



10TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION
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Together again

The 10th annual IRTE Skills Challenge took place 22-24 June, in one of the first public events in the bus industry since COVID lockdowns began. Will Dalrymple was there



Although COVID cancelled last year's Challenge, the event returned this summer to S&B Automotive Academy in Bristol. Technicians from three new operators (Go South Coast/morebus, East Yorkshire Buses and Brighton and Hove Bus and Coach), alongside stalwarts Go Ahead London, Arriva, First Bus and others, competed on technical challenges within enhanced safety measures including hand wash stations, daily testing of participants and guests and social distancing.

New this year was the first category for mechelec apprentices; it combined tests of mechanical and electrical skills. Four apprentices were in the running in that new category, including Metroline third-year apprentice Marlon Gammell (pictured, right). During a break, he gave his reaction to the event: "It's been an eye-opener. It tells you where you're at with your learning, and areas that you need to focus on."

As to the importance of multiskilling among apprentices, Metroline master technician Adonis Kleanthous said: "I come from the commercial vehicle world, and my upbringing as an apprentice covered everything. I am wanting to bring that to the fleet industry. We are thinking about the

future. With electric vehicles, hydrogen, hybrids, you'll need to have all-rounders."

Contestants in that new category had 10 challenges to complete on the day, compared to nine for mechanical and eight for electrical. Designing the mechelec competition for the first time involved getting the right balance of mechanical and electrical without going into a major diagnostics case, stated S&B Automotive Academy training and education director Richard Belton.

As vehicle electrical systems continue to develop, it's no surprise that their profile at the event is growing. Will Kewn, Allison Transmissions customer integration manager, said: "Electrical is fundamental to engineering. It's the way the industry is going. Electrical opens doors with what you are able to do. We have reached a point where mechanical

systems are limited. But with software and control systems, there are avenues for increased fuel efficiency and offering additional features."

He added: "In terms of our challenge [at the event], we're limited in what we can do mechanically. More and more the faults are becoming electrical."

The OEM has sponsored the event since it began. Jade Noble, bus and coach market development manager, said: "The Skills Challenge is growing year-on-year, because there is more interest in industry. It is promoting the hard work that engineers do."

Those sentiments were echoed by Richard Hennessey, DVSA director of operations, south. He said: "The Skills Challenge is great. We [DVSA] have the same challenges as industry: getting new talent into the sector and keeping them here for their career. The Skills Challenge plays into this: technicians come, participate in challenges and learn something." He added that DVSA is recruiting 20-25 new vehicle standards assessors (who are accredited to the irtec inspection technician licence).

The Skills Challenge was sponsored by Alexander Dennis, BAE Systems, FCL, Knorr-Bremse, Shell Lubricants and Tengtools, and Allison Transmissions, Altro, Imperial Engineering and Premier Pits. 

