

Chapter 7



Freight Capacity Issues

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7 FREIGHT CAPACITY ISSUES

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7.1 This chapter relates to the following questions listed by the Committee:

- 6.3 – What would be the impact on freight services on the classic network.

General background

7.2 Government supports increased freight traffic on the rail network, as this potentially delivers environmental benefits and some decongestion of the trunk road network. However, the British market remains a challenging environment for rail freight, with most movements being relatively short distance; there has also been decline in traditional heavy industry, where rail's competitive position is relatively strong.

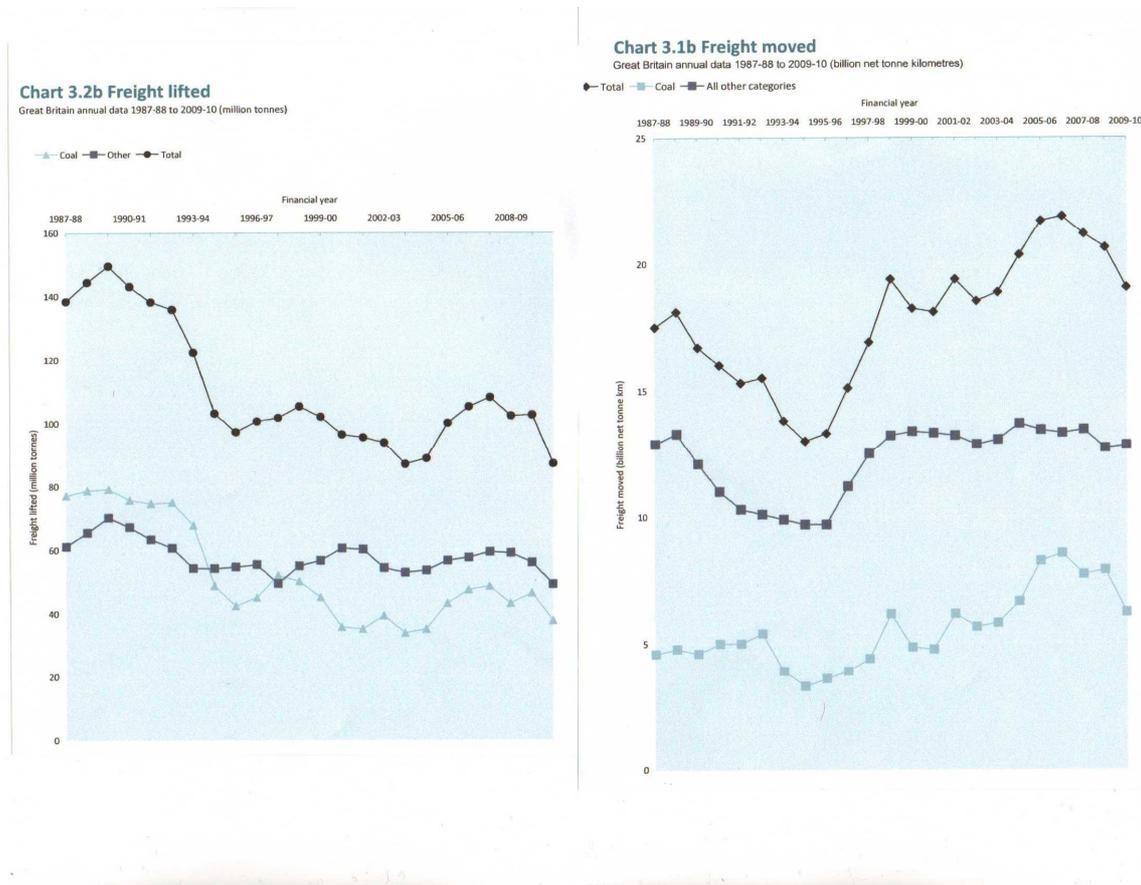
7.3 Nevertheless, there was significant growth immediately after privatisation. This reflected two factors: (1) the new privatised operators sought to increase volumes, and (2) coal supplies to power stations continued to switch from home produced coal (either deep mined or opencast) to imports, much of which came through Hunterston, near Ayr in south west Scotland, hence had to travel much further to reach the power stations concentrated in the Midlands and South Yorkshire. This trend is now complete, and coal movements are likely to decline in the long term as coal fired power stations become life expired and close. Electricity generation using coal is also very poor in carbon terms so there is little likelihood of new coal fired stations being built.

7.4 There has also been strong growth in intermodal traffic (containers) mostly to and from the big ports (e.g. Felixstowe and Southampton), but also for Anglo-Scottish flows, principally from Daventry. This is very relevant to the West Coast Main Line, which is the key trunk route for intermodal freight.

7.5 The actual freight volumes are set out in the Office of Rail Regulation's National Rail Trends Year Book¹ (pages 44 and 46):

¹ <http://www.rail-reg.gov.uk/upload/pdf/nrt-yearbook-2009-10.pdf>

FIGURE 7.1 FREIGHT VOLUMES FROM ORR'S NATIONAL RAIL TRENDS YEARBOOK



7.6 The tonnages moved by rail are at or close to a historical low, but performance has been better on the tonne-kilometres measure, as movements are getting longer.

Freight on the West Coast Main Line

7.7 Freight movements on the West Coast Main line are predominantly intermodal. This sector has shown strong growth, as discussed above, and it is reasonable to assume this will continue, with rail gaining market share from road. Part of this growth can be absorbed by operation of longer trains, delivering improved productivity for the operators, which is of course vital for them in competition with road haulage - this is a highly competitive business, with very thin margins. But there will be a need for additional freight trains, at least on parts of the route.

- 7.8 The majority of the route between London and Crewe is four track, with the two "fast" lines essentially only used by fast passenger trains in the daytime. So any increase in InterCity services has little direct impact on freight capacity except at a limited number of pinchpoints, for example between Rugby and Nuneaton, where there is only one northbound track for part of the distance, and at junctions at Colwich (where the route to Manchester via Stoke splits from the main line) and Stafford. The £2.06 billion investment proposed in Chapter 1 would directly ease these pinchpoints, so freight capacity would not be reduced as a result of an incremental increase in InterCity frequencies.
- 7.9 Current freight capacity on the route is 2-3 trains per hour in the day, except during the commuter peak (although even then, some freight trains do run). Capacity is much higher at night, probably up to 8-10 trains per hour. If all the available capacity is taken, the route could theoretically take up to 120 freight trains each way daily, although in practice this would not be achievable because of the need both for flexibility and to absorb delays. The practical limit is, say, 80 trains. At present the route takes c36 trains south of Rugby, c44 north of Rugby, so it is busy, but by no means full. However, Network Rail is currently doing work to upgrade the Felixstowe - Nuneaton cross country route, which will provide a more direct route from Felixstowe, Ipswich and Harwich. This will potentially take up to 20 trains each way off the West Coast Main Line south of Nuneaton, freeing up capacity south of there for any conceivable future growth. North of Nuneaton, there is still capacity except at the pinchpoints mentioned in Chapter 1, which would need to be tackled both to allow additional InterCity services and/or freight growth.

Summary

- 7.10 While rail freight is unlikely to grow strongly overall, there is likely to be growth in intermodal traffic. However, completion of the Felixstowe - Nuneaton upgrade will potentially allow a significant transfer of freight movements away from the south end of the West Coast Main Line, creating capacity for any foreseeable level of future growth. Capacity north of Nuneaton can also be maintained/increased by infrastructure investment to relieve specific pinchpoints.