

Barron Wood Distribution Limited

WHITE PAPER

Traction services for UK retailers

What are they, and how can they help manage capacity and cost challenges?

UK retailers are under sustained pressure to keep goods moving, at a time when the transport capacity needed to do so is becoming harder to secure.

Driver vacancies remain high across the haulage sector: 26% of HGV businesses reported unfilled driver positions in the final quarter of 2025, according to Department for Transport data, up from 24% a year earlier and still well above pre-shortage levels, even with the peak of 43% recorded in late 2021 now some way behind.[1]

The workforce behind the wheel is also ageing. Logistics UK's 2026 Employment and Skills Report found that 61.6% of HGV drivers are now aged 45 or over, which points to a long-term capacity issue rather than a short-term blip.[2]

At the same time, the cost of running a fleet continues to rise. The Road Haulage Association recorded a 5.91% increase in operating costs through 2025, excluding fuel, while operator margins remained close to 2%.[3] If retailers are weighing up whether to expand their own fleet, this leaves very little margin for error.

Traction services offer a way through this. This paper sets out what traction services are, where and when retailers use them, what can go wrong when transport capacity is inflexible, and how retailers are using traction as a deliberate part of their transport strategy as opposed to being a last resort.

1 https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/road-freight-statistics-2025/heavy-goods-vehicle-driver-vacancies-in-the-united-kingdom-2025
2 https://transportoperator.co.uk/2026/07/01/logistics-uk-report-identifies-challenges-in-maintaining-hgv-driver-workforce/
3 https://www.rha.uk.net/Portals/0/Membership/Annual%20Cost%20and%20Pay%20Surveys/Cost%20Tables%202026.pdf





What are traction services?

Traction services are a transport model built around a straightforward division of responsibility. The transport partner supplies the tractor unit and the driver; the retailer supplies the trailer, along with its stock, loading operation and warehouse processes, which remain unchanged.

In practice, this means drivers work from the customer's own distribution centre or transport site. They collect pre-loaded trailers and complete scheduled deliveries within the retailer's existing collection windows and delivery plan. Capacity can be structured around a regular, contracted requirement that is layered with additional flexibility for busier periods, or arranged on a purely ad hoc basis, depending on what the retailer needs.

This arrangement is distinct from standard haulage. A conventional haulage service works on a simple basis: a vehicle arrives, collects a load and delivers it, usually as a one-off engagement. Traction services work differently.

Because the same drivers and vehicles return to the same sites, routes and schedules repeatedly, they become an extension of the retailer's own transport operation, not an external resource brought in for a single job. Drivers can therefore build familiarity with specific depots, loading procedures, delivery locations and site requirements over time, in much the same way an internal fleet driver would.

The distinction between traction and standard haulage services has a practical consequence. By separating traction capacity from trailer ownership, each party can concentrate on what it already manages well – the retailer keeps control of its trailers, loading operation and transport plan, while the transport partner takes responsibility for supplying reliable driving resource around it.

In summary:

- Traction services supply the tractor unit and driver only, leaving the retailer's trailers, stock and warehouse processes under its own control.
- Unlike standard haulage, which is typically a one-off collection and delivery, traction services operate as an embedded, repeat-use extension of the retailer's own transport operation.

Where and when retailers turn to traction services

Traction services are typically used for repeat retail movements, where the same routes, sites and schedules run again and again.

Common applications include:

- Store replenishment: Scheduled deliveries from the distribution centre to individual stores. These keep shelves stocked in line with footfall and sales patterns.
- Distribution centre transfers: Moving stock between a retailer's own DCs. This supports regional stock balancing and wider network operations.
- Supplier or manufacturing-site collections: Bringing goods into retail DCs from further up the supply chain. Collections run to a schedule the retailer sets, giving it control over timing and volume.
- Expansion capacity: Adding transport capacity to support new stores, new regions or new customer accounts. No fleet investment decision needs to sit behind that growth.

Several pressures sit behind this demand. Driver shortages are a persistent factor across the sector, compounded by an ageing driver workforce, as set out at the start of this paper. Fleet constraints often follow closely behind – a retailer may have committed capital to trailers, warehousing and stock systems, but find itself short of the tractor units and drivers needed to move goods through that infrastructure.

There is also a more everyday inefficiency at play. Many retailers have sufficient trailers for their operation but insufficient tractors to keep them moving, and this leaves valuable assets underutilised. Meanwhile, for those retailers weighing up whether to expand their own fleet, adding permanent tractor units and drivers is a significant, largely fixed commitment. Once that investment is made, it is hard to scale back if demand does not hold at the level planned for.

Seasonal peaks sit among these pressures too, and warrant closer attention on their own. The next section looks specifically at how traction services help retailers manage the Christmas trading period.

In summary:

- Traction services support repeat retail movements – store replenishment, DC transfers, supplier collections and expansion capacity.
- Demand is driven by driver shortages, fleet constraints, underused trailers and the fixed-cost risk of expanding an owned fleet.

Seasonal peaks and Christmas trading

UK retailers' own trading figures show how sharply demand concentrates around Christmas. Tesco's online sales rose 11.2% over the festive period in 2025, and the retailer added 100,000 extra delivery slots in the final week alone; Sainsbury's online grocery sales grew 14%, while Ocado reported a 13.7% rise in sales and a 10.7% increase in volume.[4]

Behind each of these figures sits a retailer that has had to move more stock through its own supply chain to meet demand – replenishing stores, shifting goods between distribution centres and bringing in extra volume from suppliers, all within the same compressed window. This swing, far from being a one-off, is a predictable, recurring feature of the trading calendar that is concentrated into a matter of weeks.

This creates a genuine planning dilemma. Sizing a permanent fleet to absorb Christmas-level demand means carrying tractor units and drivers that sit underused for most of the year, at a cost most retailers are unwilling to bear. Sizing a fleet to the quieter months, by comparison, leaves the business short of capacity exactly when demand, and customer expectations, are at their highest.

Traction services offer a practical way to manage this swing. Capacity can be brought in specifically for the peak trading period, scaled to match the volume increase, and released again once demand returns to its usual level. The retailer avoids a fixed, year-round commitment, while still having the tractor units and drivers in place when they are needed most.

How that capacity is secured still matters, though. Pricing for ad hoc or last-minute transport capacity tends to squeeze upwards as the peak trading period approaches. Retailers that book capacity further in advance are typically better placed to manage this cost, in much the same way that locking in a rate ahead of time avoids the premium attached to booking at short notice.

This combination of planning risk and pricing pressure points to the same conclusion. Flexibility is most valuable at exactly the time a retailer can least afford disruption, which is also when that flexibility is hardest, and most costly, to secure at short notice. A shortfall in capacity during the Christmas period is far more visible, and far more costly, than the same shortfall at a quieter point in the year.

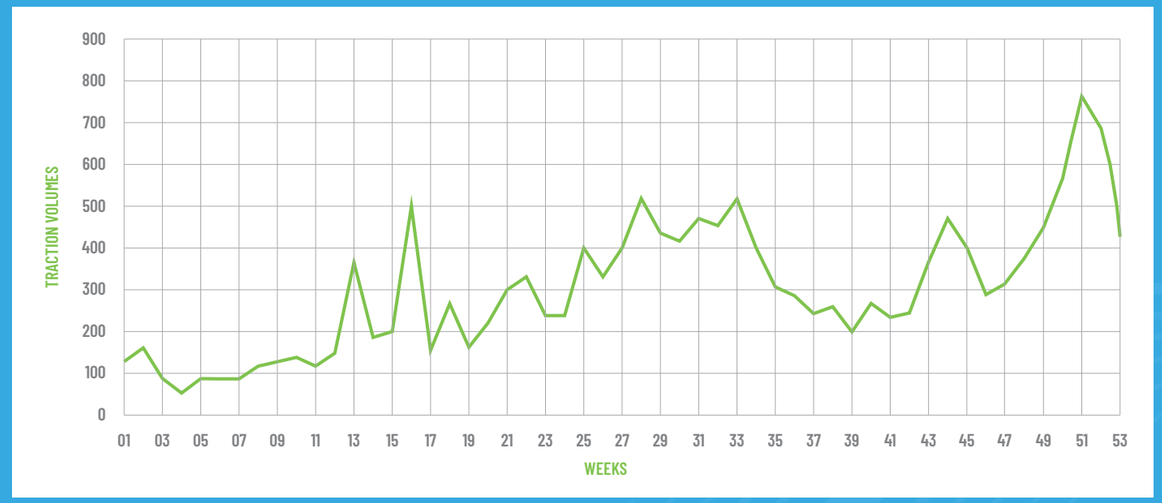
Agreeing traction capacity ahead of peak removes both risks at once. The retailer is not left competing for capacity on the open market in the week before Christmas, nor is it paying the premium that comes with it.

In summary:

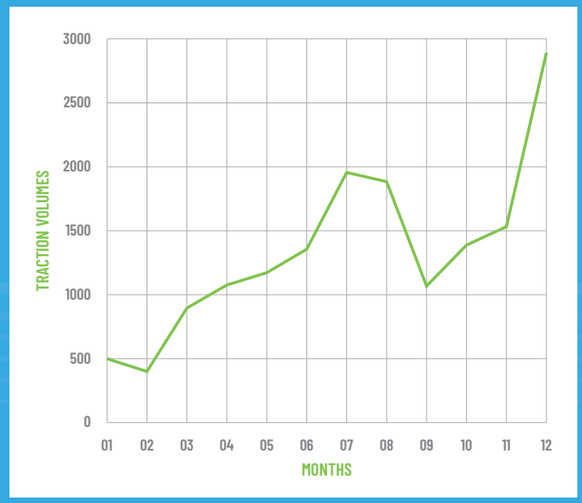
- Retailers' Christmas trading figures show a significant, recurring demand spike concentrated into a few weeks of the year.
- Traction services let retailers scale capacity for peak periods without carrying that cost for the rest of the year.
- Agreeing capacity ahead of peak can avoid both the planning risk of a shortfall and the pricing premium that comes with booking at short notice.

4 https://www.igd.com/commercial-insight/retail-analysis/articles/retailers-christmas-results-learnings-for-2026/72250

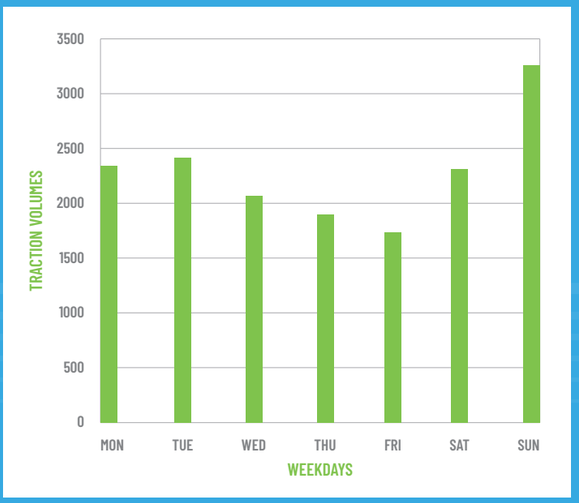
bwd Weekly Traction Volumes (2025)



bwd Monthly Traction Volumes (2025)



bwd In Week Traction Volumes (2025)







The risk of not being flexible

When a retailer cannot flex its tractor and driver resource to match demand, the consequences surface quickly and are felt across the business.

These typically include:

- Missed delivery slots: Stores do not receive stock on schedule, with knock-on effects for availability on the shelf.
- Bottlenecks at the DC: Collections fall behind, and trailers queue for tractors that are not there to move them.
- Spot-market premiums: Cover sourced at short notice is priced at a premium, often with no guarantee of availability.
- Strained retailer relationships: Repeated service failure erodes confidence between retailer and transport partner, at a point in the relationship where trust matters most.

These consequences all feed into each other. A missed slot creates a bottleneck, which forces a last-minute search for cover, which drives up cost and still may not resolve the problem in time. The retailers best placed to avoid this chain of events are those that have already built flexibility into their transport capacity, well before the spike in demand arrives.

The benefits of using traction services

Traction services address the risks set out above directly. Capacity that flexes with demand, and is agreed ahead of time, helps to close the gap that leads to missed slots and DC bottlenecks, all while removing the need to compete for cover on the spot market when a shortfall does occur. The relationship between retailer and transport partner stays intact as a result, without coming under strain each time demand spikes.

But avoiding these risks is only part of the picture. Beyond that, traction services bring a set of advantages that go to the heart of how a retailer runs and grows its business more broadly.

Such advantages include:

- Capital efficiency: Capital is not tied up in depreciating tractor units and drivers, and stays available for the areas retailers compete on directly – stock, stores and technology
- Strategic focus: Management time is spent on running the retail business, not on fleet administration or driver recruitment
- Growth enablement: New regions, stores or customer accounts are not held back by a fleet-investment decision or a recruitment cycle
- Partnership value over time: An embedded relationship, where drivers know the sites, routes and procedures, becomes more valuable the longer it runs

Taken together, these benefits highlight how traction services should be seen as a strategic move, and not simply a contingency measure. A retailer that uses traction services well is, in addition to avoiding disruption, freeing up capital and management resources for the parts of the business that drive growth.

In summary:

- Traction services help retailers avoid the planning risk, cost and relationship strain that come with inflexible transport capacity
- Beyond this, they offer capital efficiency, sharper strategic focus and the ability to grow without a fleet-investment decision attached





Working with an established logistics partner

The benefits of traction services, and the extent to which they are realised, hinge on the quality of the partner supplying the traction capacity. A retailer handing over tractor units and drivers to run within its own operation needs confidence that the standard of service will hold, particularly during the periods when the pressure is hardest felt.

bwd has supplied logistics services for over 30 years and manages a traction operation built on an asset-light, network-based model – this gives retailers access to capacity without the retailer itself carrying the fixed cost of a larger fleet. The bwd network extends across the UK and into Europe, which enables retailers to scale a traction arrangement as their own operation grows or changes shape.

In terms of reliability, this is constantly tracked and shared. Currently, bwd delivers 99.3% on-time-in-full across all operations, a figure that speaks to the consistency retailers need from a service built around repeat, scheduled movements. Real-time tracking, reporting and dedicated account management are provided as standard, meaning retailers have ongoing visibility over their traction capacity at any point in the schedule.

The choice of partner carries as much weight as the model itself. An embedded, repeat-use arrangement can only deliver on its promise of flexibility and reliability if the partner behind it can be trusted to perform to the same standard – through the quietest and busiest points of the year alike.

In summary:

- bwd combines over 30 years of experience with a UK and European network, an asset-light model, and 99.3% on-time-in-full delivery.
- Real-time tracking, reporting and account management give retailers full visibility over their traction capacity as standard.

Looking ahead: Traction services and retail transport planning

The pressures set out in this paper are not expected to ease. The UK's driver shortage is structural rather than cyclical, and an ageing workforce means the issue is likely to deepen before it improves. Peak trading windows are also becoming sharper, with online retailers reporting ever larger surges in the run-up to Christmas. All of this is placing more pressure on transport capacity within an ever shorter window.

Against this backdrop, asset-light and flexible fleet models are likely to become more common across retail transport, not only around peak periods but as a standing part of how capacity is planned.

Technology is also playing a growing role, with better visibility and planning tools making it easier for transport partners to allocate capacity efficiently across their customer base. Sustainability adds a further incentive, as well-utilised assets support the emissions and efficiency targets most retailers are now working towards.

Taken together, these trends point in one direction. Traction services are set to become a more central part of retail transport planning, much more than a stopgap used only when other options have been exhausted. Retailers that build this kind of flexibility into their operation now will be better placed to manage both the regular pressures of driver and fleet capacity and the sharper demands of peak trading, without carrying the cost of a larger owned fleet year-round.

If your business has trailers ready to move but needs additional tractor capacity to keep them moving, get in touch with the bwd team to find out how traction services could support your operation.

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