

Our approach to freight

While the main purpose of East West Rail (EWR) is to provide passenger connectivity between communities, the railway will also support freight services. This includes both commercial and other associated freight traffic, such as maintenance traffic.

Currently, freight trains run regularly along the part of the route that is already operational between Oxford and Bedford. Our plans would maintain capacity in the proposed timetable for the freight services which are currently operational, and provide new capacity for increased future freight demand as a key enabler for sustainable economic growth.

The impact of freight services on local communities is being assessed, managed and mitigated in the same way that passenger services are.

Benefits of freight services

The benefits of freight trains on EWR include:

- Reducing CO₂ emissions by up to 76% compared to moving goods by road*
- Reducing road congestion, as a freight train avoids the need for up to 129 lorry journeys*

- Improving road safety – it is estimated rail freight prevents around 600 casualties nationally every year*
- Allowing the re-routeing of existing freight trains away from congested areas of the national railway network, such as routing across London, and providing diversionary opportunities when other parts of the railway network are closed
- Bringing benefits to the regional and national economy, with the EWR route helping add growth beyond the economic benefits of £2.45bn per year nationally (2023 prices) which rail freight already provides*

Through engagement with the rail freight industry and consideration of the wider national railway network, we have sought to understand the likely demand for freight on EWR and make appropriate provision. This has included assessing existing freight routings serving key demand generators such as the major ports, and new opportunities for freight growth using the EWR route. We have also considered how EWR may be used strategically for temporary diversions, when other routes are shut for maintenance or other works, or when the network is under pressure.

*All figures taken from Rail Partners, Freight Expectations: How Rail Freight Can Support Britain's Economy and Environment

Infrastructure considerations to support freight

We have designed the railway to an appropriate gradient, gauging, train length and weight specification so it can accommodate the freight trains the industry is seeking.

At some locations along the route, creating suitable freight paths means we need to provide new passing loops along to enable the overall timetable to operate effectively. Passing loops are additional sections of track which make it possible for passenger trains to overtake slower traffic such as freight trains.

Maintaining existing freight and planning for growth

Most freight trains would start and finish their journeys beyond the EWR route, so we have considered interfaces at the connections with other railway lines, such as at Oxford (for the Cherwell Valley Line), Bicester (for the Chiltern Main Line), Bletchley (for the West Coast Main Line (WCML)), and Bedford (for the Midland Main Line).

For the existing railway between Oxford and Bedford, our proposed upgrades would increase freight capacity. This is particularly relevant to growing commercial freight flows such as containerised goods trains running between the Port of Southampton and key terminals in the West Midlands. Some of these new freight services via EWR are already operational, removing lorries from the roads, and we expect this traffic to grow.

Our proposed new railway between Bedford and Cambridge would provide further opportunities for freight services, for example to/from the Port of Felixstowe. These might be new, or diverted services which already run via a different route on the existing network.

For both the existing and new sections of route we have been investigating the freight implications and requirements in a similar manner, including consideration of local communities.

Levels of freight traffic

Based on our work to date, current scope, and capacity available on the surrounding network, we anticipate freight service levels (focusing on commercial traffic) over EWR to be:

- Up to one freight train per hour in each direction between Oxford and Bletchley, most of these would run onto the WCML
- Up to one freight train every two hours in each direction between Bletchley and Bedford
- Around two new freight trains in each direction each day east of Bedford

We estimate this level of freight service could replace up to 2,950,000 lorry journeys every year, or 9,800 lorry journeys per day.

We have also made provision for additional freight services from the Felixstowe area to use the route in the future, allowing for up to one freight train per hour in each direction. However, this would only be possible with additional investment elsewhere on the national rail network.

Get in touch

If you have any questions, please get in touch using the details below:

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