

How rail timetabling works



Network Rail is responsible for coordinating and validating timetables for the national rail network. Each train and freight operating company develops the timetable they would like to run in their area, and Network Rail then coordinates all the different timetables to produce a single national rail timetable.

We update the timetable for the national rail network twice a year, once in May, once in December. This allows train and freight operating companies a regular opportunity to make changes to their services – run more or new services, change the timing of their services, and/or change their routes.

The national timetable needs to balance what can be many competing demands – the heavily used commuter services, slower stopping trains serving small communities, non-stop fast trains running between major cities, as well as the requirements of businesses that rely on freight.

We have to manage the available space on the rail network so that it is used fairly and safely.

Developing the timetable is a very complex process that seeks to balance the needs and ambitions of all operators. We have to consult many different organisations as we develop a new national timetable, and it takes 16 months.

How a timetable is developed

16 months in advance	Network Rail establishes what long-term engineering work will need to take place as part of its ongoing Railway Upgrade Plan during the period of the new timetable.
14 months in advance	Train and freight operating companies give Network Rail advance notice of any significant changes they wish to make to their current timetable.
10 months in advance	Train and freight operating companies formally submit ('bid') their new timetable. For the next three months, Network Rail works on developing the new national timetable from all these bids, checking for conflicts between different operators, and ensuring that trains can be run safely.
6 months in advance	Network Rail provides the rail industry with a national 'base' timetable, enabling operators to start planning logistics, produce rotas and train staff.
4 months in advance	Operators can 'bid' for readjustments to their new timetable to take into account such things as known special events or weekend engineering work. Network Rail again works through the bids for each and every week to ensure there are no conflicts and trains can be run safely.
3 months in advance	The new timetable for each week is finalised and the railway industry formally publishes the timetable to passengers. Advance tickets go on sale.
Day of timetable change	The new timetable comes into operation.
During the period the timetable is operating	Network Rail works very closely with operators to accommodate changes to the timetable, such as increasing services ahead of a sporting event, allowing for emergency engineering works to take place, or manage severe weather.

