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Interview: David Sidebottom

David Sidebottom, passenger director at [Transport Focus](#) spoke to Lorna Slade about why Toc's need to grab the media agenda, working with the DfT, that Dispatches documentary, and difficult questions from passengers

The room we were booked to meet in was taken, and without going in and telling the interlopers to jog on as some past interviewees have, David Sidebottom immediately opted for the room next door; but having seen him through the window the women in the first room happily vacated, I got the impression, because they liked him.

With another drop in passenger satisfaction recorded for Spring 2015 I wondered if NRPS figures are influenced by rail's frequent portrayal in the media as the bane of commuter's lives? 'I don't think they are as the way we deliver and scope out the survey is all about asking passengers to rate the journey they've just done, and consistently it's built a picture that when performance is bad satisfaction takes a dip – that's the biggest driver. So when services are punctual value for money goes up and we get a halo effect that isn't affected by a bit of bad news the night before. But bad news does impact on trust, which is not a measure of satisfaction.'

Last year [Transport Focus](#) published some work on passengers' relationship with and trust in the industry, and what came out is that they get a lot of their news about Toc's through external media, and that Toc's are not controlling that agenda.

'When they do control that agenda', said Sidebottom, 'through social and traditional media like station posters and leaflets there's more of a sense of 'Ah, now we know why this is happening we'll cut them a bit of slack', but when it's via the news media it's generally negative so our message to the industry is 'If you can, grab the agenda.'

'You mean Toc's should communicate properly and effectively' I add, 'Yes, and know who you're talking to, don't do it in blanket messages, try and segment your market,' suggests Sidebottom. 'I know Toc's are trying to be more sophisticated about that but there's still a long way to go in building that level of trust and relationship with individual passengers.'

Talking about the Spring figures being down bar one or two operators, Sidebottom points to the picture in the south east quadrant as reflecting the reality of what has been a really poor level of performance for some time now. To that end [Transport Focus](#) has been asked by rail minister Claire Perry MP to do some work for the south east quadrant 'task force' consisting of Network Rail, Toc's and DfT. 'She has asked us to sit around the table as a kind of 'honest voice' and as well as using traditional research methods we'll pilot a new methodology that allows us to take the temperature of how passengers feel more instantaneously. We will be a critical friend, a very honest broker in the sense of 'Look, this is getting better or that isn't'. To be around that table and indeed have the minister ask us in the first place is great.'

'But so she should really' I point out. 'Absolutely, yes, and Claire Perry is certainly driving what I hope will be the kind of improvements that passengers will see over the next couple of years.'

What's changed?

Sidebottom laughed knowingly when I pointed out that a press release from Passenger Focus in 2012 had an identical message – namely that passengers need to have a greater say in the franchise replacement process.

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What has changed since then? 'A couple of things I think. One is the transformation, under Peter Wilkinson at the Rail Executive. I think what he has done, obviously with colleagues, has reinvigorated the whole franchising process and put a much clearer focus on what passengers are getting out of franchising. So he and his senior team have worked with us, and others, an awful lot to hear that. The bidding groups are encouraged as a result so they come and talk to us and the good thing is they also meet with other local rail user and pressure groups, so they're getting messages from the grass roots as well. The other significant development is that we're now part of the franchise assessment process in that we get to see the customer service elements of the franchise bids – anonymized of course – and we give things a thumbs up or down as the case may be. That's a unique position and comes with some risks and some challenges – we don't know which group is saying what but we can comment on their proposals around innovation, customer service delivery and so on.'

Customer Reports are another big development – does Sidebottom believe passengers will trust these publications? 'Its early days but we did some research around that with Abellio Greater Anglia, c2c and GTR. There is a bit of scepticism that if it's not done in the right way, if it looks a bit glossy and corporate, then it's kind of a turnoff. So the work we're doing to understand what passengers want from this kind of publication is a good thing and we've seen one or two improvements in the AGA publication. But as the franchises role out they'll 'get it' because it's a communications tool and the one thing we know from the work we did on trust and relationships is that if Toc's can control their media agenda more, as I said, they can start to build and deliver in those areas.'

In terms of how these reports will be pushed out, Sidebottom mentioned there are mixed messages from passengers on what they prefer, 'generally they tell us the meet the manager sessions are still valuable, so they could be handed out there, but Toc's will do things differently: I know ScotRail used to have its management team out on trains,' and we chuckled at the image of men in suits bearing down the aisle looking for an earnest conversation with captive passengers.

Closer to the heart of the industry

Transport Focus has therefore grown ever closer to the heart of the rail industry and there is no better illustration of this than that the new round of franchise contracts are seeing Toc's committing to targets for satisfaction as measured by the NRPS. 'Chiltern and I think London Midland had it before 2012 but this is something we pushed as a post-Brown review because it focuses the mind. I mean most of the operators and Network Rail use NRPS as a management tool, and even MD's have their own, or part of, their bonus appraisal system geared around that, so that's great. And it's right to focus on what passengers get versus what they want to see improved.'

Since it's sponsored by the DfT, what makes Transport Focus's work different to that which could be done at the Rail Executive, I wondered? 'We are completely independent and not affected by any kind of political pressure,' pointed out Sidebottom. 'We set our own work and agenda and instead of being involved in the box ticking contractual arrangements of franchises we're much more about the heart and mind of the passenger, and we have the ability to work with Toc's across the nation. We talk to some more than others but we get a sense of what's working, or not.'

But does he feel that his organisation's recommendations and findings are acted upon enough by government and Toc's? 'It takes a bit of time. The rail industry can be quite slow at implementing, building and doing things. We've been pleased with what's happened in franchising but that got a real push from the Rail Executive and the department. We've also seen how the industry has reacted to some of the problems in the south east. But the things we want to see happen, for example good WiFi on all train carriages, why is it taking so long? This is an

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honest question that passengers ask us. Why should it take millions or billions of pounds to come in? Just get it done.'

Working in a silo

Sidebottom featured in June's Channel 4 Dispatches investigation, which didn't portray First Great Western in a great light. Was he surprised by what he saw? 'Well, let's be straight, I was shown some clips and I commented on them, and as a passenger advocate what else could I say? I was disappointed with some things such as the split ticketing issue because there are rules around that, but others didn't surprise me. I wonder why there is a working timetable and a published timetable for example – Marks & Spencer doesn't have two pricing guides – it should be very straightforward, 'here's a product and here's what you buy'. I realise it's much more complicated than that but I'm working on behalf of the passenger.'

Transport Focus has had some 'very sensible and mature conversations with FGW' since the documentary according to Sidebottom, who pointed out that lots of great work is being done with the Toc around how passengers are affected by the engineering works at Bath Spa. 'You know it's about lessons learned and then getting on with it. I'm sure they've done things in-house we don't know about as a result of the programme, that's for them to sort out, but passengers will be the judge of how well they perform in future through NRPS and other research.'

But do Toc's really have the right attitude to passengers? What are they getting right and wrong? Sidebottom is thoughtful. 'I think the difficulty for the industry is how do you translate sitting around a senior exec table deciding on innovations with getting them out to four and a half thousand staff working in some quite challenging conditions? There has to be a continual push right through the ranks because this is a customer service business.'

In terms of whether staff are trained well enough in customer service ethics, Sidebottom believes Toc's have to understand better that many commuters have little choice about whether to travel with them and to find ways of improving their experience. For some it's around better use of technology innovation to understand individual passengers, smart ticketing or social media, so they can push information to the customer before they even start their journey rather than them having to hunt it down, and when things go wrong to make compensation easy.

'But technology aside it's about delivery on the day,' he feels. 'Passengers like railway staff for information – we know that, so the guard on the train, the platform staff, they will seek out a human being to speak to, and if that interaction becomes strained and is frustrated it doesn't help.'

Maybe rail works in a silo and would do well to take learnings from other service leaders? 'The answer to that is yes,' said Sidebottom emphatically. 'I know at Group level people are coming into the industry from outside which is good. A colleague is meeting later with someone at Stagecoach who has come from Marks & Spencer. Whether you class that as innovation I don't know but hopefully they won't go native very quickly. You've got to hang on to that; if you trained at M&S hang on to that please!'

Valuable input

Transport Focus handles nearly three thousand complaints from frustrated passengers per year; I wondered if some make commercially viable suggestions about rail? 'These are intelligent people and we see some very passionate arguments about why the railway should be doing this and that, but again the process of change in rail is like turning an oil tanker at times, and the cultural stuff about passengers being more than just a ticket has to

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change. We're seeing it slowly through the new franchising process, and it may be another two iterations before it takes hold, that's if we still have rail franchising in ten to 15 years' time; then we might see the long-term benefits.'

Should Toc's be hit where it hurts more around customer satisfaction, perhaps lessening the subsidy for example? 'That's a classic passenger-style question and a good one,' said Sidebottom. Network Rail or the operator may pick up a fine here and there but where does the money go? Couldn't it be better spent on actually improving schemes that feed back to the passenger? I think it's a fair question.'

What's the hardest question passengers ask, I wondered? 'That has to be 'How bad do things have to get before a franchise is removed from an operator?' There are lots of hurdles and steps to go through and passenger satisfaction will always play a part and there's financial stuff involved and it's wrapped up in a contract I don't understand...' So what do you say to them? 'I waffle on just like I've done to you and sidestep the issue. In fact I have every sympathy concerning problems in services, but if there are penalties and fines please invest them back in improvements. Taking two million pounds off Network Rail is not a lot in the scheme of things, it's public money coming back around isn't it, so spend it on something that helps the passenger, just don't let it disappear into the Treasury black hole.'

Very diverse

Previously regional director of energywatch in the north west, Sidebottom has been with [Transport Focus](#) since 2006 and in his current role for one exactly one year when we met in August. His remit seems to be quite wide and I wondered if the position has been what he expected. 'It's a great job that involves coordinating our research and policy output. I'm working with our chief executive Anthony Smith and the board and externally we're working with the Toc's, bidding groups and RDG among others; in fact I spoke at an RDG event recently on open data and transparency – I took a piece of our research to a roomful of public affairs and communications executives from the Toc's. I get to speak to politicians and I'm doing a BBC interview this afternoon on compensation arrangements in the south east. I cover a lot of bus work as well so no two days are the same.'

Sidebottom is on record as saying: 'I'm often told by rail staff that I know more than they do and I'm handy to have around when it starts to go wrong.' 'Did I say that?!' he laughed. 'My knowledge of trains is very limited. I'm not a train geek, what I like about trains is people. I sit on a train and just watch the interaction between passengers and staff – I live in Manchester and I've travelled to London for various jobs for 21 years now and the change is there to see.'

Moving across questions such as whether the CMA's recommendations will enhance customer service – 'as a consumer organisation we believe choice is good', and the fact that half of Toc's have yet to sign up to the Delay Repay scheme – 'these are going to be baby steps to get to a point where automatic compensation arrives and the industry could be more proactive,' it's clear the Sidebottom's focus is innately on how passengers can be better served. As he puts it 'at the end of the day I'm an old-fashioned consumerist. I think the customer is king. People should be complaining more, people should know their rights more, and when you look at businesses such as M&S and John Lewis they make heaps of money but at the same time everyone has a warm and cuddly feel about them. Why aren't other industries in the same feel good space? And when a rail commuter spends five to six thousand pounds a year they're entitled to have their say in how that business runs and get a good service day-in day-out as well as when it goes wrong. That's a test of how a good business works.'

Finally, asked what he would like to see in terms of the future structure of the industry, Sidebottom is sure about one



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thing. 'I could switch my job tomorrow and do something else to do with consumers but I hope the industry never loses sight of the views and experiences of passengers – its customers – and uses them as its bedrock.'

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<http://www.railpro.co.uk/railpro-magazine/september-2015/interview-david-sidebottom>

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