Regular safety inspections

Inspection scope and content

A safety inspection can be a freestanding inspection of just those items affecting road safety and certain environmental issues. Or it can be part of a more comprehensive inspection that, in addition, takes into account items relating to the vehicle's work performance and economic operation

Regular safety inspections are essential to an effective roadworthiness maintenance system. Although a part of the overall vehicle maintenance plan, the inspections should ideally undertaken as a separate, albeit often sequential, operation to routine servicing and repair. This provides the maintenance programme with the flexibility to intensify or otherwise change frequency of inspections. It also allows the introduction of ad hoc inspections, should they be required, without affecting frequency of servicing and other routine work (e.g. when the operating conditions call for more regular checks or when first-use inspections are required).

In addition, freestanding inspection reports can be produced which provide the operator with the means of determining not only the roadworthiness of individual vehicles in service but also the overall effectiveness of their vehicle maintenance system, thus enabling the instigation of any changes that may be necessary.

Being cost effective

Although primarily undertaken in the interest of safe vehicle operations, safety inspections, together with prompt remedial action, are also cost effective. The early indication of wear, damage or maladjustment may prevent sudden failure of components – resulting in unscheduled downtime – or prevent wear becoming so advanced that premature replacement becomes necessary.

New vehicles entering service that have undergone a recorded pre-delivery inspection that is as comprehensive as a safety inspection will not require a further inspection. Used vehicles, not previously operated should be given a full safety inspection.

A safety inspection must include all the items covered by the statutory annual test.

Reference should be made to manufacturers' recommended tolerances to ensure that each item covered by the safety inspection is inspected properly and limits of wear and tolerance are adhered to.

In addition, VOSA produces annual test inspection manuals. These give details of inspection methods and pass/fail criteria. A copy of the annual test inspection manuals can be downloaded free of charge by visiting the business link web site on www.businesslink.gov.uk/transport.

These manuals are useful as a guide when safety inspections are carried out. However, higher standards may be needed during safety inspections to allow for deterioration in service before the next inspection.

Safety inspection intervals

Operational needs must not override safety considerations. Safety inspections should, where it is practicable be programmed to follow a time – based pattern. The frequency at which inspections are undertaken should be determined by assessing the level of mechanical degradation likely to be incurred over a period as a result of the vehicle's usage. This will depend on such factors as:

- The type of vehicle, the nature of its load and the equipment and fittings it carries or supports
- The type and range of operations on which it is likely to be engaged
- The type of terrain and the nature of the environment in which it operates or is likely to operate
- The distance and speeds at which it travels and the journey times

Assessing the above factors for each vehicle will, in the majority of cases, enable a time – based programme of inspections to be formulated. Some operations however, are subject to continuous change, or vehicles can frequently be re-assigned alternative tasks or routes, making the adoption of a strictly time-based inspection programme impracticable.

Mileage-based inspection programmes may be more suitable for some operators but will need to be linked to time.

Adapting your systems

If you are an operator, you are free to tailor these inspections to suit the nature of your operations and vehicle characteristics. It is acknowledged that modern vehicle systems now have the ability to indicate maintenance requirements. You may even deploy more than one system across a fleet, where vehicles and the nature of their work vary. Systems will be judged primarily on their effectiveness in maintaining roadworthiness.

It follows therefore that in order to maintain an inspection regime that is sufficiently flexible to accommodate these changing criteria it might be more appropriate to adopt an inspection frequency determined by, for instance, the vehicle's mileage.

Once established, operators wishing to change safety inspection frequencies, or on the basis on which the frequencies are determined, must notify the VOSA Central Licensing Office.

New vehicle operators

If you are a new vehicle operator, you will need to know where to start. However, you will not have the benefit of past experience or vehicle maintenance records to call upon.

The chart in Annex 4 provides a guide to safety inspection frequencies likely to be appropriate for various operational modes.

The frequencies shown are in weekly increments and take account of the type of work undertaken, the operating conditions and mileage covered. Whatever the safety inspection interval is, its effectiveness in ensuring that the vehicle is safe for use on the road must be regularly monitored. Monitoring is especially important in the early stages.

Safety inspection report forms

A written report must be completed for each safety inspection separately for both vehicles and trailers. If the record of the safety inspection is to be stored electronically then the checklist used for the inspection need not be retained. This does not rule out the use of an electronic device (e.g. PDA) in place of a checklist For further information relating to computer systems use this guide together with the VOSA Guide to the Use of Maintenance Software and Computer Storage of Maintenance Records.

Each report must show at least the following:

- Name of owner/operator
- Date of inspection
- Vehicle identity
- Odometer (mileage recorder) reading
- A list of all items to be inspected
- An indication of the condition of each item inspected
- Details of any defects found
- Name of inspector
- Details of any remedial/rectification or repair work and by whom it was done
- A statement that any defects have been repaired satisfactorily and the vehicle is now in a safe and roadworthy condition

The report may contain details of any work to be carried forward. In particular, further checks may be needed on certain items deemed likely to deteriorate during service and make the vehicle unroadworthy before the next scheduled inspection or routine service.

Intermediate safety checks

With some types of vehicle and operation it may be necessary to check some components more often than at full safety inspections. For example, a vehicle used in urban areas such as a public service vehicle or a local delivery vehicle, or vehicles used in hilly areas may require a weekly brake component and adjustment check together with a steering and suspension inspection. It is sometimes necessary to check components following repair work. For instance, the Code of practice for the selection and care of tyres and wheels for commercial vehicles (developed jointly by the Department for Transport, the British Standards Institute and industry and trade associations) recommend that following road wheel removal and refitting, the wheel nut torque should be checked – after the vehicle has been standing for 30 minutes or after having travelled for between 40 km and 80 km (25 to 50 miles).

Ad hoc safety inspection intervals

Safety inspections may be needed at times outside the scheduled programme. Examples include when the vehicle is used for harder work or covers greater distances than usual (e.g. vehicles used on site).

Safety inspection and repair work records, whether undertaken by operators or contracted out, must be kept for at least 15 months as part of a vehicle's maintenance history, irrespective of the method of storage/ retention.

Operators must, however, ensure that the electronic records are complete and available, or can be made available on request for inspection at the operating centre. If you hire, lease or borrow a vehicle you are responsible for its roadworthiness and to have available, if required, copies of any inspections that have been carried out while the vehicle is in your possession.

Electronic capture and storage of safety inspection data

Electronic capture and/or storage on computer of details of defects found or work done (e.g. bar coding or scanning), is acceptable provided that a means of interpreting each code is readily available.

Safety inspection records can be stored electronically, using a computer. The system must be tamper-proof and capable of producing hardcopy information for use at public inquiries held by Traffic Commissioners. Computer records must contain the same information (set out on page 16) with the exception of:

• A full list of the items inspected (these can be indicated on the paper report used for the inspection);
• An indication of the condition of each item inspected (it is sufficient to provide details of defective items only).

Internet-based systems are becoming more common. These provide significant opportunities for improving the ease with which operators can plan and monitor the maintenance of their vehicles, thus leading to higher standards and improved compliance. For further information relating to computer systems use this guide together with the VOSA Guide to the Use of Maintenance Software and Computer Storage of Maintenance Records.

A person undertaking safety inspections must be technically competent and operationally aware of the safety standards that apply to the vehicles they examine.

They should have been trained in the techniques of vehicle examination, diagnosis and reporting, and possess a sound working knowledge of the relevant inspection manuals produced by VOSA.

A safety inspector should not be expected to carry out repair or servicing work during the course of the examination. There may be times during the course of an inspection when the inspector will require the assistance of someone to operate certain vehicle controls. The operator must ensure that this assistance is available when required. The vehicle's driver can often provide such assistance.

Authority to remove a vehicle from service

If you are the operator, you must ensure that someone within your organisation, at all times, has the authority to decide whether a vehicle is fit for service and to take it off the road if it is not. That person must be available to decide whether a vehicle can be allowed back into service after repairs. This responsibility may be delegated, in writing (i.e. in the form of a standard agreement), provided that it is made clear what their responsibilities are.

Vehicle cleanliness

Vehicles should be cleaned regularly on top, inside and underneath. This will make it easier to spot defects at scheduled safety inspections and during the daily walk around checks.

Duties of staff

It is important that all staff with an involvement either directly (e.g. drivers and workshop staff) or indirectly (e.g. transport management) are made fully aware of the company's legal and moral responsibilities as an operator of road vehicles. They should also be made aware of the subsequent importance of ensuring the effective operation of the vehicle maintenance programme.

Drivers, workshop staff and those otherwise responsible for the condition of vehicles should be individually informed in writing of their specific duties and responsibilities – particularly regarding safe vehicle operation.

Emphasis should be placed on the importance of maintaining an effective safety inspection programme and the role they play in promoting and sustaining its integrity.

One method might be to write to each relevant employee in duplicate, thus permitting a returned signed copy to be retained by the company.

http://www.dft.gov.uk/vosa/repository/Guide%20to%20Maintaining%20Roadworthiness%20%20Proposed%20New%20Edition.doc.