

Crippling HGV driver shortages 'greatest challenges of a generation'

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The boss of Britain's biggest pallet delivery network has warned that crippling driver shortages are causing "one of the greatest challenges of a generation".

[Pall-Ex chief executive Kevin Buchanan](#) said a huge fall in the number of available drivers, caused by a combination of factors, threatened huge supply chain delays.

He said Government must offer fresh support to help the industry train up new drivers to fill the spaces and ease the deadlock.

[The Road Haulage Association \(RHA\)](#) says there is a shortage of about 60,000 drivers right now, and around 30,000 HGV driving tests were lost last year because of the pandemic.

Many European drivers have also returned to their home countries, with Brexit and pandemic restrictions dampening enthusiasm for returning to the UK.

As a result, hauliers have been forced to ramp up wages to attract talent, with concerns that that and stock shortages are forcing end prices up.

The industry wants the Government to make it easier for drivers whose certification has lapsed to come back into the business and want it to encourage insurance companies to lower the minimum age of driver cover from 25 to 21.

There was criticism this week when Transport minister Grant Shapps said they were helping by extending the hours drivers can legally work.

However he said they had also “ramped up” the number of available driving tests and were “considering other measures”.

Mr Buchanan runs and is a co-owner of the £87 million turnover Pall-Ex Group, which was set up by [ex-Dragon's Den star Hilary Devey](#), and is headquartered at Ellistown, near Coalville, Leicestershire.

The group operates [two pallet networks in the UK, Pall-Ex and Fortec](#), and its membership of independent haulage businesses taking shares in the business.

Members move pallets for one another within the network, with most of its UK freight passing through its central Leicestershire hub. It has similar hub and spoke operations in other countries.

Mr Buchanan, who has been in transport for more than 30 years, said emergency action was needed now.

He said: “As an industry, we are facing one of the greatest challenges of a generation.

“The combination of Brexit and the Covid-19 pandemic has compounded the driver shortage that has been an ever-increasing threat for several years.

“Drivers having to isolate and those who have chosen to leave the industry because of Covid, as well as a vastly reduced talent pool thanks to most European drivers no longer having freedom of movement into the UK has seen the number of skilled

drivers fall off a cliff in the last 18 months.

“The government must act immediately to protect the supply chain that has kept Britain moving for the last 18 months.

“The government has always been slow to recognise the transport sector as a key industry in this country.



Pall-Ex chief executive Kevin Buchanan

“But now, more than ever, it is vital that it does not neglect the heroes who were hailed as key workers throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, who transported everything from life-saving medical supplies to toilet roll.

“That simply cannot be allowed to happen.”

A Pall-Ex spokeswoman said the average age of HGV drivers in

the UK was increasing – currently standing at 56 – as fewer young people entered the industry.

More and more of its member businesses, she said, were struggling to find drivers to carry out collections and deliveries in a time when demand has increased significantly.

She said that a Pall-Ex survey suggested three-quarters of its members said that they were affected by driver shortages every single day, and 100 per cent said the situation was causing their business to suffer.

The skills gap, Brexit and Covid, had resulted in a situation where stock shortages of household items and grocery essentials were already being seen – described as a “perfect storm” by Paul Sanders, chairman of the Association of Pallet Networks (APN) in an open letter to the Transport Secretary.

Craig Stevens is managing director of Pall-Ex shareholder member STD Developments, in Congleton, Cheshire.

He said: “We are finding it hard to continue to deliver the quality service we have built our reputation on.

“It is something that our customers and fellow network members now expect from us.

“If things carry on the way they are going, profits will start to drop and we will be forced to increase our prices, as will all other transport businesses.

“This will have a massive impact on the price of goods purchased in the UK.

“There needs to be a greater incentive for young people to get into driving HGVs.

“Providing support with the cost of training and forcing insurance companies to cover new drivers would be a step in the right direction to solving the problem.”



Grant Shapps, Transport Secretary
(Image: Getty Images)

Fortec shareholder member Brocklehurst Transport Ltd is also experiencing the challenges brought about by the driver shortage.

Dave Webster, managing director of Brocklehurst Transport Ltd, in Yorkshire, is a Fortec shareholder member.

He said: "If nothing changes, we will have to park our trucks up. We will not be able to operate as a business.

"To improve the situation, I'd like to see a relaxation of the CPC regulations allowing drivers, whose certification has lapsed, to come back into the business and have 12 months grace to complete refresher training.

"The Government needs to encourage insurance companies to lower the minimum age from 25 to 21, as this means so many more talented young drivers can enter the industry. This would

be a massive help.”

The Department of Transport told the BBC it is “well aware of HGV driver shortages”.

In a statement, it said: “Most of the solutions are commercial and within the industry, with progress already being made in key areas such as testing and recruitment, and a big focus towards improving pay, working conditions and diversity.”