

UK LOGISTICS NEEDS REAL INVESTMENT, WARNS FORWARDING CHIEF

The British International Freight Association (BIFA) is calling for real investment in the UK's logistics network, ahead of the Chancellor's Emergency Budget tomorrow.

While road traffic - passenger and freight - has surged over the past three decades, the capacity of the network has scarcely increased at all and the effects are being felt in increasing, and increasingly erratic, journey times in all parts of the country.

Existing roads are also crumbling, says BIFA, with emergency repair work also contributing to slower journeys, especially at night when much of the country's freight is on the move.

"Congestion needs to be planned out of all modes of UK transport," says BIFA Director General, Robert Keen. "While Governments of all hues have made promises in the past, very few significant schemes have been delivered."

Statisticians estimate that the UK's population will increase to 72 million people by 2050, "putting an unprecedented strain on the country's logistics network," says Keen.

The freight industry is often overlooked by politicians, he continues, despite the fact that 2.2 million people in the UK - one in 12 of the workforce - are employed in the sector, according to the Government's own figures.

The specific part of the supply chain for which BIFA's members are responsible is even less appreciated, says Keen. "The government needs to pay more attention to the value of international freight and logistics to the UK and urgently address issues that impact on the global supply chain, including Customs, EU legislation, security and international trade treaties.

Ports and railways, too, need the benefit of more strategic and joined up thinking. While major private investment has gone into the new London Gateway Port and the enlarged Liverpool2 container terminal, Keen points out, "what has too often been lacking is commitment by the government to deliver the improved road and rail inland links that these schemes require if we are to realise their full potential."

The prolonged dithering over when and whether to extend runway capacity in South-East England is perhaps though the supreme example of the procrastination that is at the heart of Government transport policy. "It is time to get down to some long-term, strategic airport planning before the UK finally and irrevocably runs out of airport capacity," Robert Keen emphasises.

Many other aspects of Government policy will impact on the freight and logistics industry, even areas that at first sight don't seem to have much effect on the sector. Take the hot political potato of immigration, for instance. Immigrants are playing a vital role in keeping UK logistics moving, as drivers, warehouse operatives and, increasingly, management. Any moves to restrict immigration from the rest of the EU or from further afield, "could potentially have a very serious impact on the logistics industry," Robert Keen states.

Education policy will also have a big impact on the health of the UK logistics sector, he believes. The lack of public knowledge of and engagement with the industry needs to be tackled, if the industry is to successfully encourage and enthuse the next generation of logistics professionals. Much more could be done to encourage young people to take up a

career in the industry, which rarely appears on the radar of school careers officers or recruitment specialists.