

## In the passenger seat

## Will passengers sit it out?



## Anthony Smith considers the next steps in the franchise waltz

Does Anne Carter, who commutes daily from Guildford to Waterloo, at a cost of nearly £3000 a year, care who runs the trains? Is Anne more likely to care about getting a seat, punctuality and fare rises? Should passengers be active participants or passive recipients of decisions made on their behalf?

Given the importance of the franchise replacement process, we think they should be actively engaged. More than 65,000 passengers a year take part in the National Passenger Survey, but we get the message from most passengers that they might fill in a questionnaire on the train but don't want to go to public meetings or other events.

involvement in both franchise replacement and ongoing franchise management. We should have the results ready in the near future to feed into the Department for Transport's deliberations following the Brown franchise reform report.

Short franchise extensions do not need to be investment deserts. Much infrastructure investment will continue but some of the so-called 'softer' things might be put on hold. We will be watching this closely. We are pitching relatively low-cost things: breaking down punctuality figures by routes, publication of right time performance data, making buying a ticket easier, adopting and using forthcoming industry guidelines on dealing with passengers who don't have a 'valid' ticket and ensuring that passenger satisfaction does not dip.

The government's decision to limit rises to RPI+1 per cent was welcome as it lessens the pain but fares will still rise sharply. While train companies have become better at explaining that they are collecting money on behalf of government in respect of the regulated fares formula, that is never how passengers will view it. They pay their money to train companies and, due to the ability of the companies to flex fares on individual routes within an overall basket, it may still feel like a pretty stiff rise.

How the industry plays this flexibility is key to perception – last year the pain was more shared. We strongly believe the range of flexibility needs to be reduced but not eliminated.

The other traditional festive debate is about Boxing Day services. When they are put on and well-advertised they seem to be used. Given the state of the economy, giving people more transport choices



If things are going well most passengers simply don't even notice the journey. If things are not going so well then that is different. Timetable changes, patchy performance, taking away services and endemic crowding can galvanise passengers.

One quick way to find out – ask them! That is what we are currently doing – testing the passenger appetite for

seems a good idea. So, well done to those train companies that do take the plunge and run services. The DfT and South Eastern move to run some high speed services on Boxing Day is particularly welcome. Something else that could be secured in future franchises? ■

Anthony Smith is the chief executive of Passenger Focus.