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In the transport industry, certain issues capture the public's attention, while others fail to, time and time again. In pubs up and down the country, debate rages about the UK's innovative new high speed rail network, season ticket fares and those much needed improvements to the local roundabout, motorway or T junction, yet other vitally-important topics, such as rail freight, remain ignored. The enhancement of the UK's rail freight network remains the single biggest 'no brainer' in the world of infrastructure – the demand is there, the business appetite is apparent, now we in the industry need to band together to implement a coherent, nationwide programme of development.

In many ways, a freight train is much more influential in the life of the average person than a passenger service. It delivers our online shopping, that new tablet or mobile phone, our confectionery and soft drinks, it transports the limestone and cement used to build our homes; and this influence is increasing. No longer synonymous with coal and the industries of old, rail freight is fuelling the UK construction boom and moving imported goods from our ports to consumers. In the past five years, the weight of construction materials transported by rail has increased by 45 per cent, and total demand for rail freight is forecast to double by 2043.

Opening up capacity

Government policy acknowledges the need to shift cargo from our roads to the railways, and recommends the development of more Strategic Rail Freight Interchanges (SFRIs), changing the economics of rail freight so that it competes directly with road-based logistics. For both industrialists and environmentalists, this makes sense. Transporting goods by rail rather than road produces 76 per cent less CO₂, costs less and reduces traffic congestion.

In the Midlands, the bringing forward of plans for DIRFT 3 and other SFRIs in Northamptonshire as well as East Midlands Gateway, adjacent to East Midlands Airport and the M1, are encouraging signs that the case for rail freight stacks up. However, capacity increases aside, we must also drive behavioural change and make it easier for a wider range of businesses to adopt intermodal or purely rail-based logistics. In mainland Europe, 'freight villages' open up access to SMEs by providing managed postal and customs services onsite, our new schemes should consider doing the same.

It's also important that passenger rail and freight go hand in hand, with schemes promoting dual capacity increases, where possible. Our plans for the Midlands Rail Hub, a programme of works to improve east-west connectivity across the Midlands Engine region and beyond will transform passenger services, while also opening up space for 36 extra freight paths per day, taking the equivalent of 4,320 lorries off the roads.

Local vs. National

Although my day job demands focus on the Midlands' rail freight capability, no single region can make an impact without working in partnership with its neighbours. Much of our cargo comes from the ports of the South East, Southampton and Felixstowe, where high land values impede the construction of SRFIs. Working to overcome this challenge will benefit freight capacity UK wide. Four of the UK's five freight paths run through our region, up to Scotland and the North, through to Wales and East Anglia, so similarly, the Midlands' success is the nation's success. Post-Brexit, it may be that multimillion pound investment in the Humber Ports draws traffic away from a congested Dover; we must keep our ears to the ground and be ready for change.

The Future

Any investment in rail freight is an investment in a more sustainable, high-value economy. The nationwide shortage of HGV drivers is an issue that refuses to go away – recruitment remains low and the average age of the men and women transporting our road-based freight is over fifty. Attracting, training and retaining individuals as train drivers, a better-paid vocation, is much more achievable. When it comes to powering a productive economy, we have a choice to make. Either move goods unsustainably by road from one obscure warehouse location to another, or pursue a modern logistics industry with the capacity to move non-perishable goods by train, supporting high skilled, high paid jobs.

The benefits of rail freight, both from an economic, social and environmental perspective must become something we talk about. Something we discuss not only in the industry, but in the pub. Yes, people will always moan about potholes, and muse over the future of electric cars, but we must also talk about how we're going to create a sustainable logistics industry and an economy fit for the future. It's our responsibility to start these conversations so please - if you're reading this – pass it on.



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