

Bottlenecks and opportunities

World supply is damaged. China has introduced electricity rationing and is producing less as a result. Some Chinese ports have been partially closed for periods this summer thanks to continuing covid outbreaks. World shipping has been disrupted by shortages of empty containers, by a Suez Canal blockage and by pandemic restrictions. There is a general shortage of heavy goods vehicle drivers across Europe. China, the USA and the EU are turning to policies that rely more on home production and less on imports and global collaboration. There is a gas shortage worldwide, worsened by a period of little wind to generate power that way and by Russian negotiations over the new pipeline to Germany . The regulator still has to grant a licence for the pipeline which is fully compliant with EU rules. There are skill shortages on both sides of the Atlantic as economies recover from the anti pandemic closures.

The UK labour market despite the lockdowns has relatively low unemployment and a high level of vacancies. Some lower paid activities are in particularly short supply. There needs to be an adjustment, with people offered training and better pay and conditions to ensure we have enough HGV drivers, care workers, food processors, farm workers, chefs and the rest. We also need to make sure there are enough people going through the longer training periods to be nurses, doctors, engineers and similar so we do not have to rely on inviting them in from lower income countries that need their own people.

Whilst in the short term these stresses are worrying to people, they are also an opportunity to improve the lives of many. I have written and spoken before about truck drivers. There is now greater agreement that they need better break and overnight facilities. They could also do with Highway departments that understand their needs to get to shops, hospitals and other customer places more easily. There does need to be better pay for those still on low pay and for those the industry needs to attract. It is primarily a task for employers to offer the better packages and to support people through training where necessary. Government needs to see through its promises to greatly expand training and testing capacity and should with Councils work on improving the conditions for drivers on the public highway and in parking and rest facilities.

Employers in a number of areas need to do a similar exercise. In the care sector local government has a role to play as the buyer and user of many services. What combination of better training, more machine power and other support, and pay is needed to recruit the workforce needed? On the farms what investment can there be in support equipment and labour saving machinery to get the crops in, the fruit picked and the vegetables packaged? There is still a long way to go with growing methods for fruit and vegetables to make them easier to pick and pack. Can the hotel and restaurant industry offer better career opportunities including training more chefs?