Our approach to freight

East West Rail's primary purpose is to provide connectivity between communities and support economic growth as a passenger service.

Alongside this, and noting that freight already runs on sections of our route, government has asked us to consider how we:

- Maintain existing freight services that already run through commuter hubs including Oxford, Bicester, the Marston Vale and Bedford.
- Plan for increased future freight demand to enable wider economic growth.

As part of this, the impact of any freight services on local communities will be assessed, managed and mitigated in the same way as passenger services would. We are working closely with the rail freight industry to optimise the benefits and opportunities.

The benefits of freight include:

- Reducing CO_2 emissions by up to 76% compared to transporting freight by road.
- Reducing congestion on local roads, as one bulk freight train can remove up to 76 lorries from the road.
- Improving safety by taking lorries off the road – rail freight prevents an estimated 600 casualties every year.
- Bringing benefits to the UK economy estimated at £1.6 billion every year in UK business productivity gains.

We have sought to understand what the demand for freight on East West Rail could be, including the immediate potential uptake, future growth considerations, and constraints on other parts of the railway network.

Infrastructure considerations to support freight

There are several factors to consider when seeking to enable the running of freight services. These include connectivity to the wider network and the nature of the infrastructure required to accommodate freight trains, and availability of freight paths. A freight path is a space in the timetable between passenger services, where freight could run without risk of affecting the reliability of passenger services, and vice versa.

In some cases, we propose including passing loops along the route to enable this mixed traffic to run. Passing loops provide additional sections of track which make it possible for passenger trains to overtake freight or slower trains.

We will design the railway to an appropriate gradient, gauging and weight specification, in order to accommodate freight trains.

Maintaining existing and planning for new rail freight services

Most freight trains would start and/or finish their journeys outside the East West Rail network, so suitable connections are required to the other main lines. The existing sections of East West Rail between Oxford and Calvert, Bletchley and Bedford already carry freight trains every day, and East West Rail would continue to provide capacity for these services.

Connections already exist to the Oxford Main Line, West Coast Main Line (WCML) (east to south only) and the Midland Main Line.

There are opportunities, particularly to and from the ports of Felixstowe in the east, and Southampton in the south, to provide alternative and efficient routes for existing freight to use East West Rail. The new railway would provide a new connection from these sections to the WCML from west to north and the Cambridge area. We have been investigating these options and what the implications and requirements would be, including consideration of local communities and the potential investment that would be needed.

Our work indicates that the likely demand for these additional freight services would depend on further investment in infrastructure beyond East West Rail. Within our current proposals, and without additional investment beyond the project, East West Rail would allow for:

- Up to two new freight services per day in each direction from Felixstowe via Cambridge through to Oxford and beyond.
- Up to two new freight services per day in each direction from Southampton via Oxford, Bletchley and onto the West Coast Main Line once the first phase of East West Rail is complete.
- Up to ten additional freight services per day in each direction between Oxford and Milton Keynes and beyond once East West Rail is fully operational.

Despite the limited uplift in freight services, this could still replace up to an estimated 250,000 lorry journeys every year, which would be around 980 lorry journeys per day.

Additional services from the east of England could use the route in future, but this would only be possible with additional investment and enhancements both on the East West Rail and the national network. While the demand is mostly for containerized traffic from ports, there may be opportunities for other construction or aggregates traffic to run as well.