



Women in Rail Trustee Story Spotlight – Darren O'Brien MBE

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Building Safer Spaces -For Work, for Growth, for Everyone

When I joined the rail industry, I thought I was signing up to move people and goods safely, efficiently, and on time. And I still believe in all of that, but, pretty early on, I began to see gaps in representation, in inclusion, and in how safe people felt being themselves. Not just passengers, but with my colleagues, women in rail, for those who've had to pause their careers for care or other reasons, for those facing violence, harassment, or worse.

I often ask myself, in a system built for schedules and operations, are we doing enough for our people and the communities we serve? Do we recognise the gap in confidence and the needs of women returning to work, maternity leave, career responsibilities, menopause? Or someone who's escaped domestic abuse and is trying to rebuild their lives? Do we have safe spaces? Do our policies, culture, leadership match the diverse needs of our people?

One of the programmes I have thrown myself into with Women in Rail is "**Never Mind the Gap**". It originally came to Leeds in September 2024 and only last month we ran it again. The idea is simple but ambitious, to help women, especially those who've had time away from work, get back into work and importantly into rail, show them what roles exist, give them the tools, confidence, mentorship. Over the week participants can try workshops (CV writing, interview practice), go behind the scenes at a depot, visit stations, hear from women in senior roles, see what engineering, operations, planning actually look like.

This matters, many women, when they return after a break, find themselves unsure, discouraged by what's changed, or feel they no longer "belong." The rail industry is huge, complex, and in some areas still very much male dominated. When we bridge those gaps, of confidence, inclusion, access, you don't just help individuals, you shift culture. You expand the talent pool. You make things better, more resilient, more representative.

White Ribbon – because safety isn't optional

Another core part of what I lead on is our White Ribbon work. White Ribbon UK is the charity focused on preventing violence against women and girls, with a strong emphasis on engaging men and boys in changing behaviours, attitudes, norms and creating allies. It's not an add on, it's fundamental. Because how we shape our environment determines how we grow, growth has the power to cultivate a culture where everyone feels safe, respected and included

The White Ribbon programme is about awareness, allyship and taking action. Accreditation of rail companies (of which there are nine), training, ambassador programmes, campaigns inside the network, safe reporting, changing culture so that people have the tools and confidence to speak up and empowered to create long-lasting change.

When companies become White Ribbon Accredited, it demonstrates their commitment to action, to cultural change, making their environments safer, more respectful, where respect and equality are embedded as part of the operational DNA.

Changing behaviour, allyship and leading by example is imperative for creating the change we want to see, in doing so we can create positive cultural shifts.

Rail to Refuge – helping people escape harm

One programme that is very close to my heart is Rail to Refuge. Victims of domestic abuse find themselves trapped due to the economic abuse and inability to leave because the cost of doing so is too high. I believed the rail industry could offer hope and help save lives by paying for train travel for victims escaping abuse. By offering an escape route, people could access refuge safely by train, removing the financial barriers imposed on them. I founded this scheme and during the pandemic it was rolled out nationally. Since 2020, it has helped thousands of domestic abuse survivors, women, children and men, escape abuse and reach a place of safety.

This isn't just about giving a free ticket. It's about compassion, duty, connection and doing the right thing. It's about saying, "We see you, we hear you and we are here to help." And making sure that can happen in the world we operate in.

If any of this seems like just good PR or nice gestures, I assure you it's not. There are huge challenges.

- Systemic inertia, old processes, old cultures, sometimes resistance to change, especially when it means training, policy change, rethinking how we hire or promote.
- Unseen barriers, lack of childcare, lack of confidence, gaps in networks ("who knows who"), people not understanding what a career path in rail looks like.
- Safety perceptions, people may feel unsafe even if policies are in place, and sometimes actual safety is compromised (harassment, reporting systems, validation)

Culture is hard to measure, and change is slow. It's easy to count how many women attend a workshop, much harder to capture how many feel safer, or stay in their role, or see promotion, or don't feel harassed.

But despite all that, I'm convinced none of it is optional. Every person who doesn't feel they belong, every person who fears for their safety, every woman who is shut out or silenced, that's a failure of the system. We have a responsibility to take action, to ask ourselves what does the future look like and how are we going to create these necessary changes for inclusion, diversity and equity. In my role as a trustee of Women in Rail, I will continue to ask questions, listen to understand the struggles of marginalised groups and collaborate with key stakeholders to break the cycle and create environments where we can all grow and flourish.

You need to get comfortable with the uncomfortable

I don't go out of my way to seek praise or feedback, that's never been my style. But what I've learned, especially through being part of the Women in Rail community, is that growth doesn't come from comfort. You've got to be willing to have awkward conversations. To ask yourself hard questions. To listen, even when what you hear challenges you.

Being an ally isn't a passive label, it's about showing up, being visible, and following through on the commitments you make. If you say you're going to support someone, you do it. If you say you want to drive change, you put yourself out there, not just behind the scenes, but in the room, in the conversation, and sometimes in the spotlight too.

We need champions, people willing to tell their stories, to lead from the front, and to make space for others to feel confident doing the same. Because if we don't talk about these things, if we don't share the why and the how, how can we expect others to feel comfortable enough to reflect, to shift their thinking, to act.

Change comes from within. Not from ticking a box, but from a genuine desire to do better, for ourselves, our colleagues, and the industry. And in all of this, positivity is key. If we can approach change with hope, with belief in progress and in each other, then the uncomfortable becomes a little more familiar. And that's when things really start to move.

What keeps me going and what I hope for

What gives me energy? Moments, when a woman in "Never Mind the Gap" says she never realised there was a depot role, she can't believe she can apply, when staff in a White Ribbon accredited company say they feel supported or understood, the families reached by Rail to Refuge. Also, meeting other leaders who say: "Yes, we want to do more. Yes, we want equity, and voices are being heard."

What I hope for is that rail is seen as a place where careers don't pause, especially for women who've wanted to return. That returning is smooth, respected, supported.

Safety, respect, equity are built in, the default, not the extra. That harassment is not tolerated, that employees know where to go, that passengers feel safe.

We have more visible female leaders, more women in technical, operational, frontline roles, and that the industry reflects the diversity of the population.

We cultivate allyship deeply, because change doesn't happen when only those affected speak up. It happens when everyone in the system takes responsibility.

The lens I try to walk through every day

So, even on a regular working day, when I'm delivering my day-to-day role at the Rail Delivery Group, I try to keep asking, Is this inclusive? Is this safe? Is this equitable? And the programmes I lead for Women in Rail are part of that lens. "Never Mind the Gap" fills a gap in entry and return to work. White Ribbon fights the gap between policy and lived safety. Rail to Refuge bridges the gap between danger and safety.

What I want people to remember is, progress looks like more than metrics. It looks like someone feeling safe on our network. It looks like someone believing they can return to work after five years off. It looks like no one left wondering if there's a place for them here. That's the story I'm committed to telling, over and over, until the gap is no longer something we even have to say "mind."

“It’s not our differences that divide us, it’s our inability to recognise their value.”

One of our biggest responsibilities at Women in Rail is to help ensure that this industry truly reflects the communities we serve. That's not a nice-to-have, it's a must. Because when rail becomes more representative, more inclusive, it also becomes stronger, smarter, more resilient.

Diversity isn't just about gender, it's about everyone. And for me, that especially means ensuring marginalised groups aren't just welcomed, but supported, empowered, and given real opportunities. Careers with focus. Pathways that are clear and accessible. Not just entry, but growth.

But to do that, we've got to start by looking at how we judge, often unconsciously, and be honest about the barriers that still exist. We need to stop judging, start listening, and start building spaces where people can show up as themselves.

There's a quote I always come back to: *“It is not our differences that divide us, but our inability to recognise their value and celebrate those differences.”* That's what it comes down to. Not just tolerating difference but valuing it. Celebrating it.

Because the more voices we bring in, and really hear, the better this industry becomes for everyone.

If in doubt, freestyle

For me, everything I do, whether through Women in Rail or just showing up as an ally, is about breaking down barriers. Metaphorically think of this as freestyle dancing.

There are no rules. No judgment. Just movement, energy, and enjoyment. Freestyle removes barriers. No one's worrying if you've got the right steps, they're just glad you showed up and gave it a go.

That's exactly what we need more of in this industry, acceptance, more freedom to move. More people feeling like they can bring their whole selves to work, however off-beat that might feel at first.

At Women in Rail, we are not just trying to fix a problem now, we are working on the future, the pipeline, yes, we are challenging, yes we ask those awkward questions and yes we are relentless in our mission, we really do believe rail should be somewhere where everyone gets a chance to step onto the floor.

And if we can make the rail industry just a little more like a freestyle dancefloor, open, inclusive, full of energy and opportunity for all, then I'd say we're heading in the right direction.

Stay safe, call out bad behaviour, put allyship into action and remember you are important and belong here.

Thanks for reading my story, Darren

For more information on Women in Rail, please visit: www.womeninrail.org or contact wr@womeninrail.org