

# I want SMEs to be better represented and recognised for the vital role they play: John Chappell, New RIA SME Group Chair

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John Chappell has been revealed as the Railway Industry Association's (RIA) SME Group Chair.

RIA is the trade association for UK-based suppliers to the railway industry, established over 140 years ago and with over 300 member companies.

John's appointment comes at a critical time with the outbreak of COVID-19.

The Associate Partner at CPC Project has spoken to railbusinessdaily.com about his role and the challenges ahead.

How does it feel to be the new RIA SME Group Chair?

I am delighted to have been voted by RIA's SME Members to represent them and their interests. It comes at a critical time with the outbreak of Covid-19, and I am keen to make sure that SMEs have a voice at this

time. My role as RIA SME Chair has certainly burst into life a lot quicker than I expected.

What are your priorities as Chair?

My first priority is to listen to SMEs and understand their challenges, priorities for the future as well as more immediate needs at this unprecedented time. Every SME will have a different perspective, but there will be common themes that we need to identify and make clear to industry stakeholders.

As an incoming member of the RIA Board I have already represented SMEs on calls with Rail Minister Chris Heaton-Harris MP, who listened to our concerns and has committed to engage with us at RIA for ongoing updates.

I have also co-chaired Covid-19 SME Group webinars with Kate Jennings, the new RIA Policy Director, involving Network Rail, the Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy (BEIS) and the Department for Transport. These weekly scheduled webinars are a great opportunity for SMEs to ask questions, share their experiences and hear how the Government and Network Rail are responding to the Covid-19 challenge.

Difficult though these next weeks and months will be, SMEs as a group must also focus on the medium to longer term. A better future for SMEs in UK rail is not a quick fix – it is a long game, which requires purpose and commitment that we at RIA can foster. Simon Babes, Director of Movement Strategies, the previous SME Group Chair, ably supported by the RIA team, was able to make significant progress in developing the SME Group. Working with the new Vice-Chair, Lucy Prior, Business Engagement Director at 3Squared, and the team I am honoured and excited about the chance to lead meaningful and sustainable improvement.

What are the big issues for SMEs in rail during the coming months and years?

Today, the answer is Covid-19. We are all desperate to know how long the crisis will last, and we need more clarity from Government about how businesses can operate, and how long support will be maintained. There's a head of expectation after the green light was given for HS2 and Government's commitment to rail expenditure, but can these infrastructure improvements continue in the current environment? Who makes the decision to stop work and to restart it? How does this impact on commercial contracts? What support and commitment is there from Tier 1s to SMEs? There are many questions for SMEs and the answers are unlikely to be simple. In the meantime, keeping all channels of communication open is essential to the health of SMEs and the wider sector.

Tomorrow, and in the long term, I passionately believe that the rail industry is changing.... and that it is changing for the better. The expectation is that the Williams Review will make it a requirement that future arrangements will be far more localised and collaborative. The overarching messages from the Government is one of devolution, regionalisation and localisation. This is great news for SMEs, as it is for the communities they serve.

Give us some information about you. What's your experience working with rail SMEs?

I founded my first SME business 37 years ago, and for the last 16 years had the privilege of undertaking

some great roles in Network Rail, in Atkins Global and in SME rail businesses. I understand the world of the SME, I am excited by the energy and dedication of SME leaders and teams, and I am constantly delighted by the successes I see – but I do understand the difficulties too, and want to work with the SME community to open new possibilities.

During this difficult time, due to the coronavirus outbreak, what would your message be to SMEs in rail?

It is essential that we maintain our business capability for the future; we need to focus on protecting what we have and preparing for the days of recovery ahead...

- take advantage of the financial support measures available from Government
- keep engaging with clients to work together to advance opportunities available
- make sure that we understand operational and financial arrangements with those we supply to and those that supply us
- be responsible to our teams, we have a duty of care and should be communicating with them regularly and listening to their concerns.

What support is there for SMEs to cope with coronavirus? What is RIA doing?

RIA are working tirelessly to provide information to members and the wider rail supply chain. There are constant updates, cascaded from Government, Network Rail, BEIS and the DfT and regular feedback through to Ministers and senior leaders within the industry. RIA have launched a “Coronavirus Information Hub” on their website and are sending daily updates as the situation progresses, so members can stay up to speed with the latest developments. RIA have also launched a survey for members to feed their views back, the results of which will help inform RIA’s engagement with clients and policymakers.

What improvements need to be made when it comes to the representation of SMEs to central and regional Government, to infrastructure owners, to service operators, to large suppliers and to the wider supply chain?

I want SMEs to be better represented and recognised for the vital role that they play in the industry. I want more clarity, more collaboration and commitment to the SME supply chain. I will make it my business as RIA’s SME Chair, to push for early engagement for SMEs to influence procurement.

Once we are through the Covid-19 crisis I would like to see more opportunities for client engagement such as dedicated supplier events, product forums, meet the buyer sessions and Chatham House Rules events to discuss industry challenges. And it’s not just what we can do in the UK, we can establish an international SME suppliers summit, to promote SME success around the world.

Despite the challenges we have to remember this is a time of major investment – what words of reassurance would you give about the opportunities in the future?

Despite our present difficulties the UK rail sector as a whole has a great future – unprecedented investment has been promised and the role of rail and rail investment is ever more important. We have also seen some great steps forward for SMEs in the UK rail sector.

For example, the Rail Sector Deal launched in 2018 set out a new approach to collaborative working between Government and industry. This promotes a commitment for a minimum 33% spend on SMEs across all government departments. Similarly, those investing in transport such as the DfT are actively encouraging the wider supply chain and SMEs to work together through their supplier framework structures. And most recently, Network Rail has launched its SME strategy, recognising the importance of SMEs to the economy.

Let's work together to nurture these first 'green shoots' in a fertile new landscape for SMEs.

Visit [www.riagb.org.uk](http://www.riagb.org.uk) for more details

*Photo credit: RIA*