

Higher, lower, longer, heavier – You can't please all of the people all of the time!!!

Nothing is likely to arouse more emotion or ignorance than any discussion on lorry weights and dimensions. Therefore it is quite amusing to watch the current debate on the subject, prompted by Mike Penning's request for comments on allowing longer semi-trailers to operate in the UK, following tests in various EU countries.

Inevitably there are those who will immediately seek to blame Brussels!!! However the facts are quite different as currently the UK allows heavier and larger trucks than most other EU countries outside of Scandinavia and Benelux!!!! In the UK there are currently no limits on vehicle heights and our maximum weight at 44 tonnes is 4 tonnes heavier than the EU standard.

Two "showmen" of the haulage industry Stan Robinson and my old friend Dick Denby have received much publicity for their larger and heavier trucks. However I would give the "Denby Double" more chance of reaching the shelves of Ann Summers than the roads of England!!! Therefore these extrovert designs cause more ignorance than serious debate on a subject that is currently dividing the transport sector.



Throughout the 70s and 80s UK bridge engineers were appalled at the suggestion that few of their bridges could withstand any additional weight. The "anti-road" lobby ruled the roost and the UK industry and the transport sector suffered from the fact that our vehicles could not carry the same loads as in other European countries. Calls from the FTA and RHA fell on deaf ears, until around 1990 when the current weights and dimensions

brought us more or less in line with the rest of Europe. Paradoxically the higher 44 tonne weight limit crept in as a way of promoting "combined transport" operations. But our absence of any height limits allowed UK operators to use higher trucks than almost anywhere else in Europe.

Over the past 20+ years EU regulations have been introduced for most components on all road vehicles. All of these relate to safety or environmental protection and have saved countless lives. However until now most of the bodywork of commercial vehicles has not been covered by many of the regulations. Now there is Directive 2007/46/EC known as ECWVTA covering the vehicle as a whole and therefore meaning that all vehicles must comply with all EU regulations including the general maximum height limit of 4 metres.

This has thrown the UK distribution sector and especially the retail giants into panic. Over the years they have taken advantage of the extra height available to operate some trucks at over 5 metres allowing double deck operations. This clearly saves many road miles and is extremely efficient, especially when combined with the new "teardrop" designs that are

also very fuel efficient. Most of these vehicles operate on fixed pre-planned routes and therefore are seldom or never involved in bridge strikes.



However this practice contrasts with the other side of the higher vehicle debate where because of overall ignorance of measurement, combined with no fixed limit, every working day there are between five and ten notified incidents of trucks hitting railway bridges. These figures clearly exclude those accidents not reported. For Network Rail this is a major problem causing daily road congestion and train cancellations.

A personal view is that the UK government should accept the 4 metre limit except for purpose built vehicles operating on designated routes, with punitive fines for those ignoring these conditions.

We now come to the question of longer semi-trailers, allowing the transport of 2 extra ISO pallets or 3 extra euro pallets. The ministers consultation request has met with very differing responses and the reasons are quite clear. The RHA members are mainly opposed to the idea, fearing that as in the past any increase in the load carried has not resulted in any increase in the transport price. Secondly as in the past any new vehicle specification will result in their current fleets losing their resale value, as they are regarded as obsolete. This is also of major concern for the trailer rental companies, who like many hauliers will depreciate their fleets over quite long periods.



Clearly the retailers can see the advantages of longer trailers and as many will lease or rent their trailers over quite short periods they will not suffer from the same losses on disposal!! In any case it should be remembered that whatever the result of the debate there is unlikely to be any increase in the weights or turning radii of the new vehicles. In fact new trailer steering technology allows vehicles to be more manoeuvrable than before.

To complete this debate one has to mention the design of 60 tonne truck that has been gaining popularity in many countries and recently received a green light to operate in Holland. Suitable for long hauls on proper highways the combination consists of a 3 axle truck with a 9 metre body. The truck hauls a 2 axle "dolly" coupled to a standard 13.6 metre semi-trailer, which can be hauled and manoeuvred by a standard tractor unit. Like the "Denby double" not suitable for most UK roads or limited parking stops!!



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