



‘How can we improve customer service in the rail sector?’ APPG on Customer Service event, 12th February 2019

Portcullis House, Houses of Parliament, London SW1A 0AA

In attendance:

- Philip Davies MP, Chair
- Chris Evans MP
- Andrew Rosindell MP
- Graham Morris MP
- Jamie Stone MP
- John Penrose MP
- Lesley Laird MP
- Giles Watling MP
- Baroness Randerson
- Lord Berkeley
- Olivia Rohll, Office of Nick Herbert MP
- Jonny Haseldine, Office of Anne Marie Morris MP
- Anthony Smith, Transport Focus
- Duncan Henry, Rail Delivery Group
- Richard McClean, Grand Central Trains
- Jo Causon, Institute for Customer Service
- David Dagger, Institute for Customer Service
- Bethan Davies, Kindred
- Gareth Morgan, Cavendish Communications
- Adam Jogee, Cavendish Communications
- Sabrina Huck, Cavendish Communications

Contributions from invited speakers

Philip Davies MP opened the session and invited speakers to give their perspective.

Jo Causon, The Institute of Customer Service

- Jo welcomed guests, and thanked Philip Davies MP for chairing the meeting.
- Explained that according to the 2019 UKCSI Customer satisfaction in the rail sector is 69.9 (out of 100) and 26% of rail customers say they have experienced a problem with rail services.
- Scores were low when it comes to complaints handling, where the sector scores only 5.4 out of 10.
- This alludes to a cultural problem within businesses which do not take customer service seriously. The Institute believes that it can help firms to change this culture and become better.

Anthony Smith, Transport Focus

- Explained that reliability of the rail service was the key to customer satisfaction in the sector.
- Noted that the Government is investing in the rail sector, but it will take time for passengers to see the fruits of this investment.
- The time table crisis was an example when work that’s been done to improve services has been nullified in the eyes of the consumer because the negative experience overshadowed potential improvements.
- Remarked that many passengers feel as if rail companies were not accountable to passengers.



Duncan Henry, Rail Delivery Group

- Said that the current rail fare system dates back to 1994 and is clearly not fit for purpose anymore.
- Explained that overcrowding is a main issue for consumers, particularly those who commute longer journeys. It should not be acceptable for them to have to stand for long periods of time during the duration of their commute.
- Argued that projects such as Crossrail and Thameslink will improve the situation for customers over time.

Richard McClean, Grand Central Trains

- Said that passengers are satisfied with services if they are punctual, deliver value for money and have helpful service personnel on board and at stations.
- Explained that Grand Central scores well among its passengers for punctuality, although the company in fact performs only slightly better than other service providers.
- Believes that this perception is due to the high standard of customer service on the trains. Passengers feel well informed in case of delays which helps change their perception.
- Said that it was important for rail companies to have a vision of purpose.

Philip Davies MP, Chair

- Asked whether service levels have driven revenue growth for rail providers or whether it was the other way around.

Richard McClean

- Argued that the decision to improve customer service is a long-term investment which underpins the success for Grand Central. It was important to have this long-term vision for the business.

Philip Davies

- Noted his personal experience of difficulties when it comes to changing routes after booking tickets when plans change. The system was too complicated and inflexible which is not good customer service.

Duncan Henry

- Said it was possible to make these changes with the support of a customer service employee but that there might be a need to better train or support staff to help passengers effectively and in a straightforward manner.

John Penrose MP

- Asked what policymakers can do to improve the rail services. He was particularly looking for suggestions that do not require structural intervention.

Anthony Smith

- Said that the quality of infrastructure was important, as well as giving customers choices.
- Emphasised the importance of a long-term strategic vision for rail. Sometimes this might get lost when franchises change.

Richard McClean

- Agreed that the provision of choice for passengers and a consistent business plan was an important factor for customer satisfaction.
- In terms of franchising, he noted that sometimes smaller businesses could be more effective than multi-layer large companies with more muddled decision-making structures.



Anthony Smith

- Argued that some of the problems with the current system were not attributed to the franchising system as a structure per se but had to do with the types of contracts that are being issued.

Lord Berkeley

- Said that he believes it was a structural problem.
- Asked whether it was true that Open Access programmes might end.

Duncan Henry

- Reinforced that this was not the case.

Jo Causon

- Emphasised again the importance of cultural changes within businesses to make them truly accountable to passengers.

Lesley Liard MP

- Opined that the foundation on which the rail system is built in this country was not working and asked what strategy there was to improve this.
- Praised Grand Central for their work on employee engagement which contributes to improved customer satisfaction in the long term.

Duncan Henry

- Said that to achieve improvements, it was vital to ensure better communications, to bring together Network Rail and train operators and to work on improved timetabling.
- Alliances between Network Rail and operators need to be allowed to flourish as culture changes within businesses need time.

Anthony Smith

- Said that passengers first and foremost want certainty in the system.

Lesley Liard MP

- Asked again what concrete strategic proposals there are to improve the network.

Richard McClean

- Said there was a need to be tactical; often rail is seen as an 'instant gratification' business where passengers form opinions quickly whilst on their journey. It was important to also think more longer term.

Andrew Rosindell MP

- Highlighted issues that exist with Crossrail, which is often delayed, which leads to passengers being upset.
- It was not easy to solve these issues as TfL is in charge which often brings political challenges, too.
- Asked who is running stations – it was often not clear who is responsible for their upkeep or where passengers could go to complain about their state.

Jo Causon

- Acknowledged the importance of 'design through the lessen of the customer' as the journey does not only include the time spent on the train, but already begins as they enter the station.



Baroness Randerson

- Highlighted that sometimes staff did not have all the information available that they need to keep passengers updated.
- Also highlighted the issue of driver's contracts and voluntary overtime. In the summer this has led to services being cancelled frequently.

Richard McClean

- Explained that it was difficult to design new contracts that did not have the same employment provisions in it as the other rail companies do, given that they all recruit from the same labour market.
- Acknowledged that it was important to facilitate a good work and team environment to retain staff.
- At this point, Philip Davies MP had to leave the meeting and handed the chair over to Andrew Rosinell MP.

Graham Morris MP

- Shared his experience from train travel across the country, where he often experiences issues such as old carriages or infrequent services.
- He also highlighted the fact that the ticketing system could be confusing for some passengers as it does not necessarily state clearly what trains can be taken.

Andrew Rosindell MP

- Asked whether there were plans to design a nation-wide Oyster card system which could be used on trains.

Duncan Henry

- Said that plastic cards for train travel were already available.

Anthony Smith

- Said that more and more people want to travel by train and it was the industry's responsibility to make it as easy as possible for passengers to do so.

Andrew Rosindell MP brought the meeting to a close and thanked all speakers and guests for attending.

Ends.