

Call for passengers to be given vote on who runs their trains

Passengers should be given a vote on whether train operators should continue running services, the head of the consumer watchdog has said.



Commuters should be given vote on train franchises, according to passenger watchdog Photo: Christopher Pledger

By David Millward, Transport Editor

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Anthony Smith, chief executive of Passenger Focus, has called for a radical overhaul of how franchises are awarded.

His most eye-catching initiative would see passengers being given a vote on whether a company should retain its franchise when it comes up for renewal.

This would raise the possibility of poor performing operators being sacked by their long-suffering passengers, some of whom pay more than £5,000 for an annual season ticket.

Mr Smith's call comes at a time when the Government is considering overhauling the franchising system.

Currently potential franchisees are primarily judged on how much money they will pay to the Treasury for running profitable lines or how much subsidy they will receive for loss-making routes

as well as the service improvements they promise.

Although Passenger Focus is invited to submit its views during the franchising process, it is unclear how much weight they carry.

During the ill-fated West Coast Main Line franchise fiasco, the contract was awarded to First Group, which scored far worse in consumer surveys than Virgin, the company it would have ousted had the decision not been scrapped.

“The first priority for passengers is to keep the trains running and to deliver promised improvements in the short and medium term,” Mr Smith said.

“However, there does need to be some fresh thinking over the longer term about how to give weight to the passenger voice when making decisions on who will run their train services.

“A vote on franchise extensions is one radical option for doing this.”

This could be done by asking participants in the massive National Passenger Survey, to say whether individual franchises should be renewed.

Simon Burns, the rail minister, said train operators were expected to invest in their services if satisfaction dropped.

“In his review of rail franchising Richard Brown recommended that even more should be done to take the quality of services into account when awarding franchises,” he added.

“We are now looking at how this might be best reflected in our future franchising programme, which we will announce in the spring.”

A spokesman for the Association of Train Operating Companies (ATOC) added: “Passenger satisfaction is a key consideration over the life of a franchise because operators have a long-term commitment to attracting more travellers.”

Maria Eagle, Labour's transport spokesman, said communities felt they had little say in the services they received.

“The Government should devolve responsibility for local and regional rail services to partnerships of accountable transport authorities.”