



## **THE RAIL CONSUMER CONNECTION: NEW FORMATS OF CONSUMER REPRESENTATION IN THE RAIL INDUSTRY**

The fore-runners of this paper are a conversation with a member of the RPC staff (IS) and the paper ‘Future of Passenger Representation’. (undated 2005). The RPC is changing from a regionalised consumer representative structure with paid representatives to a more centralised model with a 16 strong board overseeing an organisation with 3 principal functional areas – research and communications; complaints and passenger links – working in offices in London and Manchester. All the current regional offices will be closed. The organisation is a GB organisation although the devolved administrations are thinking of setting up their transport representative bodies to work alongside RPC as the GB body.

The National Consumer Council has described consumer representation in the following terms:

“In this paper we use the term ‘involvement’ to describe ‘consultation’, ‘participation’ and ‘representation’ as a continuum that forms the spectrum of involvement. Involving consumers can take many forms and an effective strategy will make use of a range of methods of involvement.

Gathering information on consumers’ views and experiences is a vital resource for policy-makers and service providers, and as an aid for the development of a consumer involvement strategy. But information gathering alone is not involvement. It does not usually offer a dialogue with consumers or provide consumers with direct means to participate in policy-making processes.”

In their choice of organisation to represent rail consumers in future, the RPC has set up what we could call a ‘consumer leadership’ information gathering model along the lines of research-based and policy development organisations like the National Consumer Council and

Consumers' Association. The research-based policy making function has been taken into the centre and a developed regional/national structure with local chairpersons and committees has been dismantled. A centralised complaint handling structure will be established out of London. The board will plan a programme of work based on what the document calls "a pragmatic view on what can be achieved over and above complaints handling and reactive work".

The new organisation is strongly placed to develop a coherent set of research-based policies that can be effectively deployed in making a case to a central source of funds, power and action. The structure is essentially an information gathering network servicing the central decision making body. The structure resembles a network that a newsgathering operation might put in place with a mix of employed and freelance staff (albeit in the RPC model, the freelancers do not get paid).

The RPC document states that "The new organisational structure will be franchise- and Network Rail route-focused." Does the 'information network' form that service that function?

### **Pearls without the Nitty Gritty**

The RPC wants the best of both worlds – the credibility of a centralised policy making organisation backed by the conventional methodologies of well-funded and well-done research focussed on a selected range of issues as well as the credibility that comes from being seen as the authentic voice of the user down at the grass roots. But how to get the pearls of consumer insights without getting sucked into the nitty gritty, untidy world of the local, the disorganised and generally difficult consumer?

### **Passenger Link Managers and their Role**

The new role of Passenger Link manager liaising with both TOC and users in both champion and advocate mode is the hinge/lynchpin of this organisation and will be there for everyone.

The Passenger Link Managers (PLMs) are key posts and the document describes them as 21<sup>st</sup> century workers with no fixed abode, constantly on the move, courtesy of their comms technology. They will be in touch with the TOCs and the two main sorts (the document calls them 'routes') of customer involvement – champions and advocates. In addition, they will be

media spokespersons and be involved with TOC stakeholder boards. This new way of working is described as taking passenger representation into a new era.

The PLMs will certainly be RPC representatives. In addition, the information flow will not be wholly one way since they will be tasked with reporting back on their encounters as they buzz about their patches.

Their direct relationships with passengers are more difficult to define. The passenger relationships will be with ad-hoc interest groups and assorted enthusiasts. They will be occasional and to a degree opportunistic. A possible exception to this will come with the administrative processes that come with the establishment of standing consumer panels as a consumer research resource. If consumer representatives are to be actively recruited, then the basis for that recruitment must be methodologically sound – one person per station is for example not proportional to numbers using the station or the relative complexity of the issues at that location.

The consumer voices may be multiplied – they will however also be weaker. The individual or sectional voices if they are voiced, heard and collected will be subsumed in the official view emanating from the centre.

While there is an enthusiasm for and an interest in the railways, this can develop in some circumstances and with some people into obsession. This is not a basis for a user network in touch with some generalised idea of the ‘user experience’. The initial incentive is emotional and thereafter that feeling must be fed by association with like-minded colleagues and some wins or signs of influence. To achieve these goals, they must be supported and encouraged by a paid professional staff available to them when they are needed. They need a hand and without it, they despair and die.

Our experience with building capacity at the local level to carry out the role of consumer representation is that it needs sustained investment. The ad-hoc and opportunistic dip into consumer opinion produces little and the feedback is poor. The builder of a representative network must look beyond those who present themselves to seek others less committed to a personal agenda or hobbyist’s obsession. In doing so, they incur responsibilities to represent and succour those whose time and energy they have recruited. In doing so, they may well tap into opinion that is less predictable and by definition less easy to manage. They must nonetheless encourage it and represent it.

It will be a rare full time or contract PLM who puts his/her rewards and security at risk to become the champion of the wild-eyed and noisy consumer interest that challenges not just the practice of the rail industry but the established policies of the 'official' rail representative body. Just as rare, will be the manager who invests time, risks embarrassment as the silence and the empty rooms that are so often the lot of those who call meetings in public. They will need to harness and deal creatively with anger and frustration – not least their own caught as they will be between the expectations of their own management, the passengers and the TOCs.

I do not know where these paragons are to be found. Indeed I do not know if they exist. It certainly adds up to more than a recycled and re-trained regional secretary.

There are real questions of accountability and interest for both PL Directors and Managers. The structure appendix was not attached to the version of the paper I saw. There is a prima facie need for some board governance development work to recognise the potential for conflicts of interest and challenges to independence.

The RPC needs a set of values, principles and yardsticks that underpin in our experience the successful consumer participative structures and philosophies.

1. Respect and Recognition for Consumers and Passengers
2. Penalty-free Participation – give volunteers the Resources to help them do their job.
3. Understanding of Role – clarity and equity
4. Means of sharing individual experiences with others in the same boat
5. Time to consult and develop views
6. Help in defining and addressing issues of immediate relevance with emotional impact
7. Victories and as part of that, opponents over whom victory is not only sweet but from time to time possible.

The managers who work with consumer/ user representatives need a job description as well as an attitudinal and competency framework that ensures:

1. Respect and recognition from colleagues for the diversity of views the PLM prompts from users not for an ability to enforce unanimity upon users whether individuals or groups.
2. The basis for any regular management appraisal will reflect the reality of this job, understand how both risk and success can differ according to the hat being worn/ role being played

3. Ability to provide passenger/ consumer representatives with access to resource and the support of the statutory consumer representative system
4. They must help foster the initial enthusiasm that led to the user's decision to stand up and be counted by all means possible
5. They must be seen to be even-handed as between TOC and the consumer interest even when the latter is unruly and irrational and obsessive and impolite/ aggressive.
6. Their personal skills must be of the first order with an outstanding ability to manage time and set priorities.
7. They must also be comfortable with relationships that can be adversarial; manage those relationships in a non-judgemental manner and provoke and stimulate debate
8. They must be prepared to work irregular hours and be prepared to make themselves available outside normal working hours.

What are these paragons to be paid?

## Conclusion

### Risks – Users

These proposals do not offer the user interests enough. They are not being paid and they are not being supported. Any contribution will disappear into the central RPC.

The prediction is that the local representational structure is offered as a gesture to traditional thinking about the importance of the grass roots and that it will wither on the vine. This will happen first with the advocacy network whose purpose and standing are very unclear. The champions or at least a selection may survive because they represent a cost-effective resource for the research department – easily accessed for instant surveys and easily maintained to sustain numbers and representativeness.

Researching consumer opinion is not the same as consulting or representation.

### Risks – Managers

If the regional secretaries under the previous dispensation found too much of their time was taken up by a single committee with a limited number of members then how will their successors get on when faced with the need to cover a much wider waterfront from commuter groups to disabled travellers pressure groups? How will they access and package these views

in a way that does justice to the views and persuades the TOC to action or RPC to take up the case for change?

How will they be appraised and to whom are they accountable?

## **Risks – RPC**

If the RPC seeks the rewards that come from being seen as being the best because most authoritative source of consumer opinion on the railway, then it must be on guard for others competing for that role. Leaving such a lot of space on the ground will encourage others be they local or national administrations to fill in the gap with their own networks. These rivals too will seek access to central government and Network Rail.

Split site management may turn out to be more expensive than hoped and dysfunctional. Why not have both PL Directors and all PLMs run out of one office in Manchester? If not then mysteriously, the London job will be seen to be more important than the Manchester one – closer to power, more visible, better paid (London weighting).

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