



# HEALTHIER HAULAGE

How to overcome the workforce crisis  
in the trucking sector

# CONTENTS

## A Trucking Lives and Timewise briefing

### Context

1. Job quality issues in road haulage:  
the priorities for change
2. Drivers of poor job quality
3. Opportunities for change
4. What next?

### References

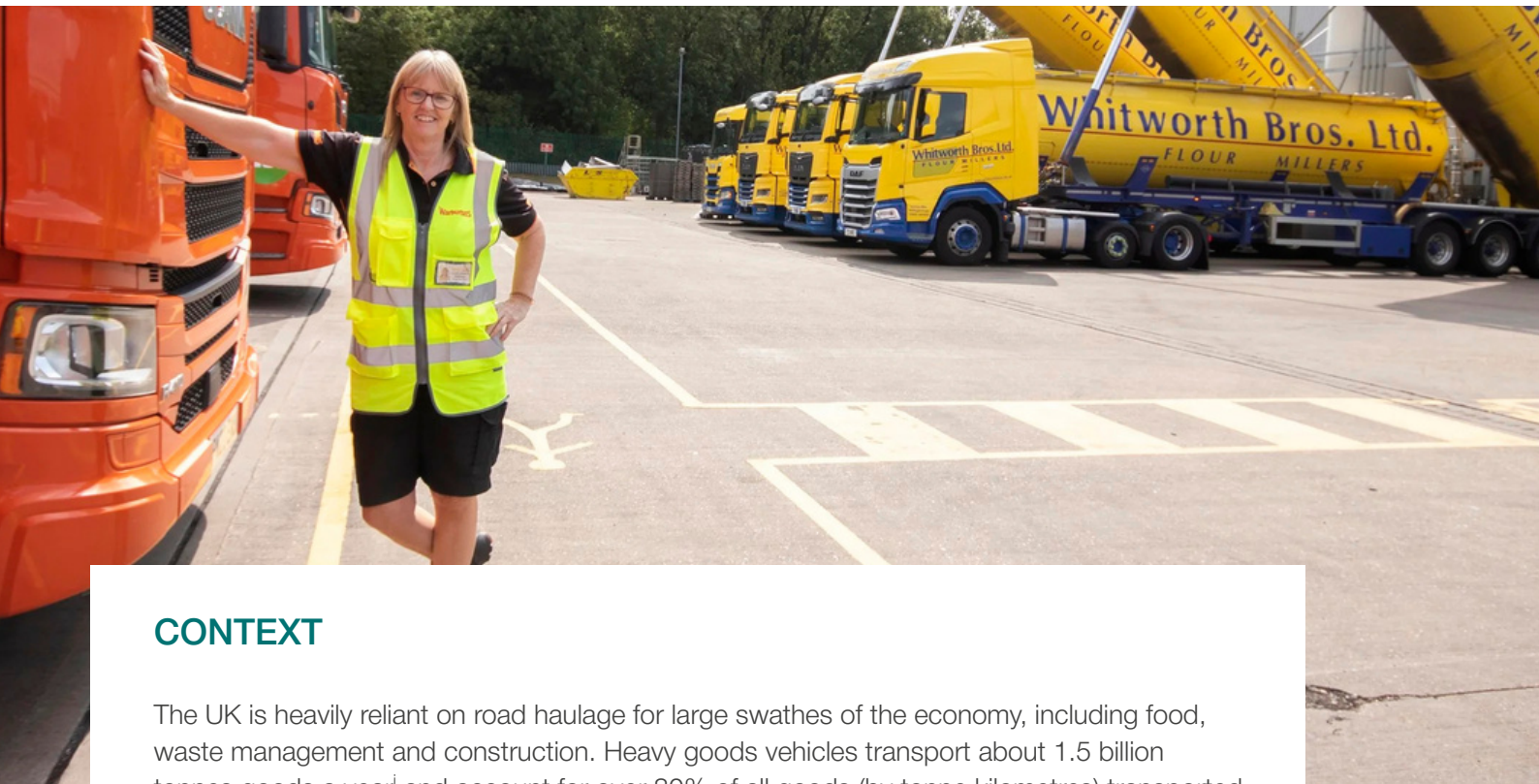


Photo credit: Holly Revell  
for The Trucking Lives  
Photography Exhibition

## CONTEXT

The UK is heavily reliant on road haulage for large swathes of the economy, including food, waste management and construction. Heavy goods vehicles transport about 1.5 billion tonnes goods a year<sup>i</sup> and account for over 80% of all goods (by tonne kilometres) transported across the UK.<sup>ii</sup>

Yet the sector faces a perfect storm of an ageing workforce, difficulties attracting younger and more diverse workers and rising sickness levels. The latest data from the Office of National Statistics shows that both the sickness absence rate and the number of days lost to sickness per worker in transport and storage were higher than any other sector in 2025, exceeding levels at the height of the pandemic in 2021.<sup>iii</sup>

Recruitment campaigns alone won't fix these problems. Recently published reports from the UKRI Economic and Social Research Council-funded Trucking Lives project<sup>iv</sup> – covering nearly 2,000 Heavy Goods Vehicle (HGV) drivers – and from Timewise<sup>v</sup> show that more attention is needed on the nature of the jobs themselves. Long hours and unpredictable schedules are driving people out of the sector and making it more difficult to attract a more diverse workforce. Younger workers are more likely to find truck driving incompatible with life outside of work. People with caring responsibilities, particularly mothers, can't find roles that fit with their commitments. Older drivers are exiting early due to years of overwork and poor health.

New technology, including AI, present an opportunity to redesign how work is structured and experienced on the ground - such as by helping route planners and managers to better account for staff schedule preferences. But without targeted effort, new technology will simply reproduce the lack of worker input or control over working patterns.

In June 2026, Timewise and the Trucking Lives project jointly convened key industry voices to identify the priorities, blockers and opportunities for job quality improvements in the sector. Participants included representatives from a nation-wide logistics operator, the independent haulier Welch Group, Logistics UK, the Road Haulage Association, the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers (USDAW), and academic researchers whose work has focused on the experiences of truck drivers from the universities of Oxford and Newcastle. This briefing sets out the findings, based on their views and insights.

## 1. JOB QUALITY ISSUES IN ROAD HAULAGE: THE PRIORITIES FOR CHANGE

The discussion confirmed that road haulage faces a significant job quality problem, one that goes beyond a simple recruitment challenge. The group identified three priority areas for action:

### 1. Working patterns: long hours and unpredictable schedules

Long hours remain a defining feature of the job for many truck drivers. The Trucking Lives survey found that those working part-time were significantly more likely to be satisfied with their jobs, more likely to remain in the sector, and less likely to experience mental health crises associated with their work – but the survey also found low awareness of flexible working options, low availability, and even lower take-up.<sup>vi</sup> Beyond overall hours, participants agreed that unpredictability of working patterns - not knowing when a shift will end, when a driver will get home, or what route they will be on – is a key concern for drivers. This makes it difficult to plan their lives, manage caring responsibilities, or maintain health routines. Participants highlighted the mismatch between the operational rhythms of trucking - early starts, unpredictable finishes, overnight stays far from home - and the childcare infrastructure available to working parents as a key factor affecting the sector's ability to attract women and parents with young children.

### 2. Health management: lack of decent food, sleep and support

The health toll of HGV driving is well-evidenced. Over half (54%) of HGV drivers say that the work has a negative impact on their physical health and nearly a third (32%) say it affects their mental health.<sup>vii</sup> Drivers are twice as likely to develop diabetes as the general population, with an estimated two in five road transport workers having the condition.<sup>viii</sup> Alongside long hours, sedentary working, poor diet on the road and disrupted sleep are key drivers of this and other health issues, while time pressures can make it more difficult for drivers to take the breaks they need to manage health conditions. These issues, alongside problems of social isolation and work-related stress, have been linked to the relatively high suicide rates among male HGV drivers.<sup>ix</sup>

Participants connected these health outcomes directly to the structure of the job and the working environment, not simply to individual lifestyle choices. They also highlighted that drivers who are sleep-deprived, managing uncontrolled diabetes, or struggling with mental health are not only more likely to leave the workforce: they are less safe on the road.

### 3. Facilities: inadequate roadside infrastructure

The shortage of safe, high-quality roadside parking facilities on key freight corridors was highlighted as another key job quality issue affecting the health, wellbeing and safety of drivers. The low quality and insufficient quantity of facilities limits access to healthy food and decent hygiene facilities, while freight crime represents a serious concern, with organised gangs targeting drivers and their cargo. This situation means many drivers rest and sleep in their vehicles and exacerbates problems of anxiety, sleep disruption and fatigue.

These issues can be particularly acute for women, who make up a very small proportion of current HGV drivers, but have been the target of UK government and sectoral recruitment drives. Female truckers are more likely to be primary carers, and so are most affected by the mismatch with childcare provision. Academic research carried out as part of the Trucking Lives project has found that many women drivers were the first in their organisation to go through pregnancy, request post-maternity flexible working, or raise related concerns, with managers making up policy as they went along, while some roadside facilities offer no separate toilets or showers for women.<sup>x</sup> These are not just personal challenges for a small sub-sector of the workforce: they represent structural barriers that limit the sector's ability to diversify its workforce.

## 2. DRIVERS OF POOR JOB QUALITY

Participants identified a range of structural, commercial and cultural factors that affect poor job quality in road haulage:

### Just-in-time logistics

The widespread adoption of just-in-time delivery models creates a significant source of unpredictability for drivers. A specific issue raised was the unpredictability caused by customer delivery sites - particularly large retailers and distribution centres - where drivers are scheduled to arrive at a booked time but may then be made to wait for hours. This is experienced as disruptive and demoralising, makes it hard to plan shifts, and can cause drivers to breach their hours. Some centres have signed up to charters limiting waiting times, but the commercial relationship can make it difficult for individual hauliers – especially smaller ones - to enforce consequences for excessive delay.

### Industry fragmentation

While small operators may have the capacity to support their drivers on a case-by-case basis, they often lack the driver pool, the planning capacity, or the management resource to implement structured flexibility. If a company has only 30 drivers at a depot, finding two people who want to job-share, with compatible routes and schedules, is more difficult. Fragmentation also limits collective action: smaller hauliers are often dependent on a few large customers whose requirements set the conditions of work.

### Infrastructure market failure

The shortage of safe, high-quality roadside parking on freight corridors was described as a market failure. Despite some government investment in improving standards at existing sites, there has been insufficient focus on increasing capacity in the right places, and planning permission for new sites remains difficult to obtain.

### Low margins and asset pressure

Road haulage operates on very thin margins, particularly for the small and medium sized operators who make up most of the sector. Vehicles are expensive assets that must be fully utilised to generate returns. This creates strong commercial pressure against any operational change - including flexible working - that might reduce productive hours and affect overall viability.

### Knowledge gaps and cultural resistance

Even where flexible working policies formally exist, they are frequently not implemented well. A recurring theme was the lack of training and awareness among transport managers and route planners about what flexibility might look like in practice, what their legal obligations are, and how to have meaningful conversations with drivers about working arrangements. Cultural resistance among managers and drivers themselves compounds this. Full-time working is deeply embedded as the norm in a male-dominated sector, meaning latent demand for change is rarely evident. Where flexible arrangements do exist, stigma and fear of career or reputational consequences can deter drivers from requesting them.

### Scheduling software and embedded industry norms

The growing use of scheduling and route-planning software, including AI-enabled tools, was identified as an emerging risk. This technology could enable positive change (discussed further below), but anecdotal evidence suggests that these tools are currently reinforcing existing industry norms, including assumptions about full-time working and standard shift patterns. As AI becomes more deeply embedded in workforce planning, the risk is that poor practices become digitally entrenched and harder to change.

### 3. OPPORTUNITIES FOR CHANGE

The discussion explored what needs to happen to support improvements. A clear message was that no single actor can resolve these issues alone. The interdependence of different parts of the supply chain means that change requires coordinated action, backed by government.

#### Larger logistics companies

Large logistics operators have the greatest capacity to improve job quality, and the roundtable heard a positive case study of what this can look like in practice. A large operator described a structured programme of flexible working with around 450 drivers at two sites, including job shares and adjusted hours, developed in partnership with the recognised union. Key elements included:

- Proactive communication with drivers about available options, rather than waiting for formal requests - demand for flexibility emerged once it was actively promoted as a possibility.
- A close working relationship with the union, which acted as a trusted first point of contact for drivers considering a request, building confidence before any formal process began.
- Flexibility in route and cab assignment to accommodate individual needs. Examples included meeting a request from a driver with Autism for consistent cab and route allocation and another's request for an earlier start time to manage blood sugar levels associated with diabetes.
- Manager training, identified as a critical learning point after they found requests were being rejected without conversations taking place, undermining trust. Managers needed support to understand both their legal obligations and how to have meaningful discussions with drivers.
- Internal mobility pathways, including a warehouse-to-driving programme enabling internal recruitment and backfilling of driver positions as the workforce ages.

There are two broader lessons from this example:

- First, flexible working at scale is more achievable in large fleets because the driver pool is large enough to match people with compatible preferences and routes.
- Second, the barriers are at least partly cultural and organisational rather than operational. While delivery requirements beyond the operator's direct control can play a part, internal planning efficiencies (such as drivers waiting for work because of poor resource planning) were also cited as a factor.

The example suggests that, if one large logistics company can do this, others can too. Although most employers in haulage are small, larger companies account for a large proportion of employment, meaning that greater uptake by large operators would have significant sector-wide impact.



## Small and independent hauliers

Small and medium-sized hauliers operate in a very different context, with more varied and unpredictable volumes of work, driven by customer orders - rather than contracted lanes or set routes. In this environment, formal flexible working in the conventional sense is more difficult to implement: there are not enough drivers to easily match job-sharers, and the nature of the work changes daily.

The roundtable heard from a family-run regional haulier employing around 70 drivers, whose reflections illuminated some opportunities for smaller operators:

- While formal flexible working arrangements are hard to deliver, smaller operators can work to give drivers more predictability over what type of work they will do and when. This includes matching drivers to work types suited to their preferences - for example, keeping those who need to be home each night on multi-drop or local delivery work, while those willing to deliver long-distance do so by choice.
- Case-by-case personalisation is a strength. Without layers of organisational bureaucracy, smaller operators can respond to individual driver needs more directly and quickly.
- Cross-functional mobility offers some flexibility. Drivers moving into planning, operations or warehouse roles - and back again - provides a form of variation and relief from the road, and can support drivers who need a temporary or permanent change of pace.
- Network partnerships can improve welfare conditions. Membership of haulage networks enables drivers to stop at partner depots rather than public truck stops, which typically offer better security, facilities and human contact.



*"Flexible working as most sectors understand it doesn't map neatly onto an SME fleet where the work changes daily. What we can offer is predictability. Knowing what type of work you're on and roughly when you'll be home matters more to most of our drivers than a formal arrangement on paper. That's a planning choice, and it's within reach of any operator our size."*

Jamie Sands, Head of Solutions, Welch Group

## Trade associations and industry bodies

Trade associations occupy an important position in the system: they cannot compel change, but they can shape norms, share best practice, educate their membership, and advocate to government. Participants identified a range of ways in which these bodies can support improvements:

- **Best practice dissemination:** member briefings, conferences, and other channels provide opportunities to share examples of good working practice - including more flexible and predictable working arrangements - across the sector. The diversity of operator types makes it important to share examples that reflect different business models and scales.
- **Resources:** some industry bodies are already developing resources and support to help hauliers to tackle health issues – such as the Road Haulage Association’s ‘Guide to Maintaining Driver Health’, which calls for more regular medical checks<sup>xi</sup>, and Logistics UKs Thrive platform providing mental health support and signposting in partnership with physiotherapists, wellbeing apps and road safety charities.<sup>xii</sup>
- **Manager and transport manager training:** identified across the roundtable as a gap, trade associations can play a role in building knowledge and confidence among transport managers about how to handle flexible working requests, health-related adjustments, and diverse workforce needs.
- **Market convening:** industry bodies can provide an important leadership role to tackle the collective action hurdles to change, such as by negotiating sector-wide agreements and enforcement mechanisms between hauliers and distribution centres on the approach to waiting times; engaging roadside parking providers and other key stakeholders in a strategy to address safety, food and hygiene facilities; and leading efforts to shape new scheduling and workforce planning technology in partnership with software developers.
- **Advocacy:** Where key stakeholders refuse to engage voluntarily, government action is required. Industry bodies already play a key role pressing government for action on issues such as a more strategic approach to roadside parking and tackling freight crime.



*"Every day, thousands of professional drivers are working hard to keep our homes, hospitals, supermarkets and high streets supplied with the goods we all depend on. The RHA is committed to working with Timewise and the Trucking Lives project to identify practical solutions to ensure we have a healthier and more diverse workforce. This is vital to ensure hauliers and drivers can continue to meet the needs of the economy and the public, particularly in an age where the sector is under growing pressure to meet the expectations of consumer convenience."*

Declan Pang, Director of Public Affairs & Policy,  
RHA

## Trade unions

Where trade unions are present and well-embedded, they play a critical enabling role in driving better job quality. The roundtable heard how the union at one large logistics site had been instrumental in the employer's flexible working programme - acting as a trusted first point of contact for drivers considering requests, helping them understand their options, and building confidence before any formal process began. The role of the union as a trusted intermediary, rather than an adversarial party, was emphasised as key to making the programme work. Agreeing the approach to legacy contracts that can create barriers to healthier working patterns for other workers is also best done in partnership with trade unions to ensure a fair approach and transition.

There is a risk that the cultural barriers to change and existing demographic profile of the workforce limits the degree to which unions push proactively for the kinds of working pattern changes that would help attract younger and more diverse entrants to the sector. Career progression, variety, and the ability to manage work alongside life needs should be central features of union bargaining agendas. Union members have made clear that health - particularly diabetes, sleep apnoea and mental health - is a central concern. There is an opportunity for unions to connect these health concerns with the structural job quality issues that drive them, and to push for working pattern changes and welfare improvements as health and safety issues, not just worker preferences.



Photo credit: Holly Revell for The Trucking Lives Photography Exhibition

## Other key stakeholders: customers, technology and government

The roundtable identified several stakeholders whose actions are critical to change but who were not directly represented at the event:

- **Large customers and retailers:** Supermarkets and large retailers set the commercial conditions - delivery windows, drop volumes, contract prices - that shape the working conditions of drivers throughout their supply chains. Efforts to minimise supply chain costs have knock-on effects on shift patterns, waiting times and driver welfare. Bringing customers, and particularly major retailers, into conversations about job quality was identified as essential for systemic change, including the possibility of contractual protections for drivers against excessive waiting times at delivery points.
- **Technology developers:** AI-powered scheduling and route-planning tools are being rapidly adopted across the sector, with many buying off-the-shift licences. There is an urgent need to work with the developers of these tools to ensure that worker wellbeing and preferences are built into their design, rather than simply optimising for cost and vehicle utilisation. In sectors where e-rostering is widespread, such as health, evidence suggests that tools that support organisations to capture and consider staff preferences lead to improvements in staff satisfaction, absence and recruitment rates. Where they do not, they can scale poor practices and entrench workforce challenges.<sup>xiii</sup>
- **Infrastructure providers:** While roadside facilities operators have historically proved hard to engage, participants noted that the shift to electric HGVs is already prompting investment in higher-quality driver welfare facilities at charging hubs. Early evidence suggests that the companies building this infrastructure have put driver welfare at the forefront, in contrast to many traditional truck stops. This creates a potential step-change in the quality of the working environment for drivers of electric vehicles and should act as a competitive pressure on other facilities to raise their game.
- **Government and regulators:** The Government has a key role to play in improving roadside services through the introduction and enforcement of standards, a coordinated response to freight crime, and better strategic planning for new facilities where needed. Stronger and better enforced Working Time Regulations may be required to tackle problems of excessive hours and overwork, and the Diabetes Association has called for the DVLA to mandate stronger health checks to mitigate the public safety risks linked to diabetes among truck drivers.

More broadly, participants agreed that the logistics sector should be a focus of industrial strategy, in recognition of its role as a foundational sector in its own right rather than simply an enabler of other sectors. The Government should convene key industry leaders to design and implement initiatives to improve performance and job quality, backed by incentives to engage.



### 3. WHAT NEXT?

The 'Trucking Lives' project runs to December 2026. The next stages of research will involve working with the automation, electrification and data-driven transformation of UK road haulage, and the implications of this for truckers - ensuring their voices and needs are front and centre of the transitions that are already underway, and that these technologies are used to improve working lives.

Timewise will continue to work to promote good practice and scale change through improved sector coordination and dialogue in frontline sectors, including transport and storage. Priority areas include effective implementation of the Employment Rights Act, including new rights to end one-sided flexibility that only benefits employers and strengthen workers' access to formal flexible working arrangements.



#### Trucking Lives project

For more information, visit the website at <https://truckinglives.co.uk/> or contact the project team on [truckinglives@conted.ox.ac.uk](mailto:truckinglives@conted.ox.ac.uk)



#### Timewise

For more information, visit the website at [www.timewise.co.uk](http://www.timewise.co.uk) or contact the team at [info@timewise.co.uk](mailto:info@timewise.co.uk)

### REFERENCES

- <sup>i</sup> Department for Transport (2026) "Domestic road freight statistics, United Kingdom: 2025". Available here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/road-freight-statistics-2025/domestic-road-freight-statistics-united-kingdom-2025>
- <sup>ii</sup> Department for Transport (2025) "Transport Statistics Great Britain: 2024 Freight". Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/transport-statistics-great-britain-2025/transport-statistics-great-britain-2024-freight>
- <sup>iii</sup> Office for National Statistics, Sickness Absence in the UK Labour Market: 2025. Data released on 1 May 2026. Available here: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/labourproductivity/articles/sicknessabsenceinthelabourmarket/2025#groups-with-the-highest-sickness-absence-rate>
- <sup>iv</sup> Hopkins D, Medappa K, Davidson AC, Gregson N and James A (2024) Views from the Cab: The Working Lives of Heavy Goods Vehicle Drivers in the UK, Trucking Lives. Available at: <https://ora.ox.ac.uk/objects/uuid:546d5789-9592-438a-8623-ab04e885aa83>
- <sup>v</sup> Lanning (2026) More than Miles: Designing Healthier Jobs in the Logistics Sector, Timewise. Available at: <https://timewise.co.uk/article/why-logistics-needs-a-job-work-design-revolution-and-why-now/>
- <sup>vi</sup> Hopkins et al. (2024) Views from the Cab: The Working Lives of Heavy Goods Vehicle Drivers in the UK, Trucking Lives. Available at: <https://ora.ox.ac.uk/objects/uuid:546d5789-9592-438a-8623-ab04e885aa83>
- <sup>vii</sup> Hopkins et al (2024) Views from the Cab: The Working Lives of Heavy Goods Vehicle Drivers in the UK, Trucking Lives. Available at: <https://ora.ox.ac.uk/objects/uuid:546d5789-9592-438a-8623-ab04e885aa83>
- <sup>viii</sup> Diabetes Safety Organisation (2025) Hiding in Plain Sight: The UK Diabetes Crisis – a call to action in the road transport sector. <https://diabetessafety.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/Hiding-in-Plain-Sight-Diabetes-and-the-road-transport-sector-v4.pdf>
- <sup>ix</sup> See Mates in Mind, Transport and Logistics. Available at: <https://www.matesinmind.org/what-we-do/sector-specific-support/transport-and-logistics>
- <sup>x</sup> See James A, Hopkins D, Medappa K, Davidson AC and Gregson N (2025) "Gender at Work in Logistics Supply Chains: Mother Truckers 'In a Man's World'", presentation for the RGS-IBG Annual Conference 2025 University of Birmingham 29 August 2025, and Work Employment Society Annual Conference University of Manchester 8 September 2025. Available at: <https://www.slideshare.net/slideshow/mother-truckers-gender-at-work-in-logistics-supply-chains/283024568#slide1>
- <sup>xi</sup> Road Haulage Association (2023) Guide to Maintaining Driver Health: Keeping drivers fit for the road.
- <sup>xii</sup> See <https://logistics.org.uk/thrive>
- <sup>xiii</sup> See Timewise, forthcoming, E-Rostering to Meet Staff and Service Needs: A Toolkit, NHS England.

## ABOUT TIMEWISE

Timewise is a national non-profit organisation that exists to ensure work is designed around real lives, not the other way around.

Work hasn't kept up with the realities of modern life in Britain today. As the pressures on the workforce have increased, job design has stayed stuck, leaving millions unable to fully participate in the economy. This is bad for workers, bad for business, and bad for public finances - driving up social security and health costs while employers face problems of burnout and poor retention.

Over the last decade Timewise has worked with many of the UK's leading employers to design work that better fits modern lives, so that flexibility, predictability and control aren't privileges for the few, but the norm for everyone.

We do this through:

- **Research and campaigns** to build the evidence base and make the case for change.
- **Workplace solutions** designed and tested with employers across all sectors.
- **Partnerships and influencing** to scale what works and drive systems change across sectors, places and policy.

We specialise in finding solutions where they're hardest to find, including frontline sectors such as transport, construction, education, health, social care, childcare and retail. Our track record shows it is possible to deliver healthy, well-designed jobs for workers and meet complex operational needs - resulting in lower staff turnover, reduced sickness absence and higher performance.

---

## ABOUT TRUCKING LIVES

Trucking Lives is a three-year research project funded by the UK's Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) as part of their Transforming Working Lives research priority (ES/W009447/1).

The project is collaborative and multi-institutional including researchers from the Universities of Oxford, Sheffield and Newcastle. It seeks to: make visible the everyday experiences of work and life amongst UK truck drivers; interrogate the changes being brought about in the trucking industry; and find means to improve the work and life conditions of UK truck drivers.

The project completed the largest ever academic survey of UK lorry drivers, complemented with over 100 interviews, a trucker photography competition, and a documentary photography exhibition.

More information on the Trucking Lives project is available at: [www.truckinglives.co.uk](http://www.truckinglives.co.uk)



Timewise Foundation is a limited company registered in England and Wales.  
Company number: 05274371

© Timewise 2026 | [www.timewise.co.uk](http://www.timewise.co.uk)