



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

Summary report

2021



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# Introduction

This summary report presents the findings of research conducted on experiences of work in UK road freight transport and warehousing and recommendations to improve working conditions. The research identifies concerns associated with six aspects of work: employment relationships; workers’ relationship with management; workplace pressures; working time; work-life balance; and compensation. The research also explored 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 Economies 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.





# 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.<sup>1</sup>

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.<sup>2</sup> 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.

“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.”<sup>1</sup>

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.<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup>

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.<sup>5</sup> 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.”<sup>6</sup>

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.

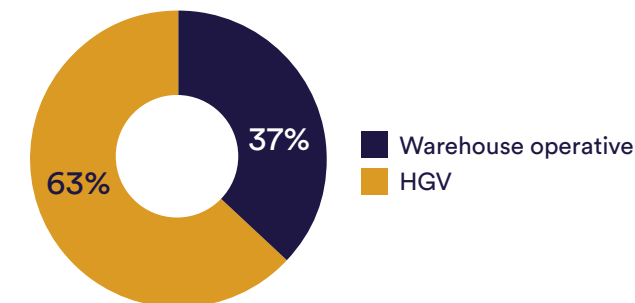
The project was granted ethical approval from the University of Nottingham Research Ethics Committee.

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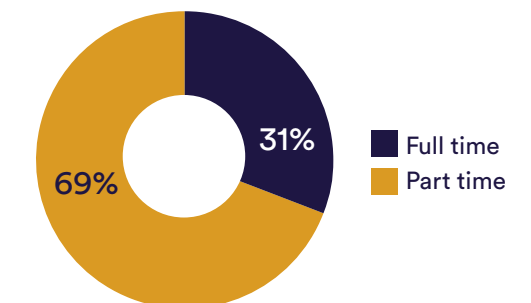
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# Profile of participants

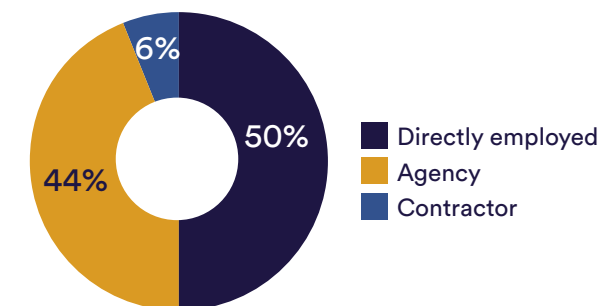
## Occupation



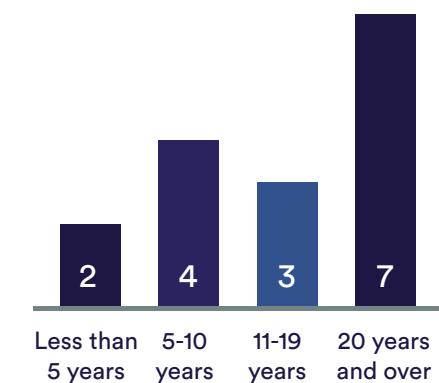
## Employment contract



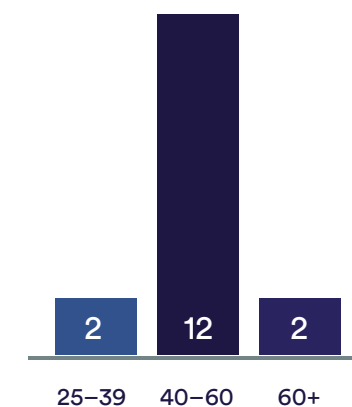
## Employment type



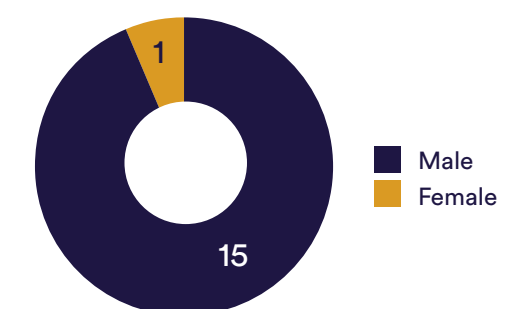
## Number of years in the sector



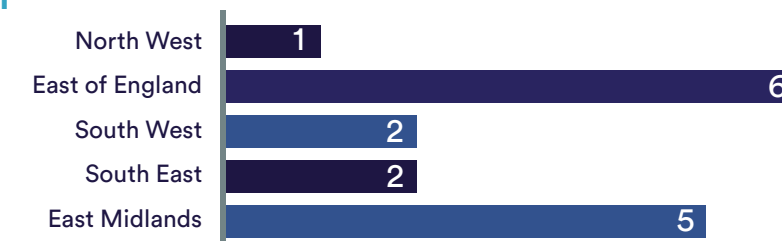
## Age



## Gender



## Location





# 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.

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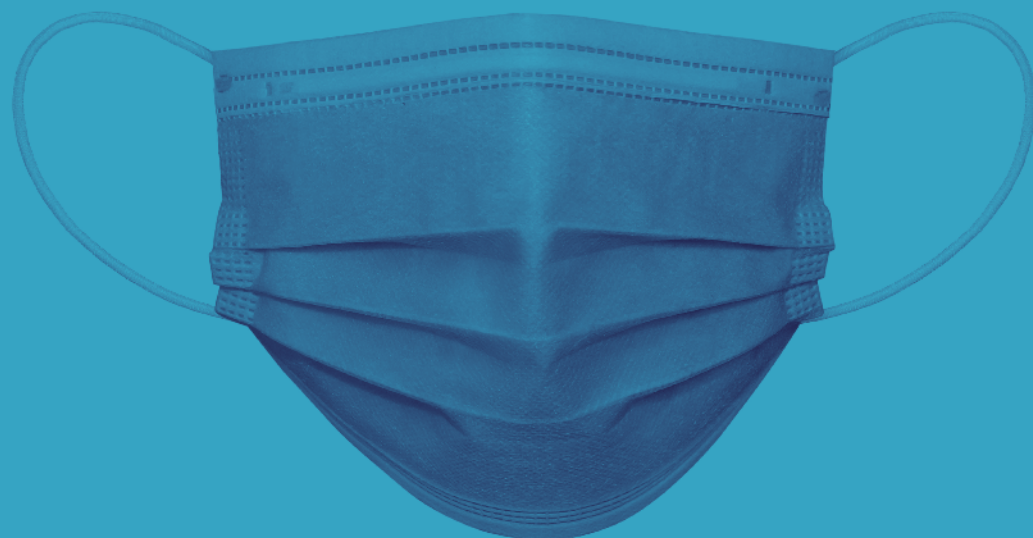
## Impact of Covid-19 on workers

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.<sup>7</sup> 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. 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. 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. 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. In the warehouse sector, workers reported that some colleagues had voluntarily chosen to hand in their notice for fear of contracting the virus.



## Driver shortage or disregard for working conditions?

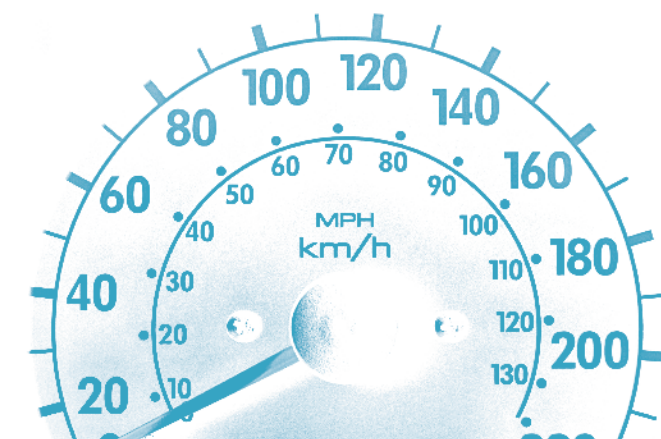
Logistics associations and providers have long complained about a significant shortage of HGV drivers. It has been commonly reported that there is a shortage of 50 thousand drivers. However, Logistics UK’s Skills and Employment Report, recently suggested that there is now a driver shortage of 76 thousand drivers in the UK.<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup>

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. Many drivers also expressed that they felt that industry bodies and hauliers were using the shortage as an excuse to keep pay rates low. Others stated that there were many drivers with licences who chose not to work in the sector because of the pay and conditions. However, the few drivers who felt that there was a shortage blamed this on the conditions of work in the sector. 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. 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. Several drivers commented that there may be a shortage but only in certain parts of Britain such as around the golden triangle.<sup>10</sup>

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# 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

## 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.

## 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 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



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- <sup>10</sup> In logistics, the Golden Triangle refers to an area in the Midlands with large distribution facilities and good transport links.







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