

FREIGHT TRANSPORT – THE POOR RELATION?

Gavin Scott
Freight Transport Association

To the average man in the street, local authority official, civil servant or politician the expression 'Transport' means the movement of people. Little thought is given to the movement of goods and if it is it is usually in a negative context. "How can we restrict the movement of goods vehicles so that we can move people more quickly and efficiently?"

Knights of the Road

Thirty or forty years ago lorry drivers were called 'knights of the road', intrepid professionals who carried all sorts of goods along the country's highways. Indeed Atkinson the late lamented vehicle manufacturer used a knight's helmet as a radiator grille logo. What happened between then and now? What has turned people against the lorry that they used to love? The lorry that is delivering all the commodities they want? Why, in this day and age, are goods vehicle drivers seen as an unnecessary evil by a great part of the population? I believe that, in part at least, the problem is the rise in the number of private cars. The mystery of the lorry is lost and the newly empowered car drivers resent the road space taken up by goods vehicles. In the last decade alone the number of private cars on our roads has increased by 25% to about 28 million. In the same time the heavy goods vehicle population has increased by 8% to about 420,000. So - for every large goods vehicle on the road there are more than sixty cars. Interestingly light goods vehicles, not above 3.5 tonnes maximum weight, have increased by 40% to just over 3 million. And what is increasingly the big complaint these days? Well - white van man, of course!

Roads congestion and other constraints have forced the transport industry to become ever more efficient in order to continue reliable deliveries, at competitive cost. The UK logistics industry is generally accepted as being among the most efficient in the world if not the most efficient. This has been achieved in the face of increasing restrictions on its flexibility of movement. Movement by road is restricted by delivery curfews, pedestrianisation, priority vehicle lanes that really mean bus lanes, outdated speed limits, and the highest fuel taxation regime in the civilised world. If the advice to change modes is taken up and goods are sent by rail the paths available are restricted for use by passenger trains, gauge clearance is not sufficient to allow the most common containers to pass without the use of special equipment, the 24/7 economy that the industry is trying to serve is restricted by a five and a half (if you are lucky) day a week train service which, even then has night-time restrictions when most freight traffic moves.

What is freight anyway and why do you say it's the poor relation?

Perhaps the reason that few people give much thought to the logistics industry is because they don't notice it. People do not think of all the things they use every day as freight. Perhaps if we used the expression goods or commodities people would think differently.

The logistics industry suffers because of its efficiency. When we turn on the gas or water tap or the electric switch we expect the service to be there instantaneously and will be annoyed when, for whatever reason, it doesn't happen. The logistics industry might be said to be the fourth utility. People expect to find goods in the supermarket, fuel at the filling station, papers at the newsagent, beer in the pub, books in the bookshop or, indeed, find the contents of wheely bins or recycling boxes have disappeared, without thinking how it happened. Of course the answer is that lorries were involved in each case.

It is in great measure because of the efficiency of the logistics industry that the UK has the cheapest diesel and petrol prices in the whole of Europe. It is only when the chancellor has added his 50.3 pence a litre and 17.5% vat on the whole lot that we find ourselves paying more than any of our continental cousins.

Ponder for a few seconds to think of how long our way of life would survive without the freight industry and goods vehicles in particular. Quite apart from the very obvious lack of food in shops – most supermarkets are replenished several times a day – it would be a matter of a few days at most before fuel ran out. Public transport would come to a halt because of this and the population would be limited, in travelling terms, to as far as they could walk or cycle. How many of us here today could handle that. It really does not bear thinking about but many people seem to take the attitude that the industry that carries the lifeblood of our nation through its arteries, the road and rail system is an unnecessary evil.

What progress have we made?

There is no doubt that in recent years the subject of transport has gained a much higher profile. Twenty or thirty years ago, if the word 'transport' appeared in policy documents, it was likely to be a note at the bottom of page 63 about the need for buses to keep to timetable. Freight transport got even less mention and that was likely to be something along the lines of the need to keep horrible, polluting lorries as far away as possible from civilised society. As an example one local authority's transport strategy with regard to freight consisted of a couple of lines – To remove freight from roads to other modes such as rail and sea – the authority had neither a rail line or a coast line!

Things are changing, fortunately, and we now have, in Scotland, a National Transport Strategy together with a Freight Action Plan and a Bus Action Plan. We hope that the actions in the Freight Action Plan will assist the logistics industry to become even more efficient and help deliver the growth in the economy that is the main aim of the Government. But this will not be achieved without assistance and goodwill from other agencies. Transport Scotland is in the throes of producing the Strategic Transport Projects Review. It will identify what road and rail infrastructure improvements we need between 2012 and 2022 to keep the country moving. It is disappointing to find the paucity of mentions of freight movements in the work so far done. All the key strategic outcomes relate to public transport and car journey times. Accessibility is expressed in terms of people, economic activity in terms of jobs. Freight movements are mentioned only in the passing. I'm sure that when the Review is complete it will include many of the improvements that the logistics industry needs but I have a feeling that they will be on the back of improvements needed for the movement of people. As an example of the people movement bias, the route that moves much of the whisky distilled in Speyside to the south has not been included as a strategic corridor.

The draft National Planning Framework has several freight related projects in it. But this, in itself, may be part of the problem. People seem to be quite happy to discuss freight in strategic terms when container terminals or the like are being proposed but have difficulty in identifying the food that they expect to find in the supermarket or the fuel that they expect to come out of the petrol pump as freight. These things are commodities that appear by some system of magic just like the electricity that you expect to light the room when you flick the switch or the water that comes out of the tap when you turn it on. We don't trouble ourselves to work out how it got there but we expect it to be there. It's the same with logistics. "I expect the things that I want to be there but I don't want to know how they got there and I'm prepared to be critical of the delivery method even if I don't understand it.

What could we still do?

Let us look at some of the constraints mentioned above and see what we might do to help the logistics industry.

- Curfews

Many delivery points throughout the land are subject to curfews of one kind or another. Many of these were introduced decades ago when goods vehicles were noisier and had greater emissions than currently. FTA, together with member companies developed a toolkit for improving night time deliveries entitled 'Delivering the Goods'. This suggests a partnership approach with local authorities to find ways of removing delivery vehicles from busy roads at peak periods without causing unnecessary noise and

light pollution. Unfortunately, with one or two notable exceptions authorities have been reluctant to even consider trials. One of these notable exceptions is where a curfew was amended to allow deliveries at 0130 and 0300. This resulted in the company saving 2 hours of driving time per day, took two journeys per day off busy roads and, because of the time saved, reduced CO₂ emissions by 68 tonnes a year.

- Pedestrianisation

The concept behind pedestrianisation is to allow the public to walk in, mainly shopping areas, without having to concern themselves with motorised traffic. All well and good but consider the timings of some of these schemes. Some start as early as 0930 and conclude as late as 1800. If we wish to make a delivery to premises within the area the vehicle will be forced to be on the road at the same time as everybody else going to work or delivering the children to school. Effectively pedestrianisation is exacerbating the problems of congestion at peak hours. In the mornings, when most companies, given a free hand would like to make deliveries most pedestrian schemes are devoid of people. The build up of foot traffic really only starts with the approach of lunchtime. Modifying the timings of such schemes would benefit the logistics industry without noticeable detriment to the pedestrian public.

- Difficulties in making deliveries

With the introduction of decriminalised parking enforcement the freight industry was optimistic that, this would help the free flow of traffic by removing illegally parked vehicles from city centres. For a while this seemed to work. However some of the privatised parking enforcement companies seem to have got overenthusiastic and many operators now have to employ full time staff to appeal against parking tickets wrongly imposed on goods vehicles making deliveries. In most cases the success rate is extremely high but the administration costs are also high and something the industry could do without.

- Priority vehicle lanes.

These are usually, or almost exclusively, called Bus Lanes. It is understandable that authorities may wish to give priority to certain classes of vehicle to ensure the efficient use of the infrastructure. The problem is, of course, that, in calling these pieces of road bus lanes there is a presumption that no other vehicles should be allowed to use them. This results in the arguments for cycles, PTWs and taxi drivers all arguing to be allowed to use the 'Bus Lane'. Using the expression 'Priority Vehicle Lane' would be more acceptable. Then the vehicles that were to be given priority could be defined. It might be buses only or no single occupancy cars and, yes, there would be bids from the freight industry for goods vehicles to use them at appropriate times. Goods vehicles run to timetables just as buses do. Unfortunately the general attitude of Local

Authorities is that it is not policy to allow other vehicles into 'Bus' lanes and it is not policy to consider changing policy.

- Speed limits

The National speed limit for large goods vehicles on single carriageway roads is 40mph. This limit has been in place for half a century since long before air braking, before ABS, before radial tyres and before a host of other safety improvements that are now standard on goods vehicles. The speed limit for buses on the same roads is 50mph. What is it about buses carrying the moving load that is passengers that makes them so much more inherently safe than goods vehicles? This speed limit is so discredited that the police, anecdotally, will turn a blind eye to vehicles if they are not doing more than about 50 mph. If a law is that bad it needs to be reviewed. One thing that might bring this to a head is the possibility that SPECS average speed enforcement cameras may be deployed more widely. These ANPR cameras can identify vehicle type from the registration number and, therefore, the appropriate speed limit for the vehicle. Deploying this system on single carriageway roads will effectively impose a 40mph speed limit on all vehicles.

What progress has been made?

There is no doubt that the logistics industry has made enormous steps over the last two decades. Vehicles are much cleaner and emissions have dropped massively. Since the introduction of Euro1 diesel engines in 1990 which reduced the previous black smoke exhaust to a grey haze, emissions of all types have dropped by well over 90%. Vehicles are now fitted with air brake silencers and even have cut outs so that the driver's radio is switched off when the cab door is opened. These measures might be termed environmental improvements. On the safety front antilock braking, electronic stability control, radial tyres and a host of other features might be termed safety improvements.

Drivers are now much better trained than they were twenty years ago. The increasing cost of fuel, which accounts for more than a third of vehicle costs, has encouraged more employers to send drivers on SAFED (Safe and Fuel Efficient Driving) courses where fuel efficiency savings have reached more than 10% in some instances. Drivers carrying hazardous cargoes have to undergo specific training and be retrained on a regular basis. Hazardous cargoes range from such things as explosives and radioactive materials through petrol and diesel to seemingly innocent substances as bulk whisky and aerosols. From 2009 new drivers will have to obtain a Certificate of Professional Competence before being allowed to drive vocationally and all drivers will have to undergo regular update training to keep the qualification.

In the transport office computerised routing and scheduling is standard with satellite navigation and tracking being deployed to trace vehicles and loads.

Moving away from road, which will continue to be the predominant method of moving goods, grants to encourage modal shift to rail and water have successfully increased carryings by these modes. Unfortunately the system of grants mitigates against the provision of common user sites. The result is that we see, as in Grangemouth, two sites being built next to each other, each having been awarded grants based on the number of sensitive lorry miles that will be taken off the road and transferred to rail. It all goes back to what the EU will allow but it cannot, surely be beyond the wit of man to find a way of provision of facilities without duplication.

Are we our own worst enemy?

Despite all the efforts that the industry has made to improve efficiency and professionalism it seems that our friend, Jimmy Public still doesn't care for the logistics industry. Unfortunately, despite all the industry's efforts it only takes one incident that disrupts somebody for all of them to go for naught. It might be the lorry that gets stuck under the bridge because the driver listened to the satellite navigation system rather than looked at the road signs or the driver who double banked his vehicle and caused a blockage because some blue badge holder had parked in the middle of the loading bay, each give him an excuse to decry the logistics industry. No matter that all the goods he wants were in the shop when he went there. No matter that the CD he ordered on the internet was delivered the next day or that the council lorry took away all his refuse without spilling any. That one incident is enough to turn him against the industry for a long, long time. People seem to be much more forgiving of bus or taxi drivers in similar circumstances for some reason. Perhaps it's because they carry people and not anonymous cargo.

Still the Poor Relation?

I am happy to say that the setting up of the Freight Division within the Scottish Government has helped immeasurably in assisting the logistics industry by raising its profile in Government circles. Through it the industry has received grant assistance for essential training during the skills shortage that we suffered. It has also published advice encouraging the Regional Transport Partnerships to work with the logistics industry in setting up Freight Quality Partnerships. These are in their infancy for the most part but we must be optimistic that they will flourish and the partnerships and their constituent local authorities will see the value in working with the logistics industry to improve life for everybody.

Until politicians and opinion formers realise that the freight industry is not only about grand international projects but also about getting food to the shops, furniture into houses, the houses themselves and everything that we use, eat or dispose of every day I fear that the freight industry will continue to be treated as the poor relation. Unfortunately freight doesn't have a vote people in buses, cars and on cycles or foot do, and they are the ones that the

politicians will heed. Look around you as you relax this evening wherever that might be and imagine what life would be like if all that surrounds including the seat you sit in had not been delivered at some time in its life by a goods vehicle. Be thankful that the logistics industry is there working for you. Then go out and tell your neighbours. Remember, poor relations sometimes turn out to be great benefactors.

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