

**T**ell anyone outside the industry that there is no regulatory requirement for technicians who inspect, service and repair commercial vehicles – even 44-tonne gtw petroleum tankers – to have recognised qualifications, and their jaws might drop. If maintenance is cited as a contributory factor in any of the recent high-profile truck fatalities, and if those concerned can't prove competence, we should expect public outrage.

In practice, few technicians today get anywhere near a truck, van, bus or coach workshop without training. No dealership would retain its network position without strict adherence to the principal's standards, and few independents would risk the fallout. Nevertheless, without national standards and certification of current competence – mandated or not – workshops are running risks. And so are the operators using them.

Hence the appeal of the voluntary irtec technician licensing scheme, re-launched by the IRTE in 2011, now with several levels matching workshop structures – and currently being extended to include additional bus and coach, and special types certifications.

Hence also the growth in uptake of the IRTE's Workshop Accreditation scheme, introduced in 2012 to raise standards in the industry, and this year being looked after by the FTA (Freight Transport Association).

As we go to press, figures for irtec show a total of 5,371 technicians licensed UK-wide, with 1,549 accredited in 2014 and 422 already this year. Of these, 4,038 are at Inspection Technician grade, 1,035 Service Technician, 99 Master Technician, 97 Advanced and 102 others (assessors and combined grades). As for Workshop Accreditation, the records show 123 sites certified to date.



# INDEPENDENTLY ASSESSED

The IRTE's voluntary irtec technician licensing scheme and its Workshop Accreditation programme are growing fast as operators and workshops alike recognise the value of independent certification. Brian Tinham reports



**"Operators now need to insert irtec-licensed technician maintenance statements in their O licence submissions, which is what the traffic commissioners want to see"**

John Parry, irtec steering group

Where is the growth in irtec coming from? Well, as Mercedes-Benz signs up for its dealerships' technicians, all of the major truck manufacturers are now on board - with their training schemes aligned to the irtec standards. Then in bus and coach, big names including Arriva and First Bus are also now using irtec at various levels (see later). Similarly, the retail sector is raising its standards to irtec, with the likes of Carlsberg, Morrisons, Sainsbury's and Tesco all now requiring contracted workshops to train up to irtec standards.

John Parry, chairman of the irtec steering group, also points to the DVSA (Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency), which is now mid-way through getting its vehicle inspectors accredited to irtec. Additionally, he says discussions are nearing successful conclusions with big names such as DHL and Wincanton. And he cites Pullman Fleet Services and other independent workshop groups, which are already pursuing irtec policies for their technicians. "Operators now need to insert irtec-licensed technician maintenance statements in their O licence submissions, which is what the

traffic commissioners want," he advises.

Gary King, operations support manager at Sainsbury's, agrees and says his organisation now requires 100% IRTE Workshop Accreditation for all its contractors. "As part of the tender process, all potential VMUs [vehicle maintenance units] must either hold Workshop Accreditation or undertake to achieve it as soon as possible," he says.

"The next phase is to put all our contractors' technicians though irtec. Quite simply, we want the maintenance and compliance of our vehicles to be above the industry benchmark. I control fleet compliance and I want to sleep at night. Everyone should aim for this."

He's far from alone in that thought: Maurizio Romano, operations director at Pullman Fleet Services, says the group has been working with irtec for the last couple of years, with a goal of getting all technicians licensed to at least Inspection Technician within three years.

"irtec validates and endorses our standards - as does the IRTE's Workshop Accreditation scheme, which is why 14 of our 32 operations are already certified... Ultimately, I think irtec

and Workshop Accreditation should be mandatory... If we are conforming, why isn't everyone else?"

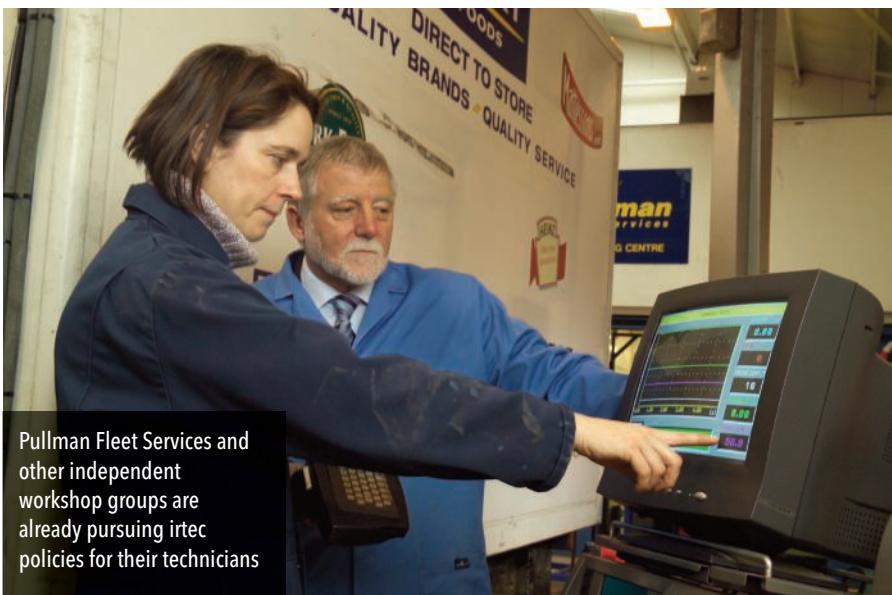
But it's not just about compliance. Talking to some operators putting their staff through irtec, it becomes apparent that they see considerable additional value. Take Arriva London. Engineering director Ian Warr, who also believes the DfT should legislate over technician standards, says he's been using the accreditation scheme for two complementary exercises.

#### DOUBLE EDGED

First, given the strict service performance requirements of TfL, this bus operator has been checking the competence of all 270 existing mechanical staff to get a normalised picture ahead of setting up a new training matrix. But second, his team is also using the irtec online assessment tool to test the capabilities of potential new recruits - and then offer training to irtec standards to those that pass muster as an incentive to join.

"From starting in mid 2014, we are now about 80% complete in terms of assessing existing staff," says Warr. "We've been working with Gateshead College, which brought in the accredited assessors. It's been a baptism of fire for some who may have done their apprenticeships 25 years ago. But we're now getting to the point where we have an objective baseline from which to plan training."

Warr explains that the next phase will entail sponsoring technicians through IRTE membership so they get individual CPD plans. "If the weakness is in engine management systems or electrics, then we'll offer modular training courses for those disciplines and fast track them to irtec. If the deficiency has to do with general knowledge, then we'll turn to adult apprenticeships, using the courses tailored for our operations in London by



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Gateshead College." Compare that to the cost of blanket training courses.

What about those new entrants? "This is about identifying good candidates, using irtec," says Warr. "If they are successful, we give them a six-week familiarisation, training and up-skilling period, where we convert them into bus mechanics, if they come from the freight or aircraft industry, or the military. At the end of that, they need to achieve irtec accreditation at Service Technician or Advanced Technician level to secure an offer of work with us."

As for the future, Warr says irtec will remain central to technicians retaining employment. He also says Arriva London's ambition is to secure more irtec Master Technicians and to develop its own. "We're pioneering a centre of excellence with our own in-house training facility, drawing on the supplier network, together with our own training people and Gateshead College."

#### **SETTING THE STANDARD**

It's a similar story at Arriva UK Bus, where engineering development manager Lloyd Mason says the company is focused on the Inspection Technician grade "to set the standard" for maintenance across all operating companies' fleets.

"Thorough inspection is really important, and irtec assists us in assuring that all our vehicle inspectors are competent," says Mason. "The irtec online assessment also tests technicians' knowledge of the PSV inspection manual, vehicle inspection techniques, categorisation of defects, and the O licence. So we're using that tool to assess other areas for improvement."

And he adds that UK Bus is also working with its training provider City College Coventry to ensure that apprentices completing their courses enter operating companies' depots with irtec accreditation. **TE**

#### **Where does irtec go from here?**

Since developing the Advanced Technician and Master Technician routes as progression steps for irtec accreditation in 2013, IRTE has gone on to introduce Trailer Service Technician and Trailer Inspection Technician. And there is also now a combined truck and bus assessment.

Next up will be levels specific to bus and coach engineering and to special types. Lloyd Mason, engineering development manager at Arriva UK Bus, explains that, because the organisation is among the few working to irtec Service Maintenance and Advanced Maintenance Technician, Arriva is working with IRTE and IMI trialling new assessments, initially for heating and cooling, and pneumatic door systems.

"Heating and cooling is a well recognised problem area for buses and coaches, due to the potential for problems around rear engines, enclosed compartments, and the stop-go activity," explains Mason. "Sometimes it's down to the engine or engine bay design; sometimes it's poor maintenance or a lack of competence on the part of those carrying out thorough examinations."

Clearly, irtec needs to respond to such requirements to stay current and comprehensive, and Mason says that, in this case, operators can expect a new standalone assessment under the 'engine' heading. "The assessment is written. We've identified what irtec-competent technicians need to be able to do. We've also put timescales on it and identified tooling required." Ratification is likely in the next few months.

Meanwhile, Steve Gannon, programme team leader for Manchester College, which has been working with irtec since 2006, says recent attention has focused on vehicles outside mainstream road operations. He cites mobile cranes, items classed as plant, cement mixers, truck recovery vehicles and the like, which – although based on conventional chassis – are not covered by MOT or PMI requirements.

"We've been working with Ainscough Crane Hire on the mobile crane carriers side, developing training courses for their technicians, and engaging with IMI on qualification development

for special types and appropriate new irtec assessments," says Gannon. He makes the point that, while the lifting equipment is covered legislatively by LOLER (Lifting Operations and Lifting Equipment Regulations), which define inspection, maintenance and competence requirements, the same is not true of parts in contact with the tarmac.

"We're aiming for a new irtec assessment by the end of this year. We've done tests and trials, and adopted the large commercial vehicle inspection route under Inspection Technician, based on Ainscough's maintenance records and schedules. This is important: even though they're not subject to PMI or annual tests, if this plant is involved in an accident, it will be investigated in the same way as any other vehicle."

Graham Weights, service support manager at Ainscough, agrees. "Our original work with Manchester College involved technician training for our transport operation. But the mobile cranes side is not mainstream so we worked with them to plug the gap on inspection and maintenance training and assessment. In the end, we want bona fide training for our technicians underpinned by the independence of an irtec assessment. As a business, that gives us the assurance that our engineers are receiving the highest quality training available."

