

Maggie Simpson *Director General* Rail Freight Group

The **Rail Freight Group Conference**, taking place on 2nd April in London, will provide the rail freight community with the latest updates on the changes to the industry, as well as the opportunity to network with senior rail freight professionals. Ahead of this year's event Director General of the Rail Freight Group, Maggie Simpson, shared her views on the challenges and opportunities within the rail freight industry.

The prospects for the rail freight sector are looking good in 2020. Rail freight is a low carbon solution for logistics and many companies and policy makers are looking to modal shift from road to rail as a way of reducing carbon emissions in supply chains. This is bringing new customers to rail, and existing customers are looking to increase their presence.

At the same time, a nationwide shortage of HGV drivers is also causing pressure for road freight operators. An ageing workforce, the impact of Brexit and factors such as road delays and congestion are making this a difficult dilemma to fix. Being able to move 50 loads with a single driver by rail makes perfect sense, leaving the scarce road resource available to do the essential 'last mile', delivering goods to customer warehouses, depots and stores. Such factors are also tending to increase road prices, which also helps the economics of moving to rail.

However, growing rail freight is not without its challenges. The railways are a system, so changes in any part of it inevitably impact elsewhere. The current profound challenges in the passenger franchises and the outcome of the Williams Review mean that fundamental change will be happening to the structure of our railways, and freight cannot avoid being impacted by this. Of course, there could be positive changes too, and we need to look for the opportunities that this brings as well as making sure that the private sector freight operators and their customers are properly protected, both at a national level and where powers are devolved to Scotland, Wales and sub national and regional transport bodies.

The railways also need to make a compelling case for decarbonisation. Modal shift to rail today can make an immediate impact on national carbon emissions but there is no place for complacency, as pressure to reduce and eliminate diesel as a fuel is only increasing. This means that we need to persuade Government to reopen the case for electrification of the strategic freight routes, along with upgrading the power supply to allow freight to operate. In the first case, a series of small infill schemes could immediately allow trains to convert using the existing locomotive fleet.

In the medium term, freight operators will need to look at new types of equipment, which could include bimodes as well as electric vehicles, but to do so they need confidence in the technology and capacity of the network to ensure they can get a return on that investment.

This year's **Rail Freight Group Conference** will be an excellent opportunity to discuss these topics and to hear from speakers close to the action in important policy areas. I am really looking forward to chairing the event, and to some stimulating and interesting discussions with the audience. Looking forward to seeing you there.

You can hear from Maggie and many other experts including Network Rail, Freightliner, DB Cargo, Office of Rail and Road and many more.

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