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Great freight

The Freight Transport Association (FTA) is clearly not afraid to speak its mind. With recent acerbic comments on issues ranging from toll increases to under-investment in infrastructures and highway code upgrades, this organisation is standing up for what its freight operator membership believes – and arguably for the sector as a whole.

That firm stance is led from the top, by the association’s current president Stewart Oades. An FTA board member since 2007, Oades has been president for just over a year, taking over from Andrew Haines. With more than three decades’ experience in logistics, the president’s word counts for much – and not only when he criticises developments that threaten members’ livelihoods, but also when he evaluates the FTA’s, and indeed the sector’s standing in the transport world.

“The [freight] sector hides its light under a bushel. Freight operators don’t like to make a fuss about what they are doing – unlike many other rival sectors,” he observes ruefully. “In fact, we think we’re the unsung heroes of British industry.” Arrogance? No. It’s a statement of fact, based on Oades’ extensive work at a variety of significant freight operations around the country and indeed in continental Europe. And his concern is that, as a result, freight doesn’t get the hearing it should.

“The UK logistics sector comprises probably the most professional group of operators that exists throughout the whole of Europe. When I worked for Exel, we spent a lot of time working outside the UK and our customers always wanted to deal with UK operators, because of the quality of the people.”

But is that image reflected in government and society? It’s a moot point, so getting the FTA from

where it is today, to where Oades wants it to be, is going to take some work – starting with the Commercial Vehicle Operator Show 2010. On the evening of the show's first day, the FTA is hosting its 'Love Logistics' evening, at which a high-octane audience will see four short films that highlight the difference logistics makes to everyday lives. "What we want to do is take the opportunity to tell people about the essential service we provide and how well we do it. It is time we congratulated ourselves, and the show provides the perfect platform."

Oades expects the Love Logistics audience to include members of government, and hopes that it will help them to a new understanding of the importance of FTA members' contributions to the economy. Despite complimenting governments on their parts in improving the lot of UK operators, Oades remains measured in his praise. "We think the next government must substantially reinvest in infrastructure. And not just the road network – that goes without saying. Our concern now is the environment around it, as we move towards a carbon-free world and work to combat emissions."

He's talking about issues surrounding alternative fuels, such as biofuels, CNG (compressed natural gas), LNG (liquefied natural gas), dimethyl ether and hydrogen – as well as battery charging points for electric commercial vehicles and hybrids.

FTA's own efforts in this area saw the establishment of its Logistics Carbon Reduction Scheme (LCRS) at the beginning of the year, as

our work," he says. "I understand why some are not involved, but, with our bigger corporate members, I can't see many not signing up."

But Oades also raises other issues related to the environment that are currently worrying freight professionals. He cites delivery access outside daytime hours, for example. "If you polled all our members on the one thing they want more than anything, it would be the ability to operate their fleets at night," he insists. "Currently, environmental planning restrictions prohibit it, even though we can see a big opportunity, in terms of the environment."

Then there is the small matter of respect. Instead of the oft-painted negative picture of dirty van and truck fleets, Oades would like to see some appreciation not only for the scale of investment and engineering ingenuity lavished on improving transport, but also for the importance of freight operations. "Commercial vehicles are an easy target, but truck operators make a huge contribution to the economy, not just in terms in making deliveries happen, but also road fuel duty."

For the FTA boss, that gives the transport industry the right to be judged as an essential user, in much the same way as agricultural users – enabling it to qualify at least for reduced fuel duty.

He also toes the party line when he maintains that recent toll increases for the Severn Bridge crossing and the M6 Midlands Expressway are "completely inappropriate" to transport users, who effectively provide an essential service.

debate

FTA president Stewart Oades tells John Challen why the industry should be spreading the word about loving logistics

Who is Stewart Oades?

A married father of two, Stewart Oades has spent 30 years in the logistics industry, having enjoyed senior positions at a number of operators, such as Safeway, Exel and Christian Salvesen. While at the latter, Oades was responsible for the company's turnaround and subsequent sale to Groupe Norbert Dentressangle. With family links to haulage, Oades studied the economics of transport at university and holds an honours degree in business studies. He has served on the FTA board since 2007 and was made president in March 2009.

reported in Transport Engineer (February 2010, page 4). With the March deadline now passed, Oades says he is pleased with the reaction to the scheme from government and operators alike. "We've had a positive response from government, as well as public backing from [Secretary of State for Transport] Lord Adonis," reports Oades. "They agree we are taking positive steps towards making carbon reduction work – and we are making good progress. We're already engaged in detailed discussions with many operators," he asserts.

Oades' own estimates put the total number of vehicles now covered by the scheme at 25,000, a figure he says is growing on a weekly basis as major operators, such as DHL and TEG, come on board. "Ideally, I'd like the scheme to include the vast majority of our members – to give it the credibility that will force government to recognise

His solution? Pay-as-you drive: "[FTA] wouldn't rule out road user charging, because it is more suitable [than tolls] and more sensible," insists Oades. "But we would like to be involved in discussions about how it would be implemented towards the commercial vehicle sector."

Finally, on the subject of sensible decisions, Oades is keen to get interested parties thinking outside the box: "Common sense ideas, such as longer vehicles, should be on the agenda. We're relaxed about dropping the heavier vehicles side, if we can get longer vehicles," he says. "We know there are engineering challenges for longer vehicles, but we also see the environmental benefits of reducing tractor fleet numbers that come from improving individual vehicle length by 10 or 12%. We will continue to put our view forward, but we just need a receptive audience for debate." 