

# COMMENT : SLIMMED-DOWN WATCHDO

**The regional Rail Passengers Committees are being wound up this month. From 24 July they will hand over to.... well, to whom? A centralised successor organisation, announced in the Railways Act, is not yet up and running. So who is representing passengers' interests, asks Paul Clifton**

**S**it in a regional Rail Passengers Committee meeting, and you quickly understand why they are being abolished.

The people who attend are very well-meaning, very well-informed – and very parochial. Pleasant, mostly older gentlemen in tweed jackets, with time to spare, gossiping merrily about the quality of the biscuits and instant coffee. They are deeply concerned about the state of the steps on the footbridge of their local station, and less well informed about the financial structures that will dictate the next round of passenger franchising. Their grasp of the bigger picture is not always impressive.

'I last came to one of these five years ago,' comments South West Trains chairman Graham Eccles, who turned up at the last-ever Southern RPC meeting in June. 'And the faces are all familiar. Not much has changed. So I think in re-organising the RPCs, Alistair Darling has taken a step in the right direction.'

Yet he still came, as did the managing directors of both Southern and South Eastern Trains. Around them sat people whose knowledge of the local network and its features and foibles exceeded that of most 'anoraks'. And this bank of expertise is to be lost almost entirely in the re-vamped Rail Passengers Council.

The Railways Act 2005 is creating a single centralised organisation with offices in London and Manchester. The regional network will be

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replaced by two passenger link directors and 12 passenger link managers. Each will cover one or more train operators, or be linked to franchise regions. For example, we might see one passenger link manager covering Kent, Thameslink and Southern, but such specific areas have yet to be defined.

Christopher Irwin, chair of the Western RPC, is not impressed.

'We have 16 committee members in the South West, and five staff. In South Wales there are 15 committee members with about the same staffing as us. All of us will be replaced by one solitary passenger link manager.'

The abilities of the regional committees vary widely. Some, such as the Western, have produced big-picture reports assessing how regional railways fit into wider policies on land-use planning and national housing provision. Others have concentrated more on inspecting stations or recording the performance on specific train journeys.

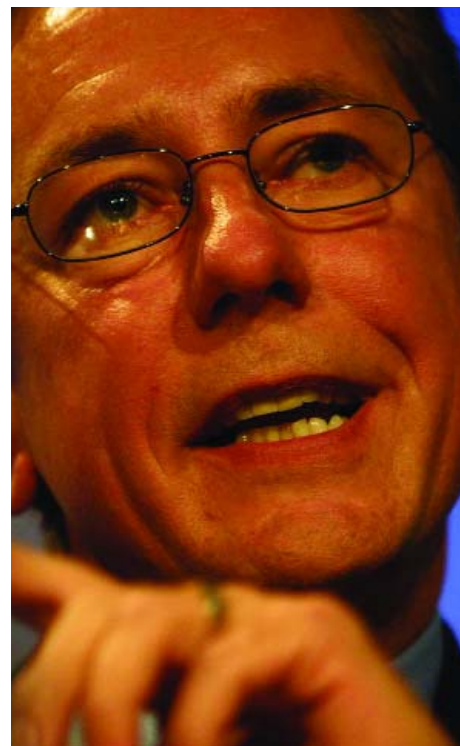
'Technically we have been autonomous bodies,' explains Irwin. 'So there was no real obligation on us to do things in the same way as each other.'

There has been a great deal of discontent among the regional committees at the perceived loss of local representation. That's inevitable with so many job losses, as the number of employees nationally falls from 73 to 39.

The new managers will simply not have the time to know their routes as intimately as the part-time committee members. The knowledge base will be smaller.

'Rail is a local thing,' says Tim Nicholson, introducing his final public meeting as chairman of the Southern RPC. 'For most passengers, it is not about broad national policies. It is about our daily experience on one route. It is about something of fundamental importance to our daily lives.'

But the patchy way that is tackled by the committees is part of the reason for restructuring. The Department for Transport was keen to underline that the changes were



**Architect of change: former Rail Passengers Council chairman Stewart Francis was responsible for killing off the network of local committees.**

proposed not by them, but by Stewart Francis, who has recently stepped down as chairman of the Rail Passengers Council.

'It is about accountability and value for money,' explains an RPC spokeswoman. 'The old structure was not necessarily the best way to ensure passengers' views were put forward. Daytime meetings on weekdays are only going to attract a certain sort of people.'

It's certainly true that regional committees are largely made up of older off-peak travellers who travel by rail because they choose to, with few current commuters involved.

'The quality of regional representation has often come down to the personalities involved and their individual relationships with train operators,' adds the RPC spokeswoman.

'Also, we are one of the few rail organisations with a nationwide remit, so a centralised structure is more appropriate. We'll be more of a consumer-led organisation, with less anecdotal, more focused research.'

But when will all this happen? The regional committees disband later this month, on 24 July. But Tim Nicholson complains: 'I cannot find anyone to hand over to.'

The new board of the centralised RPC was only decided in June. And as the regional committees

# G FACES TOUGH CHALLENGES

were wound down, the new passenger link managers had still not been recruited.

A substantial hiatus in passenger representation seems inevitable, coinciding in the South with the final bidding for the Integrated Kent Franchise and in the West Country with the public consultation period for Greater Western.

'Passenger link managers will have to find other ways to supply the RPC with grass roots experience and knowledge,' says Tim Nicholson. 'This could be a cause for real concern. I have said to the train operating companies that their stakeholder panels could become far more important in future.'

To which the RPC spokeswoman replies: 'We will probably develop a computer-based e-forum, perhaps in the style of YouGov.' But not in the immediate future.

No train operator seems particularly upset by the demise of the regional committees. The members would no doubt argue that's because

they were a thorn in management sides, holding executives to account. In truth, train operators saw the local RPCs as a sometimes-useful sounding board, but little more.

The co-ordinating Rail Passengers Council in London was a bigger player. Decision-makers sought its guidance. But its successor organisation will be without the skills of the very highly-regarded Stewart Francis, who resigned in May due to ill health. It will aim to be much more effective at lobbying the key people at Network Rail, Atoc and in government. It will try to be more professional, and it will have the budget to do so.

The 12 new board members of the Rail Passengers Council were announced last month. Some have rail experience; others come from outside the transport industry.

They include David Burton, who used to run the West Anglia Great Northern franchise, three chairmen of the old regional rail passengers committees and two members of the British

Transport Police Authority. A recruitment campaign to find a replacement for Stewart Francis as chairman of the new RPC is under way.

The old organisation cost £6m a year to run. The new one will have £5m, but without the overheads of the regional bureaucracies. That should leave plenty of cash to spend on finding new ways of representing the interests of passengers.

'It's a scandalous thing that Stewart [Francis] has done,' complained one of the more effective regional chairmen stepping down this month. 'It's going to leave an enormous gap. One local rep cannot do the work of so many people across such a wide area, and they cannot know what it is like to travel on every line and to every station at different times of the day and night.'

*Paul Clifton is transport correspondent for BBC South and CILT Transport Journalist of the Year.*



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