

# Westminster woes? Why not let the professionals give it a go?

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*Jonathan Holdcroft, head of corporate affairs at Worldline UK & I, talks about whether the government should be considering looking more towards industry professionals to take some of the pressure off of rail reforms.*

The good news is there's been a definite development in the passage of Great British Railways (GBR) legislation, as we welcome the newest batch of ministers to the Department for Transport. The bad news is, the only thing that's definite is that it's not in this Parliamentary session and it's hard to see when meaningful rail reform can come before the House of Commons. But does it need to, for industry to be revitalised for the benefit of customers, taxpayers and the exchequer?

To be fair to government, we live in febrile times: war, pandemic recovery and market turmoil all require the urgent attention of Parliament and Whitehall, let alone how government's challenges have been intensified by the 'mini budget' and the reversal of most of it, heaping pressure on public finances and hard-pressed households.

Where does that leave rail? The Williams-Shapps Plan for Rail set out a laudable and ambitious programme

to put UK rail into the hands of effectively an arms-length public body, GBR, as a 'guiding mind' for rail, letting concessions to operators but driving the industry relatively independently of central government control...or that was the plan.

We truly believe the Great British Railways Transition Team (GBRTT) has done a good job of an unenviable task; deftly balancing the attention of an expectant industry and supply chain, with the dynamics of government. It's clear GBRTT have put a lot of thought into what the future of the industry could look like, but these hardy secondees can't do everything and nor can government. The more we can reduce government's workload, the more credibility we have as an industry. In this, is the opportunity for industry to be of its best for customers and taxpayers. The opportunity for us is pulling together and working on the art of the possible, to get on with delivering the parts of Williams-Shapps that everyone agrees about.

Perhaps we need primary legislation to change safety or financial accountability for rail, or to set up a statutory body as its guiding mind. But aside from those functions, given the eye-watering pressure on government and Parliament, industry and supply chain together can take some of the workload of rail reform (and might welcome doing so?) by getting on with policy developments that possibly don't require time in Parliament: revamping fares structures (or at least trialling and showcasing something better), making ticketing and payments modern and fit-for-purpose and of the same standard as many other retailers (that customers rightly expect) and building a coherent and network-wide integrated timetable to drive positive customer experience.

Nobody has a silver bullet for rail's challenges but while there's no time to waste on reform, there are thousands of people working hard to make the industry better and promote its recovery. Imagine what could be done if government gave them licence to just get on with doing what they can do best?! For better or worse, our industry's structures are complex and sometimes, frankly, outdated, helping no-one other than those who profit from inertia and the status quo. On the upside, there are thousands of people in the industry who want to build on its successes, mitigate its failures and ensure it can innovate to make rail's future financially sound, attractive to customers and strong against its modal competition whilst deeply integrating it across the whole public transport landscape. Never has this need been more urgent, and it's unlikely there'll be a better opportunity than now.

For Worldline, we believe open data can have a transformative effect on every part of rail: operations, passenger service, revenue collection and returns to the taxpayer, by maximising efficiency and providing accurate information rather than relying on guess work or unreliable data when that just isn't good enough. We believe rail can achieve the ambitions of unleashing opportunity across the country, decarbonisation and fuelling economic growth too. We believe that the supply chain in partnership with industry can commercially collaborate to invest in an industry that is the spine of the British public transport sector. We believe each part of the industry can play its part in saving and rebuilding rail. In many ways it doesn't matter who's in Downing Street now or in the future as our industry will always be subject to political caprice and there's always a reason to say 'that won't work'. Forget working like that. It gets you nowhere.. Let's find out what does work and then pragmatic, rapid ways to deliver it together, legislation or not.