

Move on up

John Challen reports on the complex issues around logistics from the University of Huddersfield, host to the recent International Sustainable Logistics Conference

With operators always keen to move cargoes more easily, more quickly and more cost effectively, the topic of logistics tends to attract attention. So it's well worth picking up on some of the outputs from the recent International Sustainable Logistics Conference, which examined legislation, innovation and commercial viability.

Chaired by former Exel engineering director, and member of the IRTE's Technical and Government liaison group, John Parry, the event at the University of Huddersfield highlighted approaches being taken, and gave delegates the chance to reconsider the way they do business and operate truck fleets.

Parry characterised the event as one of the few occasions where industry and education can come together, and the university's own Dr Nick Hubbard, head of the department for logistics, transport and tourism, explained that this could be a growing trend. Hubbard talked about opportunities for the transport industry to hook up with academia and also revealed that some operators have expressed a keen interest in working on projects currently being undertaken by his own department.

The first big session of the day was dedicated to road transport itself, with Dave Rowlands, technical services director at Wincanton Group, talking

about the future of alternative vehicle fuels, and the options available with DME (dimethyl ether), hydrogen, methanol, biogas, methane, battery-electrics and biodiesel. He admitted that Wincanton was keeping its options very open by not discarding any one power source, but said his organisation is, in the end, keen to find one that stretches beyond a niche market solution.

Minimal investment

For the retailer's perspective on logistics, Chris Hall, head of national transport at ASDA, highlighted parent company Wal-Mart's announcement that its goal is to cut 20m tonnes of CO₂ from the global supply chain in five years. He talked of "fewer and friendlier miles", attained by the use of double-deck trailers and logistics collaboration, which Hall maintains are capable of saving 5.7 million miles a year. A 23% increase in vehicle fill is also beneficial, saving 3,000 journeys a week.

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John Parry

Talk of improving efficiency, as opposed to specifically investing in new technologies to cut carbon emissions, was a common theme. Tellingly, when looking at sustainable transportation, Hall said quite simply: "If it's going to cost us, then we won't do it."

One other point raised by the man from Asda was the benefits brought by rail: the company has evidently saved seven million miles by using rail to transport goods long distance. Indeed, life away from road transport made up a substantial portion of one of the sessions, with presentations about logistics at ports, and adoption of trains and the UK train network.

David Cross, sales and marketing manager at DB Schenker, for example, gave a good account of the advantages of rail – namely the company's 'Five-a-day flyer', a weekly intermodal train service that bring fresh produce from Spanish farms to UK supermarket distribution centres in just 48 hours. Cross argued that the equivalent journey by truck would use two tonnes more CO₂, and accumulate an extra 13.7 million km of road journeys. However, while there are plenty of developments like this, transportation of goods by rail remains a very small percentage of the network and is likely to remain so, unless a lot more development is undertaken.

In summary, and echoing the thoughts of another presenter, Neil Callaghan from Hanson Cement, Parry said that there is clearly still much to be done to achieve anything like sustainable logistics – but that a lot of benefits can be found by getting the basics right.

"Some things are so obvious, such as switching lights off, or ensuring chilled vehicles are managed correctly," he insisted. "There are lots of things we can do to reduce [emissions and costs], not least with fuel management, but I have yet to see anything other than a niche solution for alternative fuels." 