Contractors are frustrated that many safety and environmental features are not supplied on their vans as standard. **Stephen Cousins** reports

Driven to distraction

WHEN CARILLION INITIATED a health and safety campaign last year, fleet account manager Pat Brown was keen to reduce the risk of accidents caused by reversing. "We wanted reversing cameras fitted in all our new medium-sized panel vans to give drivers a better view of any obstacles behind them," explains Brown. "It's particularly useful on building sites where there are hazards that can't be seen in the side mirrors and where operatives often can't hear a van's reversing alarm due to noise from machinery."

But Brown was disappointed to learn that cameras were not fitted as a standard on new vans and manufacturers were instead charging high prices to intstall them. 'The only cost-effective option was fitting the systems ourselves,' he complains.

Brown is not alone in thinking that manufacturers of medium-sized panel vans could do more to meet the demands of construction's end users. Fleet managers complain vehicles lack other important safety features such as electronic stability control, which maintains vehicle stability and prevents skidding. Vans are increasingly used as mobile offices, but vital kit such as three-pin power points and air conditioning is still not fitted as standard. And although vans with lower carbon emissions are available, many say the technology is underdeveloped.

Regular visits

On the other hand, manufacturers point out that feedback from end-users and fleet managers often leads to new innovation. Phil Reed, a spokesman for Citroën, says: 'Our field-based representatives regularly visit managers of large fleets. When end users highlighted the security risks associated with the number of doors on our Relay panel vans, it led to the introduction of central locking on all doors."

But there's every reason for manufacturers to be listening to their construction customers. Rok runs a fleet of 1,600 vans, for example, while Kier has 2,000 and around 70% of Carillion's 14,000-strong fleet comprises commercial vehicles. And in the on-going recession, van sales this year are forecast to be down 37% on 2008.

In the last 10 years there have been significant improvements to safety features in medium-sized panel vans. Standard models now include features previously only seen in cars, such as driver air bags and anti-lock brakes. But more needs to be done, says Carillion's Brown: "Reversing is one of the biggest causes of accidents [the Health & Safety Executive estimates that nearly a quarter of all deaths involving vehicles at work occur during reversing.] but reversing proximity alarms, which emit a beeping sound that gets faster the closer you get to an object, are never standard on panel vans and we have to fit them ourselves."

David Oliver, head of procurement at Rok, runs a fleet comprising mostly Ford Transit vans. He says he would consider switching manufacturer if driver safety aids seen in most cars were fitted as standard – specifically electronic stability control. Often referred to as electronic stability programs (ESPs) by van makers, this computerised technology improves vehicle stability by detecting and minimising skids. When the system detects loss of steering control, it automatically applies the brakes to individual wheels to correct the vehicle.

Kier's head of procurement Stuart Lightbody is also keen to see this implemented in medium-sized panel vans. 'ESP and anti-skid technology would be handy as 3,500kg of deadweight out of control can be a handful,' he says.

While simple features such as height-adjustable seats and adjustable steering columns might seem a nice-to-have rather than a necessity, Lightbody believes they also have safety implications: "Some drivers spend all day in their vans but they have to make do with an uncomfortable driving position. Bad posture will not just affect comfort, it can also limit visibility of the road and increase driver fatigue."

Reduced speed

Manufacturers can fit speed limiters on vehicles, which help reduce the likelihood of accidents as well as cutting fuel consumption. Iveco offers 90kmh, 100kmh and 120kmh alternatives, while the Ford ECOnetic comes with a 70mph limiter as standard. But these would prove less effective if vans are often deployed in built-up areas. "Speed limiters would have limited impact for us due to the tight geographical spread of our sites where slower speeds are the norm," says Jonathon Lagden, services development manager at Willmott Dixon Sustain.

> "Reversing is one of the biggest causes of accidents, but reversing proximity sensors are never standard on panel vans and we have to fit them ourselves."
> Pat Brown, Carillion

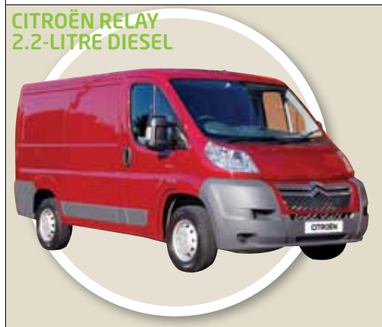
Drivers on long journeys are also suffering due to lack of air conditioning, says Lightbody: "It's important that drivers remain alert, especially when they spend four or five hours in a van at a time, but air conditioning is still a prohibitively expensive option – how are you supposed to do a day's work when you emerge from your van feeling like you've done 10 rounds in a boxing ring?"

It seems strange that other basic kit needed to perform work-related tasks is not standard on many vans. "Satellite navigation systems are a very pricey option so we have to rely on drivers to carry their own systems, but many don't and can't find their destination," says Lagden. "Sat-nav should be built in as standard."

It's also far from ideal that drivers still have to rely on a small 12-volt socket to plug in or charge their PDAs, mobiles and satellite communication systems, rather than conventional three-pin sockets we all use in the home, office and increasingly on trains. "You'll have to go to the body builder if you want three-pin AC sockets," concedes Jon Stokes, product manager for Daily vans at Iveco.

As if worrying about the safety and welfare of their drivers was not enough, fleet managers are facing a huge modern-

How contractor-friendly are these leading vans?

CITROËN RELAY 2.2-LITRE DIESEL	SMITH ELECTRIC EDISON	FORD TRANSIT ECONETIC 2.2 LITRE DIESEL
		
SHORT WHEEL BASE, LOW ROOF **Price:** £17,200 **Engine size:** 2,198cc **CO_2 emissions:** 208g/km **Average mpg:** 35.8 **Gross weight:** 3,300kg **Max payload:** 1,455kg **Capacity cargo area:** 8.0m³ **Load length:** 2.7m 	**MEDIUM WHEEL BASE, LOW ROOF** **Price:** £53,550 **Engine:** 90kW induction motor **CO_2 emissions:** 0 **Max range:** 100 miles on one battery charge **Gross weight:** 3,500kg **Max payload:** 1,220kg **Capacity cargo area:** 6.5m³ **Load length:** 2.9m	**SHORT WHEEL BASE, LOW ROOF** **Price:** £18,095 **Engine size:** 2,198cc **CO_2 emissions:** 189g/km **Average mpg:** 32.9 **Gross weight:** 2,840kg **Max payload:** 1,097kg **Capacity cargo area:** 6.5m³ **Load length:** 2.6m 
CONTRACTOR-FRIENDLINESS 7 All models have remote control central locking, power steering and a dual passenger seat	**CONTRACTOR-FRIENDLINESS 5** Short battery life makes it only suitable for urban or inter-urban journeys	**CONTRACTOR-FRIENDLINESS 7** "Ford is our preferred manufacturer due to up-time and reliability. In our experience their vans are better engineered." **David Oliver, Rok**
SUSTAINABILITY 8 "Second-lowest carbon emissions for a diesel of this type, and a modified Euro 5-compliant engine is coming soon." **Phil Reed, Citroën**	**SUSTAINABILITY 9** "These vans will definitely become more popular, especially on contracts for local authorities who are keen to cut emissions." **Pat Brown, Carillion**	**SUSTAINABILITY 8** "This year we plan to lease several ECOnetics, which, thanks to optimisation of gears and the engine, increase mpg and reduce CO_2 emissions." **David Oliver, Rok**
RUNNING COSTS 7 When connected to Citroën's Trafficmaster fleet management software, fuel savings could result	**RUNNING COSTS 8** No fuel costs, but batteries aren't cheap and are likely to need replacing during the van's lifetime	**RUNNING COSTS 7** The vehicle's top speed is restricted to 70mph, cutting fuel consumption
OPTIONAL EXTRAS 7 Electronic stability program, traction control and hill start assist are part of a £180 option package	**OPTIONAL EXTRAS 5** None available on website or specification documents 	**OPTIONAL EXTRAS 6** Air conditioning, rear parking sensors, rear view camera with overhead colour display
OVERALL 29/40	**OVERALL 27/40**	**OVERALL 29/40**