

Rail Freight Leading the Challenge of Decarbonisation

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Rail Forum Midlands (RFM) has updated colleagues across the industry on progress with its 'Opportunities to Decarbonise Freight SME Challenge'. RFM's Rail Freight Decarbonisation Challenge firmly supports the Government commitment to recovery and Build Back Better and in particular its plan for sustainable growth.

The project has seen several prestigious freight clients providing the opportunity for SMEs to work collaboratively to address the challenges faced by the rail freight industry when it comes to reducing their carbon footprint. Although rail is already recognised as a carbon efficient means of transporting freight, rail freight companies know they need to stay ahead of the game and are keen to further reduce the impact of their operations on the environment.

The SME collaboration challenge process sits within the Midlands Pilots workstream of the Rail Supply Group's Rail Sector Deal; led by RFM on behalf of the industry with participation open to all SMEs in the UK.

The six clients involved with the Opportunities for Decarbonising Freight challenge included a broad cross-section of the rail freight industry with Freightliner, GB Railfreight, DB Cargo, ERMEWA and VTG all taking

part working with Tarmac as a key customer. The challenge was launched in October 2020 when 90 registered companies listened to an in-depth presentation by the freight operators, giving details of their challenge and providing examples of where the supply chain could help with their goal to reduce carbon emissions.

RFM says they were overwhelmed that a total of 21 possible solutions were submitted to the clients; these were then presented during two days of online Dragons Den style events. The ideas put forward included new concepts through to market ready solutions and covered all aspects of rail freight operation from remote condition monitoring, fuel saving solutions, driver advisory systems, depot improvements and alternative forms of propulsion.

The sessions were supported by the University of Derby who are working with the client group on wider decarbonisation initiatives and the Department for Transport and Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy both of whom offered their support to help make the challenge a success.

Following the Dragons Den the clients have identified 10 specific ideas to take forward either individually or collaboratively. In addition, and as a direct result of the challenge process, the companies behind no less than four of the ideas presented at the Dragons Den have submitted bids for SBRI "First of a Kind" funding, supported by the freight clients involved in the challenge.

RFM will continue to monitor progress and provide support for those ideas being taken forward and is actively working with the group to look at further opportunities for collaboration.

The Opportunities to Decarbonise Freight was the second SME challenge to be facilitated by RFM, the first considered light-weighting of rolling stock. A summary of key strategic lessons learned has now been prepared and recommendations are being developed as part of the work RFM is leading on the sector deal.

Robert Hodgson, Engagement Manager for RFM said: "We are really pleased to support this initiative to help bring new ideas and solutions from the SME supply chain to meet the goals and aspirations of freight operators. It is really encouraging to work with a group of dedicated rail professionals who want to do as much as practical to make their part of the industry even greener in the years ahead. An early benefit has been the opportunity to introduce members of the supply chain and freight communities to each other, enabling a deeper understanding of both capabilities and priorities."

Chris Swan, Head of Rail at Tarmac, said "The rail freight industry is well positioned to support the UK's decarbonisation ambitions and the opportunities to drive forward innovation and progress are much greater if we work together collaboratively.

"This process has allowed potential suppliers to demonstrate some great products and initiatives to the industry, with some ideas being taken forward that will make a real difference to the way we are operating."

Maggie Simpson, RFG Director General said: "Rail freight is a critical part of the UK economy, but tends to be less well understood than passenger rail. Initiatives like the 'Opportunities to Decarbonise Freight SME Challenge' are showing what can be achieved by increased collaboration, bringing fresh innovation into rail

freight and helping SMEs understand the priorities and opportunities in the sector. We look forward to seeing the further development of these innovative ideas.”