

## **Southeastern Franchise Consultation Response**

I am a disabled person who has spent the majority of my life reliant on public transport to get to work and around generally. I have travelled extensively by train all over the United Kingdom and have lived in London for the last 4 years. The consultation paper makes interesting reading but is too verbose and lacks important content and emphasis, especially in relation to bringing stations and staff up to a decent standard. I offer this response in the spirit of openness and seeking to improve the quality of the franchise and the customers' experience of journeys.

### **Point 1: Southeastern Railway company**

Southeastern is, in my considered opinion and experience of daily commuting, totally unfit to run any rail franchise in this country. Here are some of Southeastern's failings: Many stations remain completely inaccessible to disabled people; ticket offices fail to adhere to published opening hours; station facilities are often shut to customers yet staff are seen using them; many staff are unwilling to provide even a basic level of assistance to customers; customer information regarding lateness and disruption is rarely timely or accurate; trains are allowed to run when they are clearly poorly maintained and should be repaired; trains are cancelled because of failure which is almost certainly due to poor maintenance; Southeastern's customer service is abysmal.

I could go on at length for each of these failings. Southeastern's favourite tactic of blaming the third rail system used on much of the South East rail network is a total abrogation of responsibility. Their Managing Director, Charles Horton, was the Finance Director of Connex. I am sure you will recall that Connex were stripped of their franchise for multiple failings. Southeastern knew what they were getting involved with so have no reason for blaming the third rail system other than to try and shift focus away from their bad management.

The last two snowfalls highlighted Southeastern's incompetence in many of these areas, especially in getting information out to customers. Southern Railways were able to get far more services running on their lines which also use the third rail system. Social networking sites, in particular Twitter, provided vastly superior and much quicker information. Indeed, during the media coverage of these conditions, Charles Horton was conspicuous by his absence, hiding behind PR drones. Southeastern's preparations for last winter were laughable and lacking in any realistic assessment of customers' needs. The tales of passengers being locked in trains for hours are yet more evidence of Southeastern's unsuitability to hold the franchise.

The recent discussion about statistics and the perception that Southeastern fiddled the statistics to avoid paying out to customers is another demonstration of the contempt they hold for their customers.

Southeastern must not be allowed a renewal of the Southeastern Franchise. There is a track record of incompetence, failure, ambivalence and even contempt towards customers. I believe that London Metro train services must be bought under the remit of Transport for London, who are accountable to the London Assembly. Southeastern are not so there is very little accountability to the people they serve who live and work in and around London.

London Overground has a far better punctuality record than Southeastern yet still use the third rail system. Poor maintenance and bad management can be the only explanations for this huge disparity in performance statistics.

## **Point 2: Customer Focus**

The consultation document makes many mentions of business focus but precious few of customer focus. Public transport is a service industry, providing sufficient capacity and timely services for those who live and work in the capital to get to and from work safely, with as little overcrowding as possible.

Southeastern have consistently failed to show any real customer focus in their attitude and service provision. The regular tales of overcrowding, poor reliability, poor communication and bad staff attitude from Southeastern commuters are a litany of Southeastern's failures.

Given that Train Operating Companies get assistance from the government and make large profits (ostensibly from charging obscenely for season tickets) I would argue that the priority here should be providing excellent services to customers, with shareholder dividends being a fortunate sideline if the Train Operating Company gets things right.

How much government money has been paid to Southeastern executives who fail in their duties of care and service to customers? Get the customer focus better and you will help to stop the drain from the capital of people who have had enough of poor service from Southeastern. Customer focus should be at the heart of what Train Operating Companies do. Right now it clearly is not.

## **Point 3: Disabled Provision**

There is a marked lack of emphasis of disabled provision mentioned in the consultation document. A considerable number of stations, if not the vast majority in the Southeastern area are not disabled friendly. The same can be said of many of the staff at those stations. Compare this with my native West Midlands area where the vast majority of stations have some kind of disabled provision unless the physical geography of the station area (Lichfield Trent Valley being the sole example I know of) prevents this. London and the South East is way behind Birmingham when it comes to disabled provision. This fact alone should shame all those responsible for public transport provision and administration in London. This needs to be addressed and quickly.

Despite holding the Paralympic games, many areas of London are still remarkably backward in its approach to assisting disabled customers. I have witnessed Southeastern staff at Victoria Station ignoring disabled customers approaching the disabled gates, preferring to lark about and chat with their colleagues. A number of rail and tube staff (Victoria rail and tube, Charing Cross rail, London Bridge rail and tube) resent allowing disabled people through the disabled gates, preferring to try and funnel them through able bodied passenger gates. Another Southeastern member of staff at Victoria snorted at me like a teenager when I insisted on their opening the disabled gate for me. These kinds of attitude and behaviours are totally unacceptable.

The consultation document must and any bid for the Southeastern franchise must include clear, measurable commitments to increase staff training on dealing with disabled customers sensitively.

Disabled provision on trains can and must improve. As must education for commuters, especially those with bicycles who block seats with their bicycles and refuse to move them so people, including disabled people can sit down. It follows that cycle policies must be properly enforced and train managers be instructed to proactively police them. Disabled or not, passengers should not stand because an ignorant person cannot be bothered to put their bike or bag somewhere sensible.

## **Point 4: Performance Management and Accountability**

One reason why Southeastern has been allowed to get away with so much poor performance is that it has no accountability to the London Assembly and that successive governments have not had the

stomach to act to hold Southeastern senior management to account. This must change. Exceptional performance deserves some kind of reward. Adequate performance does not. Unacceptable performance deserves punitive action. Copping out, as Charles Horton so often does in blaming the third rail system comes under unacceptable performance.

There should be clear, challenging targets set for Franchise operators. These should be monitored through a transparent process by an independent body and there should be punitive charges levied when targets are missed. These levies should have no right of appeal and should come straight from the finances of the Franchise holder, not passed on to the passenger.

The Franchise holder must be accountable to the DfT and the major authorities in the areas it serves. Thus the Southeastern franchise holder must be accountable to the London Assembly. There should also be a customer panel, members chosen on merit and run by an independent body and with its own ability to make recommendations to the Assembly.

Rail franchises must not be seen as they are currently, an easy way to screw the customer and the government out of money while getting away with doing the barest minimum to satisfy the terms of the Franchise agreement. The Franchise must be proactively supervised by the DfT so the performance issues the Southeastern commuter faces today never arise again.

#### **Point 5: Cost**

The cost of tickets, in particular season tickets, is a joke. Season tickets are insanely overpriced. A zone 6 season ticket costs around £170 per month. The equivalent ticket in the West Midlands is less than half of that price. The delay repay scheme operated by Southeastern is as bad a joke, repayment when it comes being in the form of vouchers. Season ticket price rises need to be tightly controlled and subjected to the severest examinations.

#### **Conclusion**

Please do not be swayed by any argument that the provision for the Olympic and Paralympic games was a success because of Southeastern's efforts. The real reason for that "success" is that many Southeastern commuters took their holidays then to avoid the congestion the Olympics and Paralympics caused. If Southeastern claim they were able to run more reliable services then you should ask yourselves why this was the case. What were Southeastern able to do with their maintenance schedules that they are unable or unwilling to do during normal times?

It is my considered opinion and experience that Southeastern is the worst Train Operating Company in the United Kingdom and that it has not been stripped of the franchise is an indictment of the weakness of successive governments. I would urge you to consider integrating my suggestions into the Franchise document so that Franchise bidders and customers are clear that customer service is at the heart of the Franchise requirements and must be the primary motivation for bidding.

The UK's rail services are an overpriced joke. My suggestions, if integrated into the final Franchise document, will start going some way towards righting that.

Yours sincerely

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