

Heavy mob up to no good

The Freight Committee of Railfuture has recently been aware of a campaign by the road haulage industry to increase yet again the permitted weight of heavy goods vehicles.

The committee feels it is necessary to instigate a campaign against this development before it is too late, possibly by lobbying ministers, MPs and other influential groups.

By Eric Layfield

Once again the road haulage industry has started a campaign to further increase the weight of heavy goods vehicles.

Only a few short years ago the maximum weight was 32 tonnes. This was increased to 38 tonnes and, relatively quickly, was followed by 44 tonnes. With each increase in road weights came an abstraction of traffic so that the alleged benefits of increased weights never materialised. Although the absolute number of the heaviest lorries has slightly decreased, they are carrying more freight over longer distances than ever and the average motorway user would be hard pressed to agree that "heavier lorries equals fewer lorries".

At the time of the last increase, from 38 to 44 tonnes, the Government Minister responsible, John Prescott, asked the Commission for Integrated Transport to study and report on the issue. The report was quite unequivocal in its findings, which included:

1 If 44 tonne lorries were to be allowed on the roads they would have a negative impact on rail freight without certain measures being put in place IN ADVANCE to ensure no abstraction of traffic took place.

2 The Government should make it clear to all concerned that tonnes was the top limit and further increase would not be contemplated.

John Prescott received the report and, totally ignoring its recommendations, immediately authorised 44 tonne lorries without any safeguards. We should not be surprised by this as Mr Prescott was on record before this action as being in favour of lorries weighing 70 plus tonnes and almost twice as long as the present maximum allowed!

Thankfully he is no longer directly in control of transport but, as Deputy Prime Minister, we must presume that he still has a certain amount of influence in cabinet.

Now, after an indecently short period of mourning, the road haulage industry has restarted the campaign for heavier lorries. Buoyed up by their previous successes, and knowing that a simple weight increase has diminishing returns as more and more freight simply fills

a lorry before the maximum weight is reached, on this occasion they are adding the demand that lorry dimensions are also increased. As lorries are already unlimited by law as to their height, we can only assume that this demand will cover length and width.

The industry justifies this campaign with the usual chestnut that "heavier lorries equal fewer lorries". They cite the Working Time Directive (WTD) and a national shortage of drivers as reasons to have each lorry carrying more. The possibility of paying better wages to attract drivers, as the railways have done, seems to have gone completely over their heads. Perhaps they are well aware that proper wages would increase their costs and more traffic would return to rail from where it was so recently abstracted.

The largest lorries currently allowed in the UK for general use weigh 44 tonnes gross and are 16.5 metres long. As an indication of the sort of increase being sought, the manufacturer SCANIA has demonstrated to the European Commission a concept lorry weighing 60 tonnes with an overall length of 25.25 metres. The lorry design that found favour with John Prescott several years ago weighed 70-75 tonnes and was around 31 metres in length!

If such lorries were confined to motorways they could just possibly be justified. However, the road haulage industry has always successfully lobbied against such restrictions and has won the right to use the largest lorries in the smallest streets

of our towns and villages. Often, a maximum size lorry will call at a town centre store to drop one pallet before travelling to the next town to drop another and so on. The streets of our towns are unsuitable for the current generation of lorries, let alone anything larger.

As mentioned earlier, a new generation of larger and heavier lorries would not only consolidate existing lorry loads but would also abstract massive amounts of bulk traffic from rail and water. An example of this effect was the increase from 32 to 38 tonnes. Almost overnight, five rail served stone depots in the Manchester area were closed as the traffic went to road. With a 60-70 tonne lorry no bulk rail traffic could be considered safe. Coal, stone, steel, even iron ore could transfer to road so where would the alleged environmental benefits of larger lorries come from?

As this article is being written, the world is in the grip of yet another oil crisis. The response of the UK government is to maintain its suspension of rail freight grants, which were designed to assist in moving environmentally sensitive freight from road to rail. Instead of considering an increase in lorry weights the Government must reinstate rail freight grants with a vengeance and ensure that the maximum amount of long distance freight travels by rail.

By this means alone a sufficient number of drivers would be freed to do local delivery work and negate the effect of the working time directives and driver shortages.

Reward for loyalty

By Tony Smale

Railfuture user group liaison officer

You may have heard that Central Trains are going that extra mile to attract customers by introducing TV entertainment screens in their carriages. Time will tell whether this has the desired effect, but it's encouraging to see operators putting some effort into making rail travel more attractive.

As a minimum, train companies should be able to offer refreshments from a trolley or buffet counter on their longer-distance services, but I'm not sure they should emulate the intrusive level of services to be found on some of the higher-cost airlines.

Newspapers, nibbles, hot towels, lemon-scented wipes, aperitifs, digestifs and somewhere in between it all, a containerised meal. I experienced all this recently on a EuroMed train trip from Barcelona. Clearly they were out to impress!

Who can forget the party atmosphere of cheap-travel Network Days in the heyday of the BR's Network Card? We all felt part of a club. It was our railway! True, there are still some bargains to be had, but loyalty rewards for regular rail

users are a bit thin on the ground. Perhaps in a few years from now, we'll find that reward schemes are much more commonplace as smart-card payment becomes the norm for bus and train travel.

Meanwhile, simple initiatives can go a long way to making the rail traveller feel valued. Perhaps a printed journey guide can be offered to visitors. This normally takes the form of a welcoming colour leaflet, describing the route and places of interest.

"Community Partnership" railways are particularly good at producing this kind of literature, and often the line user group assists with research, writing and photography.

So do any of the train operators in your area go the extra mile? Or do you have any novel ideas for encouraging use of rail?

Let me have your nominations and suggestions, and we'll give them an airing at the forthcoming rail users' conference.

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