

GB Railfreight – Response to the National Infrastructure Commission

London Transport Infrastructure Review

Q. What are the major economic and social challenges facing London and its commuter hinterland over the next two to three decades?

Rail freight plays a vital role in bringing aggregates and other construction materials to London for major civil engineering and construction projects, as well as removing waste in the form of spoil. For Crossrail, GB Railfreight has transported over 1 million tonnes of excavated material from the tunnels to a new nature reserve at Wallasea Island in Essex.

In order to sustain growth across these markets, and continue supporting UK manufacturing and construction, it is vital that London possesses strategically effective rail connectivity and freight facilities. As such, we are going to detail areas that we believe need to be considered in the National Infrastructure Commission's Review.

a. Inland rail freight terminals

i. Aggregates terminals

In the Greater London Authority's Local Aggregate Assessment for London 2013, it was concluded that, with two years left to run on the Capital's landbank of permitted aggregate reserves, rail heads would be crucial in sustaining high levels of imports into London.

GB Railfreight supports the development of existing and new strategically effective aggregates terminals across London, which are truly open access for the rail freight industry, in order to deal with actual and prospective growing demand.

The key to adjusting to demand and not wasting spend on the wrong developments is focusing on sites that have economies to support them, as well as incorporating aggregates needs in plans for station rebuilds and enhancements (e.g. Euston station), and major programmes such as HS2.

Despite being intermodal terminals, both Stratford and Willesden freight terminals are prime examples of speculative builds subsequently closed, that suffered significant losses because, along with delay risks and road congestion costs, they had a limited market to drive business.

On the other hand, if we assess Hanson UK's Kings Cross Concrete facility, it has been able to grow into the second largest concrete site in the UK as a result of its strategic location. This growth has been supported by infrastructure at the facility, which allows it to accept large trains and offer significant storage space, as well as high levels of operational competitiveness.

It is also important to note that central and local government's commitment to selling off public land reduces scope for potential aggregates sites in London and, as a result, the Chancellor's 160,000 homes target.

GB Railfreight recommends that an evaluation is made of the markets across the Capital that require support, or further support, from an aggregates rail freight terminal.

ii. Cricklewood

Cricklewood represents the last location in London that is ideally connected for both road and rail freight. Companies operating there primarily carry out spoil and refuse haulage. In September last year, GBRf ran its first train for FCC Environment, transporting waste from its new North London Railfreight Terminal in Cricklewood to Buckinghamshire.

As the Capital continues to build, and major projects and programmes such as Crossrail and HS2 progress, more and more construction soils and materials need to be able to leave the capital efficiently and with the least cost to the environment. This comes at a time when London's roads are already seriously under strain. Cricklewood will, therefore, be crucial in helping remove lorries from London's roads.

The planned Brent Cross Thameslink railway station, as part of the Brent Cross Cricklewood development, will see various freight sites being moved from one side of the Midland Main Line to the other. Our concern is that could lead to the reduction in available land for freight, so we would like to see various sites safeguarded for freight prior to the move.

GB Railfreight recommends that freight sites at Cricklewood are safeguarded.
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b. Freight route investment

In order to support proposals around inland freight terminals and freight capacity in London, we need to address the problems of bottlenecks on key lines in and out of the Capital. These bottlenecks often occur on sections of two-track with flat junctions, such as on the North London Line, West London Line and South London Line.

The North London Line provides a nationally important and electrified freight route from the UK's largest ports, at Felixstowe and London Gateway. In order to cater for the planned growth of freight and passengers, and to do so robustly over the next 20-25 years, the North London Line needs additional signalling throughout and a new regulating point near Gospel Oak or Kensal Rise. Reduced planning headways (with additional signalling) are also needed between Gospel Oak and Barking.

Further capacity problems exist on the Midland Main Line north of St Pancras, which has been designated as congested infrastructure by Network Rail. The Line cannot cater for current demand, let alone future passenger and freight growth. As such, timetabling is crucial to limit delay. However, with the second stage of Thameslink opening in 2019, this will become even more difficult.

The investments made by the Strategic Freight Network fund, and work carried out by Network Rail to incentivise passenger growth, have increased the separation of freight and passenger services. Following West Anglia Route Modernisation and enhancements to the Great Northern Great Eastern line, there will be the potential to run freight and passenger operations from London to Doncaster in almost total separation. More opportunities to separate the traffics brings benefits to both modes of freight and passenger, whilst crucially retaining the ability to use both routes for contingency and maintenance provision.

GB Railfreight recommends that opportunities are evaluated for improving infrastructure capacity on the North London Line, South London Line and Midland Main Line.
