

Guest Opinion

Anthony Smith, chief executive Passenger Focus



2015 – a Happy New Year for passengers?

Watchdog Passenger Focus keeps an eye on the rights of railway users, as well as people who travel on buses and trams. Set up by Parliament, PF is responsible for regular surveys of opinion, as well as representing people who have an unsatisfied complaint. Chief executive Anthony Smith points out that the Christmas disruptions at King's Cross and elsewhere were high profile examples of the issues which can often affect commuters as well.

LOUISE commutes from Fleet to London Waterloo every working day. As she waited for her train on Monday 5 January, what was on her mind? Probably the same things that have concerned passengers for some time. Will the train be on time? Will I get a seat? My annual season ticket has just gone up to £3,716. Just get me there and back without hassle – I don't want to notice the journey.

However, a historian looking back at 2015 may conclude that this was a golden year for the railway. The industry's recent safety record is good. Five-year investment plans are pumping passenger and government money into maintenance and longer-term investment. A Conservative-led Coalition is driving HS2 through their heartlands in the Chilterns. HS3 across the North is promised. Glittering new stations are emerging. Pouring concrete has never been so fashionable.

Shorter-term passenger numbers are continuing to rise. Passenger satisfaction, as measured by the Passenger Focus National Rail Passenger Survey (NRPS), remains steady. Revenue is pouring into the industry – over £8 billion a year comes through the farebox. The rise in regulated fares is now, finally, pegged at inflation.

Have we finally reached that elusive balance of long-term taxpayer investment with passengers nearly bearing the running costs? If so, why when asked, admittedly sometimes in fairly narrow surveys, do many people say they would like to see the railway re-nationalised? What do they really mean?

“After two minutes’ delay, something should be said”

Maybe the answer lies in the recent research we carried out about passengers and trust in the rail industry – you can find it on our website. We wanted to explore why, when so many passengers seem broadly happy with the service they have received on the day, overall opinions of the industry seem very mixed.

Satisfaction falls off markedly when you ask passengers to recall their most recent or most frequent journey rather



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than – as our passenger survey does – the precise journey they have just made. In some cases the scores plummet. First Capital Connect, for example, was scoring 77 per cent in the NRPS but satisfaction with passengers' most frequent journey was just 43 per cent. Passengers start to recall recent bad days, remember perhaps when information during disruption was not good, or when cancellations meant they stood crushed together.

The research clearly shows that some train companies are getting this more right than others. Virgin is more trusted by its passengers than many train companies in the South East are, for example. While commuters probably have a different mindset to longer-distance travellers – it feels like a tax on going to work – all passengers probably want the same basic needs satisfied.

The research shows the core elements of trust are the delivery day in and day out of the basic service promises and the quality of communication from the train company.

If the basic service is not delivered on commuter lines then no amount of communication can make up –

although handling delays well can compensate. It is no accident that the lowest value-for-money scores in the NRPS are from holders of annual season tickets using First Capital Connect and Southeastern services. The highest are from long-distance passengers on Advance tickets using Grand Central. The feeling of having exercised choice is a powerful one.

So, how can the industry earn trust from its passengers and, ultimately, government funders? The overall train-company NRPS scores mask very wide variations. Performance drives satisfaction – you can see that NRPS and rail performance track each other over the years. For too many passengers the basic performance is still not being delivered with anything like consistency. Good patches are constantly punctuated by bad. As performance has dipped in parts of the country, so has satisfaction.

We seem to have got quite good in this country at rebuilding the railway around passengers. Projects such as Reading, King's Cross and Nottingham have been mostly well handled (with a few exceptions, such as 27 December at

King's Cross). However, the big mother of all projects – London Bridge – was always going to be difficult. Electrification is rumoured to be late and over budget.

It seems difficult to imagine that in the cold light of May 2015, after the election, all the outstanding projects will be affordable. We have been promised so much new infrastructure that, even allowing for the downturn in other countries, some may question whether it can all be funded, let alone built at once.

The major roads budget, traditionally raided to pay for rail-cost overruns, is also going to be locked into a five-year spending plan. Gearing up the supply chain after decades of stagnation is bound to drive cost inflation, shortages and delays. The next Government will have to hold its nerve. There will inevitably be pressure on fare rises again.

In the meantime there is much the industry and government could do to demonstrate they really are on the passenger's side. For example, sort out ticket machines so they do not display gobbledegook information. Keep up the

focus on daily performance. Get staff to handle disruption better. After two minutes' delay something should be said, even if to say they don't know what is happening; passengers just want to know someone is in charge and cares about them.

Stop hounding passengers who have made an innocent mistake and been caught with the 'wrong' ticket. Focus on better information at the outset and on chasing the real criminals. It would help to decriminalise fare evasion and rely on general law where intent must

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be proved. The faults of the current ticketing system are largely dumped on passengers to sort out – give them some help.

I remain optimistic. Everything is moving in the right direction for public transport. More people are living in towns and cities. While fuel prices have dropped, motoring remains pricey. Patterns of car ownership are changing. Environmental concerns are not going away. The railway has got better – those rising passenger numbers are not all distress purchases.

The next few years are going to see massive, visible improvements. Crossrail will open. New Thameslink trains will finally unlock the rolling-stock market. The Northern Hub and electrification will start to deliver across the country. New intercity trains will replace the aged and venerable high-speed and other trains. Far fewer passengers will be travelling on BR-era trains, having a rather BR-era experience.

However, unless the industry does more to earn our trust, we passengers may well continue to yearn for a supposedly golden era that never existed. All the credit for that investment will not be banked by politicians or the industry. To get that trust train companies have to stick to their basic promise – the timetable. Treat your passengers with respect – and then tell them how well you are doing.