

# Driver numbers: a further perspective

Kirsten Tisdale FCILT investigates the current state of the driver profession and offers her thoughts on how best we can deal with an ageing workforce.



Above: Kirsten Tisdale  
FCILT is principal,  
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Above: As transport providers, we need to schedule trucks and their drivers intelligently

## AUTHOR

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## SECTOR HIGHLIGHTS



When I wrote my article for the Driver Welfare Report in *Focus* – 'Driver numbers: a different perspective', *Focus*, November 2015 – I was struck by the paucity of statistics giving insight into the age profile of HGV drivers. On the basis that if you do not ask you do not get, I asked the Office for National Statistics (ONS) and the Driver & Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA) for a breakdown into five-year age bands.

I got a prompt and useful response from the ONS – see Figure 1. Because of the wide age bands, previously published figures from the ONS did not really reveal what was happening between the ages of 35 and 64. It could even have been interpreted as being pretty flat if you did not know the industry. I believe this to be the first time that meaningful figures have been available at this level of granularity.

What you cannot see from this graph is that, over the past year, the age band with the largest number of drivers moved from being 45–49 to 50–54.

Without careful consideration of its implications, this graph might look like a slightly skewed normal distribution, Mathematicians tend to be happy with a normal curve, so it is tempting just to glance at this and miss what it is really showing. This is profoundly not normal. What we would like to see here, in a stable economy, is a flat profile, so that all drivers leaving the industry through retirement are replaced by young drivers starting their working lives.

A timely response from DVLA initially made me think that I had managed to miss a seam of data gold. The ONS data is from the Labour Force Survey and is based on sampling, and so I was hoping



that the DVLA driving licence figures for October 2015 would give me a real handle on the figures. However, the DVLA figures for C+E full licence-holders are about double, and Cat C full about three times the accepted number of around 300,000 HGV drivers. The ONS figures included in Figure 1 come to 287,000 and the FTA quoted September 2014 figures from DVLA that indicated that 326,000 full LGV drivers had received DQCs. The DVLA figures are GB only, while the ONS figures are for the whole UK.

The DVLA driving licence figures do come with a proviso: 'The presence of valid driving entitlement does not mean that all individuals are actively driving, are resident in the UK or have not deceased. Neither the DVLA nor DfT would recommend that users rely on these data being a true reflection of the number of active driving licence holders or drivers.' That is a big margin of error, and is not accounted for by older drivers who have stopped driving, as each age band is uplifted to a marked degree. There are other questions I have asked about the data.

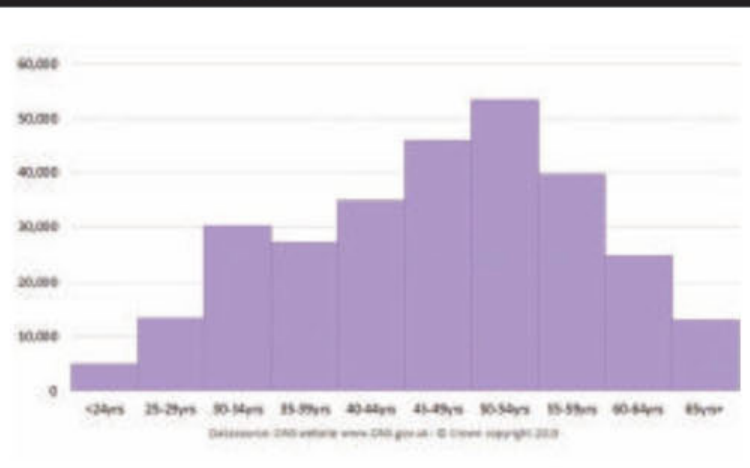
### How have we ended up in this place?

What has led our industry to a situation where we have an ever-decreasing number of drivers joining us? I believe that a number of factors have combined to create this situation, including increased and changed legislation making the driver's role more difficult and less attractive, but not any safer. This is before factors such as congestion have been considered. At the same time the wider world has been changing in a way that means you do not have to leave your bedroom to explore and communicate with the outside world.

In Table 1, I have included some of those changes, indicating which age band of drivers was 21 when each change was implemented – the age when people can really start to think about becoming HGV drivers. In 1986, just before the driver numbers start dropping away on the graph, the 12.5-hour spread-over was removed, which I believe made the job considerably less attractive.

Next I have noted the introduction of red light and then permanent speed cameras. While no one would argue that you should have the right to drive through a red light, and you may feel that adhering to the speed limit is part of a driver's job, many of us will

Figure 1: HGV driver numbers from ONS Labour Force Survey in five-year age bands, July–September 2015



have been caught by a speed camera at some time or other in our lives. For professional drivers, though, driving day in day out, that increases the risk of losing their licences and with it their jobs – while just trying to get on with the job. Next we have the introduction of speed limiters that, along with more recent changes, now means that an HGV may go only 6mph faster on a motorway than on some bendy B-roads, even in the middle of the night.

Then it became impossible to go straight for an HGV1, and we stopped new car drivers from experiencing the halfway house of a 7.5t truck, which is what I was doing myself, without any additional training, at 18. Then came the Working Time Directive, with its Periods of Availability, making it essentially little more than another administrative burden. Then the DCPC for new drivers starting in 2009, and for established drivers taking effect more recently.

Then further medical requirements. No one would argue that drivers who are unfit should be driving and, putting the cost of medicals to one side, this will probably be reducing the pool of older drivers rather than the younger ones, but it will be one more thing that makes a career in driving look less attractive. It may not turn out to be a career at some point in the future. No doubt I have left out some examples. I am grateful to the CILT Knowledge Centre and FTA Membership Advice Centre for helping me to pinpoint when some of these changes occurred.

Table 1: Timetable of driver legislation changes

What happened in the five years when this band of drivers became 21			
Age band (years)	When 21	Driver legislation	Changing world
50–54	1982–86	12.5-hour spread-over removed	First Sega and Nintendo
45–49	1987–91	First red light cameras	World Wide Web invented
40–44	1992–96	Speed limiters and first permanent speed cameras	eBay and Amazon started
35–39	1997–2001	Cat C1 introduced, separate tests for C and C+E, written theory test	Google founded
30–34	2002–06	RTD and digitach	UK broadband kick started
25–29	2007–11	DCPC for new HGB drivers and changes to medical requirements	i-Phone launched
Up to 24	2012 onwards	Further changes to medical requirements	





At the same time, the world has changed in all sorts of ways – see Table 1. Today's young people are not the same young people who became truck drivers in 1982. They do not need to get in the car to meet up with friends, test their spatial skills or go shopping: they can do all that in the comfort of their home through technology. Some do not even want car licences, as they cannot afford to keep and run a car. Many live at home longer, so have fewer responsibilities, but more need for parental approval. Who wants other people in the house getting up at all hours? If they are married and have children, they will need and want to work predictable hours, as their partners will also need to work in most cases. People change jobs more frequently these days and jobs are less secure, which does not incentivise anyone to invest in very specific training.

**What can we do about it now?**

Longer term, we plainly need to get more drivers into the industry. No doubt it was the lack of our industry's ability to plan (embarrassing when you are in logistics) and invest in resources that led to the introduction of the RTITB levy to start with. I surely cannot be the only person who thinks that removal of that levy back in 1992 was not a great idea. Yet now we seem to have ended up in a place where there will be an apprenticeship levy, but the part of our industry where we really have a problem will not benefit from it. This is beyond irony.

From a practical point of view, it should be noted that we do not currently have the capacity to train and test that many drivers all in one go. The industry could train drivers without help from the Government, but we are now in a place where we are so many drivers down it is probably impossible for that to happen. If we accept that we are currently some 45,000 short (I have seen figures that range from 45,000 to 60,000 from various industry bodies) and if we say that the cost of training a driver is about £5,000, then to train all those drivers would be some £225 million. *Motor Transport's* Top 100 for 2014 indicated that the profit for the 10 biggest logistics providers was £629 million, with about half that from just one company. You would be asking the industry to put a third of next year's profits into training in what is already a low-margin business.

In the meantime, we need to make better use of drivers wherever we sit in the supply chain. We need to regard them as the scarce resource that they truly are. We need to think green with respect to the use of driver time. As consumers, we need to stop ordering things we do not need. As transport providers, we need to schedule trucks and their drivers intelligently. The Government and its agencies need to make sure that roads, traffic management and borders are fit for purpose. Calais and Operation Stack are not great for a country that depends on imports, and the Forth road bridge being a no-go area is just not acceptable. Local authorities need to make sure that drivers can deliver the goods efficiently: un/loading does not equal parking.

As industry customers, we need to collaborate. This was the subject of the recent Women in Logistics conference where we learned that partnerships are the most difficult collaborative situations, while also being probably the most common in our industry. We all need to ensure that drivers are tipped in a timely manner at DCs. I should be very interested to know the total time taken in PoAs, which are often effectively an admission of wasted driver time.

In very round figures, we currently have 300,000 drivers, with the shortfall about 45,000. If we found 5% savings, that would equate to a third of the shortfall. That does not get rid of the impending age problem, but it could help alleviate the current problem a little. However, the money saved would need to be passed on to drivers. It is no good expecting them to earn less for the greater good. They need to be paid the same amount to carry out the same amount of work in fewer hours or more money for more work in the same hours. Otherwise, there is no incentive. Under the headline 'Operating costs stable', the FTA recently reported: 'There is still a tendency to freeze pay across all types of employee, with 74% of contributors reporting no changes in basic pay or gross pay.' The industry may have been able to persuade existing drivers that times are tough and that they are lucky to get a zero percentage rise with few shift premiums, but 'Operating costs stable' may not actually be good news when you are desperate to attract new employees and failing to do so. We need to keep the drivers we already have, not only their time but also the drivers themselves.

**What next?**

By 2020, all these drivers will be five years older and will have moved across to the next age band. In other words in four years' time, unless something miraculous happens, the largest bar on the graph will be drivers aged 55–59, assuming we are lucky enough to keep them beyond 2019, when the next tranche of DCPC training is due to be completed. Driver numbers are now a national issue, with political, economic and social implications as well as industrial.

I believe what we need to see now is the data for all C and C+E drivers with DQCs in five-year (or smaller) age bands, giving an absolutely accurate picture of the current age profile of HGV drivers and the extent of the problem, which only the DVLA can provide. I have recently asked if my original request falls under the Freedom of Information mechanism.

Increased wages and training need to be built into increased operating costs and, in turn, the charges for transport need to go up. After all, user costs are going to rise anyway if goods have to be transported in smaller trucks and vans as a result of the shortage of this key resource; and we need to be as embarrassed about wasting driver time as Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall makes people feel about food waste.

**About the author**

Kirsten Tisdale FCILT is principal, Aricia Limited, the logistics consulting company she established in 2001. With a career spanning various aspects of logistics, she now specialises in strategic projects that require analysis and research, helping companies put facts and figures around decisions they need to make.

**FURTHER RESOURCES**

Skills for Logistics blog, website:

[www.skillsforlogistics.org/news-events/blog/bbc-radio-tunes-into-driver-shortage/](http://www.skillsforlogistics.org/news-events/blog/bbc-radio-tunes-into-driver-shortage/)