive Swiss watch that you wanted to serve you well, you would not take it to a local market for maintenance," he argues.

Gregory Distribution's policy is to do main-

tenance in-house wherever possible and use conveniently located franchised dealers where this is not feasible.

"That said, there is definitely a market for specialist third-party workshops that are able to offer a competitively priced alternative to the franchised dealers' headline rates, and the competition must be good for the sector as a whole," says Walker.

Gregory's preferred vehicle supplier is Scania. "From our perspective, they are getting it right," Walker continues.

"We are always looking at vehicle uptime, which means we want trucks maintained when drivers are on rest periods, usually during the small hours or weekends."

Getting it right

Walker says Scania has embraced this, providing a good level of cover nationally, and is prepared to discuss bespoke solutions to maintenance challenges, combined with realistic fixed-price maintenance deals.

Sims says "all manufacturers are getting something right" and have a framework for franchised dealers to follow. "But make no bones about it," he says, "this business is a people thing. You get a switched-on, dedicated service manager with the backing of a dealer principal and you have a winning strategy."

Sims notes that a manufacturer can have the best system and procedures but without dealer-level commitment it is worthless.

"An operator needs to be loved and that starts at the dealership," he says. ■

THE IMPORTANCE OF LOCAL DEALERS AND WORKSHOPS

Ian Wrench, commercial vehicle aftersales director, Renault Trucks UK:

"We believe this is one of the key areas for any operator or repairer, be it manufacturer or independent. Most operators' locations will not be the same as their customers' and they will also change over the life of the vehicle as their business evolves.

"So the priority of the network is to provide the high-quality repair and maintenance work across the board and to be able to respond when required. One call to Renault Trucks 24/7 roadside assistance service, for example, is fundamental to many operators."

Sam Whittaker, customer services and operations director, Mercedes-Benz:

"Having a supportive dealer is key to operating any business. The local dealer needs to understand both the customer's vehicles and business requirements."

Matthew Lawrenson, regional director, Imperial Commercials:

"It's imperative. I always say that the sales department will sell your first truck and the aftersales departments will sell the subsequent ones. Choosing the right service provider is key to maximising the profitability for any operators.

"It's not just about completing the service sheets at the lowest cost. It's about maximising uptime and that means getting the job done right first time, having the parts available off the shelf and being close to the dealer, so the truck can be out working again as soon as possible."

John Davies, head of UK service and support, MAN Truck & Bus UK:

"It's absolutely critical. However outstanding MAN engineering design and production may be – and they are outstanding – they can only ever be as good as our local dealers."

Keith Child, marketing director, Isuzu Truck:

"We believe this is very important. Despite the fact that our particular vehicles are predominantly used for local distribution work, we still want every single one of our dealers to be highly trained, highly skilled, keeping the right level of parts in stock, having the 20 or so Isuzu specialist tools on hand and being fully familiar with the Isuzu Diagnostic Service System."

Mark Grant, aftersales director, Scania (GB):

"It's as important as it's always been – a good local relationship is essential. But it's equally important to have the backing of an excellent service network nationwide. With our R&M contracts, it doesn't matter which of our 89 UK locations a truck visits. We arrange maintenance times to fit in with the operator's own schedule. It's all about convenience and serving the customers in the best possible way to maximise the uptime of their fleet."

