

# COMPETENCE AND COMPLIANCE

**Operators and workshops are signing up to the IRTE's Workshop Accreditation and irtec technician schemes. Brian Tinham finds out why**

**F**ive years ago the famous five – C Butt, DHL, Sainsbury's, Wincanton and the IRTE (Institute of Road Transport Engineers) – launched the IRTE Workshop Accreditation scheme. While enthusiasm was initially patchy, the programme has now taken off – with operators increasingly demanding that workshops be certified under their maintenance agreements and workshops accordingly putting themselves forward for assessment.

Why the move? As Ian Chisholm, managing director of SOE (Society of Operations Engineers, the umbrella organisation for IRTE), observed at the scheme's launch, although the operation of HGVs is highly regulated, workshops are not. The result: "While operators may be subject to severe penalties if found to be non-compliant in any area – and that includes maintenance – no form of regulation applies to maintenance contractors," he said.

Clearly, a scheme that independently validates workshops' maintenance facilities, training, processes, procedures and performance to a national standard

was the way to go. For operators it would bring peace of mind that workshops were compliant. And for workshops that achieved accreditation, it would bring extra business.

These have certainly been among the experiences of Sainsbury's, DAF dealership F&G Commercials and Bullwell Trailer Solutions.

## **AMBITIOUS PROGRAMME**

Sainsbury's operations support manager Gary King explains that all of this retailer's 13 contracted workshops around the UK are fully accredited. "Workshop Accreditation has been part of our criteria for awarding truck and trailer maintenance contracts for three years now, ever since we announced our first conformant site at Pullman, in Stoke on Trent. Our ambition was for all workshops to meet a national standard so that every organisation and everyone working on our vehicles would be doing so to the standard."

That ambition has been achieved and continues today, with newly contracted workshops – if not already formally accredited – being required to pass an



assessment within six months. But King isn't one for complacency. "Once all of our sites were Workshop Accredited, the focus shifted to irtec [the IRTE technician licensing scheme] so that we could gain control of the standards of the technicians themselves."

So where is Sainsbury's today? "We started mandating irtec 18 months ago, and the vast majority of our contractors' technicians are now certified to irtec Inspection Technician," answers King. "It's all about ensuring competence and currency of engineering skills to the national standard and then building on that with manufacturers' training."

King explains that six months ago his team of fleet operations managers established training matrices for each of its VMUs (vehicle maintenance units). "That's the only way to ensure that our contractors' technicians are equipped to inspect and maintain our fleet, with truck-specific detail including the diagnostics, how to strip down equipment, parts to use, torques, etc. It's all about operating a safe, efficient fleet."

Is it working? King is unequivocal: "If you look at MOT first-time pass rates alone, the national average has improved dramatically over the last 10 years, but it's still only 89%. We don't

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Frank Woodhead



L to R: F&G Commercials’ Glenn Stevenson and Frank Woodhead, Trafford mayor John Holden, Harrie Schippers (Paccar), Ray Ashworth (DAF), John Gilligan (F&G)

want to be part of that. Our average is 98.5% because we’ve been using the national standards to raise the bar. We won’t rest until it’s 100%.”

On the workshops side, his conviction is mirrored by F&G Commercials, which last month opened a 5.2-acre site in Trafford Park, following its acquisition of the Chatfields Manchester DAF business. Co-founder Frank Woodhead says his firm invested £5 million in the dealership, which now boasts 10 truck service bays, an ATF (Authorised Test Facility) lane, an 11,000ft<sup>2</sup> parts warehouse, tachograph centre and truck wash. For him, though, people and processes are just as important – and hence his commitment to irtec and Workshop Accreditation.

“We started with irtec back in 2011, when DAF signed up to the scheme,” recalls Woodhead, explaining that all technicians across his sites in Barnsley, Huddersfield and Oldham archived irtec to Inspection Technician. And – despite DAF currently considering its position on irtec, now that its licences are up for renewal (stating that it runs its own audits) – he insists that F&G Commercials remains convinced.

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And he adds that he is already in discussion with Manchester college, with a goal of moving up through the irtec levels, ultimately to Master Technician.

**QUALITY OF SERVICE**

His view of the IRTE’s contractor scheme is identical. “Our Oldham site achieved Workshop Accreditation in January; Manchester is imminent; and Barnsley and Huddersfield will follow. The point is anyone can open a site, but achieving Workshop Accreditation proves that we have everything in place to meet customers’ expectations.”

It’s a similar story at trailer repair and maintenance specialist Bullwell Trailer Solutions, which now looks after over 5,000 vehicles. Managing director Gary Bulley says that having irtec-licensed technicians and Workshop Accreditation guarantees quality of service.

“Having IRTE Workshop Accreditation is a testament to the high standards we abide by, both in terms of the services we offer and our working practices,” states Bulley. And the same applies to irtec, which he sees as the benchmark. “We put a huge

emphasis on training and skills so it’s just as important that our technicians are recognised for their abilities as it is for the company to be recognised as a whole.”

As for the benefits, Bulley says: “Being accredited by the IRTE means our customers can be assured we are fully compliant. I’m genuinely impressed with how well [irtec and Workshop Accreditation] are received. In fact, we’ve found many of our blue-chip clients now enquire whether we are accredited. What’s more, since receiving Workshop Accreditation two years ago, we’ve seen new business increase by 15%.”

But the last word goes to Sainsbury’s King: “Every operator has a different approach, but we focus heavily on compliance – making sure the fleet is safe and legal. For us, backing that up against national standards is critical. The fact is, for all operators, large and small, this is the only way to make sure that workshops are compliant and staffed by competent people.” **TE**

**IRTE** Workshop accreditation