Anthony Smith

A new year recipe for passenger satisfaction?

If plans for the next five-year period of rail investment can be synchronised with changes to the franchising process proposed by the Brown review, the rewards for rail could be great

"South West Trains man" is probably a good proxy for the man on the Clapham omnibus in rail terms. I was talking to someone over Christmas who commutes four days a week from Stockbridge to London. His verdict was simple.

"SWT are pretty good. The train is usually on time. I get a seat. When things go wrong information has got better. Pricey, but a price worth paying." As the Government and the industry enter another period of introspection it is worth bearing this quote in mind.

What does the ever-increasing number of rail passengers think about the Brown review of franchising? Probably not much. Most passengers are far more concerned with their train today being on time, clean and value for money. If investment continues to slow as a result of the delays in franchise renewal passengers might notice more, but for the moment attention is more focused on day-to-day matters.

The latest wave of our rail National Passenger Survey makes interesting reading. Overall satisfaction is up to a new high. While the autumn wave scores tend to be higher than the spring wave ones, as fare rises fade in the memory, this is still a good score. Many train companies have posted good improvements. East Coast is level-pegging with Virgin at 92% overall satisfaction.

Greater Anglia, still with a long way to go, has improved markedly. Chiltern has reached 91%. First Hull Trains has bounced back to a healthy 95%. Grand Central leads the whole pack with 96% overall satisfaction.

Scores in some individual areas have also shown notable improvements. Many train companies are getting much better scores for the way they deal with disruption. London Midland continues to raise its score in this area with its Twitter feed and other ways of reaching passengers.

We know that the key driver of rail passenger satisfaction remains punctuality. While there are flat spots, punctuality continues to head in the right direction, dragging satisfaction with it. What does all this tell you?

Broadly the industry is starting to really focus on passenger needs and more consistently providing them. Most train companies are reporting revenue and passenger growth of around 6%. Most industries would really like this level of growth at the moment.

There are other factors behind passenger growth. The London and South East economy remains more resilient than that of other places. Oyster pay as you go in London has fuelled travel and made it easier to pay. Petrol prices remain high and traffic congestion will always be there. Internal flights are becoming less attractive as rail frequency, speed and reliability grows.

> **'Franchising must be centred on its original purpose: to underpin the provision of reliable, value for money trains'**

The increase in passenger numbers cannot all be down to distress purchases: the quality of the product has improved. Quality is still uneven, too many areas still have substandard services, and a host of big issues, like ticketing, remain. But something is going right.

Our input to the Brown review was fairly straightforward. Franchising must be centred on its original purpose: to underpin the provision of reliable, value for money trains that passengers want to use. Using the franchise process to aggressively recoup public subsidy was always fraught and has become more so. Taxpayers are diffuse. Passengers are not – they are vocal and rely heavily on the rail services they use.

We always felt there is no ideal franchise length or size. Longer franchises? Maybe, but extension based on good performance seems a less risky approach. Mechanisms to allow adjustments to franchise agreements need to be more sophisticated to allow for greater partnership between the Government and train companies. The needs of passengers need to be given more weight, both during franchise renewal and operation. Efficiency is welcome but not at any price. Costs should be saved by better ways of working, not cutting services.

Many of these issues are reflected in Richard Brown's report. It is a good piece of work. Succinct, well-argued and prioritised, it maps out a good way forward.

Getting the franchise process back on track is in passengers' interests. Brown's suggestion that the National Passenger Survey is given more prominence as an objective in franchise specifications and increasing its size could help boost the passenger voice. Longer-term arguments about structure and process can continue but let's get investment turned back on.

The Department for Transport, the Office for Rail Regulation and the industry have a frantic few months ahead of them. If franchise renewal and the industry's incentives for the next control period can all be aligned the rewards will be great. Growing passenger numbers, increased satisfaction, increased revenue and industry cost control leading to inflation-only fare rises could be within our grasp.

Maybe new year optimism is getting the better of me but if all parties are focused on the needs of passengers, then the future looks brighter.

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