

UK Driver Shortage - RHA calls for action

7 June 2021

Context - background

The driver shortage for HGVs is hitting crisis level in the UK. A combination of factors (many of them long-standing) has contributed to the current situation.

Recovery from Covid 19 is increasing demand across supply chains, the impact is already being seen with the increased opening of “non-essential” retail and parts of the hospitality sector in recent weeks. The recovery is exacerbating the already existing shortage.

Brexit has contributed too. So has the loss of about 12 months of driver training and testing. The long-term ineffectiveness of apprenticeships for lorry drivers and the general hostility from authorities and Government towards lorries and road transport in general is also unhelpful in recruiting and retaining drivers.

Changes around IR35 have not helped either, adding cost and uncertainty for many operators. Overall cost pressures are increasing, it is the case now that freight customers should expect higher freight rates to feed through to the end of 2021 at least.

We need something (or some things) that works to address the driver shortage for the industry and the drivers.

Obtaining a licence to drive a lorry and the associated costs of Driver CPCs and medicals is a significant impediment to joining and, in some cases, re-joining the profession.

The immediate point is that there is a need for tangible short-term urgent actions that will help deal with the shortage of drivers in the coming year. It is critical that solutions that fit the industry rather than the bureaucratic requirements and limitations imposed by Government departments and related bodies. This has to embrace diverse actions including international recruitment and retention and finding ways to allow qualified drivers to rapidly re-join the industry.

Action will be needed to address the issues over the longer term too. The respect for drivers and the vital skilled contribution they make for society needs to be better recognised. We already see that post Covid some drivers are not wanting to go back to the way they worked. Congestion, hostility towards drivers and lorries, conditions on the road, treatment at collection sites, narrow delivery slots with fines, hours, work-life balance are all factors that require improvement.

Required Actions

Reconsider the Shortage Occupation List

Current Government policy in this area, to ban a skilled job from the Shortage Occupation List because of random and notional academic standards, is defective.

Lorry driving is a skilled profession with high levels of responsibility and accountability for those operating the vehicles on the road.

The training requirements are significant, with costs of training and ongoing skills requirements greater than a number of areas that are on the Shortage Occupation List.

Revising the Shortage Occupation list is not a panacea given Europe wide driver shortages, but it would make a significant contribution to reducing shortages. Government policy is very unlikely to change, if it did, we should not expect any change to be permanent.

Coronavirus Recovery - Seasonal Visa Scheme for qualified lorry drivers

We propose a seasonal worker or periodic visa scheme for lorry drivers is allowed. Qualified lorry drivers with Driver CPC and a licence that is valid to drive a lorry (C or C+E) could be eligible for a scheme.

It could be modelled on the Temporary Worker - Seasonal Worker visa (T5) scheme that is currently limited to farm workers. A scheme built on this would be a tightly controlled way of dealing with short-term driver shortages.

The RHA will support any development work for such a scheme.

Again, this will be no panacea as the EU is also suffering driver shortages, but its contribution could be significant and quick.

Continue prioritisation of driving tests for lorry drivers.

This is a Government led action that requires continued commitment. DVSA have committed to supporting this to address the massive backlog in lorry driver testing. Our ask here is that this priority for vocational driving tests is maintained. ***Ideally with clear commitment from DVSA and the Secretary of State at the Department for Transport.***

To date, vocational testing HAS been prioritised as we have requested. This has been supported at top level in Government, we hope this continues as a priority.

Proposal for a “Return to HGV Driving” scheme

Many drivers have left the sector over recent years. Some retired, others to do other things.

Feedback from drivers indicates a wide range of reasons for drivers leaving the sector. We think we know why drivers leave, but the information on motivations for leaving the profession is patchy. The RHA believes a detailed survey led by the Department for Transport of HGV drivers who have left the profession will assist policy makers and industry address problems and encourage retention. The RHA will support actions in this area.

In the meantime, we should address several impediments that may prevent HGV licence holders from returning to the sector. This may include the need for medicals or driver CPC qualifications. Some drivers will simply feel more confident with some refresher training, still others would prefer more flexible or part-time working arrangements.

The proposal is that the industry in partnership with Government develops and promotes a “Return to HGV Driving” scheme. We will need to decide what areas need to be tackled and how. Loan support for medicals and driver CPC may be an option. Businesses themselves may consider how to promote alternative working patterns to encourage drivers back to the sector. Extending domestic Driver CPC validity for 1 year, on the basis of 1 days training, may also be an option to keep drivers active post Covid.

This could be backed up with a “We need you” type of campaign explicitly directed at inactive drivers.

Promotion of the job and the sector

The industry is undervalued and taken for granted. This results in ignorant approaches to road network management by local authorities through to a general lack of respect for drivers and haulage operators.

The sector does not just need drivers, other essential occupations in the sector available.

The RHA believes there needs to be a substantial and co-ordinated promotion of the sector to support all the recruitment and training activities needed.

The RHA will work with Government and other trade bodies to further progress on promoting the sector.

Apprenticeship funding gap for C+E drivers in England and Wales.

This long-term issue is just now being addressed after many years of no progress and bureaucratic obstruction. Less than 10% of what sector pays in apprenticeship levy is used by sector. The system has not worked because funding has not been available for C+E licences and apprenticeship systems do not fit most parts of the sector. There appears to have been an obstructive and hostile approach from the educational establishment over several years towards HGV apprenticeships.

Good news is that C+E apprenticeships will become available in England and Wales from 1 August 2021. The RHA funding request, increasing Government Apprenticeship support for C + E to £7,000 has also been approved. The industry (& RHA) will need to act to take advantage of this new approval for C + E apprenticeships and funding where it is practical for driver training.

However, what needs to be recognised is the time lag between commencement of an apprenticeship and the driver being available for work.

Apprenticeship for Class C HGV Drivers

This apprenticeship has been available for some time. Class C licences are used for rigid vehicles only. The current class C apprenticeship is intended to be replaced by a new class C based Urban Driver Apprenticeship in August 2021.

It is essential that IFATE deliver this new class C Urban Driver Apprenticeship on time by 1 August.

Proposal for an SME focussed HGV Driver Training Scheme

A shorter, tighter scheme than the main Apprenticeship schemes is needed to deliver skilled, qualified drivers more quickly for the sector.

There is the opportunity to create an SME focused scheme. Many SMEs find the bureaucracy surrounding apprenticeships difficult to manage. Even some large companies find the apprenticeship system does not meet business requirements and choose to train outside the apprenticeship system.

We suggest that a scheme is developed to allow operators to obtain payment for training, lessons, Driver CPC and tests that will be funded by a loan to be repaid from salary over time. In principle, along the lines of the student loan system.

Proposal for an HGV Driver Independent Training Loan Scheme

This proposal is for a scheme that would allow prospective drivers to obtain payment directly for training, lessons, Driver CPC and tests that will be funded by a loan to be repaid through tax from salary over time. In principle, along the lines of the student loan system.

The scheme rules would need to be clarified. There may be a requirement to tie the scheme with an employer, perhaps an element of co-funding from an employer or an employment commitment during or post qualification.

The aim would be to speed up the supply of qualified drivers.

Initial funding could be via unused Apprenticeship Levy from the sector – which of course gets repaid over time.

Other training schemes - DWP Pilots / Road to Logistics

We all need re-double our efforts on promoting the opportunities presented by local initiatives such as Road to Logistics and the DWP Pilots.

These are medium-term programmes that need further and ongoing promotion.

General extension to Drivers Hours – Not recommended

RHA opposes wholesale extensions to drivers' hours. A short-term general relaxation of driver hour limits will be counter productive as it makes job less attractive. We should also be mindful that road safety is the reason HGV driver hours are limited.

As always, selective Drivers Hours relaxations should be used with caution and to address short-term issues that need urgent resolution that cannot be addressed in other ways.

Road network productivity

Road networks need to prioritise vehicle flow, especially main roads where Government needs to support HGV access to all A-roads. Congestion increases driver stress too, undermining recruitment and retention of drivers.

Government needs to resist anti-lorry rhetoric and anti-lorry regulation that impedes road freight operations. The movement of freight is essential for everyone and its effective and safe use of networks needs to be promoted.

Parking and network restrictions damage respect for drivers and operators. Recent examples include Government support for Kent parking restrictions, and inactivity by Government on the extension of those restrictions as well as inappropriate weight limits imposed on A roads in Oxfordshire that limit HGV access on good roads, forcing HGVs onto less suitable roads elsewhere.

Road space reallocation policies are also squandering road capacity and reducing road freight productivity. These need careful re-consideration.

Government and Local Authority measures that increase congestion should be changed to reduce congestion.

Collection / Delivery site productivity / facilities

Businesses at collection and delivery points need to improve access productivity and the treatment of drivers.

All drivers must have access to good quality, clean hygiene facilities at all sites at all times.

Pro-driver attitudes need to be deployed by sites. Current practices around narrow collection and delivery slots, with fines for late or early arrival are unhelpful and should be modified or removed.

RHA

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