

In the passenger seat Anthony Smith



# On time?

Matching expectations to the information and experience is crucial, says Anthony Smith

**T**he results of the next wave of the National Rail Passenger Survey will soon be out. The last wave saw overall satisfaction dip after a long period of improvement. While individual train companies and routes show wide variation, the national figure is now 81 per cent - down from 83 per cent in Autumn 2013.

We know from correlation analysis that the main factor driving satisfaction remains performance. The main factor driving dissatisfaction is how delays are dealt with - although this is a smaller number of people as more passengers are satisfied than not.

So, should we simply push to get more trains on time? Would that be the best way of meeting passengers' needs? It doesn't look that simple.

As part of preparing for discussions on the next five-year spending period from 2019 onwards, we commissioned work on passengers' priorities for improvement. This work can be analysed by region and individual train companies.

Top priority was value for money - we know from other work this includes the price of the ticket and the basic aspects of the service. Then follows getting a seat, frequency, and more trains on time. The pattern is very similar across the country and across train companies.

Does this imply that passengers now think performance is OK? Probably not. It remains the fourth highest factor for improvement and is a key component in value for money and overall satisfaction. However, as passenger numbers rise inexorably, it does mean much more thought needs to be given to capacity issues.

## Understanding passenger views crucial

What is the interrelationship between more and longer trains and performance? How will improving the railway - and the necessary disruption this entails - affect both capacity and performance? Understanding passenger views will be crucial as the government is going to have to decide what to buy from 2019 onwards. We have commissioned research to explore the trade-offs that passengers might be willing to make. We hope to publish the results in July.

It feels at the moment that a lot is being asked of an ageing system, just as significant investment is being made. Passengers could, and should, rely on the timetable. It is the basic promise the industry has made, the core of the contract and the basic building block of trust. It is crucial the timetable is a work of some fact, not fiction. Yes, things will always go wrong and how they are dealt with is important - including compensation



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for persistent but under 30-minute delays. But it is crucial that expectations are set right from the beginning otherwise the industry is on an uphill struggle in terms of satisfying passengers.

Open data could play a part in this. Now right-time data are more readily available (well done Network Rail), each passenger should surely be able to easily see how their train has performed.

In metro areas passengers need timetables that more reflect how the Underground shows information. At Balham I simply want to know when the next train to Victoria is. "Three minutes" means happy me. I do not need to know this train is the late-running 0747! Matching expectations to the information and experience is crucial.

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