

Our approach to freight

East West Rail is focused on connecting communities between Oxford, Milton Keynes, Bedford and Cambridge with frequent, fast, sustainable passenger transport.

As well as running these passenger services, Government has also set us an objective to maintain the existing freight services that are already running through places like Oxford, Bicester, the Marston Vale and Bedford and to make provision for potential future freight demand.

Rail freight can be a quick and sustainable way to carry goods around the country and offers many advantages, as outlined in the Government's Rail Freight Strategy:

- it reduces CO2 emissions by up to 76 per cent compared to transporting freight by road
- it reduces congestion on local roads, as each freight train removes up to 76 lorries from the roads
- it improves safety; by taking lorries off the roads, rail freight prevents an estimated 600 casualties per year
- it brings benefits to the UK economy estimated at £1.6 billion each year in productivity gains for UK businesses

The benefits of rail freight are an important consideration, alongside our obligations to the Government, but we know that communities will wish to know that effects from any freight services are properly assessed and managed.

What are we doing?

East West Rail is being designed to maintain current capacity for freight trains on the existing railway and we are considering the potential for future growth in demand for rail freight. How much freight would use the railway is not yet known as this is subject to government policy and market demand and is likely to be affected by interventions on other parts of the rail network. For instance, whether a freight operator would use EWR for its trains depends on its customers after operation begins, which we cannot know now.

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We are carrying out a study to understand what the capacity and demand would be on EWR for freight including the potential demand, the capacity considerations on EWR infrastructure, and the potential constraints elsewhere on the network. This work will inform the approach to the next stage of design and the assessment of the environmental impacts of the Project. However, whether EWR is used for freight does not materially affect choices of alignments, for instance. Therefore, the study is not critical to decisions that we expect to take after the current consultation.

There are several considerations that we shall need to consider, including:



The number of available freight paths: essentially, a freight path is a space in the timetable between passenger services, where freight could run without risking the reliability of passenger services. This capacity can be enhanced by providing additional sections of track known as “passing loops” to make it possible for passenger trains to overtake freight trains (or slower passenger trains).

The number of freight paths that could be available should be known by the time of the statutory consultation in 2021/2022 but, as explained above, the number of trains that would use EWR is dependent on market forces and Government policy, as well as the infrastructure.



The demand from the freight industry: We are working with the rail freight industry to gauge the potential interest in running freight services on EWR. Engagement has been undertaken and will continue with the rail freight industry to help EWR Co understand the interest in running freight services on EWR.



The Infrastructure: We are developing the new infrastructure to be capable of accommodating freight trains. The maximum gradient of the railway would be no steeper than 1 in 80 to allow most types of freight train to use the railway without significant risk of operating at such slow speeds that passenger trains might be delayed. We will also consider the need for new passing loops, which would be provided if demonstrated to be affordable and value for money, including evidence of future growth in demand.



Additional changes to the railway network: It is reasonable to expect that there will be demand for freight paths on the new railway between Bedford and Cambridge. The extent of demand for freight paths, and the actual number of freight trains that would run between Bedford and Cambridge, would be dependent on additional changes to the existing railway network, such as alternative connections to and from EWR at Bletchley and Bedford, which do not currently form part of the Project.

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Mitigating potential negative impact of freight: modern freight services operate with clean and efficient locomotives and rolling stock with legislative controls on emission levels, and railways like EWR are designed to include mitigation so that impacts from all train services – including freight – are properly managed.

Further information on the freight strategy for EWR and our approach to avoiding or reducing potential impacts from freight trains which may run on EWR, will be provided at the statutory consultation, which is planned for winter 2021/22. This will include information about noise, vibration and air quality assessments.

This study will inform our future approach, which will be published as part of our statutory consultation, planned for winter 2021/2022.

Get in touch

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