

Railways Bill clears second reading, putting rail freight in the legislative spotlight

The Government's Railways Bill 2025 has passed its second reading in the House of Commons, moving a step closer to reshaping the structure of Britain's railways and establishing Great British Railways (GBR) as the new guiding body for the network.

The second reading debate focused on the overall principles of the Bill rather than its technical detail, but it provided important signals for rail freight, which features prominently in the legislation.

A key element welcomed by the freight sector is the inclusion of a statutory rail freight growth target, alongside a legal duty on the Secretary of State, GBR and the rail regulator to promote the use of rail freight. This marks the first time freight growth has been embedded directly into primary rail legislation, giving the sector greater long-term strategic recognition.

During the debate, ministers reiterated the role rail freight must play in supporting economic growth, reducing road congestion and cutting carbon emissions, particularly as part of wider decarbonisation and supply chain resilience objectives.

Industry bodies broadly supported the Bill's direction but cautioned that its success for freight will depend on how it is implemented. The Rail Freight Group (RFG) has highlighted the importance of maintaining fair and transparent track access arrangements, strong regulatory oversight by the Office of Rail and Road (ORR), and charging structures that continue to incentivise high-performing freight operators.

Concerns were also raised about GBR's dual role as both network planner and operator, with calls for clear safeguards to ensure freight and open-access operators are not disadvantaged as the new system beds in.

With the second reading complete, the Bill now moves to the committee stage, where MPs will scrutinise the detail and consider amendments. For rail freight, this next phase will be critical in determining whether the Bill delivers not just warm words, but a framework capable of unlocking sustained growth on the network.

On 9 December, RFG called on parliamentarians to support the rail freight sector

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P3.
Hydrogen trial first for UK rail freight



P4.
RFG's free rail freight mentoring scheme now open for 2026



P6.
20m tonnes of stone moved by rail from Dove Holes



'Freight isn't just for Christmas' says NR Chief Executive at RFG Christmas Lunch

Article and a gallery of images on pages 8 - 13. For a full gallery from the event click [here](#).

The RFG team would like to wish all of our members and colleagues a very Merry Christmas. We look forward to seeing you at our events next year and wish you all a very prosperous 2026.



Wishing all our members and colleagues a very Merry Christmas and a prosperous 2026

*Maggie Simpson OBE,
Director General, Rail Freight Group.*

Welcome to the final edition of RFG News for 2025, wrapping up what has been a busy and productive year for the rail freight sector and for us here at Rail Freight Group.

The highlight of this edition must be the photographs from our Christmas Lunch earlier this month, where around 800 of our members, friends and guests enjoyed a fun-packed day. As always, we were looked after incredibly well by all the staff at the Royal Lancaster Hotel, and by our amazing team of magicians and entertainers, all adding to the festive atmosphere. I was delighted to welcome Network Rail's new chief executive Jeremy Westlake as our guest of honour (see our article page 8), and to hear his words of support for our sector.

The same week as our lunch saw the second reading of the Railways Bill 2025 take place in the House of Commons. The second reading starts the formal process of scrutiny in the Commons, with the Bill Committee expected to start its work in January. We were pleased to see a number of MPs raising rail freight in the debate, highlighting the need for Great British Railways to work to support freight growth, and the concerns of the industry over some of the provisions. We were also pleased to hear the continued support for infrastructure upgrades and in particular the essential works at Ely Junction, which remain unfunded. In anticipation of the debate, we contacted all MPs with a briefing note on the Bill and will follow up with those MPs chosen for the Bill Committee with further details. I was also pleased to be able to appear before the Transport Committee on its inquiry into the Bill.

Aside from rail reform we have been busy completing our new brochures on rail freight in Scotland and Wales, both available on our website [here](#). Both geographies have huge potential for rail freight growth and with elections next May we need to ensure ongoing support for the benefits of moving goods by rail.

Scotland in particular is set to have a booming green energy sector, and we are working to help members understand the opportunities for rail as that is developed, including exhibiting

next May at All-Energy 2026, where RFG will be co-exhibiting alongside Network Rail – so do look out for details of that in the new year.

RFG also continues to press for rail freight on East West Rail as the development of the central section continues, and we were pleased to see the recently published response to the third non-statutory consultation which has some important benefits for freight capacity. Freight trains continue to have sole use of the newly reopened section between Oxford and the West Coast Main Line, for now at least, but a route through to the East would open up new route options and deliver productivity savings for some existing services as well.

I was delighted to see the press coverage of the trial service conveying hydrogen by rail, page 3, which took place in early December. At our Hydrogen Seminar back in February we explored the potential for this emerging market, and some of the barriers, so a trial service is a huge step forward in demonstrating the role that rail can play. Well done to everyone who helped make this a success.

As we look back on 2025, the rail freight sector can be rightly proud of all it has achieved, in difficult economic and policy circumstances. I hope you can all take the time to relax over the festive season, and wish each and every one of you a very Happy Christmas.

I would like to say a special thank you to Yvonne Mulder who retires from RFG at the end of the year. Yvonne (centre below with RFG team members Maria Papp left and Phillippa O'Shea right) has been part of the team for over a decade, and a key part of our events, forums and awards. Yvonne, it has been a pleasure working with you, and we wish you every happiness in your retirement.



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ahead of the second reading. RFG stressed that moving freight by rail supports every person in the UK, moving consumer and retail goods, construction materials for new homes and infrastructure and supporting energy generation for millions of households. Rail freight contributes around £2.5bn to the UK economy each year, and each train keeps around 75 HGVs off the roads, helping reduce road congestion and potholes.

RFG noted that the Railways Bill contains some important and welcome provisions for rail freight, but also raises concerns, particularly around the future plans for allocating track capacity. RFG issued a briefing note to all parliamentarians outlining our key concerns, which included:

The demise of the rail regulator as the body which has grown the railway through incentivising performance, granting new routes, fostering competition and delivering rail growth. Allowing Great British Railways (GBR), rather than the regulator,

to set rules on track access and charging, determine initial appeals and mark its own work to potentially favour the 75% of operators within its stable over the other 25% public and private sector operators.

Confusion over which of GBR or Government will be the guiding mind with new sweeping powers for the Secretary of State to direct, or give guidance to, GBR Powers for Government to intervene over the management and operation of infrastructure and facilities which are not owned by the Government or GBR.

RFG Director General, Maggie Simpson OBE, said: "The success of Great British Railways will depend not on the colour of its logo but on how it supports customers, and enables more goods to move by rail. By making some small changes to the Railways Bill, parliamentarians can help us ensure that the future of our railways works effectively for all users."

Read our Westminster Update (page 14) for more on this.



Freightliner trials hydrogen by rail for the first time

Network Rail, working with Freightliner and energy partner GeoPura, has transported hydrogen for the first time on Britain's rail network, marking a major step forward for both the rail and energy sectors.

The milestone was achieved on 3 December at Network Rail's Test Tracks site in Tuxford, where Freightliner hauled a train of gas containers from Doncaster to High Marnham – marking Britain's first shipment of hydrogen by rail.

It was part of a rail and energy industry innovation event showcasing several hydrogen initiatives. This included the first re-engineered hydrogen-powered shunting locomotive, seen as a step towards replacing diesel, another milestone towards the rail industry's goal of becoming net zero. The event also demonstrated HPU hydrogen-powered generators, lighting towers and support vehicles.



Network Rail's site at Tuxford runs all the way to High Marnham, where it sits adjacent to HyMarnham Power, the UK's largest green hydrogen production facility operated by GeoPura and JG Pears. Built on the site of a former coal-fired power station, HyMarnham Power is one of the world's first rail-connected hydrogen production facilities, and Network Rail's Tuxford site will be one of the world's first net-zero railway testing facilities.

Watch the video of the event [here](#).

News in Brief:

- Network Rail has published the Access and Use Policy (AUP) Discussion Document, following the introduction of the Railways Bill. This marks an important first step in developing the future GBR framework for access and charging decisions.

- After two decades at the Office of Rail and Road (ORR) and seven years as Chief Executive, John Larkinson has announced his decision to leave ORR at the end of April 2026.

- The Rail Safety and Standards Board (RSSB) has appointed Chris Burchell as its new Chair, effective from 1 January 2026. Chris brings 30 years of leadership experience across Britain's rail and energy sectors, with a proven track record in managing complex, regulated infrastructure.

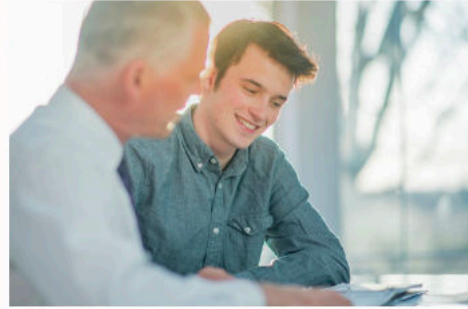
- A huge thank you to everyone who attended the Digital Forum on 3 December online. We're grateful to our speakers for sharing their insights and sparking valuable discussion.

We'd like to wish our members a very happy festive season and a prosperous 2026!



RFG CROSS- MEMBER MENTORING PROGRAMME

OVERVIEW



How our Cross-Member Mentoring Programme can help build your career in rail freight

RFG's Cross-Member Mentoring Programme is free to anyone working for an RFG member company. It has been a great success in previous years, bringing together mentors and mentees from across the rail freight and supply chain sectors.

The mentoring scheme, which begins again in 2026, provides a conventional mentoring relationship while also allowing mentors and mentees to enhance their skills and knowledge of rail freight. We have had fantastic feedback from everyone involved in the first years of the programme and are expecting this year to be just as exciting.

Our programme is led by Deanne Logan, a highly experienced coach, mentor and facilitator. She works to match mentoring partners effectively and provides initial training and regular check-ins over the year, ensuring continuous support. All mentees and mentors attend a virtual one-hour training session, which provides an opportunity to understand the programme and the role in more detail, ask questions, and learn what additional resources are available.

On these calls, people can share their prior experiences and best practices while learning new skills and/or tools to support the relationships. Joining as a mentor is also an opportunity for experienced rail freight leaders to support someone in their career by sharing skills, knowledge, and experience and coaching them in any next steps they may need.

Anyone who is working in an RFG member company can join as a mentor, mentee or both - you don't have to be working in a rail freight-specific role currently to join the programme.

If you are not yet a member of the Rail Freight Group and would like more details about your company joining us, please email maria@rfg.org.uk.

Two videos from a mentee and mentor involved in our current mentoring scheme include an inspiring testimonial from Funtó Agbeniga from GB Railfreight, who talks about her journey as a mentee including why she joined, what she gained, and how mentoring helped shape her professional direction.

Rob McKittrick, Safety & Compliance Manager at Vicia Railfreight, also shares his experience as a mentor. Rob reflects on the value of mentoring within the rail freight sector, the personal and professional benefits of supporting emerging talent, and why he believes the programme is an important initiative for the industry. Click on either of the videos below for first-hand accounts of the success of the rail freight mentoring programme.



RFG MENTORING PROGRAMME

MENTOR TESTIMONIAL



RFG MENTORING PROGRAMME

MENTEE TESTIMONIAL



The key successes of 2025's programme include:

- Confidence and self-esteem of mentees has increased
- Building connections and networking for both mentors and mentees
- Developing a deeper understanding of rail freight for mentees
- Over half of the relationships have included site visits as part of the learning, with very positive feedback from both parties
- Development of skills as a Mentor – coaching, listening, leadership, encouraging action

Some of the FAQs we receive:

What is the mentoring programme?

This programme aims to help develop rail freight skills across the sector and support individuals with their own personal development. Anyone from an RFG member company can join the programme as a mentor, mentee or both.

Based on individual skills, experience and needs, participants will be matched with someone from a different organisation, where they will meet virtually (or in person if preferred and geography allows) between 6-12 times in 2026. Both mentors and mentees will be supported with training and resources before they get started to ensure the relationship is as effective as possible.

What is mentoring?

Mentoring is a learning relationship, involving the sharing of skills, knowledge, and expertise through developmental conversations, experience sharing, and role modelling.

Who is it for?

Anyone who is working in an RFG member company. You don't have to be in a rail freight-specific role to join the programme.

How do I sign up?

To join as a mentor or mentee, please complete the appropriate registration form at the link below. Further details can also be found on the RFG website [here](#).

What do I need to do before I start?

Anyone interested should select a 1-hour training session from the dates available at the links below. This is necessary to complete prior to starting your mentoring relationship, even if you attended last year.

- [Mentor training](#)

- [Mentee training](#)

Getting started

To get started just complete the online [mentor registration](#) form or [mentee registration](#) form. Then, await a match - this will be by no later than the 2 February 2026.

If you're interested in getting involved in the next mentoring programme, but are unsure if it's right for you, please email us at contact@rfg.org.uk for more information.

Prologis UK launches next-generation distribution centre at DIRFT

Prologis UK has secured planning approval for a new 107,000 sq ft rail-served distribution centre at Daventry International Rail Freight Terminal (DIRFT), the UK's largest inland freight hub.



Construction of the building, known as DC107, is due to begin in January, with completion expected in August 2026.

The speculative development will feature a contemporary design focused on functionality, sustainability and wellbeing, including a glazed external balcony and full-width bifold doors. The building will target EPC A+ and BREEAM Outstanding.

DC107 will be delivered as a "ready-to-operate" facility, incorporating LED lighting, fire alarm systems, optimised racking options and high-quality digital

connectivity from day one. The building is targeting WiredScore Gold, enabling occupiers to plug in and operate immediately.

James Hemstock, Vice President Capital Deployment at Prologis UK, said: "At just over 100,000 sq ft, this unit's size is a rarity at DIRFT and offers a distinctive proposition for the market. DIRFT continues to demonstrate its strength as a best-in-class logistics location for businesses needing to reach every corner of the UK efficiently."

DIRFT is strategically located at the centre of the UK's logistics network, with direct access to the M1, M6 and A14, and three on-site rail freight terminals. Recent activity at the site includes major developments for M&S and GXO.

Paul Weston, Regional Head of Prologis UK, said: "DC107 marks our first speculative development at DIRFT for some time and is currently the only available building at the park. We look forward to building on this momentum in 2026."

RFG's regional rail freight brochures - making the case for increased regional development

RFG has published two new regional brochures showcasing the latest opportunities, challenges and developments for rail freight in Scotland and Wales.

Rail freight in Scotland

Scotland continues to lead the UK in its commitment to rail freight, from adopting a national growth target to investing in cleaner, more capable infrastructure. As the nation accelerates towards net zero, rail freight provides a crucial low-carbon connection between industry, communities and Scotland's emerging green energy hubs.

The new manifesto and policy document outlines how targeted investment, fair access and strong policy ambition can unlock further growth, strengthen supply chains, cut emissions and ensure rail freight continues to support Scotland's economy.

[Download the Scotland brochure here](#)

WHY RAIL FREIGHT?

- Low freight rates can remove up to 10% from the cost of goods, improving value for money, promoting higher productivity and increasing competitiveness.
- Rail freight reduces CO₂ by around 75% compared to road and improves air quality with low levels of noise and vibration and the low risk of accidents.
- Growth and innovation opportunities are increasing, supporting business growth, targets to cut supply chain emissions and freight is a key enabler to deliver on these targets.
- Rail freight is a sustainable and forward-looking sector that relies on a capable, reliable and flexible network to deliver value for customers and wider benefits for Scotland.
- Since 2017, long-haul routes have been faster, safer and more reliable, supported by a new fleet of modern, low-carbon freight trains, which are helping to support a more sustainable mode of transport.



RAIL FREIGHT IN WALES

The rail network in Wales connects three main ports and several borders:

- The South Wales Main Line, connecting Cardiff, Newport and Swansea.
- The Cambrian Line, linking Shrewsbury and the communities of Caerleon Bay and the South Wales coast, connecting the ports of Cardiff and Newport.
- The Great Western Main Line, connecting the ports of Cardiff and Newport.

There are significant and ongoing investments in South Wales and new lines are being developed in North Wales. This means there are more routes to the South Wales coast, many routes between Wales and other parts of the Great Britain, allowing services to connect customers, businesses, communities and jobs.



Rail freight in Wales

Wales' rail freight network plays a vital role in linking ports, industrial centres and rural communities with the wider UK. From the South Wales Main Line to the North Wales coast and the Cambrian routes, rail freight keeps essential goods moving efficiently and sustainably across the nation.

As industries transition to greener operations and new markets emerge, the sector is well positioned for significant growth - supporting jobs, strengthening supply chains and reducing carbon emissions.

[Download the Wales brochure here](#)



Building the country more sustainably: 20 million tonnes of stone moved by rail from Dove Holes Quarry

Victoria Railfreight and Cemex UK have celebrated the 20 millionth tonne of aggregates being more sustainably transported by rail from Dove Holes Quarry, in Derbyshire, to be used in major construction projects in UK cities.

In 2018, the two companies came together to move aggregates from the picturesque Peak District's narrow, country roads onto rail, which has resulted in a successful seven-year partnership built on performance, safety and supply chain resilience.

Debbie Simmons, Managing Director, Victoria Railfreight, said: "Reaching 20 million tonnes transported from Dove Holes is a testament to how rail can more sustainably support the transportation of aggregates into our inner cities to enable construction and infrastructure projects. Rail freight provides a slicker, quicker, and more sustainable solution, which means thousands of lorries can be taken from our congested roads every day."

Rob Wilkinson, Aggregates & Asphalt Logistics Manager, Cemex UK, added: "Rail plays a vital role in our transport operations at Cemex and directly supports our global Future in Action strategy to cut CO₂ emissions. We're incredibly proud of the strong growth in our rail operations in recent years and the positive impact this has had on our wider sustainability goals. Rail will remain a strategic priority for us, and we are committed to expanding its use as it becomes an increasingly important part of our supply chain."

RFG sponsors Seahorse Freight Journalism award

RFG was delighted to support the Seahorse Freight Association Awards, sponsoring the Overland Journalist of the Year category - an accolade that recognises excellence in reporting across the land-based freight, logistics and supply-chain sectors.

Representing RFG on the night, Business Manager Maria Papp took to the stage to present the trophy. The winner, Greg Knowler of Maritime & Trade – S&P Global Market Intelligence, secured the title for the second consecutive year, reflecting the consistent quality, insight and authority of his coverage.

The Seahorse Awards bring together journalists, editors, publishers and communications teams from across freight, logistics and transport media to celebrate high-quality reporting and informed industry debate. Sponsoring the Overland category is part of RFG's ongoing commitment to encouraging balanced, rigorous coverage of rail freight and its wider role in the logistics landscape.

RFG extends warm congratulations to Greg and to all those recognised on the night. The strength of entries across every category underlines the vital contribution journalism makes to industry understanding, public awareness and policy discussion.



Porterbrook agrees deal with Freightliner for 150 intermodal wagons

Freightliner has agreed a major deal with Porterbrook for 150 new intermodal wagons, to be built by UK manufacturer WH Davis.

The first wagons will arrive in early 2027. Based on a new 40ft platform design, they will increase container-handling efficiency

and cut carbon emissions by around 7% compared with 60ft platforms.

Freightliner, Porterbrook, WH Davis and Wabtec, which will supply the Axiom TF20+ bogies, all welcomed the project as a boost for UK manufacturing and an important step in delivering lower-carbon rail freight growth.

ORR data shows 4,088 million net tonne km of rail freight moved between April and June 2025, underlining the sector's role in reducing road traffic and emissions.



‘Freight isn’t just for Christmas’ says NR Chief Executive at RFG Christmas Lunch

RFG hosted its hugely popular Christmas Lunch on 10 December at the Royal Lancaster Hotel, London, bringing together over 800 members and guests from across the rail freight community to celebrate another year of achievement for the sector.

A firm fixture in the rail freight calendar, the lunch once again drew a broad cross-section of the industry, including freight operating companies, customers, ports, terminal operators, suppliers, politicians, officials and supporters of sustainable freight transport. Guests enjoyed the opportunity to catch up with colleagues, build new connections and reflect on a year that has brought both challenges and opportunities for rail freight.

RFG was delighted to welcome Jeremy Westlake, Chief Executive of Network Rail, as guest of honour. In his keynote speech, he underlined the essential contribution that rail freight makes to the UK economy and environment, and the crucial role it will play in the reformed railway under Great British Railways (GBR).

“Freight isn’t just for Christmas – it operates 24/7, 365 days a year,” he said. “It plays a critical role in keeping Britain supplied, from gifts and food to fuel. Freight delivers economic and environmental value. It contributes £2.5 billion annually, with 90% of benefits outside London and the South East,” he added. “When freight thrives, the country thrives.”

Jeremy welcomed the provisions in the Railways Bill, which give GBR a statutory duty to promote freight and establish new access and charging frameworks designed to give operators greater certainty and fairness, supporting the Government’s commitment to 75% growth by 2050.

Reflecting on a year of innovation and progress, he noted that 17 applications have been approved under the Access Charges Discount Policy, unlocking around 108 new freight flows each week. New initiatives such as Digital Freight Load Books are improving safety and efficiency, while growth boards and additional capacity on corridors such as Essex Thameside demonstrate proactive planning for future demand.

He concluded with a call to action for continued collaboration between industry, government and customers.

“Rail freight benefits everyone, from the food on our tables and the parcels on our doorsteps to the energy that powers our homes and the materials that build our infrastructure. To unlock its full potential, we must maintain investment and partnership to accelerate the shift from road to rail.”

In her welcome address, Maggie Simpson OBE, RFG Director General, paid tribute to the way the industry has worked together

through another demanding year.

She highlighted the sector’s rapid and coordinated response to major shipping line changes in the spring, which saw around a dozen services re-timetabled in just three months, supporting continued growth in intermodal traffic while maintaining performance.

Maggie also commended members for their strong, united voice on rail reform, noting the sector’s engagement with consultations, events and political outreach.

She said: “The draft Railways Bill now sets a strong framework for freight within Great British Railways, and that is down to your actions. There is still plenty more yet to do to ensure reform is fit for purpose, but for now, thank you.”

She pointed to encouraging developments in low-carbon fuels and new markets, including test trains conveying hydrogen in containers from Doncaster and the imminent arrival of the UK’s first hydrogen-powered shunting locomotive for a customer, demonstrating how rail freight can support the emerging carbon capture and hydrogen economy.

Maggie also celebrated the arrival of the new Class 99 locomotives into the UK, describing them as “a game-changer for our sector”.

A special tribute was paid to Yvonne Mulder, RFG Project Manager, who retires from RFG at the end of the month and will be greatly missed, particularly for her contribution to RFG Forums and the RFG Awards. Guests heard that Yvonne plans to spend more time travelling, having recently visited Qatar to complete her personal challenge of visiting a country for every letter of the alphabet.

RFG Chair Chris Swan also addressed guests, thanking Yvonne, the RFG team and Board members for their support over the year. He acknowledged that 2025 has been one of the most difficult years in living memory for the construction sector, yet rail freight serving construction has continued to perform strongly compared to the wider building market.

Looking ahead to 2026, Chris recognised that economic indicators remain challenging but emphasised the scale of opportunity for rail freight in supporting major national projects, including new green energy infrastructure, water schemes and reservoirs, and major road and rail developments such as the Lower Thames Crossing and East West Rail, as well as more unexpected projects such as theme parks. As always, the event also provided an opportunity to support a good cause.

Thanks to the generosity of attendees, including through the champagne raffle and scratch cards, the lunch raised over £7,000 for the Railway Benefit Fund, which helps railway people and their families in times of need. RFG thanked everyone who donated and congratulated the winners of the raffle and scratch card prizes. RFG would also like to thank its sponsors, VTG Rail UK and Associated British Ports, for their generous support of this year’s Christmas Lunch.



RFG Christmas Lunch 2025 photo gallery

A huge thank you to everyone who joined us and helped make the day so special.



Railway Benefit Fund thanks RFG for festive support

Railway Benefit Fund extended its thanks to RFG for hosting them at the Lunch and for providing such an invaluable platform for their cause: supporting the railway family facing challenging times.

The charity is delighted to confirm that, thanks to the generosity of all attendees, the Christmas Lunch helped raise an impressive £7,203 through its Champagne Raffle.

The atmosphere was electric, especially around the raffle. RBF said it wished to thank every single person who purchased a ticket and the generous organisations that donated such wonderful prizes.

This £7,203 will go a long way in providing critical support to railway families who are facing hardship. The attendees' commitment proves, once again, that the heart of the rail industry is very special. Thank you for helping the charity to support its own.









Congratulations to the winners of our Champagne Raffle





'Air time' for rail freight

By Jonathan Roberts, JR Consulting

The Second Reading debate on the Government's Railways Bill took place in the House of Commons on Tuesday 9 December, the four-hour debate is set out at [this link](#). The principle of the Bill was voted through, to re-assert public ownership of the national railway and operations, with a single controlling mind in the form of Great British Railways.

Party positions

It might be expected that the Conservatives and Unionists would vote against the Bill, which they did – protesting that their 'Williams-Shapps' proposals went much of the way towards Labour's objectives, and avoided the 'worst of state control' by still permitting open access and an independent network regulator.

The Liberal Democrats also voted against, despite liking much in the Bill. Their position was that it was a curate's egg. "For now, the Bill, despite its good intentions, needs further work before it can move forward".

So did Plaid Cymru MPs – because Wales should have more control and funding for its railways, and because they rejected the Government line that 'HS2 is a spend for England and Wales'. One SDLP, two Reform and three Green MPs voted for the Bill.

Members' perspectives

While the concluding vote (329 ayes, 173 noes) is a clear statement of Party (and occasionally personal) views about the overall merits of the Bill's intentions, the content of the debate is a different matter. Then, the weight of postbag, incoming emails and personal meetings, and their own travelling experiences, provide reasons for MPs to comment mostly on matters relating to the passenger railway.

This truism applies, whether it is a local or regional topic, or about reshaping the entire basis of railway control and operations. The Second Reading was a further example. There were many MPs keen to raise passenger needs, fares and ticketing, step-free access, and secure new stations and/or services for their constituencies. Fewer made the case for fair access rules and project funding for rail freight, a privately-operated and -invested sector now to be overseen by public-sector controls rather than an independent regulator. A few MPs sought advances for both passenger and freight sectors.

There was a more general welcome for the proposed mandatory rail freight growth objective, and for the Government's stated intention to have a long-term strategy. This also stimulated a significant number of calls for a similar passenger growth objective, and for the strategy and its delivery to be set out with greater clarity.

Development of the Railways Bill

It should be borne in mind that the current Railways Bill has an unusual background. There has been all-party recognition that the 1993 Railways Act had significant flaws, which caused development of the Williams-Shapps proposals for reform during 2018 to 2021.

Grant Shapps had been Conservative Transport Secretary for part of that period, so the reforms proposed then could be considered to be a politically valid starting-point, probably with more to be sought by a different Government. The key proposals were:

Goals:

- Customer Focus: Put passengers and freight first, improve experience.
- Efficiency: End fragmentation and align incentives for better performance.
- Financial Sustainability: Deliver value for taxpayers.

Means:

- Great British Railways (GBR): A new public body to be the integrating "guiding mind".
- End of Franchising: Replaced with new Passenger Service Contracts, similar to London's transport model, where private firms run services for fees.
- New Brand: A single national brand (updated Double Arrow) to unify the network.
- Fare & Ticketing Reform: Simpler tickets, flexible seasons, allow contactless/mobiles.
- Long-Term Strategy: A 30-year plan for investment and transformation.

The proposals had endured a further four years of discussion, though with no fundamental legislation by the previous Government. The Labour Government from July 2024 had already passed initial enabling legislation, and was now proceeding with main legislation on the basis of full public sector ownership and control (with the exception of rail freight), and a reduced role for the rail regulator.

The Government's position

The Bill was introduced by the Transport Secretary, Heidi Alexander, on the basis that: "Every cancelled service, every cramped carriage and every dodgy wi-fi connection reflects not only a railway that has been beset by years of dysfunction, but a transport network, an economy and, indeed, a whole country in desperate need of renewal."

"This landmark Bill means that Britain will finally have a railway owned by the public for the public—one that puts passengers first, that seizes the opportunities of freight, that offers a better deal for taxpayers and, above all, that is greater than the sum of its parts. ... We passed the Passenger Railway Services (Public Ownership) Act last November, which began the process of simplifying an industry fractured into over a dozen different bodies."

The politically different positions on open access, the roles of the rail regulator, and the scope of powers to be awarded to GBR and the ability for challenge and scrutiny of those, became the main debating points between the parties. Associated topics were the control of access to train slots, how passenger train services should be devised and tendered, and capacity and reliability priorities for rail freight.

Heidi Alexander emphasised various points:

- "Despite what some might claim, Labour Members are not possessed by some sort of ideological fever dream when it comes to rail..."
- "We have to be honest about the state of our railways; they are still a bit of a mess..."
- "Great British Railways needs to take the track access decisions, so that we can ensure that decisions are taken in the best interests of passengers overall..."
- "We are currently trialling digital pay-as-you-go in the east Midlands and Yorkshire. Combined, this means that millions of journeys will benefit from a best price promise..."
- "We will be publishing a rolling stock and infrastructure strategy next year to give confidence and certainty to the supply chain..."
- "We will be able to perform longer-term planning precisely because we are bringing the management of track and train together..."

Open Access, ORR and Freight

There was some Government sympathy for open access where it made a positive difference to the accessibility of regions to London, such as Hull Trains services, and a new service for Wrexham and Shropshire. However, the timing of several adverse decisions by ORR didn't help a favourable parliamentary

discussion about its roles. Heidi Alexander set out the Government's position:

"We want customers to be given the best choice of services and routes; this will be a core principle of Great British Railways, so it will work with open access and freight operators to harness the best of the private sector, taking access decisions across the whole network in a way the current regulator never could."

"We saw the urgent need for change only last week, with the ridiculous prospect of an empty 7 am train running from Manchester to London—a decision by the regulator that has now thankfully been reversed. However, let me be clear: GBR will not be allowed to act unchecked."

"The Office of Rail and Road will have robust powers to hold GBR to account, and all decisions GBR makes regarding access and charging will be appealable to the ORR. This will ensure that GBR's decision making is fair, considered and transparent across the board."

Replying to concerns about shortfalls in passenger services, Heidi Alexander said: "there are the provisions relating to our partnership work with mayors and mayoral strategic authorities, which will ensure that we work with our devolved partners [bespoke partnership agreements were referenced later]. Secondly, there is the really beefed-up passenger watchdog..."

"Great British Railways will not be a British Rail mark 2; instead, it will be an agile organisation that embraces innovation and devolution. It will be rooted in the communities in which it operates, with local leaders finally getting a say in how their railways are run." She put on record her "thanks to Scottish Minister Fiona Hyslop and the Welsh Transport Minister, Ken Skates, for the way in which they have engaged with me and my officials during this process."

The Conservative position

The shadow Transport Secretary, Richard Holden (Basildon & Billericay, Con) then set out the Conservative position. He majored on the further changes that Labour was introducing, saying these prioritise putting the rail system under state control, rather than prioritising passengers and taxpayers, and effective and efficient running of the railway.

He argued that the Bill allows only limited rights of appeal against GBR's decisions, with no proper accountability for the state controlled operator. This, along with the duty for GBR to prioritise its own services for access to track:

- "will squeeze out popular and well-regarded open access operators, who run services without taxpayer subsidy..."
- "it allows ministers to interfere at will in the running of the railways..."
- "it will do nothing to grow passenger numbers, or modernise or improve the rail network..."
- "and does not include provisions to grow rail freight,
- "which means that the chance to create a thriving railway which delivers economic growth and relies less on taxpayer support will be lost. So down the rabbit hole we go."

He continued: "There are no plans for greater electrification... This Government have chosen to betray North Wales again, and have abandoned the Midlands Main line upgrade as well. Both were important electrification projects... Let me be absolutely clear that when it comes to Britain's railways, we are not against the idea of uniting track and train."

"We would back a model that brings coherence to the system, but not one that weakens scrutiny and clamps down on competition. That is why we have supported a concessionary model, which the Secretary of State will no doubt recall from her time at Transport for London, as will Members from Merseyside and Greater Manchester, where such a model is being proposed. I do not think anybody has ever considered them to be on the far right."

He summarised the problems that rail freight will face: "Her Bill ignores the evidence, the experts, and the fervent cries of freight that growth has to be at the forefront of any rail reform... It is not

about the growth in competition that would bring down prices for passengers, the growth of freight that would take more lorries off our roads, or the growth of new routes to serve the length and breadth of the country."

"We find ourselves in the most bizarre position of the Office of Rail and Road handing over its powers on deciding track access and access charges to GBR, which is the very entity that has the most to gain by acting in its own self-interest. In this Bill, that self-interest is unfettered and unperturbed by any genuine oversight..."

"Certainty, supposedly guaranteed to freight, industry and manufacturing, is entirely absent. In its place, we have the misfortune of funding mechanisms that can be changed and amended at any time, without any oversight whatsoever. We have a duty to freight, which, although clearly an afterthought, is obviously welcome, but once the reality kicks in, GBR's overlordship of the process of access, pricing and timetabling will leave freight operators permanently in the lurch."

He concluded: "We on the Opposition Benches will fight to deliver a railway that works for passengers, taxpayers, freight and the future."

The Liberal Democrat position

The LibDem spokesperson, Olly Glover (Didcot and Wantage, LD) thanked all who had worked on predecessors to the Bill since 2018. "They and the Government are right to recognise that our railways need change... but we should also recognise that meddling and interference from central Government has increased since the pandemic and is at the heart of some of our problems."

The Bill was "an honest and serious attempt to simplify the current convoluted industry structure and processes". He welcomed accessibility improvements, and the idea of a long-term rail strategy. He argued for a rolling electrification programme, "something that has hitherto been missing under Governments of all colours".

"This is all about influence and persuasion with the Treasury and making sure we make coherent choices about fares and the cost of motoring, so that we encourage the transport choices we wish to see."

Nevertheless the party had "some concerns about the Bill in its current form... GBR currently sounds like a railways version of NHS England—something that the Government themselves have decided to abolish... The capacity duty for GBR laid out in the Bill is another big concern here; in just three short paragraphs, it sets out a very broad and draconian basis for rejecting applications to access the network that are not GBR."

The LibDems' main worries were:

- "There is a real lack of clarity on how open access passenger and freight will be effectively regulated and protected in the new structure..."
- "That is especially important for freight, which the Government have decided not to nationalise."
- "There is no requirement in the Bill to set a target for passenger growth, which may suggest a lack of ambition."
- "The Bill is very vague on the criteria for calculating things such as network access charges."
- "The Bill gives GBR the power to apply discounted or elevated track charges, but it is totally unclear as to what criteria will be applied in deciding the charges."
- "It is also unclear how the ORR will be able to police and enforce that effectively, given its reduced powers."
- "The Bill seems to imply that appeals against GBR access decisions will require judicial review-level criteria, making them very inaccessible to most parties..."

He hoped that some concerns will be addressed through further scrutiny on the Bill Committee:

- 30 years rather than a short period of 10 years or 15 years, for a 'long-term rail strategy'...
- "a clearer definition and some bounds put in for the many

- references to the Secretary of State's powers to override...
- "we want to see greater ambition for both freight and passenger growth..."
- "more recognition of the importance of competition and open access for both freight and long-distance passengers..."
- "Rail freight remains in the private sector and therefore needs protections, given the Government's clear preference for state ownership and operation."
- There was explicit LibDem support for worthwhile proposals for Open access.

"Only with those changes will we see a railway that is innovative, ambitious and aligned with the needs of our economy, passengers and freight end users. For now, the Bill, despite its good intentions, needs further work before it can move forward. Therefore, with some sadness, Liberal Democrat Members cannot support it."

Rail freight comments from individual MPs

With constrained space in this newsletter, we now turn to commentaries made about rail freight during the debate by individual MPs. Excerpts are summarised below, as parliamentary references of interest to RFG members.

Alice Macdonald (Norwich North) (Lab/Co-op): "[Can we meet to] discuss East West Rail to Norwich, as well as the Ely and Haughley junctions?"

Heidi Alexander: "it will take a huge amount of work to get us from where we are today to seeing trains running between Oxford and Cambridge, which has to be the priority."

Dr Kieran Mullan (Bexhill & Battle, Con): "the railways also transport freight; for example, they are important suppliers to British Gypsum in my constituency, taking many lorries off the already congested A21. Could she lay out what her ambitions are for increasing the use of freight on the railways, and how she will deliver those ambitions?"

Heidi Alexander: "I do think we need to move some of the freight that we currently move by road to the railways. The Bill will require the Secretary of State to set a freight growth target, and Great British Railways will have a duty to have regard to that target when it exercises its statutory functions, so that is at the heart of this Bill."

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth, Lab) also Chair of Transport Committee: "Clause 18 sets out a series of significant duties for GBR, including the promotion the use of rail freight. But while clause 17 requires the Secretary of State for Transport to set out a target for growth in rail freight, there is no such target in the Bill for growth in passenger demand. On freight, how will the targets be aligned?"

Ian Roome (North Devon, LD): "The long-term planning will be the important part of this Bill."

Ben Goldsborough (South Norfolk, Lab): "I want to briefly highlight the long overdue upgrades to the Ely and Haughley junctions. Again, that is important in the context of the Bill, and I ask the Government to go further on freight. Those improvements have been talked about for decades and are essential. They would unlock nearly 3,000 additional freight paths from Felixstowe, take 98,000 HGVs off the roads, support 277,000 extra passenger journeys each year, reduce carbon emissions by 1.7 million tonnes over 60 years and generate almost £5 for every £1 invested."

"Quite simply, this is infrastructure that pays for itself many times over, so my second ask to the Minister is to give the go-ahead for the Ely area capacity enhancement scheme and the Haughley junction upgrade. The economic, environmental and connectivity benefits are too significant to ignore."

Martin Vickers (Brigg and Immingham, Con) also Chairman of All-party Parliamentary Group on Rail: "Will the proposals deliver improved rail freight and passenger services in my constituency and, indeed, across the network? There are lots of 'buts'. If the Government are to achieve one of their key aims of economic growth, improved transport infrastructure and a rail network that provides for the needs of the freight sector must be a priority."

"Ministers will have noted that the Rail Freight Group has suggested that the rail freight growth target of 75% by 2050 be put into law and that discounts to encourage use of spare capacity be introduced. Clause 17 of the Bill states that the Secretary of State must set a target and keep it under review. Setting targets is easy; delivering is much more challenging. Businesses in my constituency stress the urgent need for a new east-west freight corridor, and I would like to hear the Minister's response to that when he sums up."

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills, Con): "The Bill also weakens the independence of the ORR. When a body that runs services also shapes the rules against which those services are judged, the House should be deeply concerned. There is also the unresolved question of how GBR will interact with the Department for Transport."

"The Bill creates overlapping duties that risk friction and confusion. GBR will be required to consult, to produce strategies and to respond to ministerial direction, yet its operational independence is undefined. Will political priorities override operational judgment? Will GBR operate as an arm's length body, or as an extension of the Department? How will we, as elected Members, hold Great British Rail, Ministers and mayors to account?"

Cat Eccles (Stourbridge, Lab): "... nothing moves without logistics. Rail freight is the green backbone of that system, moving goods predictably and efficiently with about three quarters fewer emissions per tonne-kilometre than road. The Bill's statutory freight growth target is the right signal, but that signal must be backed up with a firm plan. We need safeguards so that GBR's capacity duty does not allow passenger services to squeeze freight off the network, and that means transparency, fair charging and protection of strategic freight corridors."

"To unlock genuinely transformative growth, we must match governance with infrastructure. We need targeted electrification, including infill schemes on freight critical routes, which will cut costs, carbon and journey times. In some corridors, dozens of miles of electrification have already unlocked thousands of net tonne-kilometres of cleaner freight every single day, and each additional electrically-hauled train means congestion avoided, carbon reduced and reliability improved. Put simply, the freight target and electrification must work together."

"Let us be ambitious about green technologies. Electric traction is the gold standard, and battery and hydrogen can play targeted roles. GBR should set a whole-system rolling stock strategy that is modern, modular and interoperable, as well as cleaner, so that when we renew fleets, we do so with purpose rather than with piecemeal leasing at a premium."

Grahame Morris (Easington, Lab): "I want to highlight the enormous opportunity in rail freight, which often gets overlooked, particularly in my constituency at the port of Seaham, which is ideally placed to seek efficient, reliable routes to move goods in and out of the region. We have only one freight train a week coming in to Seaham."

"I therefore welcome that the Bill requires the Secretary of State to set a target for rail freight growth and place duties on GBR, Ministers and the ORR to promote it. A single dedicated rail freight business unit operating within GBR and working with rail freight businesses would, however, be an even more effective driver of long-term growth, integrated with, rather than competing with, the passenger railway. I hope that the Secretary of State will examine the benefits of such an approach."

Baggy Shanker (Derby South, Lab/Co-op): "I also strongly welcome the Bill's requirement for the Transport Secretary to publish a long-term rail strategy."

Rebecca Smith (South West Devon, Con): "Private investment extends to rail freight, which is competing not only with state owned operators but with road haulage. The Rail Freight Group warns that the Bill risks driving the sector into decline, costing the UK economy up to £ 2.5 billion and adding 7 million additional HGV movements to the UK road network."

"While the Government have committed to introducing a statutory duty on GBR to promote the use of rail freight, supported by an overall growth target, I would be grateful if the Minister took this opportunity to clarify how the duty will operate in practice and how it will ensure that GBR does not give preferential treatment to state-owned operators. Where the Bill places freight in the hierarchy of railway line use is critical, but it is not yet explicit on that, which is concerning."

Siân Berry (Brighton Pavilion, Green): "We have an integrated transport strategy on the way, but the Bill contains a mode shift target for freight without including one for passengers. The Bill needs to say more about the need to plan for new capacity and services on the basis of creating maximum potential to reduce car dependency..."

Jayne Kirkham (Truro and Falmouth, Lab/Co-op): "I welcome the duty to promote the role of rail freight and set a growth target for rail freight. I want to set out a huge opportunity for the Minister and the Department for Transport. In Falmouth, we have a beautiful multi-use port; uses involve defence, repair crews, I hope floating offshore wind in the future, and exports. We also have the rebirth of the critical minerals industry in Cornwall, with a £50 million strategy from this Government."

"That will lead to a great requirement for freight transport, but each train would take 129 lorries off our narrow Cornish roads. We have the full support of our businesses, chamber of commerce and council, and we have an enterprise zone. As a next step, we need a feasibility study, but for a very small amount of money in the grand scheme of things, we could open up the 150 yards to Falmouth docks for rail freight. That would be a step for the future; critical minerals could come into or leave Cornwall, and we could grow our economy, as we would love to."

Winding-up speeches

These are summarised in relation to rail freight, and the differences between the Railways Bill and the Williams-Shapps proposal.

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland and Fakenham (Con) Shadow Transport Minister:

- "There were also many thoughtful contributions from the Liberal Democrats. It is telling that the Government's insistence on nationalisation as the only answer has united the Liberal Democrats and the Conservatives."

- "The railways are a complex system where capacity is limited and costs are high. It is absolutely crucial to drive efficiency, maximise the scarce resources of track access and drive value for money with dynamic management."

- "Can hon. Members think of a nationalised organisation that is a byword for management dynamism and efficiency anywhere, in any country at any time? I cannot either. If poor railway management is the problem, nationalisation cannot be the solution."

- "It is true that the last few years have exposed serious weaknesses in the train franchise model. The separation of track and train created perverse incentives—I accept that. The Government are already finding out that money does not grow on trees, that merely saying that they are in favour of growth does not make it happen, and that funds from hard-pressed taxpayers are not limitless."

- "Their plan replaces railway management teams with civil servants, increasingly micromanaging operations, who will have powers to direct GBR across all its functions."

- "Then there is that trademark socialist arrogance: gone is the independent economic regulator, for the gentleman from Whitehall knows best."

- "GBR will mark its own homework, save for a toothless passenger council that has no enforcement powers. It will not just mark its own homework but decide whether to allow any competition against itself. It will decide how much to charge its competitors, limited only by how much it thinks they will be able to pay. GBR, on the other hand, will pay no charge at all."

- "The right of appeal is not to be allowed on the merits of a decision, only on the grounds of procedural irregularity."

Keir Mather (Selby, Lab) Transport Minister

On rail freight

- "Many hon. Members pointed to the critical importance of freight to UK growth. The Government are committed to supporting rail freight growth across the United Kingdom."

- "Freight operators will benefit from a legal duty for GBR to promote freight."

- "The sector will also be championed within GBR by a representative on its board with responsibility for freight."

- "There is also a requirement for the Government to set a rail freight growth target for GBR, so insinuations and accusations from the Conservatives that freight does not sit at the heart of what GBR is designed to do are flatly wrong."

On open access

- "The right hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) and the hon. Member for Taunton and Wellington (Gideon Amos) raised the important point of open access services, and a Back-Bench contribution noted that I get Hull Trains every single week to Selby."

- "I know how important open access is, and I want to reassure the House that it will have a role as part of the establishment of GBR. The Government are not opposed to open access, and the idea that GBR is bad for open access is simply false."

- "We believe that, under the right circumstances, GBR can in fact create more opportunity for all towns and all operators by reviewing the network holistically with a view to how it might work better under our new, reformed system with open access playing its part."

On track access

- "[There is] a philosophical difference on the question of track access."

- "It is critical, if we are establishing Great British Railways to manage access, that it has the full ability to do so."

- "It will be regulated by the Office of Rail and Road to make sure that its access decisions are fair, but the provisions in the Bill are sufficient to make sure that open access can continue and continues to provide incredibly important support to communities such as mine."

On ORR

- "I turn back to the point about accountability, which is incredibly important, to set out some of the ORR's functions and to tackle some of the disinformation coming from Opposition Members."

- "The ORR will continue to be the sector regulator and the Bill will enhance its monitoring role. It provides independent advice to the Secretary of State, it will enforce GBR's licence, its industry obligations and its minimum standards, and it will work with the passenger watchdog to make sure that passengers are once again at the heart of our railways. The ORR's accountability function is hardwired into the Bill."



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RFG to host Rail Freight Pavilion at Multimodal 2026 as part of UK Logistics Week

The Rail Freight Group (RFG) will be exhibiting at Multimodal 2026, taking place from 30 June to 2 July 2026 at the NEC Birmingham, as part of the newly launched UK Logistics Week.

RFG will once again host the Rail Freight Pavilion, bringing together rail freight operators, suppliers and partners within a dedicated space at the UK's leading freight and logistics event.

Multimodal is always a great opportunity to connect with industry colleagues and learn new insights. The Pavilion will showcase the vital role rail freight plays across the wider logistics supply chain and provide a focal point for collaboration, discussion and new business.

UK Logistics Week will unite Multimodal with Warehouse., Yard, and eDX at the NEC, alongside the Road Transport Expo at

 Multimodal Multimodal is the industry's meeting place where cargo owners and shippers network, find ways to improve their supply chains and discover innovative ideas to solve their transport and logistics issues. Now in its 19th year. More information	 Warehouse. Yard. Warehouse. is your gateway to the future of warehousing and logistics. Yard. is specifically designed for individuals responsible for the movement of goods, vehicles, and equipment within yard environments. More information	 eDelivery Expo For over a decade, eDX has equipped online retailers and brands with the tools and insights to streamline last-mile logistics. This year, it brings that expertise to the heart of the UK's most comprehensive logistics event. More information	 Road Transport Expo 2026 will see the fifth Road Transport Expo continuing to be the one-stop industry event that's all about the truck and everything related to it. More information
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NAEC Stoneleigh, creating an unprecedented, connected platform for the entire logistics sector.

RFG encourages members and stakeholders to put the dates in their diaries now and consider the benefits of joining us. Companies interested in taking part on the Rail Freight Pavilion should contact Maria Papp at maria@rfg.org.uk for further details.

DRS driver honoured for life-saving quick thinking

A Direct Rail Services (DRS) driver has received an industry award for his quick thinking, courage and compassion.

Chris Bray accepted the Rail Hero Award at the prestigious Heart of Gold Awards ceremony, on 26 November. His story is an inspiration and his actions exemplify the spirit celebrated by the Railway Benefit Fund's (RBF) Heart of Gold Awards, which honour individuals who go above and beyond to protect lives and support wellbeing in the rail industry.

On 20 February, while operating a freight service from Daventry to Crewe, Chris noticed a woman in distress. Recognising the imminent danger, Chris acted decisively bringing his train to a controlled stop and contacting the signaller to block the line.



Refusing to move until the woman was safe, Chris left his cab and spoke calmly across the tracks, reassuring her she wasn't in trouble. His persistence kept her engaged until British Transport Police and Network Rail staff arrived and led her to safety. Chris's intervention undoubtedly prevented a tragedy that day.

Chris said: "I really don't feel like a hero, just glad I was in the right place at the right time. I'm also grateful for the quick

response from British Transport Police and Network Rail. It was a team effort to make sure she was safe. It was a real honour just to be nominated, and in a category with such deserving winners too."

Gottfried Eymer, NTS Managing Director for Rail, said: "Chris's story is an inspiration to everyone at DRS, his actions exemplify everything we stand for, and we're exceptionally proud."

GoLink to trial high-speed, express rail freight

GoLink Advisory Group is trialling a new high-speed rail freight operation designed specifically for the courier, express, parcel (CEP) sector.

The service will combine new modern electric locomotives (Class 93s) with electric HGVs to create a fully integrated, low-carbon transport solution for long-distance line-haul networks.

It said what makes the solution different is the combination of speed, digital visibility, standardised unitisation and seamless transfer between road and rail.

It said the approach offers faster 'on rail' performance, real-time tracking and reliable 'to the minute' arrivals, giving delivery companies a genuine alternative to road and air.

The trial will demonstrate that time-critical volume can move quickly and reliably by rail, while connecting smoothly into existing road-based networks. It will test end-to-end journey times, the transshipment process between electric vehicles and rail wagons, and the digital platform that allows customers to track end-to-end multi-modal network operations in real time.

Fishbone unveils new handheld 3D scanner technology

Fishbone has expanded its engineering services with the introduction of handheld 3D scanning technology, positioning the company to deliver faster and more precise digital data capture across complex projects.

Using the SimScan handheld scanner, Fishbone can now collect data and process it in real time, reducing turnaround times and cutting costs for clients. The technology is being introduced first to rail customers, with the company citing significant opportunities for design, modelling and validation work where traditional scanning has not previously been practical.



The business says the scanner will support applications ranging from recreating missing drawings or legacy CAD data, to generating base models for parametric design, or assessing construction variances on rolling stock to

support accurate installation. Fishbone expects wider uptake from sectors including aerospace, automotive and construction, where onsite data processing and high-precision scanning are increasingly in demand.



Freight Safe Programme hosts Derby FBARG seminar

The Freight Safe Programme welcomed experts from across the rail industry to a Freight Braking and Adhesion Research Group (FBARG) seminar in Derby on 3 December.

Established in 2024, FBARG coordinates research into freight train braking and adhesion performance and supports three major projects within the Wagon Condition Programme (WCP).

Delivered with RSSB, the seminar brought together freight operators, ECMs, OEMs, infrastructure managers, regulators and academics.

Co-hosted by Neil Ovenden, Chair of FBARG, and WCP Programme Lead Tim Shakerley, the event reviewed completed and ongoing research into braking performance in low adhesion, wheel flat formation, and longitudinal compressive forces.



Port hosts rail experience day to celebrate Stockton & Darlington railway bicentenary

AV Dawson, owner and operator of the Port of Middlesbrough, hosted a rail experience event to celebrate the 200th anniversary of the Stockton &

Darlington Railway (S&DR), the first passenger railway in the world.

The 'AV Dawson Shunter Special' event, held in partnership with the Branch Line Society, brought together rail enthusiasts, primary school children and the local community to celebrate the heritage of the railway. The Teesside firm donated the proceeds from the day, £5,500 to the local community group Friends of Stockton and Darlington Railway, to support their continued efforts to preserve the railway's heritage.

Hosted at the Port of Middlesbrough, the day included spectators enjoying tours of the port on AV Dawson's 08410 and 08774 locomotives and learning more about the rail facilities on the site.

Charlie Nettle, group managing director of the AV Dawson Group, said: "We were delighted to host this event on behalf of the Branch Line Society at our Port of Middlesbrough facility. It is great to continue the celebrations of the 200th anniversary of the Stockton & Darlington Railway and showcase the rail facilities at our site to people who love the railway."

UK rail launch accelerates zero-exhaust-emission logistics goal

In 2025, Amazon began moving customer packages by rail in the UK for the first time, alongside the country's largest-ever order of electric heavy goods vehicles (eHGV) and the introduction of on-foot deliveries in London. This will help to cut tailpipe emissions, ease congestion, and keep delivery promises at scale.

Amazon enters UK rail

For the first time in the UK, Amazon is now transporting products by rail at scale, starting on the fully electrified West Coast Main Line. This fully electric line traverses between Scotland and the Midlands, with station touch-points close to Amazon fulfilment and delivery centres throughout for swift onward processing. This shift to rail is expected to move more than 20 million products within the first year, with additional routes planned before the year's end.

This new rail operation also supports [intermodal](#) flows to ferry ports, helping small and medium-sized UK businesses reach European customers while reducing on-road traffic and associated emissions.

How the rail operation works

Products are picked and prepared near rail-served stations on the electrified corridor, enabling fast handovers to scheduled services. These trains then carry consolidated loads for cross-dock at facilities linked to Amazon's wider network.

From arrival stations, packages are sorted and dispatched for last-mile delivery, increasingly via zero-exhaust-emission methods in urban areas.

Part of a broader sustainability push

Amazon's rail launch is just one pillar of a wider UK decarbonisation programme aligned to its [Climate Pledge commitment](#) to achieve net-zero carbon across operations by 2040.

This includes Amazon's purchase of more than 140 Mercedes-Benz Trucks eActros 600s and eight Volvo FM Battery Electric trucks, which is the [UK's largest-ever order](#) of electric heavy goods vehicles. With the move towards more

electric vehicles, Amazon is also increasing its high-power charging infrastructure with new 360kW chargers being added at key UK sites. These are capable of charging 40-tonne eHGVs from 20% to 80% in just over an hour.

As Nicola Fyfe, EU VP of Amazon Logistics, notes, combining eHGVs, the electric rail network, and low-emission last-mile methods will help to move more orders 'with zero exhaust emissions', a shift she calls 'a win for our customers, the environment and our business'.

Why rail is now so important for UK logistics

As sustainability efforts grow ever more prominent, rail is becoming increasingly more important for UK logistics companies, with a shift towards rail allowing for carbon reduction at scale. According to the [UK government](#), 'just one [rail freight] train can replace up to 129 heavy goods vehicles (HGVs) and a tonne of freight moved by rail produces about a quarter of the carbon emissions it does by road'. Electrified rail shipments remove tailpipe emissions from some of the UK's busiest corridors while maintaining delivery speed, meaning that shipping companies can make their operations more eco-friendly without needing to make any sacrifices on their deliveries.

Rail also allows for congestion relief, as each train consolidates high parcel volumes and eases pressure placed on long-haul road capacity.

Finally, a stronger reliance on rail leads to network resilience. Rail provides for a [multimodal](#) spine, with rail for the middle mile, eHGVs for flexible links, and on-foot delivery options providing zero-emission urban deliveries. This creates more routing options during peaks and disruptions.

Looking ahead

Amazon plans to extend rail deliveries to additional UK routes, building on the initial West Coast Main Line services. The goal is to integrate more electrified lanes as they align with customer demand, operational reliability, and sustainability impact — supporting the long-term target of net-zero carbon operations by 2040.

Booking sustainable freight shipments

These sustainable practices extend further to [Amazon Freight](#), allowing you to easily book more sustainable logistics options for your organisation's shipping needs. If readers are looking for sustainable freight services, these are offered by Amazon Freight.

Visit the RBF Christmas Shop

Scan the QR code or go to our website:
<https://www.charitycardshop.com/RBF>

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2026 Calendar TES

RFG Sponsor Partners 2025

The RFG's Sponsor Partners provide additional support for our activities and events throughout the year. The companies involved in the scheme represent a wide range of key stakeholders and we would like to thank each of them for their commitment and ongoing support.



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RFG Events Calendar 2026

Rail Freight Group (RFG) has published its provisional Events Calendar for 2026, giving members an early opportunity to plan ahead for a busy year of conferences, forums, networking and flagship events.

From the Parliamentary Reception and Multimodal to specialist forums and the AGM, the calendar reflects RFG's commitment to bringing the rail freight community together across the year. Please note the dates below in your diary, booking for each event will open in due course.

Our next RFG Event:

[RFG Members' Party 2026](#)

3 February 2026

We are delighted to be hosting our popular Members' Party at Truckles in Central London. Bookings are now open for this free-to-attend event. Please register your interest at the link above.



Forthcoming events in 2026: Dates for your diary!

- 25 Mar – Parliamentary Reception (Invitation only)
- 13 - 14 May - [RFG & Network Rail Scotland – joint presence at All-Energy 2026](#)
- 2–3 Jun – Group Meeting & BBQ - Felixstowe
- 30 Jun–2 Jul – Multimodal
- 10 Sep – Awards Dinner - Hunton Park Hotel
- Oct – Rail Freight Conference, London, in partnership with Waterfront
- 10–11 Nov – AGM & Group Meeting - TBC
- 9 Dec – Christmas Lunch, Royal Lancaster Hotel, London
- **RFG Forums:**
Construction: 3 Feb (2–4pm), 29 Apr (11am–1pm), 7 Jul (11am–1pm), 4 Nov (11am–1pm)
Intermodal: 12 Mar (11am–1pm), 13 Oct (11am–1pm)
Innovation, Technology & Digital: 6 May (11am–1pm), 24 Nov (11am–1pm)





ÖBB Rail Cargo Group expands TransFER network with new European connections

ÖBB Rail Cargo Group (RCG) is expanding its TransFER network at key European hubs, introducing new logistics solutions for customers across Western, Central and South-Eastern Europe.

A new TransFER Tuzla–Rijeka service marks the first intermodal rail connection of its kind in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The weekly service links the industrial region of Tuzla directly with the port of Rijeka, a major gateway to international markets, supporting more efficient and sustainable freight movements. RCG also offers

port-to-door solutions, enabling direct delivery from the port to customers.

RCG is also strengthening its hub at Budapest with the launch of TransFER Budapest–Curtici, a weekly nonstop service connecting the BILK terminal, a key intermodal hub between Western and South-Eastern Europe, with Curtici, the main gateway to Romania and onward routes to the Balkans and Turkey.

The new connection complements RCG's existing TransNET and TransFER services, including routes linking Budapest with Duisburg and Zeebrugge, and Wels–Vienna–Budapest. Together, these services provide optimised end-to-end transport chains, reducing transshipments, shortening transit times and improving planning reliability.

TransFER services operate on fixed timetables with predefined stops, offering freight customers flexible and easily bookable rail transport using conventional wagons or intermodal units.

Port of Barcelona approval unlocks €265m south rail hub

The Intermodal Logistics Terminal Urban Master Plan for the Port of Barcelona has been approved by the Territorial Commission of Catalonia, clearing the way for construction of the port's new southern rail node.

The project will see around €265m invested in new rail infrastructure, including reception and dispatch terminals, loading and unloading

facilities and a rolling road terminal. Part of the scheme – the Nou Llobregat Terminal – is already under construction.

Once operational, the six-terminal rail hub is expected to enable a major shift of freight from road to rail, reducing emissions, congestion and road accidents. The Port of Barcelona estimates that up to 640,000 containers and 46,000 semi-trailers could be transferred from road to rail each year.

The development forms part of the Mediterranean Corridor and will serve the port, nearby logistics zones and surrounding industrial areas. The Port will also invest €26m in new public green spaces as part of the approved plan.

News in Brief:

- European rail and intermodal bodies have warned that proposed changes to the EU Weights and Dimensions Directive could encourage a shift from rail to road. The organisations are urging EU legislators to limit incentives to zero-emission and intermodal vehicles and protect multimodal competitiveness.

- Eurostar and Deutsche Bahn have signed an MoU to explore direct high-speed rail services between London and Germany, with potential routes to Cologne and Frankfurt from the early 2030s. The plans aim to provide a greener alternative to flying and strengthen economic and trade links.

- Verdion has unveiled plans for iPort Zealand, a €1bn intermodal logistics park in Denmark, linked to the Fehmarnbelt road and rail tunnel. The 250-hectare site near Copenhagen will include a high-capacity rail freight terminal and up to 570,000 sq m of logistics and industrial space, supporting modal shift and regional growth.

- DP World has unified its Marine Services businesses under a single global brand. Unifeeder, P&O Ferrymasters and P&O Maritime Logistics will now operate as Shipping Solutions, Multimodal Solutions and Maritime Solutions, supporting DP World's shift towards fully integrated global logistics while maintaining existing teams and services.

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