



The third Steer Academy Skills Competition was another great success.



Participants in Motofix's inaugural technical boot camp.



KC Autos' apprentice James Weir (left) and Ian Pratt, Engineering Manager at First Central.

# WHAT A WEEK!

**Billed as the biggest week in the apprenticeship and skills calendar, National Apprenticeship Week (NAW) took place in February with the theme of 'Skills for Life'. Auto Body Professional rounds up some of the industry activity.**

National Apprenticeship Week (NAW) kicked off with a boost as Prime Minister Keir Starmer announced plans and £725 million worth of funding to "unlock opportunities for young people across the country" by creating 50,000 more apprenticeships as part of a wider package of developments for UK industry. However, there was mixed news for the automotive sector, as just days after the Government announcement, a Thatcham Research survey raised ongoing concerns among repair and salvage professionals, with 73% of those canvassed pointing to a critical skills shortage.

NAW did, though, provide a chance for the repair industry to celebrate the value and benefits that apprenticeships bring, while also highlighting and promoting the opportunities that exist across the sector.

FMG Repair Services and Steer Automotive Group both staged their annual apprentice skills competitions to celebrate the excellence within their respective cohorts.

The FMGRS event took place over three days at the company's Technical Training Centre in Goole, where 13 of the 126 young people training on the group's award-winning apprenticeship programme (see page 16 to read our dedicated feature) showcased their skills. The winners were Megan E (Paint), Ross T (Panel) and Megan R (MET).

Meanwhile, 40 apprentices from Steer Automotive Group's Academy apprenticeship programme headed to Emtec in Nottingham to compete in the Steer Academy Skills (SAS) Competition – now in its third year. Gold and silver medals were presented across key body repair disciplines, and the event also featured an expert training camp for a five-strong, all-female apprenticeship group from Gemini Accident Repair Centres, who undertook tasks from the main competition to develop core technical skills and build confidence.

After progressing through the heats, the top 20 apprentices then travelled to Thatcham Research for two days of technical challenges, where the

overall Skills Champions were decided after closely fought competition. The winners were two colleagues from Steer Grantham – Theo Barretto (Body Repair) and Anthoni Kurek (VDA) – as well as Samuel Cilla (Refinishing/ Maidstone Prestige) and Zak Loran (MET/Heathrow).

Motofix Group chose February to bring some of its apprentices together for its inaugural technical boot camp. Hosted at RWC Training Academy, an eight-strong group attended the intensive week-long programme designed to develop their skills and provide them with a clearer understanding of how a modern bodyshop operates as a whole as they transition into working life. The course will now be held annually, in addition to the training delivered through the Motofix Academy, which is currently supporting 32 apprentices across multiple disciplines.

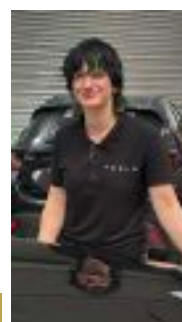
NAW was also a perfect time for organisations to launch key apprenticeship initiatives. AutoRaise introduced the AutoYouth Alliance (AYA) – a new scheme created to



The LKQ Bodyshop duo of Rio Campbell (left) and Ashley Rider.



Gemini staged an expert training camp at Emtec.



Nadeszna Jubber from Castle Coachworks.



iRG Repair Group's Kai Gammon, Callum Roberts and Cameron Vincent.



The six-strong apprentice cohort at XL Motors.



This is Bobby. A still from the Solus video starring paint apprentice Bobby Lawrence.



Action from the FMGRS event.



Fix Auto UK's Operations Director Mark Hutchins speaks to the Group's Class of 2025.

give apprentices and young people in automotive a real voice – while Fix Auto UK unveiled its 'Class of 2026' Apprentice Programme. Delivered in partnership with Apprenticeship Central, the scheme debuted last year and resulted in 52 apprentices being taken on by 29 repairers.

Another strong example of industry collaboration was revealed as First Central and KC Autos teamed up to trial a new apprenticeship pathway. The former has used its apprenticeship levy to fund the training of MET technician apprentice James Weir at KC Autos Northwich where, alongside his course at Blackpool and The Fylde College, he will be mentored by his uncle, Tim Garstang, who has a 20-year career in the same role.

LKQ Academy's bodyshop division shone the spotlight on two of its apprentices, Ashley Rider and Rio Campbell, who are being trained in-house. Both are studying towards their IMI Level 3 Paint Technician qualification while gaining hands-on experience across a broad range of bodyshop disciplines and learning alongside the Academy's 28-strong team of experienced trainers, who boast 1,360 years of combined industry knowledge.

"Just go for it" was the advice of Solus Basingstoke paint technician apprentice Bobby Lawrence when asked for a tip for any of his peers considering an apprenticeship. His comments featured in a video Q&A posted on LinkedIn as Solus shared stories from some of its 70-plus apprentices online.

Other repairers also took to social media, including iRG Repair Group, which focused attention on its trio of third-year apprentices hoping to become fully fledged technicians this summer. With six apprentices currently, XL Motors highlighted its proud track record in developing young people, including those now pursuing careers with the Coventry operation after

completing apprenticeships in areas as diverse as electronics, football, hairdressing and childcare.

Another repairer to champion apprenticeships was Castle Coachworks in Northampton. Bodyshop Manager Stuart White praised the progress of three of its apprentices and emphasised the importance of structured training programmes alongside work-based learning in developing the next generation of skilled automotive repair

professionals to meet the demands of the modern bodyshop and future-proof the sector.

"The industry is changing rapidly, and apprenticeships are essential to ensuring we have the right skills in place for the future," said Stuart. "By bringing apprentices into the business and training them alongside our experienced technicians, we're not only developing their technical ability, but also embedding the standards, culture and quality our customers expect." 

### NAW: A SIGNAL

“ This year, NAW felt like much more than just a celebration. It felt like a signal.

The reality is that, behind the positivity, 946,000 16 to 24-year-olds in the UK are currently not in education, employment or training (NEET). Wider labour market reporting also points to youth unemployment sitting at around one in six, which tells us we need clearer routes in.

So, when we see the industry coming together during NAW, it matters. It isn't just good PR, it's us opening our doors and creating a real access point for the next generation.

We've now seen a clear direction of travel from Government: apprenticeships are being positioned as a core tool for getting people into work and supporting workforce development. This year we're transitioning from the Apprenticeship Levy to the Growth & Skills Levy, which is designed to help employers respond faster to changing skills needs. This includes the introduction of 'apprenticeship units' (short, modular training), the idea of apprenticeship clearing pathways and an increase in the upper age limit of 100% funded programmes for non-levy payers in England (to become fully funded for anyone under the age of 25, up from 22).

For our industry, the direction is positive: apprenticeships are being treated as a scalable workforce solution, not a side project. Our skills needs aren't slowing down and, with technology continuing to evolve quickly, we need structured entry routes and ongoing development more than ever.

Having said that, here's the bit that matters most: starts are not success.

If we want the future of this industry to be sustainable, we've got to get the foundations right. Proper onboarding. Protected learning time. Mentors who are chosen, trained and given the skills they need, not "whoever has time". Pastoral support that keeps apprentices engaged when real life happens. The industry doesn't just need more apprentices – it needs more apprentices who complete programmes and stay.

NAW gives us excitement and momentum. The opportunity now is to keep that energy going all year round and build apprenticeship programmes that genuinely work for the next generation, and for the businesses investing in them.”

**Eleanor Baker Barnes**

Commercial Director, Apprenticeship Central

