



## **Women in Rail Trustee Story Spotlight – Gary Smithson**

### **Rail Director – Morson Talent**



#### **A Trustee with Purpose, Father, Ally, and Advocate**

Being an ally for women in rail is so important and something I take very seriously. To me, this means actively supporting women in rail in ways that go beyond words. It's about listening, amplifying voices, and creating opportunities where they might not otherwise exist. It's challenging assumptions, advocating for fair treatment, and celebrating achievements, both big and small. Being an ally is also about using my position and experience to mentor, guide, and open doors, while learning from the incredible talent and perspectives women bring to our industry. Ultimately, it's about helping to build a rail sector where everyone has the chance to thrive, and where women feel empowered to lead, innovate, and make their mark.

We must speak up, we must shout out, and we must use our voices to support change. Yet, I'll be honest, when I first stepped into this space, I felt a wave of imposter syndrome. So yes, it does exist for men too. I found myself asking, why me? What can I do? Am I the right person to make a difference?

What helped me overcome this was realising that allyship isn't about having all the answers. It's about showing up, listening, and using whatever platform or privilege you have to support others. I came to see that my role was not to lead each conversation but to showcase others, challenge inequality, and help create spaces where women can and feel safe to thrive. That shift in my mindset changed everything.

In 2025, I was proud to be named on the Northern Power Women Power List for being an ally, a recognition that highlights individuals who are driving change and championing inclusion across the North. For me, it wasn't about personal achievement, it was about momentum. If being included on a power list gives me a bigger platform to talk about diversity and inclusion and continue in my role, then it is worth it. It's not about me. It's about the change we're trying to create.

#### **Championing Women in Rail**

My focus as a Trustee is all about helping Women in Rail grow. This is not simply a project or a programme, it is a movement that challenges outdated assumptions, creates opportunities, and ensures that women's voices are heard, celebrated, and elevated across the industry.

As a trustee, I've had the privilege of helping shape the strategy and direction of Women in Rail, ensuring that our programmes and initiatives are genuinely impactful. I've been involved in mentoring schemes, supporting the SWIFT programme, and championing projects that focus on career development, skills training, and leadership for women at all stages of their rail careers. It's inspiring to see how these initiatives transform not only individual careers but also the culture of organisations across the sector.

I've been deeply involved in the Women in Rail Awards over these last three years, particularly in leading the judging process and making sure it is fair, transparent, and inclusive. Judging isn't just about handing out trophies, it's about shining a light on stories that might otherwise remain untold. Every nomination represents resilience, innovation, leadership, and passion.

This reflects my wider commitment, recognition is important, but transformation is essential. Women remain underrepresented in rail, especially in leadership and frontline roles. By championing Women in Rail, I want to help shift the balance, not just by celebrating achievements, but by encouraging the sector to ask the difficult questions about culture, recruitment, and progression.

I am clear on why this matters, diversity is not a nice-to-have. It is an essential ingredient for innovation, resilience, and growth. When women are included, supported, and promoted, the whole industry benefits.

By the way, the Women in Rail Awards are always such an amazing evening, full of energy, inspiration, and celebration of the incredible talent shaping our industry. It's a chance to connect, learn, and cheer on the fantastic achievements of women across rail. If you haven't experienced it yet, make sure you book your place for the 2026 event, tickets and sponsorships are on sale now, and trust me, you don't want to miss it. So here's a sneaky shoutout, put it in your diary, **13<sup>th</sup> May 2026**, at the historic Roundhouse in Camden, London. Tickets and sponsorship opportunities are now available, if you snooze you loose!

### **Inspiration from Home**

My commitment to equity comes from something very personal, being a dad. Having a daughter has completely shaped the way I see fairness and opportunity. I want her to have access to absolutely everything and anything she sets her mind to. That instinct as a father makes me ask, if I want this for my daughter, why shouldn't every woman have the same? Equal pay, equal conditions, equal opportunities, it's not just the right thing to do, it's the only thing that makes sense. She makes me proud every day and I want to make her proud of me, so being a trustee and demonstrating that allyship, advocacy, and action are powerful ways to create change, is what drives me every day in this role, and it's why I'm so committed to this work.

And away from work, you'll usually find me on a Monday night in my Lycra at bootcamp with my daughter. I'm the one huffing and puffing to keep up, headphones on, singing along badly to whatever's playing. She finds it more embarrassing than I do, but for me, those moments remind me exactly why equity matters so much.

I've also come to understand my role is not just showing support but actively engaging in the conversations that matter. I've learned about the challenges of menopause, spoken openly about period products for girls (I even know where they are in M&S), and tried to help normalise topics that men often shy away from. Being an ally isn't about speaking over women, it's about listening, learning, and then using our voice to help spread the word and remove barriers.

### **Training and Development**

As someone deeply invested in the future of the rail industry under my recruitment hat at Morson, I believe that training, development, and upskilling is so important. The rail sector has long been male-dominated, and while progress has been made, and we are very much at the forefront of this at Women in Rail, women still represent a minority. This underrepresentation isn't due to a lack of interest or capability but often stems from limited access to training opportunities and career advancement pathways.

The Apprenticeship Levy, introduced in 2017, was designed to fund apprenticeship training and encourage workforce development. However, a significant portion of these funds remains untapped. In the 2023–24 financial year, £3.3 billion of unused apprenticeship levy funds were returned to the Treasury, highlighting a missed opportunity to invest in the workforce. These funds could have been utilised to support initiatives aimed at

increasing female participation in rail, offering tailored training programs, mentorship, and leadership development specifically for women.

Joining Women in Rail can be a transformative step for women looking to advance in the rail sector. We offer a range of benefits, including access to exclusive member-only events, leadership talks, and networking opportunities, programmes such as “Never Mind the Gap”, the list goes on, the charity is full of invaluable resource and help and we will continue to push and develop to help our members achieve what they want to do in their careers.

### **Taking Action**

My message to the rail industry and beyond is simple, everyone has a role to play in inclusion. Progress cannot rest solely on organisations like Women in Rail, or on awards and events, however important they may be. True change requires commitment from leaders, allies, and every individual working in the sector. So action is key, I say:

- Be Visible: Share your story, put yourself forward, and don't be afraid to take up space. Recognition inspires others. We can help you do this here at Women in Rail.
- Be an Ally: Actively support women in your teams and networks. Mentorship, sponsorship, and advocacy make a tangible difference.
- Be Brave: Challenge the status quo, ask difficult questions, and push for change even when it feels uncomfortable.

If each person took even one of these steps, the industry would look radically different in just a few years.

### **Looking Ahead**

As a trustee, I remain committed to ensuring that Women in Rail continues to grow, thrive, and inspire. My role is part of a bigger picture one where rail is not only a career destination of choice but also a place where everyone feels they belong. We have some really exciting things happening this year, so keep engaging with us, keep watching and get involved.

My vision is again simple, I want an industry where diversity is celebrated, inclusion is non-negotiable, and opportunity is limitless. Working with my fellow trustees I believe that vision is getting closer and we will continue to challenge and push forwards.

### **And finally,**

I love being part of Women in Rail, it's given me the opportunity to learn from the incredible women across the industry. Their insight, creativity, and determination continually challenge me to think differently, improve my own leadership, and become a more effective ally. It's a two-way street, while I support them, I'm constantly learning and developing myself, whether it's understanding new perspectives, recognising unconscious biases, or exploring innovative ways to build inclusive teams.

Ultimately, my role as an ally and trustee is about creating lasting change. It's about helping to build a rail industry where women have equal opportunity to lead, innovate, and shape the future. It's about celebrating successes, addressing challenges head-on, and continually advocating for an inclusive culture where everyone can thrive. And personally, it's an honour to work alongside so many brilliant women who inspire me every day to be better, do more, and keep pushing the industry forward.

So yes, I'm inspired and rewarded both on a personal level, and on a professional level, every day is a new learning day and I feel very privileged. And I'm very lucky, at home my house is completely female, even the cat runs the show, but I wouldn't have it any other way. I love the energy, the drive, and yes, even the sheer determination that surrounds me. It's probably why I'm so passionate about supporting women in rail, seeing firsthand the impact women can have motivates me every day. If you want to experience that same energy and help shape the future of our industry, joining Women in Rail is the perfect next step.

### ***With thanks, Gary***

For more information on Women in Rail, please visit: [www.womeninrail.org](http://www.womeninrail.org) or contact [wr@womeninrail.org](mailto:wr@womeninrail.org)