

Dreaming of lower costs brings New Year cheer

As 2012 drew to a close, the Centre for Economics and Business Research, along with traffic information firm Inrix, published a survey that put shocking scale on the cost of congestion to the UK. It revealed that the economy suffers to the tune of more than £4.3 billion per year, in terms of wasted time and fuel. Delays specifically to business and freight vehicles cost some £1.1 billion every year, at today's prices, with over £426 million wasted on fuel, because of traffic, it suggested.

Hardly healthy for any country, and certainly not one working to rebalance its economy in favour of manufacturing, supply and export, in a bid to drive sustainable growth. Inrix chief executive Bryan Mistele unsurprisingly put it thus: "As the UK continues facing times of austerity, this study indicates that the efficient movement of people and commerce across our road networks is essential to fostering a healthy, vibrant economy."

So it's good news that a new Centre for Sustainable Road Freight Transport has been established by Cambridge University and Heriot-Watt University, with £5.8 million of public and private funding (page 4), to examine causes and postulate solutions. It's also good that its driving consortium includes big names, such as John Lewis, Tesco, DHL and Wincanton on the operator side, as well as Volvo, Goodyear and Firestone from the OEMs.

Prof David Cebon, director of the acclaimed Cambridge Vehicle Dynamics Consortium (CVDC) and the first director of the new centre, makes it clear that this is not just about technology. "When a vehicle delivers its freight and returns to base empty," he explains, "the fuel used on the return trip serves no useful purpose... So consumption per freight task is increased by 70%." And he continues: "When freight is taken off a large articulated truck and put onto two smaller trucks, 40% more fuel is used to deliver that same freight." Yet we still do it.

Hence the new centre's focus on marrying engineering and logistics. Beyond working on processes and technology to slash empty running, Cebon talks, for example, of minimising congestion by re-routing haulage vehicles, with the help of telematics and tracking, and rethinking freight distribution, focusing on fewer, larger, more efficient and more manoeuvrable vehicles.

It's a subtle, but nevertheless welcome, departure from the solely technical focus of most transport R&D. Equally, it provides useful additional context for reports such as Ricardo AEA's – commissioned by TKTN (Transport Knowledge Transfer Network) and LowCVP (Low Carbon Vehicle Partnership) – which recommends switching from diesel to gas, reducing rolling resistance and aerodynamic drag, and increasing hybrid and electric vehicle uptake (page 5).

Yes, of course those remain important, if we want to cut carbon emissions and hence fuel costs. They could also be instrumental in building up the UK's expertise to drive export growth. However, we do need a holistic approach – one that will be noticed by government and the DfT. As LowCVP managing director Andy Eastlake himself states: "The Low Carbon Truck Trials are a good start, but we need a long-term road transport gas strategy to build on the progress."

We wish you a happy, healthy, prosperous and productive New Year.



Brian Tinham BSc CEng MInstMC FSOE FIRTE

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President: Garry Gilby MBA IEng FSOE FIPlantE

Chief Executive: Nick Jones FCA FSOE

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Registered Office: 22 Greencoat Place, London SW1P 1PR

Tel: 020 7630 1111

Fax: 020 7630 6677

Email: soe@soe.org.uk

www.soe.org.uk

Editor: Brian Tinham BSc CEng

MInstMC FSOE FIPlantE FIRTE

Email: btinham@findlay.co.uk

Industry Editor: John Challen

Email: jchallen@findlay.co.uk

Contributing Editors: Brian Weatherley, John Kendall, Ian Norwell, Keith Read, Robin Dickson, Steve Banner

Art Editors: Martin Cherry, Neil Young

Illustrations: Phil Holmes

Production Manager: Nicki McKenna

Email: nmckenna@findlay.co.uk

Advertisement Manager: Craig Molloy

Email: cmolloy@findlay.co.uk

Tel: 01322 221144

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