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engineering success

How about a sustainable route for road transport?

As we go to press, the transport industry's verdict on last month's budget is best expressed as 'could have done so much better'. Yes, it may well have been a budget for the 'doers, makers and savers', as the chancellor put it, but there wasn't much for hard-pressed transport operators wrestling with a fragile economic recovery.

The FTA (Freight Transport Association) and FairFuelUK were among the most condemnatory. While welcoming the freeze in fuel duty, FTA managing director of policy James Hookham expressed disappointment that George Osborne had "not taken the opportunity to boost the economy by reducing fuel duty by three pence per litre". Meanwhile, FairFuelUK campaigner

Quentin Willson described the budget as a lost opportunity. "Cutting tax on beer and bingo, and not on fuel duty, shows how really out of touch this government is," he railed.

Howard Cox, founder of FairFuelUK, put it thus: "Huge disappointment in the chancellor's budget. It seems the Treasury is in total denial. We have presented conclusive proof that cutting fuel duty will generate jobs, increase GDP and lower inflation... Mr Osborne even said in his budget speech that punitive taxation is wrong. Well what's more punitive than taking 60% in tax from 32 million road users? The chancellor simply does not get it."

And so on and so on. Only the RHA (Road Haulage Association) was slightly more conciliatory, with chief executive Geoff Dunning welcoming the news that business rates, discounts and enhanced capital allowances will be extended for another three years. "However, for the UK haulier, currently paying the highest level of fuel duty in Europe, there was scant encouragement," he said. "We were buoyed up at the pre-budget announcement that the chancellor had some surprises up his sleeve. Sadly, they did not include a cut in fuel duty."

So, is the government out of touch? Actually, no: given the green agenda and this country's problems with the European Commission around air quality (especially over NOx and particulates – page 8), it's not difficult to see the DfT's (Department for Transport) dilemma. And in fact, although it received far less air-time than the budget, last month the DfT indicated that it is now taking an alternative approach – that of LNG/CNG (liquefied and compressed natural gas) as a replacement transport fuel – more seriously, and preparing for change.

The detail appears in a report, 'Recommendations on the use of methane and biomethane in HGVs', from the Low Emission HGV Task Force, whose members include the FTA and RHA, as well as the SMMT (Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders) and Low Carbon Vehicle Partnership. Published by the DfT, it gives a resounding thumbs up to methane and biomethane as key to reducing emissions from freight operations. It also highlights their potential to cut transport fuel costs and improve energy security. A true win-win.

Making a substantial switch to gas isn't going to be trivial, though, so in its report the task force lists 15 recommendations for government – some about investment, others policy – that together should boost uptake of gas over diesel in the foreseeable future (page 6).

It's been a long time coming. This – not squeezing fuel duty – is a sustainable path for freight.



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