

Editor's note



Passenger Focus's recent debate on boosting the passenger voice within rail franchising, held to present the findings of its new research report, *Giving passengers a voice in rail services*, was extremely interesting, and yet telling.

Given that passengers are now the main overall funder of Britain's railway, it's in everyone's interest to ascertain and cater to their needs, but having had a bit of a whipping of late, the industry seems intent on compounding that by indulging in a phase of self-flagellation that's hindering it from truly concentrating on how best to work with passengers and involve them in the franchising process.

As Peter Wilkinson, the DfT's franchising director and panellist said: 'No other country engages customers in the design of rail services more than we do and this is reflected in a big improvement in passenger satisfaction. In Denmark for example, it hasn't even been thought of. The Passenger Focus report is fascinating, there's lots that isn't right but let's not throw the baby out with the bathwater.'

PF's chairman, Colin Foxall, opened the debate by ensuring the smile was wiped off our faces. 'Trust is an issue and we're all to blame. The industry's attitude to passengers is to blame.'

Anna Walker, chair of the Office of Rail Regulation, agreed there is a need for a greater voice for passengers, but pointed out there is less consumer involvement in rail than other industries because it's complicated. 'It's a question of how customers' views are handled,' she said. 'Toc's need to really explain that they are valued. That's what's wrong. Will they treat them as customers or the enemy on the other side?'

The talk was of a 'mechanism' of a formal process of consultation, but nobody was sure what that should consist of. Alex Hynes, MD of rail development at GoAhead agreed that 'somebody has to consult the passenger on long franchise extensions, but who's going to do that?'

The possibility of having a duty to consult passengers was discussed but Passenger Focus's chief executive, Anthony Smith pointed out: 'If we make it a duty, how do we get politicians to follow that?' Peter Wilkinson agreed the passenger voice has been 'absolutely lost' in recent years and admitted the industry has been 'too producer led', but challenged the notion that there has been no consultation. 'The facts are we do have a duty to consult and we do. But decisions are not necessarily in customers' interest - we make them on the basis of what we think they want rather than elicit open questions. We need to crystallise objectives passengers tell us they want and stick to them.'

Alex Hynes agreed that WCML knocked passenger trust and commented that compared to other sectors, rail sits in the middle ground, but more towards the bankers than the NHS. 'Why is it we deliver this great product but we're not trusted?', he pleaded.

Chris Perry, head of integrated services at Centro suggested there is a level of cynicism in surveys. 'A blank sheet of paper works better but consultation is hard - people are very busy.' Vernon Everitt, director of marketing and communications at Transport for London stated that trust is driven by knowing what's promised in the first place. 'And constant dialogue is necessary - don't confuse surveys with what people really think,' he warned.

One of the key mechanisms for bringing about greater passenger involvement - smart ticketing - was mentioned by Alex Hynes. 'It means we will actually know our customers. We should copy Tesco's.' Anthony Smith felt that social media is the best way to engage. 'Talk to people and get out and about. They'll only come to meetings if you're doing something they hate.'

Anna Walker opined that finding out what customers think will inform behaviour, and that's an obligation. But Peter Wilkinson cautioned, 'Be careful what you wish for. There is a risk of making promises you can't deliver,' and he advised companies to use professional consultants when dealing with passengers.

Back to the 'mechanism', Anna Walker reminded us that it's complex but the principle is correct. 'Transparency and the right sort of debate matters, so people understand the constraints. We need to tell them what is and isn't possible.' 'Making it real in a complex environment is difficult' agreed Anthony Smith.

I think it's going to be a while before the baby starts talking.

