Our approach to freight

East West Rail is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to connect communities between Oxford, Milton Keynes, Bedford and Cambridge. The focus of the railway is on connecting these people and businesses with frequent, affordable and sustainable passenger transport, unlocking the area's potential.

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 as part of delivering wider economic growth. **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%** 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 want assurance that effects from any freight services are properly assessed and managed.

How we'll manage freight

East West Rail's central purpose is to connect people, lives and businesses as a passenger railway supporting economic growth. We know that freight already runs along some sections of our route and we're considering the potential for future rises in demand for rail freight. This will be balanced against the impact to local communities and any investment requirements.

Our 'freight strategy' is still in development with the team continuing to work on all the options and possible opportunities that we'll present as part of the next stage of proposals at the statutory consultation. We expect this to take place in the first half of 2024.

As part of this preparity work we've been carrying out studies to try to understand what the capacity and demand could be on EWR for freight including the immediate potential demand, future capacity considerations, and the potential constraints elsewhere on the network. However, whether EWR is used for freight does not materially affect choices of alignments.

There are several factors for consideration, including:

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).

Current freight along the route: a relatively small portion of the UK's total freight network use existing tracks along the EWR route, these three main existing flows of freight along the EWR route are:

1. The Oxford to Bicester part of the route currently sees some freight traffic between Oxford and Banbury Road

2. Freight traffic originating from the Midland Main Line via the Marston Vale Line, that connects to the West Coast Main Line at Bletchley

3. The final section offers paths for freight from London to Quainton Road/Calvert via Aylesbury

Potential increase in freight usage: there are opportunities to open-up some alternative and efficient routes for existing freight flow, particularly to the ports of Felixstowe in the east and Southampton in the south. We've been investigating these options and what the implications would be both in terms of local community considerations and the potential investment required.

Our work indicates that the volume of new freight flows over EWR will depend on additional investment taking place on the national network. Within the current scope of EWR (without additional investment elsewhere) EWR would enable:

- Two new freight train paths per day, per direction from Felixstowe, via Cambridge, through to Oxford and beyond

- Two new freight train paths per day, per day from Southampton, via Oxford, Bletchley and onto the West Coast Main Line

These paths could replace more than 70,000 HGV journeys on the roads every year. It would however require significant investment in other enhancements, both on EWR and elsewhere on the network, for freight to exceed these levels.

The demand from the freight industry: We're 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're 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'lll 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.

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.

Next steps

We're continuing to develop our freight strategy and will provide further updates at the statutory consultation, which we expect to take place in the first half of 2024. This will include information about noise, vibration and air quality assessments.

Get in touch

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