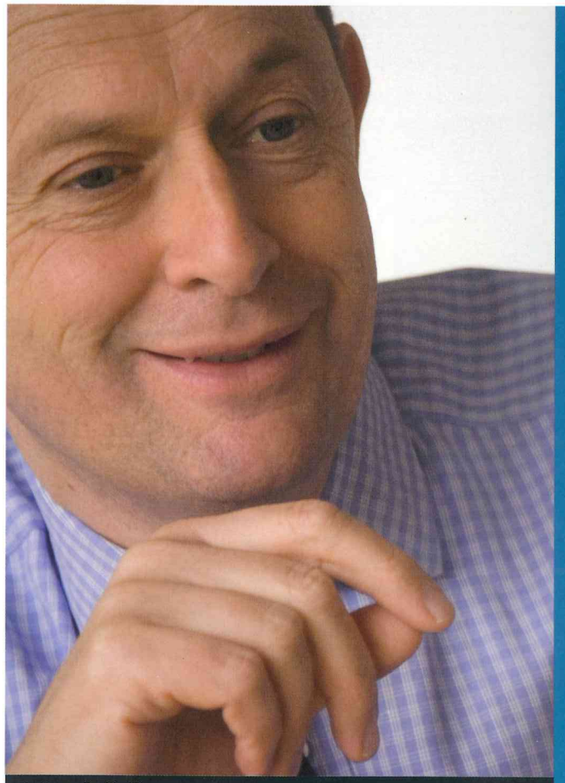


Anthony Smith (Passenger Focus)

The mission of Passenger Focus, the UK's independent passenger 'watchdog', is to get the best deal for rail and bus passengers, which it does by working to ensure the transport operators, funders and regulators put passengers first. Its long heritage goes back to the 1947 Transport Act, which also gave it a long name – the Central Transport Consultative Committee – and established a supporting network of regional Transport Users' Consultative Committees. Its remit then was limited to rail travel. In over six decades the organisation has gone through various guises, the UK rail privatisation in 1993, and a succession of (increasingly shorter) names, adopting Passenger Focus as its operating name in 2006. It took on responsibility for buses in 2008. Chief Executive Anthony Smith joined in 1999 after stints with the Consumers' Association and premium phone line regulator ICSTIS. A qualified solicitor, he's been described by one national newspaper as 'a high-tempo figure in the rail industry', so *Collection Point* was delighted he slowed down for long enough to share Passenger Focus' perspective on public transport. It's one in which communicating information is increasingly important, and managing capacity a major challenge…

Passenger Focus

How would you summarise Passenger Focus' role in today's public transport industry?

Our official remit is to represent rail passengers in England, Scotland and Wales, bus and tram passengers throughout England, with the exception of London, and users of scheduled domestic coach services in England. The word 'represent' is open to broad interpretation, but we position ourselves as a consumer organisation. We're not a lobby group for either rail or bus; we're a passenger group. Our representations are evidence-based, so we do a lot of research into what passengers like, what they want to be improved. We're not a think tank – we produce information the industry can act on. In effect, we have a simple business model: we ask passengers what they think, write it down and publish it.

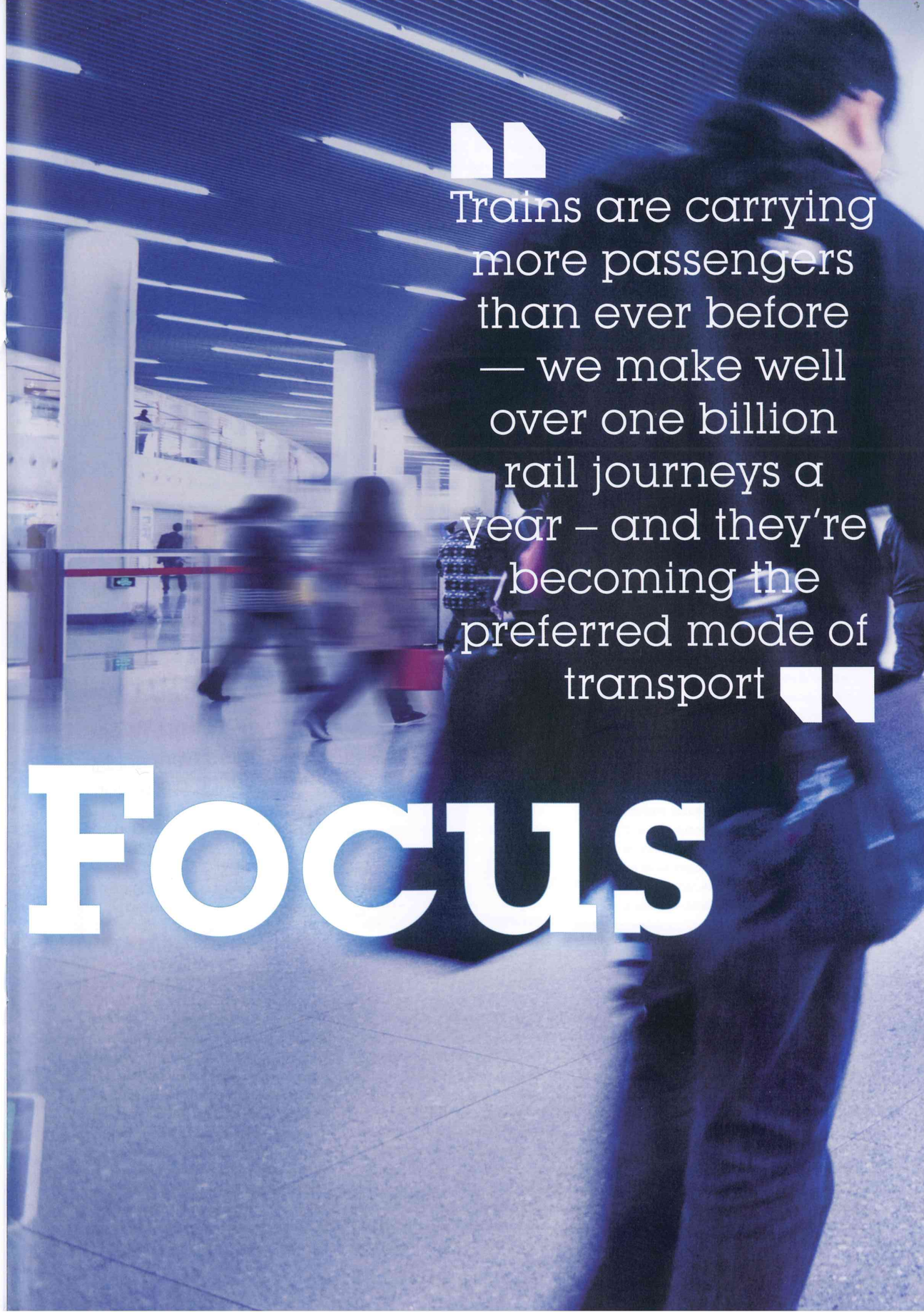
How do you gather the evidence?

We're best known for two regular, attitudinal surveys into key aspects of rail and bus travel. The twice-yearly National Rail Passenger Survey records the views of around 65,000 passengers, and each autumn the Bus Passenger Survey talks to around 30,000 people. These are large, powerful datasets, and what makes them even more powerful is the fact that we benchmark comparatively, providing all stakeholders with an accurate overview of the industry's performance. Most passengers use only one train or bus operator, so they don't know whether the service they get is above or below the industry standard.

The rail and bus surveys also point us towards other priorities – at any one time we're usually working on two or three other areas where we can make a difference. And occasionally we'll collaborate with outside organisations on specific research. For example, in November 2012 we worked with train and bus operator *Go*-Ahead on The Future of Transport, a study exploring future trends over the next ten to 15 years.

You also have a role in resolving complaints. What aspects of travel generate the most complaints?

At present we only resolve complaints about rail, and we only get involved when the complainant and the train operator just can't agree on a solution. The most common cause for complaint is how delays to services are handled. Value-for-money is another frequent issue. Then there are the more prosaic, but equally important, dissatisfactions with carriage cleanliness, the state of toilets, and so on. As for the buses,



the complaints the Bus Passenger Survey records tend to focus on things like driver behaviour, fares information, and the like.

Looking more closely at the how operators handle service disruptions, isn't keeping passengers informed the most important factor in determining levels of satisfaction?

Absolutely, because it's about what happens when the industry breaks its promise to the passenger. It's the acid test of an operator, and hugely influential on how its customers view the organisation. Most of the time, passengers don't care which company they're travelling with, because the ideal journey is one they don't remember. But as soon as there's disruption or delay, they know exactly who's responsible. And research shows that passengers' satisfaction with punctuality falls off after just a one-minute delay, whereas the industry gives itself five minutes of leeway. Passengers are much less forgiving! That said, it's worth noting that their satisfaction with the punctuality of services is rising. The latest National Passenger Survey, published in January, showed a significant improvement in punctuality and reliability. It also recorded a 6% improvement in passengers' satisfaction with how operators deal with delays.

How has information technology impacted on the way operating companies communicate with passengers?

I find the segmentation of information increasingly interesting. It used to be that putting out an announcement – 'There is a two-minute delay' – was enough, but now, while that's fine for 80% of passengers, there are 15% who want a bit more information and 5% who want even more. So operators need a suite of information channels that not only enable them to 'push' information out but allow passengers to 'pull' information as well. And this means a change in the balance of the operators' business model, which is essentially to run train and bus services, and tell people about them. In the past, operations had primacy, but as punctuality gets better it's the information that's becoming increasingly important. The only way the industry will get the confidence of passengers – and, crucially, of government – is to deliver on its promises, running services on time, and, over time, reducing costs. So if you're running punctual trains, tell people. I think any operating company without an information director at board level is missing a trick.

What about the role of social media such as Twitter in the communications process?

Social media has become established in a very short time. Twitter is especially interesting, because it has unique characteristics. It's brief, concise, can be a private conversation conducted in public, and personalised in ways that are otherwise difficult to manage cost-effectively. So operators need to understand it, and how best to use it. For example, they need to think about where they put their 'tweeters'. Some companies locate them in the control room, which introduces valuable feedback from passengers on the platforms and adds a new dimension by reminding control staff that when they press a button 6,000 people somewhere get irritated!

Latest National Passenger Surveys

The Passenger Focus website identifies ticketing as a key issue, and in 2012 you produced Ticket To Ride?, a report on the subject. What concerns you about ticketing? Is it too complex?

As regards rail ticketing, I think there will always be a degree of complexity. There are some 2,600 stations in the UK, the Oyster® card in London, zonal products elsewhere, yield management on longer routes, and so on. You can simplify it a bit, but the underlying complexity will remain. But we do foresee a major change coming in the wake of the government's forthcoming review of rail fares and ticketing – and again it's related to improving information. Before they buy a ticket, passengers need information on which to base their choices – and after purchase they need to know what they've bought. I really hope those words 'See restrictions' on the traditional orange magnetic-stripe ticket will soon be a thing of the past. I mean, exactly where do you see them? 'See restrictions' is the crudest piece of communication in the transport industry, because it's couched in such a negative way. The message is, 'Be careful how and when you use this, or we'll catch you…'

This was at the heart of Ticket To Ride? – the fact that it's become too easy to fall foul of the complexities and get into trouble. You can travel without any problems for 30 years, then one day you forget your railcard and that's it. And, by the way, the bus equivalent of 'See restrictions' – outside London – is 'Exact fare only'…..

So what will improve the ticketing situation?

Simple, straightforward solutions like Oyster, which promotes travel and is easy to understand. There's a reason Oyster has become the standard reference and a major brand – it works, and passengers trust it. There are exciting new ticketing products appearing that promise huge improvements. Contactless cards have gone down well since their introduction on London buses, and smartphone ticketing is round the corner.

There's a lot of talk about the benefits of integrated public transport. Do you share the enthusiasm?

There's no doubt that transport is going to be more integrated. Going back to the Oyster card, I believe its extension to national rail services in London has probably been the biggest single change of benefit to passengers in the last decade. Of course, London and the South East are different from the rest of the country, but they're showing the way.

What other challenges does public transport face in the future?

Capacity is always a challenge. The population is growing in some places, not in others. Trains are carrying more passengers than ever before — we make well over one billion rail journeys a year – and they're becoming the preferred mode of transport, so the ability and affordability of providing capacity at peak times is becoming constrained. Rail is a successful industry – and managing demand will be a huge challenge in some regions. For buses, outside London the proposition is tougher because people have more choices. In central Manchester, for example, you can park next to the station all day for very little. But bus is a good product in lots of places, and how good it is relies largely on the appetite of local politicians for making things happen. They're braver in some places than in others.

You mentioned the report Passenger Focus and Go-Ahead produced into the future of transport. What were the key findings?

A lot of the findings were in line with Cubic's NextCity concept. People will be more mobile, and want to do more on the move, but they won't necessarily have fixed ownership of the things that go with it – they'll rent cars and bikes. And giving them access to real-time information will be essential, so that they can make informed choices about how and when they travel. The smartphone will continue to grow in importance – in fact, for many people it will be more important, more personal, than owning a car. And urbanisation – the city as a place of dwelling – is only going to become more important, and so will getting around it, so public transport has a big future.

Lastly, after 14 years with Passenger Focus what still excites you about the job?

The challenges that still remain and the opportunities that are emerging. This is never a dull industry. I like to think I've helped build Passenger Focus into a respected organisation with considerable influence, staffed by good, committed people. Whatever your job, I think that we all get up on a Monday morning with a vague hope that the world will be a little bit better on Friday evening as a result of our actions. At Passenger Focus we're very lucky, because we have the opportunity to do that. ■