

New rail minister speaks of huge opportunities for growth of freight sector

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Rail Minister Kevin Foster wants freight to be talked about alongside passengers not after when it comes to the UK's railways.

He was speaking at the annual Rail Freight Group (RFG) annual conference, which this year returned for the 30th year, bringing together industry leaders for a day of talks and discussion.

In a recorded video, the MP for Torbay, said: "It's freight that really drove our railways creation and provides some huge opportunities for growth in the future.

"Every day vital materials are carried from medicines to the big bulk products that cannot possibly go by road without causing major environmental issues and problems for residents who live near the sites concerned.

"We should be proud to talk about the role freight is playing and the huge future it has particularly as we look to deliver the two priorities for the secretary of state of driving economic growth and decarbonisation."

Kevin told the audience that he is “very keen and interested” to hear how we can look at making more of our routes suitable for freight and ensuring our main economic hubs have the vital freight railway connections they need.

He said: “At a time when how we move goods around the country, particularly discussions about how road haulage is facing certain challenges, we should actually look at that not just as a challenge for them but as an opportunity for us in rail sector to get more freight back on our rails.

“Rail freight should not be the thing we talk about after passengers, it’s the thing we talk about with passengers at the heart of a future railway and a plan for Britain that will deliver a growing economy, prosperous communities and a rail network that we can all be proud of.”

The conference explored how to maximise growth opportunities for the industry, exploring key areas including growth through construction and the development of strategic rail freight interchanges.

Among the speakers included Helen McAllister, freight programme director for the Great British Railways Transition Team, John Smith, managing director at GB Railfreight and John Larkinson, chief executive at the Office of Rail and Road.

Maggie Simpson OBE, director general at the RFG, said: “30 years of this conference, a huge amount of debate and discussion over that 30 year period and I’ve been really pleased to have been a part of that for the years I’ve been involved with the Rail Freight Group.

“A lot will have changed over the 30 years. Hybrid conferences will have been something you saw on Tomorrow’s World, but when you do look back on 1992 there were probably quite a few similarities, the stock market had just crashed, the pound was at a record low, we were struggling with inflation and interest rates and the railways were on the verge of major structural change.

“1992 probably wasn’t the easiest time in rail freight and perhaps neither is it today, it has been a year of some real highs and real lows for the sector. Members are struggling with factors such as economic pressures, global volatility, high inflation and high fuel costs, these pressures are starting to bite on the demand for goods.

“It is not all bad news, there is still a huge positivity about rail freight. People still want more rail freight so despite that volatility we are still seeing new services starting, new terminals opening, it’s all going on and it’s still a very buoyant market.”



Photo credit: Hire Frequencies