

Finding a solution to rail's lost property problem

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In this guest writer article, NotLost co-founder, Russ Oliver, explains why the rail industry needs to review its lost property processes – and encourages operators to take advantage of a free 12-month subscription of its transformative software

Since Keith Williams and Grant Shapps shared their vision for a more integrated and efficient railway in 2021, our industry has been taking a long, hard look at every aspect of passenger experience – including ticketing, safety and security, and accessibility. Attention has now turned to an issue that, while seemingly less pressing, impacts customers and operators alike – lost property.

Rail's lost property problem

The Williams-Shapps Plan for Rail states that “the customer experience can be stressful, inconvenient and unsatisfactory at various points throughout the journey” – and reclaiming items lost on the network is one such pain point. Unlike other industries, transport is regulated in this area, and organisations have an obligation to triage and handle lost and found items in a certain way. Even so, no centralised system

exists; rather, lost property processes vary from operator to operator, with inefficiencies at every stage.

It can take operators up to seven days to register an item of lost property on their system – by which time, its owner has often stopped looking (particularly if the property in question is something essential but replaceable, like a mobile phone). Nevertheless, these items must be held for three months, leading to storage costs. Some unclaimed lost property is sent to landfill, undermining the industry's efforts to tread more lightly on our planet. Other items may be repurposed more effectively through charity partners or resellers.

Some operators field over 2000 calls a month about lost property, which incurs significant costs. The result is often-disappointing repatriation rates, and a confusing, disheartening experience for passengers, who struggle to navigate this fragmented system. The fact that lost property has returned to pre-pandemic levels (the result of passengers abandoning old routines and travelling more sporadically) despite lower daily PAX numbers only exacerbates the issue.

A joined-up approach to lost property on the rail network

UK rail is aware that it has a lost property problem. Transport Focus flagged the issue [in a 2015 briefing](#), calling for the creation of a “centralised, nationalised database for dealing with lost property”. Now, with the Great British Rail Transition Team (GBRTT) shining a light on customer experience, and operators reviewing their own processes, the industry has an opportunity to affect real change – and NotLost is keen to help.

Our team has been involved in several industry workshops around lost property best practice, and the consensus is clear – passengers and operators alike would benefit from a centralised process.

Transport for London (TfL) is a case in point. TfL handles more than 330,000 items of lost property a year across eight modes of transport and more than 400 stations (including bus, Tube, London Overground and the new Elizabeth Line) as the largest lost property operation in Europe. It wanted a new system that would make logging and finding lost property more efficient, reduce paperwork and increase the number of items returned to their customers.

NotLost's software enables staff across the network to photograph an item and register it quickly and easily in a single system, ensuring that it becomes searchable from anywhere across the network within minutes.

And, if the wider industry adopted a similar approach, the results could be transformative. The introduction of a single, unified lost property process would bring clarity for passengers, removing confusion about how to report missing items, and making it easier to locate property within a sprawling network. It would also reduce triaging and storage costs, free up staff, boost operators' green credentials, and – perhaps most importantly – improve customer experience.

Indeed, as the rail industry strives to bring passengers back to the network, it has no choice but to become more customer-focused. And clarity around processes is key, making for a comfortable and enjoyable rail experience.

Our offer to operators

At this critical juncture, we're urging operators to make a positive change and become part of a joined-up solution to rail's lost property problem. We recognise that there are commercial issues to consider, and are offering organisations a 12-month free subscription to our software, if signed by August 31, 2023. We'll work closely with clients, developing the right solution, training teams, and helping to introduce a fit-for-purpose new system. It's an opportunity to unify the lost property process, reduce costs, realise new efficiencies, and improve the passenger experience – what have we got to lose?

To learn more, contact Russ at russ@notlost.com.