

Rail freight operators welcome Williams-Shapps Plan for Rail

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Some of the UK's leading rail freight operators have welcomed the publication of the Williams-Shapps Plan for Rail White Paper, published on Thursday (May 20).

A quarter-century of fragmentation on the railways will end as they come under single, accountable national leadership, as the Government unveils a new plan for rail which prioritises passengers and freight.

A new public body, Great British Railways, will integrate the railways, owning the infrastructure, collecting fare revenue, running and planning the network, and setting most fares and timetables.

Among the ten outcomes laid out in the White Paper includes 'New opportunities for freight' with national co-ordination offering greater flexibility and responsiveness will create new opportunities for rail freight. Modern contracts will ensure the sector continues to keep goods moving and delivering vital economic and environmental benefits.

John Smith, Managing Director at GB Railfreight, said: "We welcome the publication of the Williams-Shapps Plan for Rail and appreciate the warm words used to describe rail freight – correctly identified as having

played a crucial role in keeping food and medical supplies moving during the pandemic as well as being key to building back better.

“As the Williams Review found, the rail sector lacks clear strategic direction. While we would have preferred a freight specific guiding mind, we welcome the government’s intent that the new Great British Railway body will have a statutory duty to promote rail freight. Within this context it is vital that our access to the network is given long term security as soon as possible.

“However, we remain of the belief that our sector needs a Freight Evangelist to champion it within GBR and across Whitehall. The benefits of rail freight are there for all to see, and we hope they will be recognised by GBR once it has been set up. Hopefully such an individual will be placed in post within the GBR organisation.

“We look forward to playing our part in shaping in the future of the railways including working with GBR and the Department for Transport on the Whole Industry 30-year Strategic Plan that will be set out in the coming months as announced in the White Paper.”

As part of the plans, Network Rail, the current infrastructure owner, will be absorbed into the public body to bring about single, unified and accountable leadership for the national network.

Andrea Rossi, Chief Executive of DB Cargo UK, said: “We welcome the direction that today’s White Paper provides and will continue to work with Government and other key industry stakeholders to realise the true potential of rail freight here in the UK.

“For too long the points have been unfairly set in favour of passenger train operators and on first reading, today’s proposals appear to provide an opportunity to level the playing field and really maximise the environmental and economic benefits rail freight can deliver.

“Our industry has played a pivotal role during the recent pandemic and ensured the seamless movement of goods to and from Europe during the difficult Brexit transition period but we have so much more to give in terms of helping the Government to grow the economy and deliver on its net zero emissions targets.

“We will work hard to ensure that our compelling case for the further growth of rail freight continues to be heard.”

Maggie Simpson OBE, Rail Freight Group’s Director General, said: “Businesses across the country are hungry for more rail freight as they decarbonise their supply chains and build back the economy. The creation of Great British Railways is a unique opportunity to meet these ambitions if it ensures that private sector rail freight operators can flourish, and that customers and suppliers are encouraged to invest for growth.

“We look forward to working with Government as they develop the detailed proposals, including for reform of track access and a new role for the ORR. It will be essential that the new structure and systems truly deliver on their promise for rail freight.”

Photo credit: GB Railfreight