



Give passengers the vote!

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Passengers today are probably more concerned about whether their train is on time and they are going to get a seat than about the detail of the government's recent franchise announcements. However, they will feel the impact of these franchising decisions for years to come so it is crucial that their needs and expectations are at the heart of what government buys on their behalf. The recent announcements from the DfT are an important first step towards delivering long-term stability for passengers, and much-needed, already delayed, investment.

The commitment to re-building passengers' views into the heart of the process is welcome. Also giving passengers an enhanced role in deciding whether a new operator can get a franchise extension is good news. Passengers are now putting two pounds into the railway for every pound of taxpayer subsidy – so their voice should be amplified.

However, given the length of some potential current contract extensions, it is also crucial that effective passenger

consultation and input take place in this process. Some of these decisions will affect the daily journeys of passengers for a long time – CrossCountry will potentially get a 43-month (or over three and a half years in old language) extension. If current contract extensions are simply presented as a commercial 'done deal' they will not command passenger confidence.

Passenger Focus is proposing four main areas where passenger input could be increased.

Firstly, boost the size of the National Passenger Survey (NPS). This will make the results even more robust and allow a greater analysis at route level. It will also give the passenger voice more weight when franchises are being replaced.

Secondly, build elements of the NPS into franchise contracts – this would give passengers a more effective say on how franchises run and, hopefully, incentivise the right actions.

Thirdly, make franchise extensions contingent on a published 'opinion' on the performance of the train company and its plans. Who better to rate a company than someone who may have used it 450 times in the last year or thousands of times over the length of the franchise? Government can reject or accept the opinion but must say why. Add in a well-publicised passenger vote and you start to get some real feedback. We choose governments this way - so why not train companies?

Fourthly, advertise widely when a franchise replacement comes up. Our research shows many passengers are baffled when a new franchisee appears! When and why did this happen? No one asked our opinion! What happened to the old lot? What have this new lot promised? At present there is a total information void.

For too long passengers have been the passive recipients of major decisions made on their behalf behind closed doors. The voice of the user – and main funder – of the railways should be radically boosted in a process that needs to be opened up to scrutiny. We are going to work with government to make this a reality; the time has come for passenger power! 

Anthony Smith is the chief executive of Passenger Focus

