

# West Coast main line moving 1m tonnes of critical supplies every week during Covid-19 crisis

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- Scotland's supermarkets rely on goods by rail to stay stocked
- Biomass fuel arrives by rail to Yorkshire's Drax power station
- Royal Mail post goes by rail between London and Glasgow
- Petrol for West Midlands arrives by rail from East Yorkshire and Northern Lincolnshire

Every 24 hours throughout the coronavirus crisis, 188,000 tonnes of critical supplies – including food, fuel and medicine – are being moved by rail between London, Birmingham, Manchester, Liverpool and Glasgow.

That's 1.13 million tonnes every week – most of it transported along the West Coast main line (WCML), the busiest mixed-use (passenger and freight) railway in Europe, and its key spurs.

Ordinarily, rail freight goes largely unnoticed. Much of it travels by night, rumbling in darkness to and from every part of the country to keep shops, pharmacies and hospital stocked.

But with Britain in crisis, locked down to halt the spread of coronavirus, the importance of freight comes into sharp focus – and nowhere more so than on Network Rail's North West & Central (NW&C) region,

known also as the 'Backbone of Britain'.

Despite passenger services reducing in recent weeks, customer demand for critical supplies has remained consistent, and the freight industry is standing together with Network Rail to keep key supply lines open and trains moving.

As the coronavirus pandemic goes on, Network Rail's priority is to keep vital supply routes, notably the West Coast main line and its key arteries, open. Critical to this are frontline specialists, such as signallers, without whom the railway cannot operate.

Tim Shoveller, managing director for North West & Central, said: "Rail freight has never mattered more than now for the people of Britain. Our job is to continue moving critical supplies where they're needed – keeping supermarket shelves stocked, hospital medicine cupboards full, power stations fuelled.

"Our frontline 'key workers', including signallers, control room staff and track engineers are the hidden heroes in this national team effort. They are helping NHS medics to save lives and keeping shop shelves stocked, and I'm proud of them."

Freight plays a crucial role in keeping the country's lights on. Trains carry biomass from Liverpool docks to the Drax power station in Yorkshire, as well as petroleum from Scotland to Dalston in Cumbria and from Humberside to Kingsbury Oil Terminal in the West Midlands.

Royal Mail trains continue to take parcels and post between Wembley and Shieldmuir, Glasgow.

As Scotland does not have any deep-sea ports, it relies on freight services through NW&C to keep its shops stocked. Every 24 hours, 18,500 tonnes of bananas, pasta, loo roll and other essentials pass over the England- Scottish border at Gretna in freight trains.

Next day, those goods can be found on sale in supermarkets and high street shops.

Freight companies are looking at how they can reconfigure the trains in order to get more containers per train to meet a forecast rise in demand over coming weeks and months.

Maggie Simpson, director general of Rail Freight Group, said: "The rail freight industry is working flat out to make sure essential supplies are available on supermarket shelves, that the lights stay on and that the warehouses have all the goods we need for online shopping.

"It is a real testament to all our staff, and those at Network Rail and across the railway for keeping up with changing demand and helping the whole of the UK in these difficult times."

To prioritise freight and key worker journeys, a reduced timetable is currently running on the railway network.

Government guidelines are advising the public to only travel if absolutely essential.

*Photo credit: Network Rail*