

GB Railfreight – Response to the National Infrastructure Commission

1. [Northern Connectivity Review](#)

Q: To what extent are weaknesses in transport connectivity holding back northern city regions (specifically in terms of jobs, enterprise creation and growth, and housing)?

The amount of freight transported by rail has grown by 70% in the last twenty years, hauling goods worth over £30bn for many of the UK's core industries (aggregates, intermodal, coal, infrastructure) and generating more than £1.5bn a year in economic benefits for the UK. Rail freight takes the equivalent of 7.6M lorry journeys off our roads each year with the potential for growth and further modal shift.

At GB Railfreight, we operate a significant number of services between northern city regions up and down the East Coast Main Line (ECML) and West Coast Main Line (WCML), supporting our Drax coal and biomass operations from Immingham and the Port of Tyne, our intermodal operations between the Port of Felixstowe and Manchester and Doncaster, and automotive flows between Dagenham and Garston, to name a few.

Recently, we ran our first biomass train for Drax Power from the Port of Liverpool to Selby, North Yorkshire. This was an important moment for the company, because we had been working with Drax and the infrastructure operator over the last two years to secure viable paths across the TransPennine rail network and answer the demands of one of our longest and most loyal customers.

However, there are various infrastructural constraints on the northern rail network city-to-city that are stifling rail freight's ability to move goods and provide services for our customers, and ultimately damage the markets they serve. These constraints are likely to become more significant with predicted population growth in major cities and conurbations, and therefore, must be addressed to ensure effective operations to these growing demand centres.

Trans-Pennine routes

Our contract with Drax from the Port of Liverpool was significant for the industry, because the majority of freight operations east-west have previously been residual traffic, with paths being principally reserved for high-frequency short passenger trains to-date. The arrival of new rolling stock as part of the next TransPennine Express and Northern franchises will no doubt result in further limitations on availability capacity.

This has had a detrimental impact on the development of intermodal corridors, in particular, considered a major source of growth for freight and logistics. In addition to the lack of network capacity, a planning and timetabling decision, infrastructure capacity and capability has been partly to blame.

The lack of track and important network loops between major cities, such as Manchester and Leeds, the absence of suitable gauge-cleared routes and insufficient signalling, all limits intermodal traffic.

While Network Rail is undertaking significant signalling developments in the North, various digital and physical infrastructure improvements are needed to support rail freight.

WCML and ECML

It is widely acknowledged that we face capacity issues on the WCML, a major reason for the proposed construction of HS2. Questions still exist about the reservation of capacity for freight on the classic network, following the introduction of the high-speed line, and this is particularly prescient due to the congestion issues that exist north of Crewe and Preston.

Likewise, there is extensive demand for services on the ECML and we were very supportive of the investment that was made in the North Doncaster Chord. This gauge separation at Doncaster, which like Peterborough, is a key cross country intersection with the ECML, enabled better journey times and capacity improvements for both freight and passenger services alike.

Q: What cost-effective infrastructure investments in city-to-city connectivity could address these weaknesses? We are interested in all modes of transport.

Cost-effective infrastructure investments that will improve freight connectivity fall under two headings: network improvements and inland terminal development. The latter will support the development of the former and incentivise freight traffic along respective routes.

Network Improvements

TransPennine routes

From both a capability and capacity enhancement perspective, the Diggle and Hebden Bridge rail routes between Manchester and Leeds provide key opportunities for improvements to the network. Long loops are needed at various key congestion locations and, while Network Rail is already carrying out important signalling projects, additional signalling would be welcomed in order to create a four-minute planning headway across the Pennines.

East from Leeds to York and Hull, there is currently no space for additional rail traffic. This will be tested once TransPennine electrification is delivered and faster trains are placed on the network. Four-tracking east of Leeds has already been promoted as part of the East of Leeds Capacity Scheme, so we need to ensure that this gets taken forward.

WCML and ECML

With congestion already occurring north of Crewe station, consideration needs to be given to extending four-tracking north of Winsford. What is more, with HS2 services to cater for across the Northern Fells, some dynamic loops will be needed north of Oxenholme so that current and future freight growth can be accommodated with domestic passenger and new HS2 passenger services. The lengths of these dynamic loops are not clear at the moment, but some detailed capacity planning work can establish the ideal locations and lengths of line.

Inland terminals

In order to sustain the profitability of the intermodal market, we need to ensure that there is sufficient intermodal capacity at our ports and inland, with particular emphasis on more Strategic Rail Freight Interchanges (SRFI) and warehouse facilities in the North. These rail-connected terminals

and facilities must be located at points on the network that improve connectivity to relevant sites. The iPort development at Rossington is a primary example of a facility that can dramatically ease storage pressure at major coastal ports and encourage traffic along the network.

Leeds is expecting its population to almost double in the next 15 years, but it currently only has one rail terminal at Stourton, which is already at capacity from both a rail and terminal perspective. If we compare this to Manchester, which has two international rail terminals at Trafford Park and scope for a third at Salford, it's clear that further thought needs to be given to further terminal capacity in and around Leeds.

Q. What are the key international connectivity needs likely to be in the next 20-30 years in the north of England (with a focus on ports and airports)? What is the most effective way to meet these needs, and what constraints on delivery are anticipated?

Network Rail's 2014 freight study estimates that deep sea containerised cargo into Britain is forecast to increase by 2.7 per cent per annum to 2023, by 2.0 per cent between 2023 and 2033 and by 1.7 per cent per annum between 2033 and 2043. While these increases might be deemed modest, ports are heavily dependent on the expansion of their logistics business for growth, either within port estates or using inland terminals. This dependence means that improvements in road and rail infrastructure access into ports will be vital over the next 20-30 years.

At present, various limitations exist around rail connectivity into Northern Ports on both the east and west coast of the UK. Our project recommendations may be small and incremental, but they are the most effective way of meeting port connectivity needs.

The Liverpool2 development is a good example of the desire to increase traffic through port infrastructure development, providing options for additional container services. We, in fact, ran a special Christmas train between the Port and Birch Coppice in Birmingham last year, to highlight such intermodal opportunities. However, constraints still exist on rail access, especially at Bootle Branch Junction, where double-tracking and re-signalling in each direction could increase capacity and improve performance.

On the east coast, rail connections into Immingham have just been re-signalled, but opportunities for infrastructure development exist at the Port of Sunderland and the Port of Hull. Additional signalling should be put in place along the Durham coast route, which could in turn take freight off of the East Coast Main Line, and additional signalling and removal of signal box opening hours from Hull could increase freight capacity.