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Submitted to **National ambulance vehicle specification for English NHS ambulance trusts**
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3 What is your job title?

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4 What organisation are you from or are you a member of the public?

Organisation's name or member of the public:
GMB

5 Patient Welfare: Does the specification provide a safe and effective environment for patients to receive the best care possible?

No

Please explain:

GMB, the largest union in the Ambulance Service, has consulted our members working in Ambulance Service Trusts in England. We have also consulted with our members in Wales and Scotland despite them being unaffected by this consultation. The evidence submitted into this consultation also takes into consideration concerns raised with us by some Directors of Operations.

GMB, objects to the roll out of van conversions country wide.

Issues of patient welfare that were raised by our members are as follows:

Mercedes Van Conversions have proven to be very problematic. Tail lifts have collapsed whilst stretchers are on them; the winch cannot be used safely on the carry chair without fears of tipping or unbalancing it; the side steps can be too high for older people to use; side cupboards have caused skin tears and injuries to patients as they are situated too close to them; noise levels are higher; the ride experience is rougher.

"The back of the ambulance is too bouncy with weight over the suspension, which seems non-existent, has made lots of patients feel sick (and staff)." Technician.

An 18-month long project led by the Helen Hamlyn Centre for Design at the Royal College of Art, working alongside the London Ambulance Service, the Imperial College Healthcare NHS Trust and the University of the West of England, produced their report in 2012. 'Rethinking the Ambulance' focussed on the creation of an ambulance fit for the 21st Century. The report identified that a centrally mounted trolley would best serve all, particularly multi-trauma and cardiac arrest patients. (<https://www.theengineer.co.uk/rethinking-the-ambulance>)

It is essential that 360 degree, all around access to the patient is possible and van conversions have proven to GMB members to be very restrictive.

Generally, Mercedes Box Conversions do not have the same problems as mentioned above.

6 Usability: Does the specification deliver a vehicle whose cab and patient area (saloon) are easy for ambulance crews to use?

No

Please explain:

The response from GMB members as a part of this consultation was overwhelmingly against van conversions with regards usability. Ambulance staff report that van conversions are much worse to work with compared to the modular box type ambulance. Choosing vans on cost alone will not provide an efficient fleet. More work needs to be done to consider the feasibility of retaining current modular box type vehicles and replacing cabs and chassis.

The Mercedes van conversion was described by one Paramedic as "awful". Complaints of difficulties accessing chairs which caused stresses to ambulance crew backs when moving them. On a positive note, the driving position was described as being "good".

The majority of comments regarding the Fiat van conversion is that they were too small in the front, there were seat belt problems and restricting in access for taller people, making the journey unsafe and uncomfortable for taller people with knees pressed against dashboards. In one ambulance service it has been

reported to the GMB that people over 6ft were unable to drive the vehicles due to lack of space. This brings into question the safety of taller people in the front should there be an accident.

General concerns expressed by GMB members are of weight limitations of the vehicles resulting in crew and kit having to be limited. Difficulties were reported to us of not being able to manoeuvre patients in the rear efficiently.

The Mercedes Box Conversion was described in our consultation as a "happy medium". Spacious in front and lots of space in the back for crew and patients, as well as access to kit via an outside locker really helps.

There were positive comments made about the Ducato Van Conversion due to the single loading stretcher which can elevate whilst locked inside and could be tilted in to the Trendelenburg position easily.

7 Design: Does the specification allow trusts to design the patient area in a way that will work for them and their staff, and support ambulance crews to deliver the best care possible to patients?

No

Please explain:

GMB, objects to the roll out of van conversions country wide as restricting choices to the van conversion alone proves too restricting to the design and equipment that can be carried. Full 360 degree, all around access to the patient is essential.

Also, what is essential would be a fully designed interior with staff side walk through and no equipment leads draped across the vehicle.

8 Staff welfare: Does the specification provide a safe and effective environment for ambulance crews, supporting their health and safety at work?

No

Please explain:

Questions need to be asked over whether van conversions are taking us backwards on safety?

Many staff health and safety issues were raised with the GMB who currently work with van conversions. The most common concern was regarding ramps which leave staff with back problems. Most van conversions cannot accommodate a tail lift so ambulance services choose a ramp, increasing manual handling, which involves a lot more pushing and pulling up and down ramps for staff. Vehicles need to be used that will reduce the levels of manual handling, especially considering the increased retirement age which ambulance crew are being forced to work to.

There were also concerns raised with the GMB about winch systems. Specifically, in that they cause decontamination issues and make infection prevention difficult, due to cables being dragged through bodily fluids and they aren't easily cleaned. They also present a trip hazard.

Vehicles without a walk-through bulk head door is detrimental to ambulance crew safety, especially if involved in an accident or when carrying an aggressive patient with no way of escape. Other interior design flaws have led to injuries for staff. Poor quality fittings have resulted in sliding doors breaking, falling off and striking crew on the head. There have also been examples of the locks on crews' lockers breaking, preventing staff from accessing vital personal protective equipment.

The small cab area in Fiat van conversions was a major area of concern for our members who currently work with them. Ambulance crew are at risk of lower limb injuries, especially in the event of an accident. Concerns were also raised regarding blind spots.

9 Acceptability: Does the specification allow for a vehicle that is operationally fit for purpose?

No

Please explain:

GMB objects to the country wide roll out of van conversions. Serious consideration needs to be given as to why Scotland and Wales no longer use van conversions. In Scotland, they moved away from van conversions after using them for 3-4 years. They were proven to not be cost effective or conducive to patient care. They have chosen to return to the Mercedes box conversion which GMB members consider to be far more superior and reliable, better for both staff and patients due to comfort, space and health and safety. Wales have also moved away from van conversions due to many issues including ramps, weight, driving and steering.

There was an overwhelming response of van conversions being unreliable and not fit for purpose.

"A frontline vehicle has to be robust and reliable." Fleet Mechanic.

The Mercedes van conversion was considered to be the most reliable and capable, especially off road and in snow and ice. Peugeots were considered to be off the road more often due to problems with the base vehicle, e.g. engine, transmission and electrics. Fiats are also considered to be unreliable with new ones being off the road quickly due to a variety of breakdown issues, such as the loss of front wheel traction when there is weight in the back and the steering lock described as being "appalling".

"I have serious concerns about the reliability of the Fiat model. Why Asda and Tesco choose to use Mercedes needs serious consideration." Director of Operations.

GMB members expressed concerns that this consultation was being driven by cost reasons alone. Cheaper and inferior vehicles are not the answer to any fleet problems there are in England.

"They may be cheaper to start with, but they are not long term. Experience shows they regularly break down – losing time, money and availability." Paramedic.

A wide range of examples of van conversion breakdowns resulting in the amount of time lost in garages, were given to the GMB during our consultations. These included electrical issues including auxiliary battery; ramp issues; sliding doors falling onto crew; overhead equipment locker latch breakages; attendant seat breaks in the back; breaking rear door hinges; broken locks on crew lockers. The design, quality and standard of the van conversions is what has led to all of these issues being experienced by ambulance staff – directly impacting on their working experience and the experience of patients.

Serious consideration also must be given to the possible implications of a manufacturer recall if there are faults. If there is only 1 fleet in operation, this would put the entire service at risk. Patient and staff safety must be the top priority in this consultation, not a decision made on perceived cost efficiencies alone.

10 Benefits and challenges for vehicle manufacturers: Does the specification provide any significant benefit or challenges for vehicle manufacturers in the short (1-2 years), medium (3-5 years) and long term (5 plus years)?

Please explain:

"Manufacturers should develop a demountable box that is fit for purpose to enable the chassis cab to be replaced when required. I believe this would allow trusts to achieve similar cost figures to that of van conversions whilst giving staff and patients the clinical area that is required." Paramedic.

Please provide details and any suggestions to mitigate the challenges identified:

11 Benefits and challenges for converters: Does the specification provide any significant benefit or challenges for vehicle converters in the short (1-2 years), medium (3-5 years) and long term (5 plus years)?

Please explain:

Most GMB members who have experience of working with Fiat Van Conversions felt that they had been bought on the cheap without any consideration to the long-term costs. They also reported that they had little confidence driving them, especially on rugged terrain.

Please give details of any suggestions you have to mitigate the challenges identified: