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## Secretariat memorandum

Agenda item 9  
CA003

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### Casework Review

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#### 1 Purpose of report

- 1.1. To summarise the progress to date in reviewing the way that London TravelWatch deals with its casework and make recommendations for change, which are set out in section 8 of this report.

#### 2 Background

- 2.1. A core statutory function of the organisation is to consider complaints brought to it on appeal by members of the public when they have been dissatisfied with the response given by transport operators to their original complaint. This aspect of the organisation's work is also one to which its sponsors, the London Assembly, attribute great importance and against which specific targets have been agreed as part of the process of the annual process of agreeing the business plan and budget.
- 2.2. Unfortunately London TravelWatch's performance in complaints handling has regularly been below the targets it has set. This has been a source of great dissatisfaction and over the years various attempts have been made to address the problems, particularly through requesting additional reports or amending aspects of complaint handling, but without making much impact on overall performance. It is not unlikely that some of our attempts to 'blitz' performance by diverting staff resources from elsewhere on an ad hoc basis,

or by bolting new procedures or reporting requirements onto existing procedures, may sometimes have exacerbated the problems.

- 2.3. One of the first priorities the Board gave to the Chief Executive when she took up post in April 2008 was to review how casework was handled and to make recommendations as to how performance could be improved. However, after preliminary investigations her recommendation was that it would be inappropriate to begin any fundamental review of casework handling until the staffing structure of the whole organisation had been reviewed.
- 2.4. Although the review of casework was deferred, nevertheless over the past year a series of incremental changes have been introduced which have already had a positive impact on performance.
- 2.5. The review can be split into three phases according to the focus of activity although these phases are not discrete but overlap:
  - Phase 1: June 2008 to March 2009 – initial investigation into case handling, agree and implement staffing restructure, incremental changes to ways of working.
  - Phase 2: February 2009 to April 2009 – detailed review of casework started, including policies and procedures, workloads, staffing and reporting arrangements.
  - Phase 3: April 2009 to October 2009 - implement revised procedures, procure and install new software, review and implement quality improvement measures.

### **3 Changes to casework practice between June 2008 and March 2009**

- 3.1. The Chief Executive's review of the organisation found that many of the problems affecting performance were structural and she concluded that trying to address these in isolation without reviewing the fundamental structure of the organisation would be counter-productive and unlikely to lead to sustainable improvement. Problems identified included job specifications apparently designed to meet the needs of individuals rather than the organisation, and individual staff having a range of functionally unrelated responsibilities, or reporting to different managers. These blurred lines of accountability led to some posts having responsibility for too many areas of work, and meant it was very difficult to identify where responsibility lay for performance. Staff did not always feel empowered to take decisions leading to a tendency to delegate upwards and some staff in lower graded posts were at times underemployed whilst they waited for work.
- 3.2. The restructure was designed to refocus jobs around core business functions and to better identify accountability making it easier to monitor performance. The Board agreed the restructure in October and it was implemented between November and January.

3.3. So far as the Casework Team were concerned the restructure meant:

- A shift from individual to generic job descriptions for caseworkers
- Reviewing job descriptions to remove duplication and more clearly identify the respective roles of the Casework Manager and the Director, Public Liaison.
- Clarifying that it is the role of the Casework Manager to co-ordinate and distribute work, performance manage the casework team, and prepare casework papers and reports for the Consumer Affairs Committee.
- Clarifying that the Director is expected to play a much more strategic role in respect of casework, stepping back from the day to day work unless asked to give guidance in respect of the more intractable or complex cases, intervening with operators when necessary, ensuring that appropriate support and technical systems are in place, and making sure that policy implications arising from casework are properly captured and taken forward.
- Also confirming that the Director's role is enhanced in relation to other areas previously covered by the Deputy Chief Executive, particularly in respect of consumer issues and passenger charters.
- Rearranging the office so that the two Casework Team Support Officers sit together at the reception desk (previously one sat with the Caseworkers) as well as establishing cover arrangements for lunchtime so that caseworkers need only to cover reception duties on an exceptional basis. Separating this function also means that caseworkers are not distracted by incoming telephone calls that do not relate to appeals casework.
- Realigning desks so that the four Caseworkers sit together with their manager adjacent in order to facilitate and reinforce team working.
- Responsibility for organising complaints handling audits and for analysing feedback forms has been moved from the Research and Development team to the Casework Team to ensure that functional responsibilities are not diluted through being spread across different teams.
- Changing the role of the former Webmaster & IT Systems Officer to include responsibility for assisting the Casework Manager and Director with developing and producing monitoring reports.

3.3.1. Feedback from the Casework Team has been that these changes have already had a positive impact on their working arrangements. Having clearer lines of responsibility for particular functions meant it was easier to identify administrative work that could be covered by agency staff in periods of extended absence, and being seated beside staff engaged in similar work

makes it much easier to induct and supervise temporary staff. This meant that we were able to successfully handle approximately eight hundred additional initial enquiries received in response to the First Capital Connect proposal to reduce ticket office opening hours without significantly impacting on other work.

- 3.3.2. Other changes we have made include improved liaison with the Chair of the (then) Casework Committee outside of meetings which cut down the number of cases referred to the Committee for decision and helped to reduce the time taken to close complex cases.
- 3.3.3. Although the performance figures as at the end of 2008-09 are not yet available the indications are that these have already led to improvements.

#### **4 Main casework review**

- 4.1. In reviewing the different aspects of casework to date, priority has been given to those areas most likely to contribute to improved performance whilst those which will improve the quality of the work done will be addressed in phase three of the review.

The methods used to inform the review included:

- Interviews with various members of the Casework Committee
- Written suggestions made by both staff and members
- Meetings with the casework team to discuss in detail every step of the process of handling casework and ways this might be improved.
- Visit to Passenger Focus' complaints handling team to compare practice
- Analysis of performance and staffing data
- Informal analysis of non-casework activity handled by the team

- 4.1.1. The findings and key recommendations arising from this part of the review can be grouped under four main headings which are discussed below: capacity and resourcing; policies and procedures; casework monitoring software; and committee reporting.

#### 4.2. Capacity and resourcing

- 4.2.1. Unsurprisingly, analysis shows there is a clear correlation between the volume of incoming work, staffing levels and performance. The vulnerability to periods of prolonged staff absence or peaks of work has been emphasised regularly. Records confirm that staffing levels were higher in previous years at a time when the organisation seemed to handle fewer appeals; experience also suggests that complainants are more demanding than they have been in the past. The organisation has previously judged that our staffing levels should be sufficient to handle routine levels of work. However it must be emphasised that we do not have spare resources available to cope with sudden increases in workload or prolonged absences, therefore the organisation must have ways of handling peaks in demand or periods of extensive absence through bringing in additional resources.

There are a variety of ways in which this could be done and members are requested to agree in principle that ensuring that adequate resources are available to deal with casework is an organisational priority, and that flexibility is needed to ensure we meet performance targets.

- 4.2.2. It is anticipated that once the improvements are fully in place the team will be better able to handle slightly higher volumes of work due to efficiency gains arising both from amendments to working practices and through better information support systems. It is also anticipated over time that we will be able to further develop capacity within the organisation to provide better support for the caseworkers when they are particularly busy.
  - 4.2.3. It is also clear that the team handle a lot of work that is not related to casework activity, and some of which should be unnecessary. Through the Casework Team Support Officers, staff provide a reception, switchboard and meeting support service for the whole organisation, functions that sit quite comfortably with their other work but something that needs to be acknowledged when considering resources.
  - 4.2.4. It is clear that either because passengers do not understand our role, or prefer to contact a watchdog rather than the operator, that we receive a high volume of telephone enquiries that come to us rather than a more appropriate source. In particular, significant numbers of bus passengers telephone us direct with enquiries or complaints rather than contacting TfL because our telephone number is clearly visible on every bus. We recognise that some passengers choose to contact us first, but more usually it is because it is cheaper to call us rather than calling the TfL 0845 number from a mobile phone. Not only does this result in unnecessary work for us, it is also misleading for passengers. It is suggested that TfL are asked to remove our telephone number from the contact details given in their publicity, only passing this on when they refer complainants to us on appeal.
  - 4.2.5. We will also be asking all service providers to include an additional sentence in their standard correspondence when they refer passengers who have been unhappy with their response, asking them to send copies of all correspondence at the time they do this. This will not only save us having to ask for this it will also help passengers to receive a faster service.
  - 4.2.6. We consider that there is potential benefit in improving the FAQs (frequently asked questions) on our website. This would enable passengers to 'self serve' more and ensure that passengers are less likely to come to London TravelWatch with routine enquiries.
- 4.3. Policies and procedures
- 4.3.1. It has long been our policy not just to refer appeals to operators but to set out clearly why we think the passenger has a case for appeal and what we expect in response. This policy was adopted because experience showed that the time invested in doing this led to better outcomes for passengers as well as helping to demonstrate to the operators what are our expectations on behalf of passengers. When reviewing what passengers tell us we also

identify whether there are aspects of the service given about which the passenger have legitimate cause for complaint other than the areas about which they express dissatisfaction. This approach is more time consuming than merely passing on queries as they come to us but one which we think it is important to preserve.

4.3.2. However there is another aspect of our traditional approach which we see no merit in retaining. This is our practice of referring cases which are not straightforward to members for decision rather than resolving these at officer level. Not only is it time consuming preparing large volumes of papers for committee, it has also added to delays of up to two months in progressing these cases. Although we have now managed to speed this process up through Chair's action it seems much more appropriate that staff are empowered to make more decisions about non-routine casework. However any policy implications arising from casework will be detailed and reported to committee to agree any action that should be pursued in respect of them.

4.3.3. It is proposed that, with immediate effect, responsibility for agreeing action in respect of casework appeals should be delegated to the Secretariat.

4.3.4. In addition to these two policy areas there are many amendments we propose to make to our day to day procedures which will help to improve our ways of working, the majority of which emerged as a result of the detailed discussions with the casework team themselves. These are in the process of being documented and will be implemented during May. The Chair of the Consumer Affairs Committee will be kept briefed on progress.

#### 4.4. Casework monitoring software

4.4.1. The system we use currently for recording and monitoring our casework was purchased in October 2000 and has been in use since February 2001. Although we have upgraded the system twice since then, what we are using is now very outdated.

4.4.2. It is very cumbersome to use, for example it is not entirely compatible with Word, is difficult to amend, does not assist the Caseworkers in prioritising their work, and the production of reports is hindered by how information is recorded and is extremely time consuming to do.

4.4.3. We have now passed the point where it is cost effective to have any more amendments made to the current system and it is intended that we start the process of procuring new software immediately.

4.4.4. The Director, Public Liaison has done some preliminary research into the range of systems available that might be suitable for our needs and which have been recommended by organisations known to us.

4.4.5. Although we have a fairly clear idea of what we want from a new system we propose to appoint a specialist consultant to write the technical specification

for us so we can be sure that all necessary aspects are properly covered. We will then invite four companies to bid against this specification.

4.4.6. In comparing bids we will take into account factors such as ownership of data, the cost of future maintenance and the length of contract. Obviously we would be keen to choose a new supplier who can make arrangements to transfer our existing data onto a new system as quickly as possible, however we think it is preferable to wait a little longer, if necessary, to get the best system for our needs.

4.4.7. We will ensure the Chair of the Consumer Affairs Committee is involved in the decision to award the contract and we are pleased that both our existing IT support provider and Passenger Focus' Passenger Advice Team Manager have offered to give us objective advice if required.

#### 4.5. Committee reporting

4.5.1. It is our current practice to report to committee on our performance against a range of performance targets every six months and to give a shorter report at every meeting (i.e. every two months) summarising the volume of casework being handled by the team.

4.5.2. It is not proposed that we make any changes to the performance information we report as this reflects what has been agreed as part of our business plan. Keeping this the same will also enable us to better monitor improvements in performance as a result of the changes we are making to practices and procedures.

4.5.3. However we do propose to present this information to members in a slightly different format so it is easier to extract key information and identify particular areas where performance is significantly better or worse than anticipated. This new style of report will be developed in consultation with the Chair of the Consumer Affairs Committee before the July meeting papers are prepared.

4.5.4. We also propose to adopt the practice of regular informal reporting by email on cases recently closed where we have been able to achieve a good outcome for the complainant. This will help members to develop a wider understanding of our successes.

## 5 Further Work

5.1. We recognise that it is important to add value to the complaints process. If as a result of taking up complaints passengers remain dissatisfied, we could be seen to have failed. It is therefore important that our casework reflects the highest quality standards and those caseworkers are well trained to enable them to promote best practice in customer service and to ensure that operators work within industry guidelines and correctly interpret their legal requirements.

- 5.2. We therefore want to improve staff training, review the standard of correspondence, update standard letters, compare ways of working with other similar organisations to identify best practice, and participate in 'quality circles' and benchmark performance against others to maintain up to date awareness of ongoing best practice. Further work on this will be carried out over the next few months and reported back to the Committee in the autumn.

## **6 Equalities and inclusion implications**

- 6.1. It is a business plan priority to build a profile of complainants to London TravelWatch and develop a strategy to broaden awareness of our work amongst sections of the community who are under represented in our casework. To do this we will not only review the information we get about complainants who complete our feedback questionnaires, we will seek similar information from operators to consider best how we can target groups who may not be aware of our existence.

## **7 Legal powers and financial implications**

- 7.1. Section 248 of the Greater London Authority Act 1999 places upon London TravelWatch (as the London Transport Users Committee) a duty to consider – and, where it appears to it to be desirable, to make representations with respect to – any matter affecting the services and facilities provided by Transport for London which relate to transport (other than freight) and which have been the subject of representations made to it by or on behalf of users of those services and facilities. Section 252A of the same Act (as amended by Schedule 6 of the Railways Act 2005) places a similar duty upon it in respect of representations received from users or potential users of railway passenger services provided wholly or partly within the London railway area.
- 7.2. There are no financial implications for London TravelWatch arising from the contents of this report other than those for which budgetary provision has already been made.

## **8 Conclusions**

- 8.1. The actions taken to date as a result of the review of casework handling have already led to improvements in the way we work that should be reflected in the next performance monitoring statistics. The recommendations set out below will also lead to further efficiency gains.
- 8.2. In addition the changes proposed will enable the Consumer Affairs Committee to take a more strategic approach to its work and ensure that the policy implications arising from our casework are properly discussed so that appropriate action can be taken for the wider benefit of passengers.



## **9 Recommendations**

The committee is asked to:

- 9.1. Note the changes already put in place to improve performance as set out in section 3 of this report.
- 9.2. Note the observations made in paragraph 4.2.1 of this report about resourcing and the need to ensure that adequate resources can be made available when necessary to meet the demands of a sudden increase in workload or extended staff absence.
- 9.3. Agree that we should ask TfL to remove our telephone number from all publicity posters as proposed in paragraph 4.2.4.
- 9.4. Note other action we propose to take to ensure we do not receive unnecessary work, and that passengers receive a better service, as set out in paragraphs 4.2.5 and 4.2.6
- 9.5. Agree that, with immediate effect, responsibility for agreeing action in respect of all casework appeals should be delegated to the Secretariat as proposed in paragraph 4.3.3
- 9.6. Note that a large number of individual changes are being made to the way that casework is progressed within the organisation, as discussed in section 4.3.4 which will result in further efficiency gains.
- 9.7. Note the proposed process for procuring new computer software as set out in section 4.4 of this report and to agree that the Director, Public Liaison should proceed as proposed therein.
- 9.8. Note the proposals to improve the way that monitoring information is presented to Committee as set out in section 4.5.