



West
Midlands
Rail Executive

Devolution in Action: Lessons from the West Midlands

Tom Painter

11 December 2025

West Midlands Rail Executive is a movement for change,
driving a revolution in rail services for West Midlanders

Who are WMRE?



- West Midlands Rail Executive was established in 2016 as the:

Democratically accountable rail body for wider West Midlands region

- 14 local authority Board members (2 affiliates)
- Board chaired by the Mayor of WMCA
- WMRE also leads on all rail issues for the West Midlands Combined Authority & TfWM



What does WMRE do?

3 Key Areas of responsibility

Leading Today's Railway

- Jointly (with DfT) specify & manage WM Trains contract
- Future role with Great British Railways? – live workstream

Building Tomorrow's Railway

- Sponsor of 5 new stations / station enhancements for WMCA

Planning Tomorrow's Railway

- WM Rail Investment Strategy / Fares Reform / future stations / Midlands Rail Hub

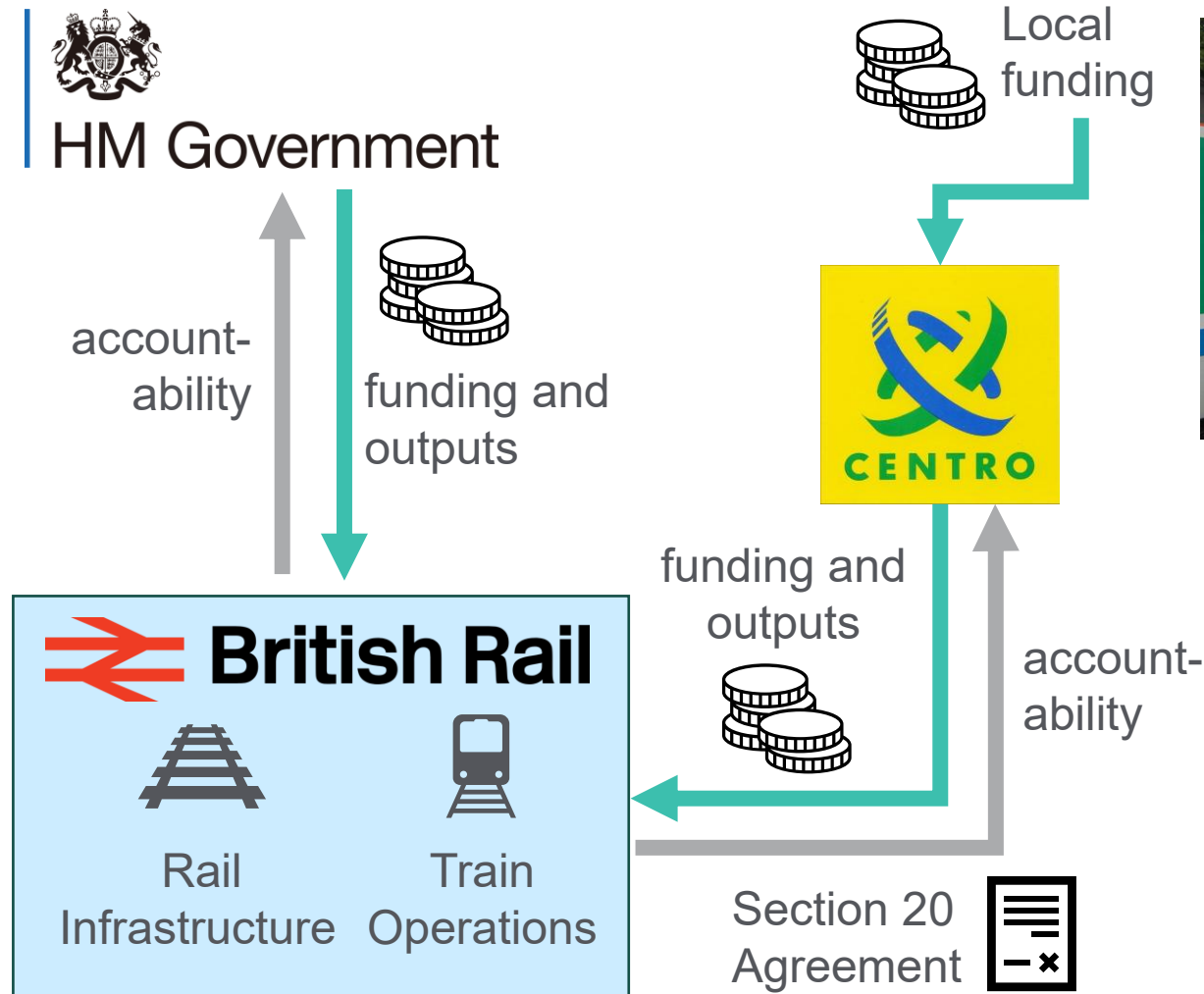




Key questions:

- How has rail devolution in the West Midlands changed as the rail industry has changed?
- What can we learn from the past about how much influence different arrangements have given?

The nationalised rail industry prior to 1993

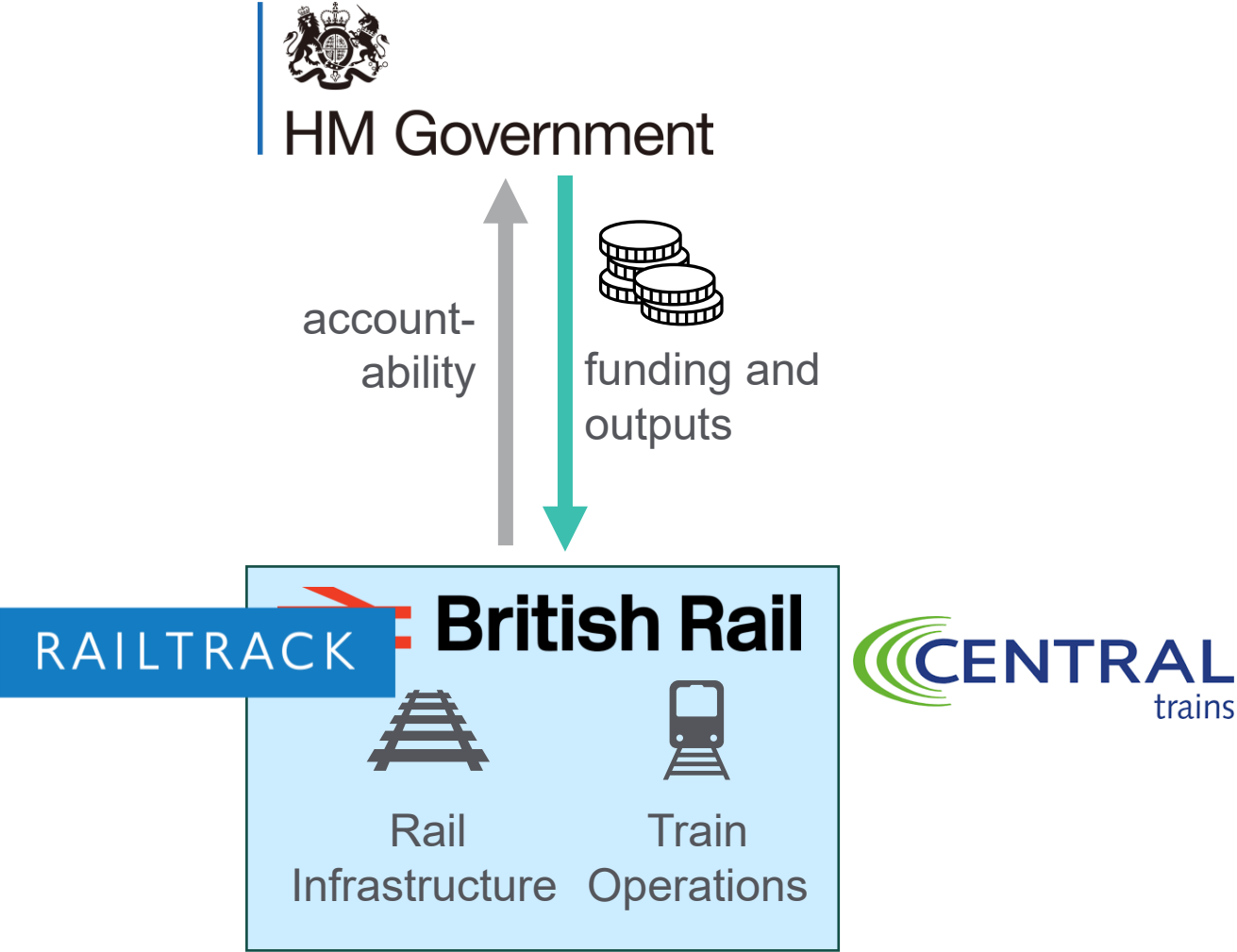


Level of control

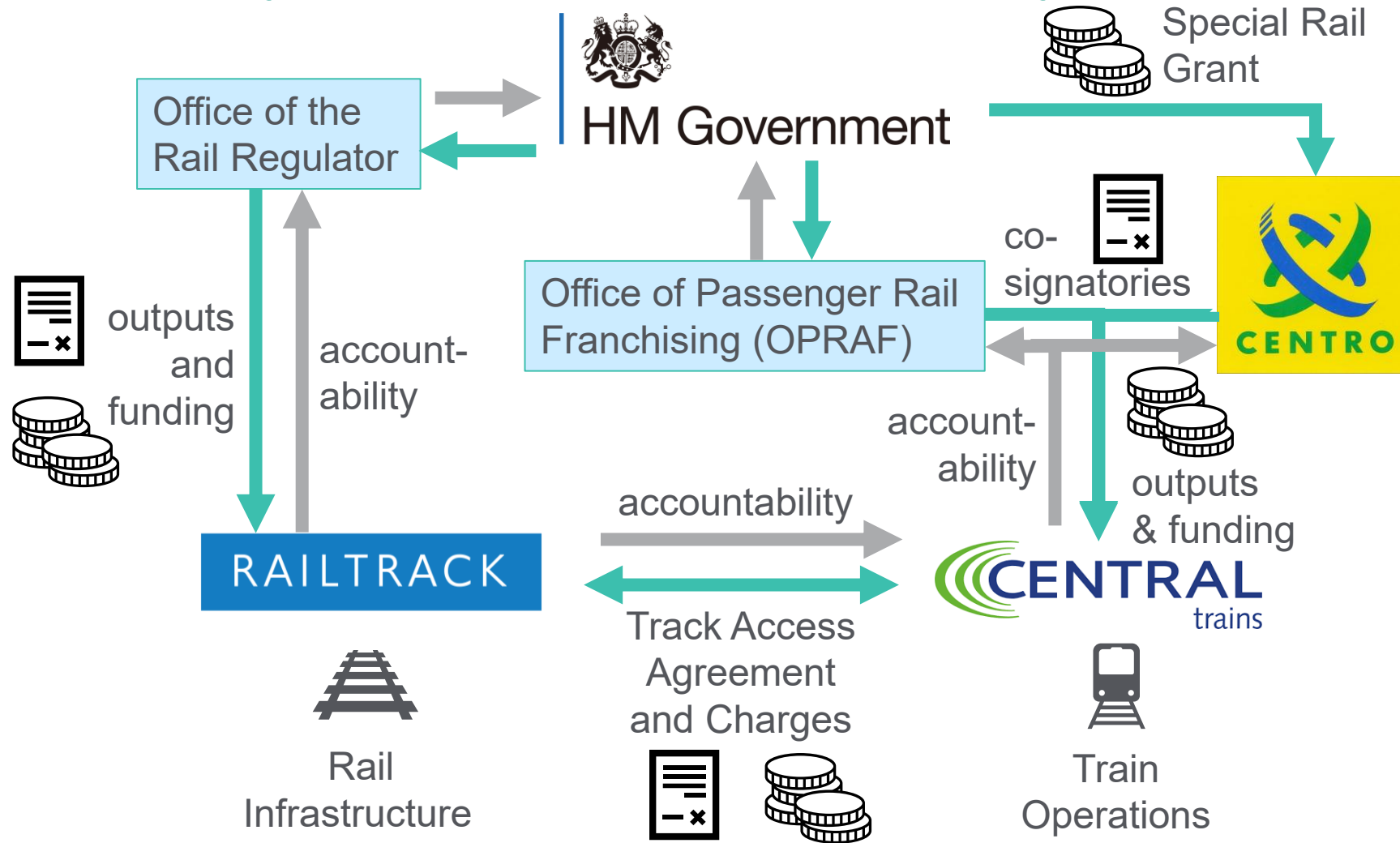


- British Rail felt accountable to Centro
- Sole supplier although funding could be withheld in event of poor performance
- Decisions made in the region about fares, investment and service levels

From British Rail to a privatised railway



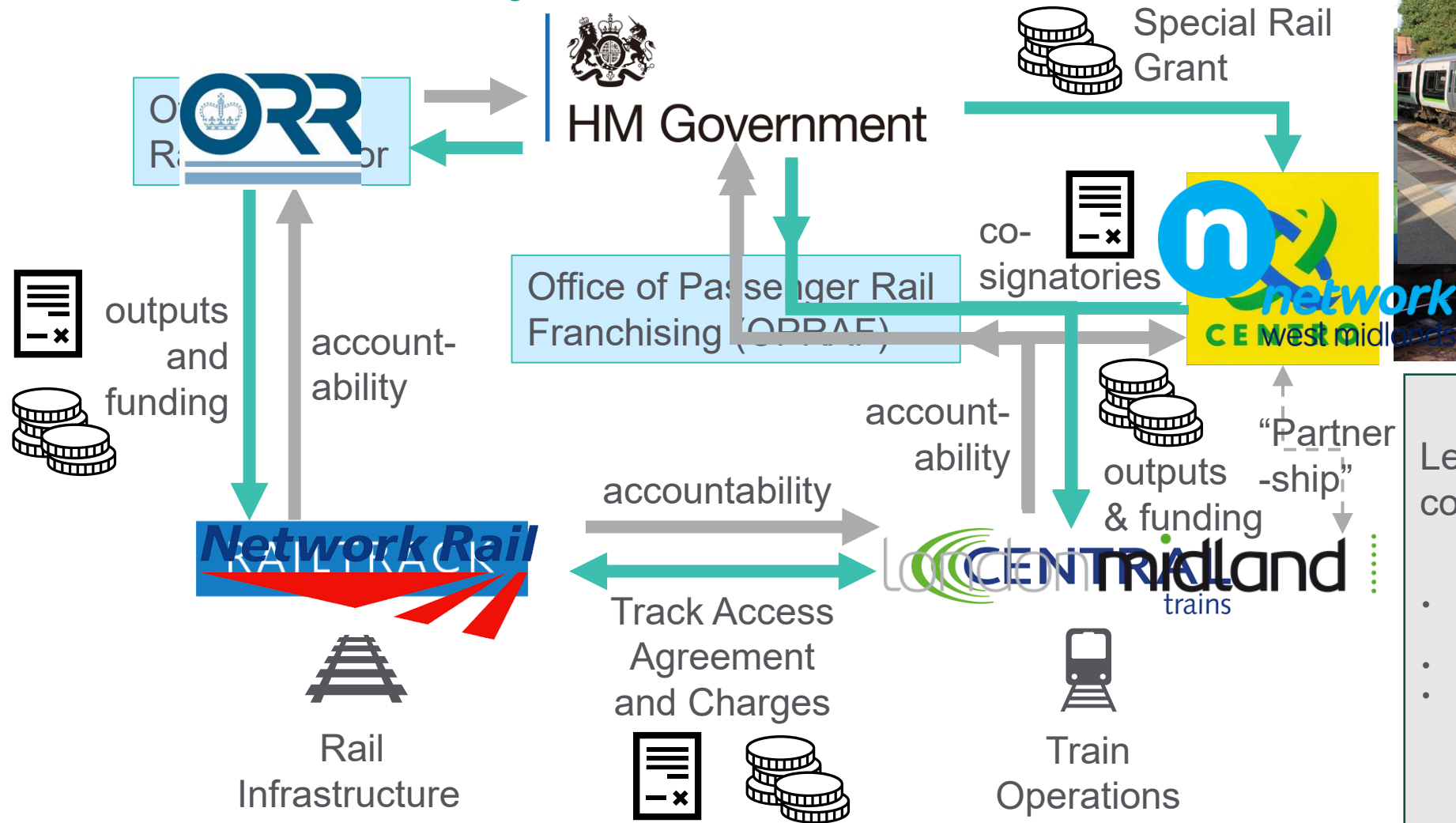
The early privatised rail industry: mid 1990s-2007



Level of control

- Central Trains felt accountable to Centro
- Contractual relationship which could be used in event of poor performance
- Decisions continue to be made in the region about fares, investment and service levels

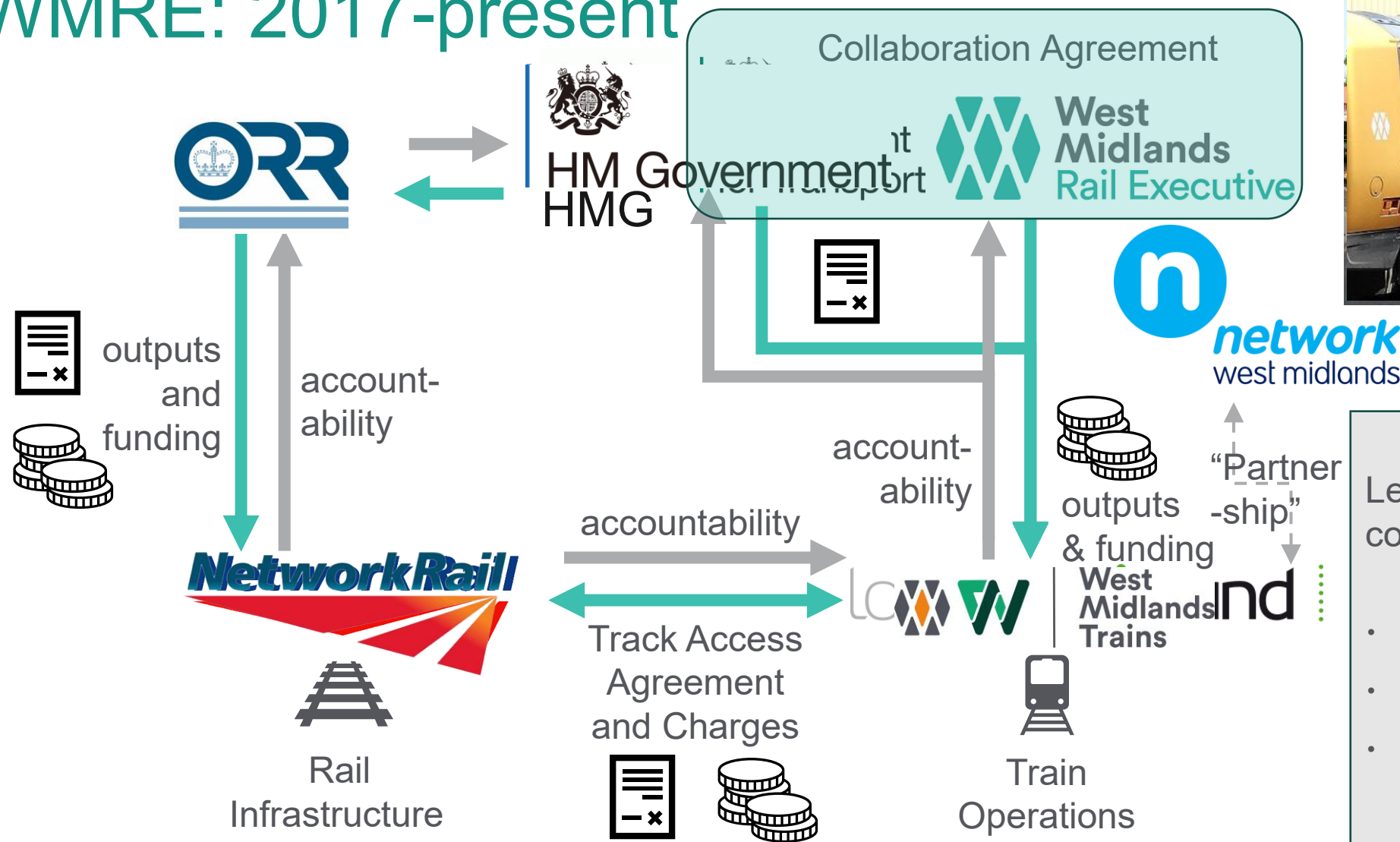
The wilderness years: 2007-2017



Level of control

- London Midland did not feel accountable to Centro (NWM)
- Centro had no ability to compel action
- Partnership could work when objectives were aligned; where they were not, Centro could be (and was) ignored

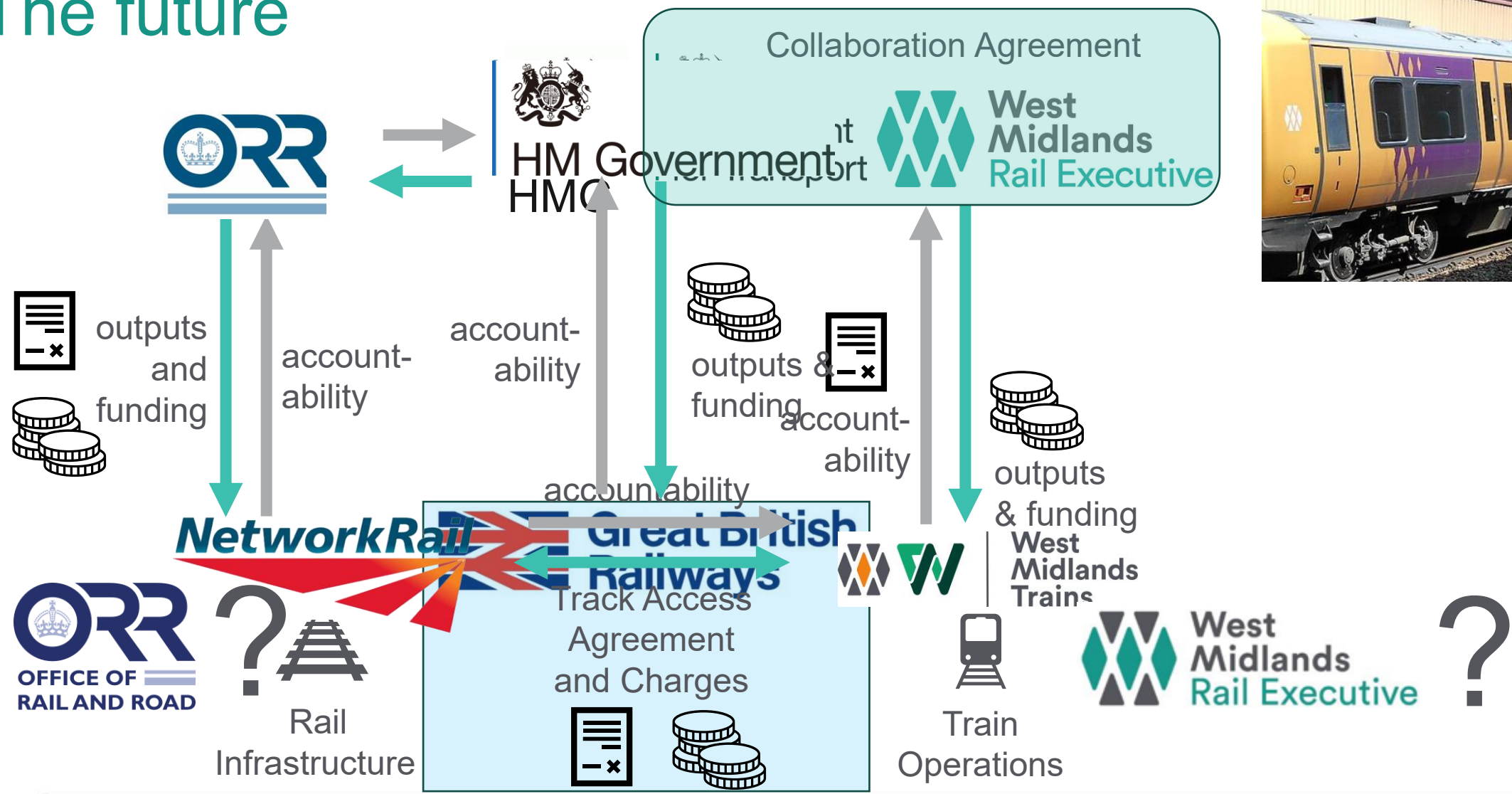
WMRE: 2017-present



Level of control

- The region re-established itself with a formal, contractual role in rail
- Contract owned by DfT; WMRE influence subject to “reserved matters”
- WMRE influence has waned since the pandemic as financial control has been centralised within Government

The future



What lessons have we learned?

- A **formal/contractual relationship** with the rail industry is essential to make sure the railway takes account of our objectives and plans
- **Less formal “partnership arrangements”** with no ability to compel **have not been successful** in giving us what we need and have left legacy issues to deal with e.g. evening peak restrictions
- **“Regional accountability”** is key; the rail industry must feel accountable to the region. Being viewed as a “stakeholder” is not sufficient
- **The region is on a trajectory**, through WMRE, of increasing influence, recovering from the 2007-2017 “wilderness” period
- The **wider geography of WMRE** has helped to align political, rail and economic geography
- Rail industry management must be **geographically focussed on the West Midlands region**; where the rail industry has had wider focus this has proved a distraction from our region
- The **region has invested more** when it has had more power over the rail industry to influence outcomes and where it has access to rail industry funding



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