



University of
Nottingham
Rights Lab

Disposable workers? Experiences of work in road freight transport and warehousing

2021



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Introduction

This report analyses experiences of work in UK road freight transport and warehousing and recommends measures to improve working conditions. It identifies concerns associated with six aspects of work: employment relationships; workers' relationship with management; workplace pressures; working time; work-life balance; and compensation. The report also explores the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on workers who have been delivering essential services. Separately, it captures perspectives on the longstanding issue relating to the road freight transport sector – the driver shortage in the UK.

The research makes recommendations targeted at five main stakeholders to better understand and improve working conditions in the sectors. This includes researchers, government, trade associations, trade unions and businesses. The recommendations are based on the research findings, evidence of good practice noted in interviews, and recommendations made by workers to improve working conditions.

The generalisability of the findings was limited by the funding available and therefore this report does not provide a comprehensive review of key issues relating to work. The findings reflect the research participants' (16) own experiences and perceptions of problems related to work in the sectors supplemented with data collected from a discussion forum used by drivers which provide insights for future research on this area.

This research was conducted by Dr Akilah Jardine, Rights Lab Research Fellow in Antislavery Business and Communities, and Dr Alexander Trautrim, Associate Director of the Rights Lab (Business and Economics Programme), University of Nottingham. The Rights Lab is a University Beacon of Excellence that focuses on research to help end modern slavery. We would like to extend our thanks to everyone who assisted with this research and provided their valuable time.

This seed-corn project was funded by the Chartered Institute of Logistics and Transport in the UK, a membership organisation for professionals involved in the movement of goods and people and their associated supply chains.



Executive summary

Key findings

This study analysed experiences of work in road freight transport and warehousing in order to understand key issues relating to work. It found that whilst contributing significantly to the UK's economy, certain factors in these sectors threaten aspects of work. These factors include:

1. the increasing competition amongst retailers, logistic providers, temporary worker agencies, and workers themselves
2. low profit margins and the pressure to reduce costs and increase productivity (which is cascaded down to workers)
3. a heavy reliance on temporary and agency workers
4. shifts in consumer habits that have increased demand for e-commerce and services such as next day or just in time deliveries

The study found that these factors present key challenges to HGV drivers and warehouse operatives working in logistics. The six key concerns that were highlighted during the research for this study were:

1. **employment relationships:** agency workers, while having flexibility in choosing when to work, expressed concerns around the terms and conditions of their work which left many feeling more unstable and insecure compared to those directly employed by companies
2. **workers' relationship with their management:** many workers felt unable to speak out against their working conditions while others were subject to threatening and intimidating behaviour in the workplace
3. **workplace pressures:** facing several workplace pressures that impacted the quality of work was a prominent issue
4. **working time:** significant concerns were expressed about the unpredictable, inconsistent and often long hours of work in the sectors and the inadequate rest between shifts
5. **work-life balance:** many workers felt they did not have adequate time for personal or family life
6. **compensation:** it was common for most workers to work overtime to obtain above a subsistence level of wages

Given the outbreak of Covid-19, the research also demonstrated workers' perception of the pandemic's impact. HGV driver and warehouse workers have been recognised as key workers and many have continued to work throughout the pandemic. Like many other sectors, some workers were furloughed or had to self-isolate due to their vulnerability to the virus. Those who continued to work expressed concerns around the availability of the work in the sector, financial repercussions and workplace safety. Many felt anxious and some reported colleagues being compelled to resign due to fear of contracting the virus.

Finally, the research captured HGV drivers' perspective of the driver shortage which has long been an issue for this sector. While it was beyond the scope of this report to study and validate the claims around driver shortages, it is clear that many workers do not feel there is a shortage of drivers. This was predominately due to the challenge for some workers in finding employment in the sector and also the poor labour and employment conditions, which many felt was a key deterrent for qualified drivers and for younger people.

Recommendations

- 1. Research:** considerably more work needs to be done to understand working conditions in the RFT and warehouse sectors. Researchers interested in undertaking further work on the sectors might wish to consider workforce demographics, hidden or hard-to-reach populations, workers' awareness and knowledge of their employment rights and the extent of labour market non-compliance across the UK.
- 2. Governments:** should strongly consider taking appropriate measures to ensure that worker rights are promoted and protected. These include improving communication channels with trade unions, trade associations, companies and worker agencies, introduce incentives to encourage good practice, investigate potential links between driver shortage and poor working conditions and introducing commuting time to legally allowed driving limits.
- 3. Trade associations and trade unions:** associations should consider promoting dialogue between trade unions and their members and identifying appropriate measures to incentivise good practice. Trade unions should continue to encourage union representation in workplaces and work on building trust with workers, including promoting evidence of the benefits of unionisation to workers.
- 4. Businesses:** Transport and logistic companies need to ensure a positive workplace culture and environment that promotes job autonomy and ensures two-way communication between workers and management; to ensure adequate time and rest, and appropriate compensation; to enable worker voice and worker empowerment; and to ensure trust, respect and dignity for all workers.

Context

Transport and logistics are an important part of any supply chain and play a key role in the economy, with many companies now relying on the timely and safe transportation of goods. They are important activities which facilitate the smooth operations of company supply chains by ensuring a balance between the supply and demand for goods and services. In the UK, transport and logistics make a significant contribution to the national economy, employing 2.7 million people and contributing over £120 billion to the UK economy.¹

Road freight transport (RFT) or road haulage is a mode of transporting goods from one destination to another. Goods can be moved between locations domestically or internationally between different countries. It is the most common method of transportation in the UK. In 2019, 79% of goods were moved by road in Britain.² It offers more flexibility than other transportation modes, benefits from the UK's extensive road networks, and is a cost-effective way to transport goods. The majority of goods are moved by heavy goods vehicles (HGVs) which are vehicles over 3.5 tonnes gross laden weight. RFT is a highly competitive and low-margin sector, comprised of businesses providing a range of services for customers such as one-off collection and delivery services, or providing third-party logistics services by integrating their services into a customer's business. Separately, warehousing activities are a key component of the logistics process and includes the efficient storage and handling of goods in designated buildings for long or short periods until they are required for distribution and delivery. Worker activities include receiving goods, for example those delivered by RFT, sorting, packing, storing, and preparing for shipment and distribution.

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Though RFT and warehousing play a key part in most economies, reports and media coverage of the sectors have highlighted concerns about the employment and labour conditions of workers. In some reports, extant research has shed light on unlawful working practices, with many companies under scrutiny for the treatment of workers. For instance, in 2016 the UK Parliament's Business, Innovation and Skills Committee condemned Sports Direct for the treatment of workers in their warehousing facilities.³ The company's employment agencies were found to be paying workers below the National Minimum Wage (NMW) and concerns were raised about the health and safety protocols of their establishments. Various deductions were made from the workers already low salaries such as pre-paid debit card and insurance schemes. Separately, at Amazon - the world's largest online retailer - employees across the world operating in their distribution warehouses have cited low wages, labour intensive and unsafe working conditions. The company's business model of guaranteeing short-delivery times such as next-day or same-day delivery and employing temporary workers on zero-hour contracts, often through labour providers, has been heavily criticised for leading to the exploitation of workers. Meanwhile, in the RFT sector, numerous reports have reported poor labour and employment practices. For instance, a study for the European Parliament reported varied employment patterns, including complex subcontracting, long driving times and inadequate rest, health and safety hazards associated with driving long distances.⁴

As part of the United Nations' sustainable development agenda, there is a global call for action to promote inclusive and sustainable economic growth, employment and decent work for all.⁵ This includes achieving full and productive employment and decent work for people, protecting labour rights, and promoting safe and secure working environments. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), decent work "involves opportunities for work that is productive and delivers a fair income, security in the workplace and social protection for families, better prospects for personal development and social integration, freedom for people to express their concerns, organize and participate in the decisions that affect their lives and equality of opportunity and treatment for all women and men."⁶

The promotion of decent work in the workplace can help tackle varying poor and unlawful working practices. This includes a broad spectrum of activity encompassing exploitative labour and employment relations. While these can range in type and severity, securing decent work for all workers can help foster environments that are resilient and responsive to poor working practices.

This research analyses workers' experiences and perceptions of work in RFT and warehousing to identify key issues concerning work in the transport and logistics sectors and measures to improve working conditions. Given the outbreak of Covid-19, declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization in March 2020, the project evolved to capture the impact of the pandemic on workers. Workers in the sectors have been recognised as essential and many have continued to operate during the pandemic to meet demands for their services.

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Methodology

This study employed qualitative methods to illuminate the experience and perceptions of workers operating in RFT and warehousing.

Data was collected via an online forum and semi-structured interviews with workers.

The team conducted 10 interviews with HGV drivers and six interviews with warehouse workers. The interviews explored participants' own experiences and general perceptions of working in the sectors and the measures that they felt should be in place to improve working conditions. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. A thematic analysis of the data was undertaken.

This research began prior to the outbreak of Covid-19 and therefore the impact of the pandemic was not initially within its scope. As the data collection began at the time the disease was declared a pandemic, accessing participants proved challenging. Understandably, numerous workers cancelled interviews citing other personal and work priorities. Some interviews were rescheduled on numerous occasions due to fluctuations with workers' assignments. Trade unions that we contacted and workers who we interviewed echoed heightened concerns and priorities for workers in the sector. Due to the impact of Covid-19 on data collection, interviews were also supplemented by data collected from a discussion forum used by drivers. The research team searched sub-forums and threads where workers discussed various aspects of their work which related to the research scope. The team extracted and analysed 15 threads, containing 522 messages that were published between 15 October 2019 and 9 July 2020.

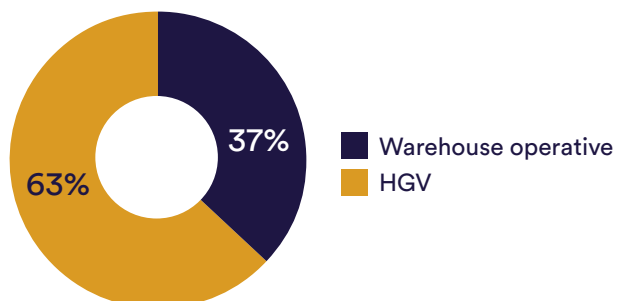
To protect the anonymity of forum users, quotes used in this report are non-verbatim.

The project was granted ethical approval from the University of Nottingham Research Ethics Committee.

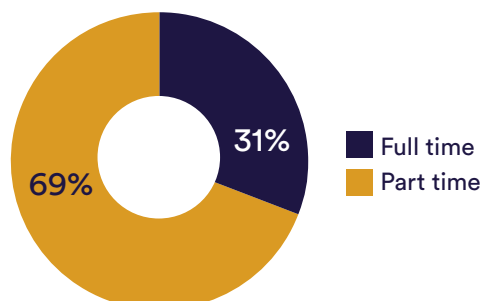
“The interviews explored participants' own experiences and general perceptions of working in the sectors and the measures that they felt should be in place to improve working conditions.”

Profile of participants

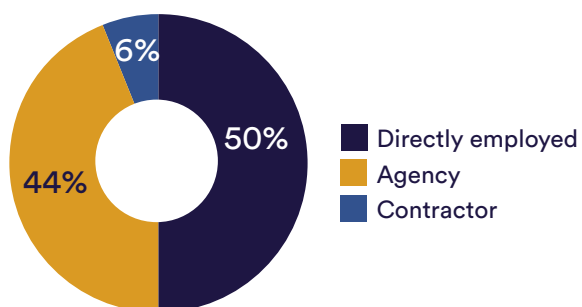
Occupation



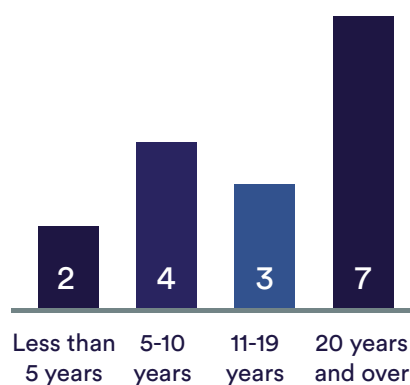
Employment contract



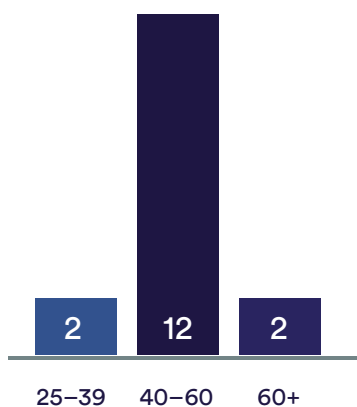
Employment type



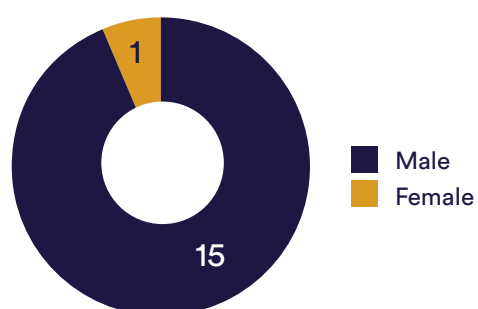
Number of years in the sector



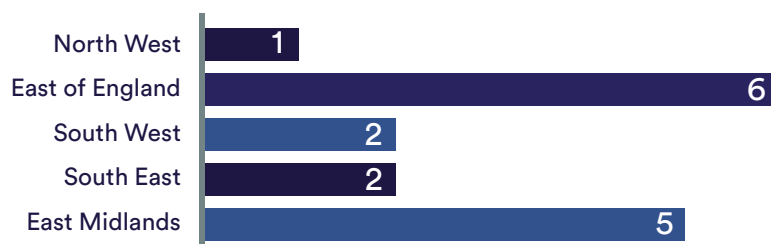
Age



Gender



Location



Findings in detail

Employment relationships: Agency vs direct employment

A key concern expressed by workers in the interviews and discussion forums was the treatment of workers employed via agencies compared to those directly employed by companies. RFT and warehousing are heavily reliant on worker agencies which allow companies to respond to the fluctuation in the demand for goods and services, particularly around busy times of the year such as holidays and as witnessed most recently, in times of global crises. However, many companies in the sectors now predominately use agencies to fill their workforce. This is problematic as extant research has shown that agency workers are often at higher risk of poor labour and employment practices due to the lack of oversight and accountability.

Some workers acknowledged the benefits of being employed with an agency. This includes agencies offering workers more flexibility:

“Agency work also has its problems, but I’d rather work for an agency and take annual leave whenever I want to.” (Discussion forum, HGV driver).

“I have a choice of either go direct or an agency, and I chose the agency myself. The reason being is if I go direct it’ll be any five days out of seven. Whereas with the agency, I could turn around and say ‘Look, I’m only doing one day this week.’ I’ve got that flexibility.” (Interview, HGV driver, agency).

However, several drivers also noted that a downside to being employed directly by a company often was that if a worker was exhausted from driving long hours, they could not turn down a shift as they would likely be left without a job:

“With direct...you’ll get penalised...you’ll have your start times and everything, and maybe by the third day you’ll get tired, but you can’t do anything.” (Interview, HGV driver, agency).

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...many companies in the sectors now predominately use agencies to fill their workforce. This is problematic as extant research has shown that agency workers are often at higher risk of poor labour and employment practices due to the lack of oversight and accountability.”

Nevertheless, the general consensus from drivers was that agency workers have poorer working terms and conditions compared to directly employed staff. Negative attitudes towards agency work predominately concerned the terms and conditions of their work. The comparison with pay seemed less of a key concern in part, due to the removal of the “Swedish derogation” contractual provisions under the Agency Workers Regulations (AWR) in April 2020, which now prevents agency workers from opting out from pay parity after 12 weeks working for a company. Pay parity allows these agency workers to receive the same basic pay and treatment as those permanently employed by a company.

While agency workers operating for a company for 12 weeks are entitled to the same pay as permanently employed staff, workers had concerns about the poor treatment of agency workers that continues to persist. As one stated:

“Now [agency workers] on the same money as we are...because of this new government law...but they don't get the same treatment as us...they get just unfairly treated...just to add their money up for the same money as the main contractor...it's not the answer, the answer is they should be treated a bit better in my eyes.” (Interview, warehouse worker, directly employed).

Many felt the constant “churning around of labour” (Interview, HGV driver, agency) in the sectors left agency workers unstable and insecure. Concerns around this were widespread and many drivers criticised worker agencies for also over-hiring workers to maintain competition at the disadvantage of workers who are waiting to be given job assignments:

“[Agencies] are like they want to have these people on their books, they say ‘Look at us, we've got like 500 drivers, you know, if you need drivers...and then...some company could come along and say ‘we need 400 drivers tomorrow’....so it's like ‘yeah, no problem we'll do that.’” (Interview, HGV driver, agency).

“All these companies are 100% reliant on the temporary workers...[agencies] take people by queue. They don't take in people by number, it's queues...when I spoke with one of the agency recruiters, he said, ‘We're hiring 60 people because we know that not everybody stays...so we don't need 60 people, we need 30 people.’” (Interview, warehouse worker, agency).

Attitudes towards the over-hiring and abundance of workers seeking assignments highlighted the disposability of agency workers which left many feeling financially insecure. This was due to companies not having to retain workers and only seeking their labour as required. Talking about this issue, an HGV driver said: “Companies are using agency drivers to do their work because it's so easy for them...to get rid of the agency driver than it is for their staff.” (Interview, HGV driver, agency). This resonated with a warehouse worker's perception of the use of agency workers: “If you're the agency person at work you're not treated anywhere near as well as the permanent people...literally, at the end of the day, they can say ‘Don't come tomorrow, don't need you tomorrow.’” (Interview, warehouse worker, directly employed).

“Attitudes towards the over-hiring and abundance of workers seeking assignments highlighted the disposability of agency workers which left many feeling financially insecure.”

Consequently, feelings of financial insecurity were fuelled by the common occurrence of assignments being cancelled. Some workers reported that they constantly had shifts cancelled last-minute after arriving to work and were therefore turned away and not paid:

“I receive a rota...told me to come to work. I spend my time, I spend my petrol and I've been working only three hours and you now sending me home.” (Interview, warehouse worker, agency).

It was noted, that in comparison, those employed directly by a company had guaranteed hours and were unlikely to have their shifts cancelled and thus, left without payment:

“It's a bit more difficult for them [company] to cancel you at that time because they've got to pay you.” (Interview, HGV driver, agency).

While there were more negative attitudes towards agency work, subsequent findings in this report demonstrate commonalities between key concerns regarding work between both agency and directly employed staff.

Relationship with management

Another recurring issue was workers' relationship with their management. This included transport managers and traffic planners in RFT, and warehouse managers and supervisors in warehousing. Here, two key issues that emerged were the lack of job autonomy in the workplace and threatening and intimidating behaviour.

1. Lack of job autonomy

Responses from workers suggested that some lacked job autonomy - meaning they feel they do not have any control or say in their workplace:

“ [I]t's the culture within the industry, firstly... is that drivers have their place, they can't complain, they can't do anything...” (Interview, HGV driver, agency).

“ [They] are preferring to take people from the bottom with poor education, with poor skills, because they're willing to stay to follow orders, to listen and do whatever they can with no argument, with not your own opinion to asking why, maybe this is a better way, or you don't have to do this.” (Interview, warehouse worker, agency).

As a result of this, a key issue was being unable to voice any concerns about their work or offer suggestions about how to improve their working environment—for example, being too tired to work, which is of particular concern for HGV drivers given the nature of their job. A driver reported having to encourage workers to speak up if they were too tired to drive:

“ I've said to them... '[I]f you're physically tired then you don't go, you literally tell the company. I've done a five day week...I'm totally knackered.’” (Interview, HGV driver, contractor).

Separately, in a discussion forum where workers discussed organized worker strikes, some drivers cautioned each other about the potential impact of publicly voicing their concerns:

“ With videos and cameras these days, I wouldn't risk joining a strike against an employer. You could be blacklisted from good jobs just to get a bit of extra money.” (Discussion forum, HGV driver).

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A warehouse worker also suggested that speaking up about conditions could result in them being blacklisted:

“ Nobody in this environment likes people who are complaining. You are good to them when you are working and when you are achieving your KPI [key performance indicator]once you say that you are having a problem, they put you on a virtual blacklist.” (Interview, warehouse worker, agency).

Some workers indicated that they wished management would consult with them when planning their shifts. For instance, there were some workers who wanted to work day shifts but were compelled to work night shifts and vice versa. Workers commented that if management communicated with them and listened to these concerns it would improve the working environment:

“ [W]e’ve even put a proposal to them, because we’ve probably got 20-30 drivers that want to do permanent nights, and we’ve got the same amount of drivers that want to do permanent days...but they..say.. ‘Well it is in your contract, is what you signed up for’...they just don’t want to listen.” (Interview, HGV driver, contractor).

Warehouse workers also expressed this concern:

“ People [should] choose which shift you want, and which is stable, you know. Otherwise, it’s difficult to plan your day. If one week you’re working morning, another week day time, some on the evening, some on the night... it’s difficult to plan anything.” (Interview, warehouse worker, agency).

2. Threatening and intimidating behaviour

Workers reported various behaviours of management that they felt were deployed to control or intimidate them. These issues were particularly prevalent in the RFT sector. Some drivers felt that their relationship with management was one of subordination, where management looked down on workers who are seen as “far down the food chain” (Interview, HGV driver, agency) or at the “lower end of employment” (Interview, HGV driver, directly employed).

There appeared to be three main tactics used to intimidate and exert control over workers:

a. Surveillance and control

In the RFT sector, several electronic devices are used to monitor drivers. This includes tachographs and cameras fitted to trucks. Tachograph devices record information about driving time, speed and distance. They are also used to ensure that drivers and employers follow the rules relating to drivers’ hours (table 1). In addition to tachographs, some companies have fitted inward facing and outward-facing cameras to their trucks. These devices can protect drivers in a variety of ways such as ensuring that they do not work over their legal hours and capturing accidents on the road, but also tracking goods being transported. However, some workers feel that the cameras (particularly the inward facing cameras) and tachographs are used to micromanage and exert control over them. While many recognise that the tachograph can help protect them from going over their legally allowed hours, they feel that this is exploited by management. For instance, it is common for drivers to be given planned routes by transport managers but different variables can affect plans, such as accidents on the road and delays in warehouses. Many expressed that tachographs are used to micromanage their routes:

“ ...the route is analysed to the nth degree by somebody sitting in an office. Why did you turn left at that junction and why didn’t you go straight on?...[W]hy have you done this, why have you gone that way, why were you late getting there...it’s like the computer says it can be done in X,Y,Z.” (Interview, HGV driver, agency).

Another explained:

“ It has gotten more and more; they completely control the process. Not just your performance and behaviour monitored through things like the tachograph...being prescribed the route that you have to take. So the driver has gotten less and less control over their daily work...the employer regards it as a positive because it increases the employer’s ability to control the work process.” (Interview, HGV driver, directly employed).



Regarding the cameras, many expressed that they have no problem with the outward facing cameras as it protects them against accidents as well as ensuring the goods they are transported are safeguarded. However, many drivers are uncomfortable with inward facing cameras:

“What makes this job miserable is that I feel like I’m always being watched. It makes me paranoid that I could be disciplined for something as simple as having a drink or sandwich on clear roads.” (Discussion forum, HGV driver).

An HGV driver suggested that companies use these surveillance mechanisms as a marketing ploy to potential clients:

“Their transport system is a product and they will go to people...and say, ‘Look we’d like to do your transport for you, you know, you’ve no need to buy any lorries, we’ll do it. But what’s more our drivers they’ve got cameras facing outwards, they’ve got cameras facing down the side of their truck for safety and they’ve got a camera in the cab pointing at them all day, so we can see what they’re doing.’” (Interview, HGV driver, agency).

The close monitoring and observation of the workforce was also an issue raised by some warehouse workers, who mentioned the use of performance trackers or rigid KPIs to control the work process:

“You’re expected to hit a certain rate...There’s a mounted terminal, it tells you your performance, the percentage of your performance and your rate and so on and so forth, so...you[re] constantly...reminded of it on a screen if you’re falling behind what they expect.” (Interview, warehouse worker, directly employed).

As will be discussed in the following sections, these mechanisms can place immense pressure on workers.

b. Disposable workforce

HGV drivers expressed that workers in the sectors were commonly told that they could be easily replaced. Many were therefore compelled to accept shifts for fear of not being able to get assignments in the future or losing their job:

“I’m doing all sorts of strange shifts because if I don’t do it someone else will get my shifts. I’ll go to work and drive even if I feel like I haven’t slept enough!” (Discussion forum, HGV driver).

Others stated:

“The relationships between a recruitment agency and its drivers...and the pressure that it can put on them to go and do a job and say ‘Look if you don’t do it this week...they’ll be no work for you next week.’” (Interview, HGV driver, agency).

“If you don’t want do it, someone else will do it.” (Interview, HGV driver, directly employed).

“HGV drivers expressed that workers in the sectors were commonly told that they could be easily replaced. Many were therefore compelled to accept shifts for fear of not being able to get assignments in the future or losing their job...”

Because of this, just as companies and agencies compete amongst themselves, drivers are in competition due to the disposable nature of their job:

“It’s like it sort of forces drivers to compete amongst themselves and usually a lot of them are offering like very low rates of pay comparatively and sort of a take it or leave it attitude then and, you know if you don’t want to work for this money, we’ll find...other people who do...” (Interview, HGV driver, agency).

Some warehouse workers also expressed this feeling that they are disposable:

“[I]t’s like if you leave they wouldn’t bat an eyelid, they’d have somebody in your shoes the following morning.” (Interview, warehouse worker, directly employed).

Drivers also reported being subject to unfair dismissal or inconsistent disciplinary action for minor infringements which often reinforces this feeling of expendability. For instance, an HGV driver reported that workers were banned from various jobs for arriving three or four minutes late on a job, while another was left unemployed because they were advocating for worker rights. It was noted that in some cases, the disciplinary actions were inconsistent to infringements, for instance an HGV driver reported that a driver was placed on a 12 month-long warning due to accidentally breaking an indicator lens, while other drivers who have caused more serious and costly accidents have also been given 12 month-long warnings.

c. General bullying culture

Workers reported that in some workplaces there is a bullying culture. Again, this was mostly prevalent in the RFT sector. Bullying tactics included workers feeling as if they were treated as “objects” and not human beings, feeling “demoralis[ed]”, “spoke[n] to like crap,” “treat[ed]...like kids” and “like second class citizens” [HGV discussion forums]. One driver expressed in a discussion forum that it feels like a “them versus us” in the workplace mentality rather than a “team.”

“[T]here is a certain amount of schadenfreude, which means to take pleasure in someone else’s misery, where you have these incidents are reported in the press and they’re seen as almost mirthful. They’re not quite bad enough to do anything about but it’s like saying ‘driving aren’t allowed umbrellas’, ‘oh look at him, you know, he’s been soaked, you know absolutely soaked out there and he can’t even have an umbrella.’” (Interview, HGV driver, agency).

This bullying culture was also expressed in some warehouse interviews:

“[Management] got a really bad attitude to how they can treat people...” (Interview, warehouse worker, directly employed).

Another worker reported a case where a worker was bullied by their supervisor because of their ethnicity:

“He was ridiculing him, you know, making fun of him, undermining him.” (Interview, warehouse worker, directly employed).



Workplace pressures

Facing several workplace pressures that impacted the quality of work was a prominent issue for HGV drivers and warehouse operatives. In the RFT sector, workplace pressures centred around workers being forced to max out their legal hours and reduce their rest breaks. A salient issue was that workers felt that pressure from companies and their management teams coupled with high demand for timely deliveries compelled them to max out or go beyond their legal driving limit. As one HGV driver expressed in an interview:

“ [T]here are some drivers who feel pressured to go over that four and a half hours, for instance, just to make that delivery on time.” (Interview, HGV driver, directly employed).

Another explained that there was a pressure to get the job done no matter what it takes:

“ I’m not proud of this...I’ve agreed to do a job then I try and get the job done... it’s a weakness on my part that I don’t at times feel comfortable about saying no.” (Interview, HGV driver, directly employed).

“ You’ve got your boss on your case constantly, because he wants you to do more and more and more all the time.” (Interview, HGV driver, directly employed).

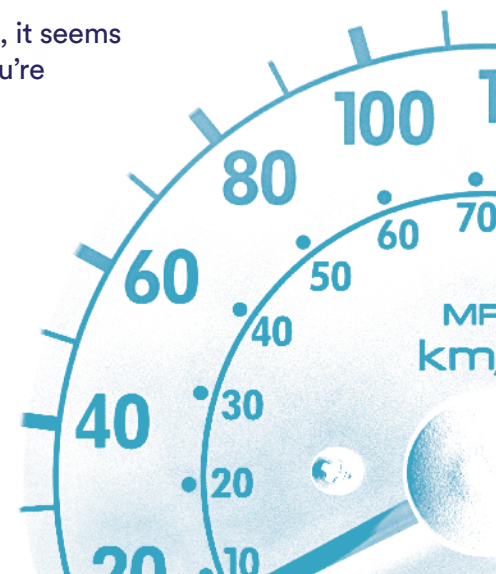
According to many drivers, the entire sector is under pressure which is subsequently passed on to drivers:

“ [S]ee it’s not the owner that is on the driver’s back. It’s the traffic planner. So, the haulier, the owner of the company can turn round and tell you to do it by the book, the traffic planner is aware that he has got a customer screaming “Your driver was supposed to be here at 8 o’clock this morning’...The rule book says you should do one thing. That conflicts with the commercial operation that the traffic planner is trying to accommodate.” (Interview, HGV driver, directly employed).

“ I think that the relationship between the transport company, the client who are sending them out there to do work, that relationship can put a lot of pressure on the driver who will carry the can for it.” (Interview, HGV driver, agency).

Many expressed concern that companies would often exploit “loopholes” in driver hours regulation to ensure timely delivery of goods. As drivers are allowed to reduce their rest breaks in some cases (for instance, as demonstrated in table 1 they are allowed to reduce rest breaks from 11 to 9 hours no more than three times a week), many drivers complained about companies using this to pressure them to work more hours even when they are tired. An HGV interview participant expressed that while their company was keen to promote health and safety at work, there was the constant pressure of doing more hours even when exhausted:

“ [T]hey want 100% health and safety, but then on the other hand, it seems as though they contradict themselves...at the end of the day you’re making drivers go out and do another load which is going to put on so many hours and he’s telling you he’s shattered.” (Interview, HGV driver, contractor).



Some commented that management could take advantage of workers who are new to driving in the sector and unfamiliar with the rules and regulations which can be confusing:

“And because you’re a new pass...and it’s their busy period, they exploit that, because then they’ll start giving you stuff whether you’re going to be going over your hours and breaking your rules. And as a new pass...you don’t know any better.” (Interview, HGV driver, agency).

“There is a lot of pressure there, and that’s because... a lot of the drivers are obviously new to this country, a lot of them don’t know any rights, so they do seem to push them into a corner where they don’t know what else they can do, to be honest.” (Interview, HGV driver, contractor).

Separately, while a tachograph can help prevent drivers from having to go beyond their legal limit, worryingly some drivers have suggested companies have pressured them into lying about their working time or driving illegally:

“Some employers will just let you get an infringement and say, “Oh, just carry on, and just write on there you got delayed because of an accident...which is not true...but the problem is if we get stopped by VOSA [Vehicle and Operator Services Agency]⁷, we get fined. We can have our license taken off us.” (Interview, HGV driver, agency).

“Agencies have never asked me to drive illegally but multiple companies have asked me both as an agency worker and as a directly employed worker.” (Discussion forum, HGV driver).

Though some workers felt the pressure to max out their hours and reduce their rest, others felt that if they did get in trouble the responsibility would fall on the driver:

“It’s always to benefit the Managers and it’s always, their sole focus is to get the loads out delivered, make themselves look good, but they can sometimes do that at cost of health and safety, and potentially the driver getting into a lot of trouble if he got pulled over...If he listened to that Manager and then got pulled over by the policy or by the DVSA he could be looking at a fine himself. And of course, if the manager was ever questioned “did you tell him to continue?” the Manager would say ‘No, no. I don’t know why he did it.’ And we’ve witnessed that a lot as well...and then they’ll discipline the driver as a result because it’s all done over the phone and there’s no sort of evidence to protect the driver...” (Interview, HGV driver, directly employed).

“Separately, while a tachograph can help prevent drivers from having to go beyond their legal limit, worryingly some drivers have suggested companies have pressured them into lying about their working time or driving illegally.”



In the warehouse sector, workplace pressure mainly stemmed from companies' keenness on improving efficiency and productivity performance which increased anxiety and stress for workers and in many cases also impacted negatively on their physical health. Similar to RFT drivers, warehouse operative reported that the entire sector was based on competition and the pressure to improve productivity and efficiency was passed to the management teams and cascaded down to the workers. As one worker said:

“ I just think the pressure on certainly middle management to make this venture a success, from their bosses, I think it can be stressful for them, and it's obviously passed down into the workforce...and they're expected to perform at a certain level...” (Interview, warehouse worker, directly employed).

This pressure is amplified by rigid performance indicators which are used to track worker productivity as some companies have expectations for the workforce to reach a certain rate. This makes the role demanding and stressful for many. Relatedly, another concern was that productivity and performance ratings did not take into consideration the diversity of tasks and the different capabilities of the workforce. As a result of this, workers felt it was impossible for the entire workforce to reach these targets:

“ [E]very task is different, but your percentage of performance...where we are now they expect 90% as an acceptable rate, and I would say probably only about a third of the workforce, in the area that I'm in, are actually getting anywhere near that....the way they look at it is, say you've got 15 people working in that particular department, if five people can do it...well so can everybody else, but I don't think they take into account that maybe the five people that can do it are probably knocking themselves out doing it and they're struggling towards the end of the week....it's not physically possible.” (Interview, warehouse worker, directly employed).

Because performance indicators and trackers can affect a worker's rating and increase the risk of them facing disciplinary action, not only are workers feeling stressed and overwhelmed, but the pressure of the workplace environment also takes a toll on their physical health, particularly with the work's quick repetitive manual handling movements. Consequently, there were reports of physical health issues related to the nature of the work such as knee problems, neck injuries, arthritis, and fatigue:

“ My feet...the pain was horrible. I couldn't breathe properly. I couldn't stand by early morning when it was 7am, 8am...I still had two hours to go...you had to lift, you had to pull heavy, very heavy [goods] and everything.” (Interview, warehouse worker, agency).

“ You see people walking, one will be limping to the left, one will be limping to the right, and some people dragging their foot and some people are bent over...” (Interview, warehouse worker, directly employed).



Table 1. Summary of drivers' rules and regulations⁸

Drivers' hours rules ⁹ Regulation (EC) 561/2006	Working time rules Directive 2002/15/EC	GB Domestic rules ¹⁰ Working time regulations
Driving <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ 9 hours daily driving limit (can be increased to 10 hours twice a week) ■ Maximum 56 hours weekly driving limit ■ Maximum 90 hours fortnightly driving limit 	Working time (including driving) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Working time must not exceed average of 48 hours a week (no opt out) ■ (Normally calculated over a rolling 17-week period, but can be extended to 26 weeks under a collective or workforce agreement) ■ Maximum working time of 60 hours in one week (provided average not exceeded) ■ Maximum working time of 10 hours if night work performed (Can be extended under a collective or workforce agreement) 	Driving <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ 10 hour daily driving limit ■ 11 hour daily driving limit when driving on duty
Breaks <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ 45 minutes break after 4.5 hours driving ■ A break can be split into two periods, the first being at least 15 minutes and the second at least 30 minutes (which must be completed after 4.5 hours driving) 	Breaks <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Cannot work for more than 6 hours without a break. A break should be at least 15 minutes long ■ 30 minute break if working between 6 and 9 hours in total ■ 45 minute break if working more than 9 hours in total 	Breaks <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ 30 minute break after 5.5 hours driving Or <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ 45 minutes break within any period of 8 hours and 30 minutes. 30 minutes breaks must also be taken at the end of this period, unless it's the end of the working day
Rest <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ 11 hours regular daily rest; which can be reduced to 9 hours no more than three times a week ■ Alternatively, this regular daily rest period may be taken in two periods, the first of which must be an uninterrupted period of at least 3 hours and the second an uninterrupted period of at least nine hours ■ 45 hours weekly rest, which can be reduced to 24 hours, provided at least one full rest is taken in any fortnight. There should be no more than six consecutive 24 hour periods between weekly rests 	Rest <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Same rest requirements as EU drivers' hours rules 	Rest <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ 10 hours rest before the first duty and immediately after the last duty in a working week ■ At least 10 hours rest between 2 working days (or spreadovers) – this can be reduced to 8.5 hours up to 3 times a week ■ Every 2 weeks drivers must take at least one period of 24 hours off duty

Working time

Relatedly, significant concerns were expressed about working time in the sectors. These related specifically to the hours of work and time to rest after work. Workers' key issues with hours were that they were unpredictable and inconsistent and/or long.

The unpredictability and inconsistency of hours was most prominent in the RFT sector. Some workers complained about not knowing when their next shift would be and the infrequency of shifts. One worker acknowledged that while they liked the flexibility of agency work, it was challenging not knowing when they would work next:

“Well ironically like I would have said, like the flexibility to choose when I work...but it's got to the point now where it's so infrequent that I must like work whenever I get any...” (Interview, HGV driver, agency).

For those who were able to work, whether directly employed or employed via an agency, there were concerns that some never knew when they were going to finish work as it was common for hours to go over:

“[I]n the general haulage and the HGV no driver knows, no driver can give you an exact finish time.” (Interview, HGV driver, agency).

“One reason why drivers leave their jobs is because they are fed up of having their contracts abused. When you're meant to be doing forty hours a week, but most weeks end up doing as much as sixty.” (Discussion forum, HGV driver).

Working long hours was therefore seen as an expectation for workers and some workers complained about having to work excessive hours. Responses such as these demonstrated how legal working time could be taken advantage of, leading to long hours at work:

“In a week they could do three 15 [hours] followed by three 13 [hours] which is a 84 hour week. And that is perfectly legal. There are different regulations covering your driving hours, so you can't drive all that time, but you can actually be on duty for 84 hours in a week. In the twenty first century that just shouldn't be allowed anymore.” (Interview, HGV driver, directly employed).

“In a week they could do three 15 [hours] followed by three 13 [hours] which is a 84 hour week. And that is perfectly legal.”

This expectation for workers to work long hours was also noted in the warehousing sector:

“[E]verybody's expected to do a certain amount above and beyond their normal working week...I think it would probably [be] frowned upon, to be honest, it wouldn't be a popular thing if you refused to do any extra.” (Interview, warehouse worker, directly employed).

“This is a 12-hour shift. That's huge hours, 10pm to 10am.” (Interview, warehouse worker, agency).

Relatedly, for some workers, working time did not take into consideration the time it took for workers to commute to work:

- “ This is 3 hours extra [commute]. So, 12 hour shift, if you add up on both sides by one and a half hour, you literally have 8 hours at home to sleep, to prepare, to do everything [else]...you haven't got the time to sleep.” (Interview, warehouse worker, agency).
- “ [T]he law says, right, ‘minimum 9 hours rest, right? So, nine hours rest for me is when I'm resting. When I'm driving back home, that's not resting.’” (Interview, HGV driver, agency).

Due to the long and often unpredictable and inconsistent working hours, many workers expressed that they are not able to adequately rest between shifts due to the insufficient time to recuperate:

- “ I'm trying to balance wanting to be available but also trying make sure I'm able to sleep during the day. I want to show that I'm keen to work but I also need to get some proper rest so that I'm alert when I'm at work. Agencies need to be responsible and let you get sufficient rest. But then again, if you're working day to day, its difficult not to want to work.” (Discussion forum, HGV driver).
- “ You cannot have your time off as normal because he's on a night shift. He has a total sleeping disorder, everything is messy, you're tired because the job you're doing it – and this I really so sad, so sad but you do this because you need the money.” (Interview, warehouse worker, agency).
- “ Now, if you think about the disruption to a driver's sleep pattern when you are continually working shifts with a five or six hour variation between start time on any given day you can't establish a regular sleep pattern.” (Interview, HGV driver, directly employed).
- “ [G]oing from days to nights, nights to days, days to nights, it's so daunting, it's absolutely knacker. It's like ‘Well why don't we do two weeks of days and then two weeks of nights?’, let's try and get our bodies sort of work out what's going on because it's a bloody nightmare.” (Interview, HGV driver, contractor).

“ Due to the long and often unpredictable and inconsistent working hours, many workers expressed that they are not able to adequately rest between shifts due to the insufficient time to recuperate.”

Due to inadequate rest, some drivers expressed concerns about driving while tired, stating that they felt this was a major cause of accidents involving drivers:

- “ Then obviously we're getting drivers who are like on their fifth day of making mistakes, people having accidents and it always seems as though it's on their fifth day, or it's a rest day on their sixth day. As I say, I brought this up as well, it is too much. I mean, they have to do a 60 hour week...this is why there's a massive accident rate with truck drivers, because [they are] tired all the time.” (Interview, HGV driver, contractor).
- “ Fatigue was signposted as to the major cause [of accidents], and this is true right across the industry. It doesn't take a genius to work this out.” (Interview, HGV driver, directly employed).

Work-life balance

A key aspect of decent work is ensuring a balance between work and personal life. Work-life balance can be understood as the distribution of time one has between work and time spent outside of work, including activities and responsibilities related to family and personal life. A common view amongst interviewees was that there was a lack of time for personal life due to the nature of their work. This was linked to concerns associated with working time.

Responses such as these highlight the challenge of trying to balance the limited time that workers have to rest with time for personal and family life:

- “ [I]t’s unsociable because you need to catch up with your sleep. You can go so many days and hours without sleep, and then by the third day it’ll just hit you and that’s it...unless you live with your family or friends, you don’t have that time [to] bond with your friends and family.” (Interview, warehouse worker, directly employed).
- “ [Y]ou basically hand in your social life card. We don’t have a social life, very little. Most lorry drivers are the same. They’re either working away all week or they work very long hours during the day so when they get home, they’re too tired to do anything else. They’ve usually got to go to bed to get up and be fit to drive the following day.” (Interview, HGV driver, directly employed).
- “ I don’t go to no parents evenings, I don’t go to no Christmas shows, no plays. I don’t see nothing. I don’t pick the kids up from school. I don’t have the luxury of taking to school, ever. I don’t think I’ve ever took my kids to school.” (Interview, HGV driver, directly employed).

Workers acknowledge the sacrifice they have to make in order to ensure that their able to financially support their families:

- “ I have a son...he needs some attention from his father...but in a way when you are renting the house, you have to pay the bills, to buy food....” (Interview, warehouse worker, agency).
- “ I feel like the kids are missing out loads...but they’ve got clothes on their back and they’ve got food, so what do I do?” (Interview, HGV driver, directly employed).

“
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Several drivers suggested that the lack of time for family and work life was resulting in the breakdown in personal relationships:

- “ [T]heir marriages are breaking down, their relationships are breaking down...a lot of them don’t see their children or their grandchildren.” (Interview, HGV driver, agency).



“[E]verybody in the industry will probably tell you the same but I’ve been in a number of industries in my working life and I can tell you that lorry drivers, understandably I talk to a number of other drivers...who are divorced...I’m not saying they got divorced because of long hours but that surely must be a contributing factor.” (Interview, HGV driver, directly employed).

“The amount of divorced drivers...is unbelievable and the majority of those relationships have floundered because at the end of the day their partner doesn’t want an absentee partner. They want somebody who can share the trials, tribulations and joys of family.” (Interview, HGV driver, directly employed).

Compensation

Another key issue raised by workers concerned the compensation for their labour. As the sectors are highly competitive with low profit margins, many workers believed that the cost of labour tends to be taken advantage of to reduce overall costs. As one driver we interviewed noted:

“They all pay the same amount for their diesel, the fuel...for their tractor units and trailers. The only variable in that is the cost of labour...the short-term solution for them is keep the costs of labour screwed down as far as possible.” (Interview, HGV driver, directly employed).

Warehouse workers also echoed this concern:

“Businesses taking advantage of this, cheap working hands, making a huge profit, huge profit, and that’s it.” (Interview, warehouse worker, agency).

Consequently, because of the abundance of workers available to work, many workers felt the competition between workers could be taken advantage of to keep wages low, particularly as many had limited options for alternative employment.

Many workers were unhappy with their pay and reported that wages tended to be low across the sectors. Some reported that the wages were only sufficient to purchase basic necessities:

“[T]his money is for you only to pay the bills, to buy food, to fill your car, but nothing more...it’s a little bit hard to tell you the truth” (Interview, warehouse worker, agency).

“[T]hey’re working for the sort of wage where if, you know, if you have got outgoings, you don’t have very much spare at the end of it.” (Interview, HGV driver, agency).

“Consequently, because of the abundance of workers available to work, many workers felt the competition between workers could be taken advantage of to keep wages low.”

Some drivers also complained about having to pay for expenses such as fuel or transport allowance. While some companies reimbursed drivers, it appeared common for there to be a delay which ended up being costly for drivers:

“So, you have to pay it all out and every month they give it you back. Well, if you do 5/4 nights out a week, that’s £450/500 a month, and you just can’t – I can’t afford – me and my family can’t afford to keep on doing it and then wait a month to get expenses back.” (Interview, HGV driver, directly employed).

Many workers expressed frustration around the lack of bonuses or rewards in work, voicing that the only bonus or pay rise was the minimum wage. One driver said that his company gave bonuses at six months and 12 months if workers did not take any sick days and so many workers were compelled to work even when ill. The driver admitted that he had been in that position:

“I knew I was very vulnerable...I knew I couldn’t fulfil my duties in the safest way possible....I didn’t want to be there.” (Interview, HGV driver, contractor).

In many cases workers were offered split-shift payments, where if they were working on weekends or late nights, their wages could change mid shift. For instance, a warehouse worker explained that on a night shift, they would be paid £11.08 from the period of 10pm to 6am, and as from 6am onwards is considered a day shift, between 6am and 10am, they would be paid the day rate of £9.40. This was also an issue in the RFT sector. However, there were some that reported no shift premium for working nights. One driver commented that the company’s response was that “it’s a lifestyle choice” and so did not necessitate extra pay.

Relatedly, though some companies offered small bonuses or split-shift payments, many drivers felt that there was a lack of career progression in the sector and that workers were likely to stay at the same wage:

“The wage that you go in when you start work is the one that you’ll basically come out with at the end of it, give or take a few pounds. There’s not a great deal of difference between the amount that drivers are paid.” (Interview, HGV driver, agency).

In the warehouse sector, there were few options for operatives to progress in their jobs. One noted was a “warehouse to wheels” apprenticeship schemes commonly offered by companies which supported warehouse workers in obtaining their HGV licences. Separately, warehouse operatives could be given more responsibilities and progress to team leaders or supervisors within their warehouse. However, one warehouse operative, though keen to advance in their career, was cautious about taking on too much responsibility without being paid. This was because there was no certainty that they would be promoted as the only positions available were those of their supervisors. They felt that workers who showed keenness were therefore taken advantage of without being paid extra:

“... one warehouse operative, though keen to advance in their career, was cautious about taking on too much responsibility without being paid.”

“If you get paid enough you can be responsible enough, but you can't be responsible if you don't get paid enough which means kind of taking advantage...so, minimum from me, minimum from the employer...if you want more, you pay more.”
(Interview, warehouse worker, agency).

Subsequently, workers in both sectors continuously expressed that the only way to make a decent income was to work more hours. Thus, on one hand, while workers feel the workplace pressure to work more hours and in some cases struggle to do so, on the other hand, many feel compelled to work more hours in order to earn adequate compensation:

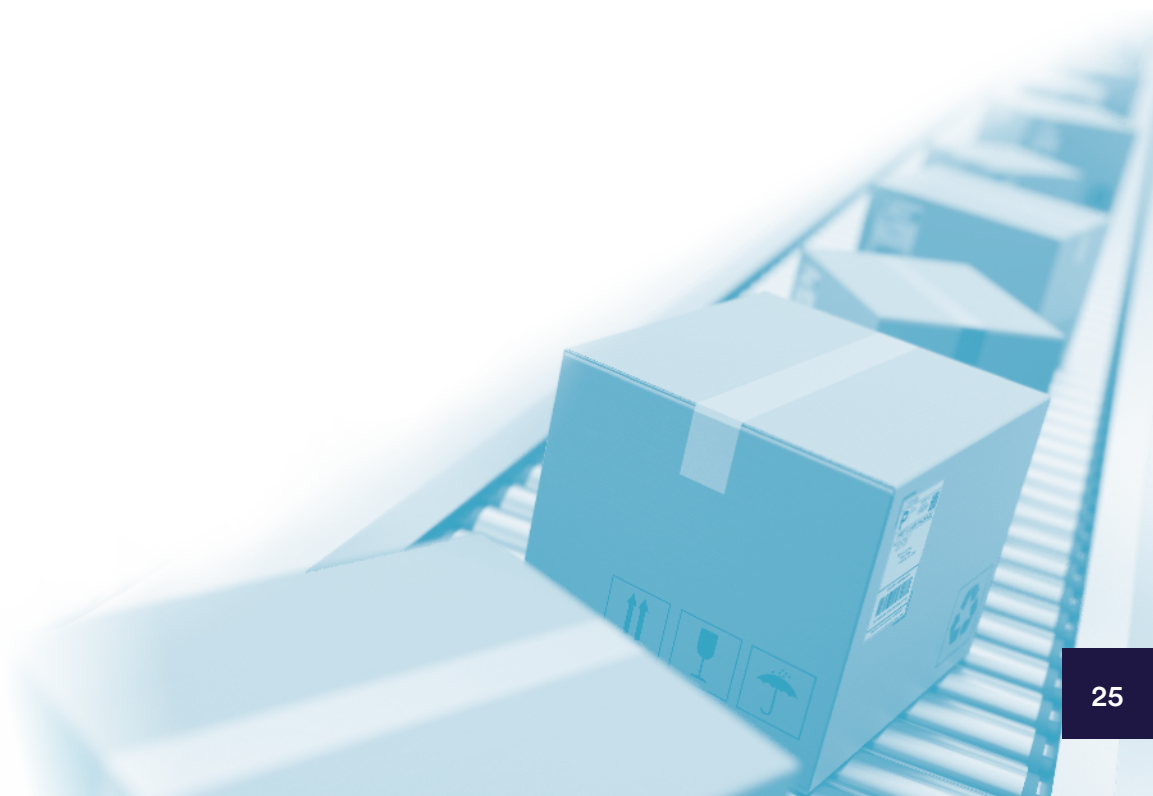
“The only reason to keep doing this job and to survive to live normal is to do overtime, as more hours as possible. This is how you make the money... if you stick [to] 40 hours, it's literally impossible. You go over.”
(Interview, warehouse worker, agency) .

“Which is why you get this, oh well we want a longer shift, we're looking at 11 or 12 hours, to try and get something that's reasonable.” (Interview, HGV driver, agency).

However, while some drivers could do overtime to earn more money, others reported that they were not paid for overtime – which is not legally required. This was often due to them being on contracted and salaried hours. As one driver said:

“I want to be paid for the hours that I work. I don't want to work for free...this week I think I've done already almost 35 hours...and I've still got three days left to work...by the end of tomorrow I will have almost completed 48 hours work. But I will still have two days to work. So, for me, it's not about whether it's enough, it's just I want to work for the hours that I'm paid and I'm not paid for a lot of the hours....”
(Interview, HGV driver, directly employed).

“Subsequently, workers in both sectors continuously expressed that the only way to make a decent income was to work more hours.”



Impact of Covid-19 on workers

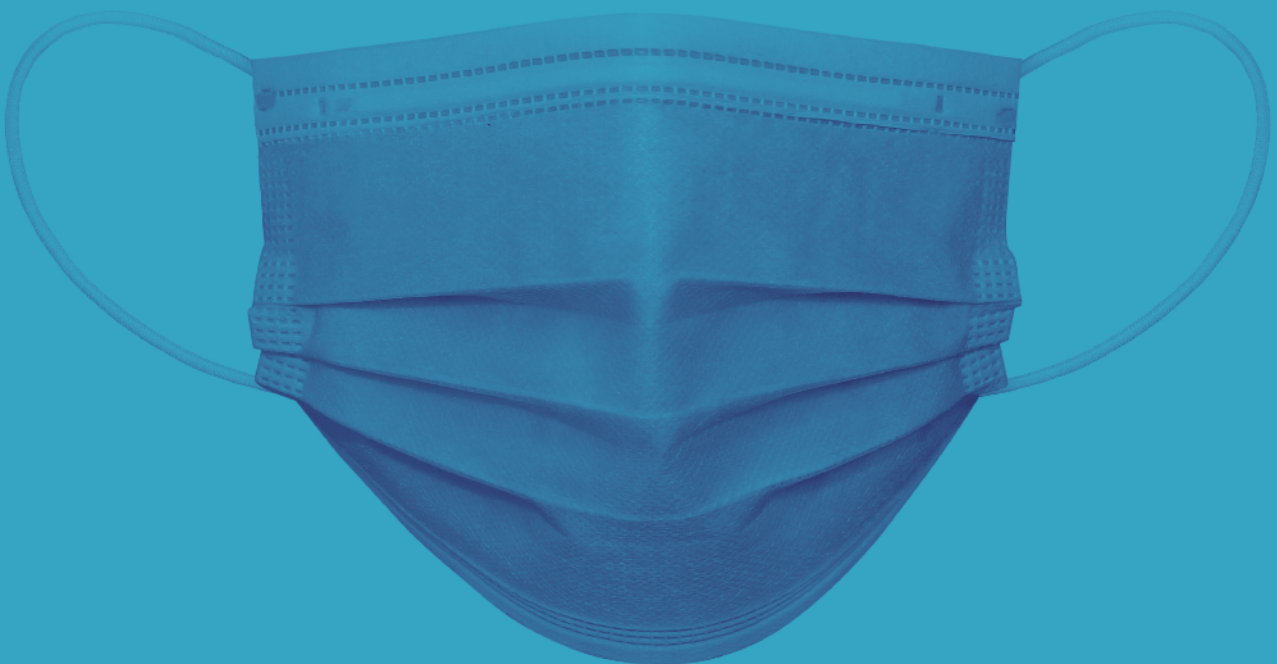
The outbreak of coronavirus has reinforced the importance of the transport and logistics sectors in “feeding the nation.” To curb infection and fatality rates, the UK Government announced that only “essential” businesses would be allowed to operate during periods of local and national lockdowns. The Department for Transport acknowledged that logistics was considered an essential industry that should maintain operations during the pandemic. In RFT, the Government amended driving time regulations for workers delivering essential goods and services.¹¹ Alongside NHS staff, care workers, and law enforcement, workers in the logistics sector have been recognised as “key workers” and have been an essential backbone to address various demands brought about by the pandemic. The present research therefore evolved to capture the pandemic’s impact on workers operating in RFT and warehousing.

Workers concerns around the pandemic focused mostly on the availability of work, financial repercussions and safety of the workplace.

For those supporting essential shops and online retailing, it was reported that work was busier than usual due to the increase in consumption and change in consumer habits. In particular, the availability of work was attributed to the rise in e-commerce with many people at home and the closure of non-essential shops. As demonstrated by table 2, according to the Office for National Statistics, online sales accounted for 35.2% of all retail sales in January 2021 up from 19.5% in January 2020.¹²

“ [B]ecause I’m doing the food stuff it didn’t impact me here....the only impact I’ve had was obviously the workload was a lot more.” (Interview, HGV driver, agency).

“ [T]hey’re just so desperate to have drivers driving because they’re just busy. We’ve probably been busier this year than we have been any other year that I’ve worked with the company.” – HGV driver (Interview, HGV driver, directly employed).



“ [I]t’s a huge boom of the online. Every business now is growing. [Online company] when I was two days working there, they said...during the pandemic they have gained 75,000 new customers.” (Interview, warehouse worker, agency).

“ We’re lucky in one way because we were working all the way through it, and what we’ve got is a good home delivery service. People could go online to the [store], call it, see what they want, order it and pay for a home delivery and they’d normally get it within 24 hours...and in some ways that’s helped us.” (Interview, HGV driver, directly employed).

However, similar to reports on other sectors, many workers have either been furloughed due to not having enough work or because they were deemed vulnerable. In RFT, HGV drivers also reported that companies were using Covid-19 to reduce their holidays: while workers were at home on furlough this period was also classified as a holiday. Those who had to self-isolate at home complained that they were given statutory sick pay instead of furlough payments:

“ [I]f you’re on furlough you get 80% of your wages. If you come off furlough and you then have, either you or a family member displays Covid compatible symptoms you’re supposed to self-isolate. They won’t pay you 80% of your wages when you are self-isolat[ing]. You’re put down as off sick, on statutory sick pay.” (Interview, HGV driver, directly employed).

Worryingly, this was seen by an HGV driver interviewed as “a positive material incentive [for] drivers not to disclose Covid compatible symptoms because they can’t afford the loss of income.”

Those not supporting essential shops or online-retailing stores also had to continue working though they were given limited assignments:

“ [I]t’s very hard. We [do] not work for online shopping. We’re working for a factory like in a shop, etc. but it’s not for online shopping. It’s not quite busy.” (Interview, warehouse worker, agency).

“ [S]ince the lockdown things started or whatever, there’s been entire weeks where I’ve got no work.” (Interview, HGV driver agency).

For those workers who have continued to work throughout the pandemic, coronavirus has brought increased stress and anxiety in the workplace, particularly for warehouse workers. Many companies had Covid-secure measures in place, for instance one-way systems, social distance signage, requirement to wear masks, and sanitisers available to workers. However, some workers spoke about the challenges of working during a pandemic:

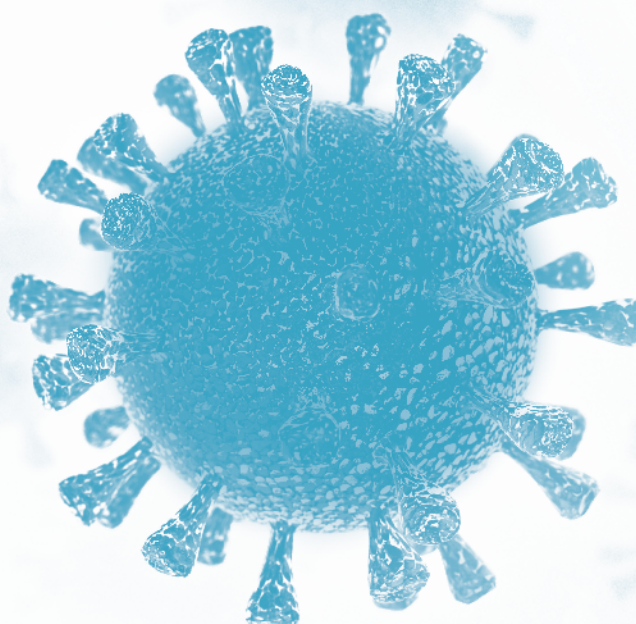
“ [A]t the moment morale is pretty bad because of Covid and people, you know, go into work [though] they feel like going to work is dangerous.” (Interview, warehouse worker, directly employed).

“ We try to do it [social distancing] but in the warehouse it’s difficult to be honest... because people are moving. How you can control people moving during the work? They can’t stop work all the time.” (Interview, warehouse worker, agency).

In the warehouse sector, workers reported that some colleagues had voluntarily chosen to hand in their notice for fear of contracting the virus.

Table 2: Retail sales for January 2021 in Great Britain (extracted from Office for National Statistics)

Category	Index categories and their percentage weights	Year-on-year growth	Month-on-month growth	Online sales as a proportion of retail in this sector
All retailing*	100	72.7	9.2	35.2
All food	14.7	143.5	11.5	12.2
All non-food	37.3	90.2	10.4	39.4
Department stores	9.1	84.9	-9.1	37.4
Textile, clothing and footwear stores	10.3	48.9	0.6	50
Household goods stores	7.8	110.1	22.6	31.5
Other stores	10.1	135.1	31.1	39.9
Non-store retailing	48	46.9	7.5	82.6



Driver shortage or disregard for working conditions?

Logistics associations and providers have long complained about a significant shortage of HGV drivers. It has been commonly reported that there is a shortage of 50,000 drivers. However, Logistics UK's Skills and Employment Report, recently suggested that there is now a driver shortage of 76 thousand drivers in the UK.¹³ According to the report, Brexit and Covid have also negatively impacted the size and demographic of the workforce, particularly due to many companies' reliance on European drivers.

There has been pressure on the Government to help attract people into the sector. In particular, with an aging workforce, it has been a challenge attracting younger people. The Road Haulage Association, which represents UK hauliers, has long voiced that the sector is facing a critical shortage of qualified drivers and has urged the government to add the sector to the UK Shortage Occupation list to attract workers.¹⁴

The problem of driver shortage was an issue commonly raised in discussion forums and during interviews. The general consensus seemed to be that there was not a shortage of drivers and this was for several reasons.

Some drivers believed there was not a driver shortage because it was difficult to find and secure stable employment in the sector. Many expressed that if there was a shortage, it would not be difficult to secure employment.

“Logistics UK's Skills and Employment Report, recently suggested that there is now a driver shortage of 76 thousand drivers in the UK.”

“When drivers who pass their tests are immediately given a full-time job...then we'll know if there is really a shortage of drivers.” (Discussion Forum, HGV driver).

“There are internet forums you read that Britain is 50 thousand HGV drivers short so everybody thinks you can just walk into a job the next day. That is a myth...gone are the days when you can walk out of one job into another.” (Interview, HGV driver, directly employed).

Many drivers also expressed that they felt that industry bodies and hauliers were using the shortage as an excuse to keep pay rates low:

“They've been saying there's a driver shortage for over 20 years. There isn't a shortage. There's never been a shortage. They use it keep wages down. If the number of drivers exceed the number of jobs available, this keeps wages low.” (Discussion Forum, HGV driver).

“It's a lie to get more people in so the hourly rate can go lower. It's a con...if there's a shortage of drivers, every company would be fighting for their drivers....If a company here would be paying you £10, I can guarantee you the company next door will say, 'I can give you £11 an hour,' the one after that would say, 'You know what, I'll give you £11.50 an hour.' They'd be fighting for drivers, it's not happening.” (Interview, HGV driver, agency).

“The sad truth is there are more people with drivers’ licenses than there are trucks. This means low wages for drivers.” (Discussion forums, HGV driver).

Others stated that there were many drivers with licences who chose not to work in the sector because of the pay and conditions:

“Now, we’re not 50 thousand drivers short, we’re actually short of 50 thousand people that want to work at minimum wage...But I’m aware anecdotally of a number of people that aren’t driving because they’re just fed up with it.” (Interview, HGV driver, agency).

“I get the feeling like it’s just, there’s so many drivers now on their books that it’s getting to the stage where like a lot of drivers will just leave and trying to get full-time work at a lower rate somewhere else rather than sitting around waiting for something that might not happen.” (Interview, HGV driver, agency).

“[H]auliers are continually moaning about the driver shortage when in fact there are loads of people out there qualified to do it.” (Interview, HGV driver, directly employed).

However, the few drivers who felt that there was a shortage blamed this on the conditions of work in the sector:

“There’s a shortage of drivers because industry is living in the past. Look at the way people are treated. People are leaving right away.” (Discussion forum, HGV driver).

Regarding the demographic of workers in the sector, many drivers believed that the sector would continue to have a hard time attracting young people because of the conditions:

“[R]oad transport companies are ill prepared to go into schools and colleges to try and recruit drivers to go and work in that side of the transport industry...because in the whole time that I’ve been driving and for the foreseeable future, there is no promotion in the driving sector...the industry is now trying to attract people to work in those conditions for the rest of their lives with no promotion, with no anything...” (Interview, HGV driver, agency).

“I think the average driver age is something like 55, no young people want to do it no more because the hours long, the pay is poor, you’re never at home. I sleep in this wagon two or three nights a week.” (Interview, HGV driver, directly employed).

For the few drivers who believed there was a shortage, this belief came either from the claim of shortage made by industry bodies and associations or because drivers felt there was a shortage because of the ease of finding a job:

“I get contacted every day asking if I can do extra assignments. So I can imagine there is a shortage.” (Discussion forum, HGV driver).

“I have a friend who only recently passed his test and he’s already been offered a full-time job.” (Discussion forum, HGV driver).

“Because there’s a shortage of truck drivers. I think there’s about 50 thousand truck driver shortages every year. So, yeah, there’s always loads of work out there.” (Interview, HGV driver, agency).

Several drivers commented that there may be a shortage but only in certain parts of Britain:

“[T]here is a shortage of drivers. I can refer to it as the golden triangle¹⁵....and it’s where all the major road haulage firms have gotten big depots. There is a shortage there but the rest of the country, no there isn’t.” (Interview, HGV driver, directly employed).

Recommendations

Although the current study is based on a small sample size, the findings provide insights for future work on this area and measures to improve the working conditions of workers operating in road freight transport, warehousing and the wider logistics industry. While this research has focused on key concerns relating to work, we did not intend for the findings to be generalisable to all road freight transport and warehousing workers and all issues relating to aspects of their work.

Additionally, it is not the intention of this study to disregard evidence of good practices by employers. Workers who we interviewed, and comments in discussion forums, often recognised and demonstrated that while there are many bad practices within the sectors, there are also some examples of good working practices. This section therefore outlines recommendations for future research, and for action by Government, trade associations, trade unions and businesses, based on the study's findings, good practices occurring in some workplaces, and recommendations made by workers themselves for how to improve working conditions.

Future research

Considerably more work needs to be done to understand working conditions in the RFT and warehouse sectors. Many workers interviewed were surprised to hear of the research team's interest in their experience and their perceptions of work. Researchers interested in undertaking further work on the sectors might wish to consider:

1. workforce demographics, to understand how different people experience the same type of work
2. hidden or hard-to-reach populations, in order to progress understanding of forced and/or precarious labour practices
3. workers' awareness and knowledge of their employment rights and their ability to exercise such rights
4. the extent of labour market non-compliance across the UK to identify targeted interventions needed to protect workers



Government

Governments should strongly consider taking appropriate measures to ensure that worker rights are promoted and protected. These include:

1. improving communication and engaging in consultation with trade unions, trade associations, companies and worker agencies in order to promote decent work and ensure better conditions for all workers
2. incentives for companies and agencies to improve treatment of workers in order to encourage good practice
3. investigating more closely potential links between the industry's concern around a driver shortage and the poor conditions of work in the sector. This investigation should take into consideration the realities of workers' experiences
4. introducing commuting time to legally allowed limits so that HGV drivers are able to work in a safe way

“

Government investment in... overseeing the health and welfare of the industry itself, pointed mainly towards its personnel, is non-existent, very poor.... they don't take the trouble to go and speak to drivers, nobody does, I can't think of anyone who does.” (Interview, HGV driver, agency)

Trade associations and trade unions

Industry bodies and trade associations are in a unique and critical position to advocate for worker rights and decent labour and employment practices to member companies.

Associations should consider promoting dialogue between trade unions and their members and identifying appropriate measures to incentivise good practice.

Trade unions help to represent the interest of workers and should continue to encourage union representation in workplaces. Many RFT and warehouse workers acknowledged the benefits of having a representative in their work and cited examples of how they supported workers in negotiating their terms and conditions and supporting them with grievances. However, interviews and discussion forums also illustrated that there were many workers who did not see the benefit of joining a union and some who mistrusted unions. **Unions should therefore work on building trust with workers and on promoting evidence of the benefits of unionisation to workers, especially new workers and those in disadvantaged groups.**



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Businesses

Businesses and employers have an important role to play in addressing poor labour and employment practices. The key concerns and issues emerging from this research demonstrate the need for transport and logistic companies to ensure a positive workplace culture and environment that promotes job autonomy and ensures two-way communication between workers and management; to ensure adequate time and rest, and appropriate compensation; to enable worker voice and worker empowerment; and to ensure trust, respect and dignity for all workers. Key actions for businesses include:

1. having a zero tolerance policy for threatening and intimidating behaviour in the workplace
2. ensuring they do not exploit the use of technology and KPIs in the workplace (while important to oversee key aspects of work) as a tactic to exert control over workers
3. ensuring they do not exploit performance measures, particularly those used in warehouses, to micromanage workers and in ways that do not take into consideration the diversity and capability of the workforce
4. ensuring open and honest communication in the workplace, so that workers are enabled to freely voice their concerns about their work environment and, for example, negotiate shifts to allow sufficient work-life balance
5. ensuring that management teams are properly trained in how to engage with workers on issues of just and fair work. For example, HGV management should be trained on rules pertaining to drivers' hours, so they can organise and schedule work to avoid breaking the rules
6. supporting unionisation of the workforce and the presence of a trade union representative within the workplace

“

You can actually end up agreeing to do something that you don't want do but you agreed to do it because it's now a conversation between equal partners and you understand the reason why you've been asked to do it. And understanding why you've been asked to do something makes a massive difference to your willingness to do it.” (Interview, HGV driver, directly employed)



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- ⁷ Replaced in 2014 by the Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency.
- ⁸ Application of these rules depend on the type of vehicle driven and the country in which a HGV driver is driving. Table adapted from the Government's guidance on drivers' hours and working time. For more in-depth explanation of driver rules and regulation see: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/856360/simplified-guidance-eu-drivers-hours-working-time-rules.pdf
- ⁹ EU drivers' hours rules apply to journeys between the EU and UK, or wholly within the EU or UK. For journeys outside of the EU, AETR rules apply. The European Agreement Concerning the Work of Crews and Vehicles Engaged in International Road Transport (AETR) are now the same as EU rules. Journeys to and through selected countries are subject to these rules. For a list of countries, see: <https://www.gov.uk/drivers-hours/aetr-rules>
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- ¹⁵ In logistics, the Golden Triangle refers to an area in the Midlands with large distribution facilities and good transport links.





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