
Secretariat memorandum

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CAC028

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Ofcom consultation on use of non-geographic phone numbers

1 Purpose of report

- 1.1. To consider Ofcom's consultation on the use of non-geographic phone numbers and agree London TravelWatch's response.

2 Information

- 2.1. Transport for London is in the process of enhancing the technology that it uses to handle telephone calls. Part of this process involves the streamlining of customer contact numbers so that customers can resolve more of their queries by calling a single number rather than having to choose from a range of different numbers, as was previously the case.
- 2.2. This process is well underway and many queries to TfL are now directed to one of its 0843/5 numbers. This move is largely welcomed as it has the potential for interaction with TfL to be simpler and less confusing. The London Assembly's recent report on Transport for London's Customer Service, to which London TravelWatch contributed, also welcomed this change and called for even greater simplification of TfL's customer contact systems.
- 2.3. 0843 and 0845 numbers are designated by Ofcom as "non geographic" numbers and there are several relevant consequences for consideration as a result of this designation.
- 2.4. Revenue Sharing**
- 2.5. For each call made to an 0845 number TfL receive a small part of the charge made. We have been assured by TfL that as the revenue produced by this is very small it was not a significant factor in the decision to change to these numbers. However, while TravelWatch accepts that a small payment to TfL for information provided can be justified, there is concern that a call to, for example, the Oyster Helpline to make a complaint or seek a refund generates some revenue to TfL.
- 2.6. Charging**
- 2.7. Of greater concern is the cost to customers of using these numbers and the knock-on implications for inclusion.

- 2.8. A geographical, 020 number, of the type used by London TravelWatch, is often included in call packages both for landlines and mobiles, and will often cost nothing to call. The highest charge is likely to be for those using pay as you go mobiles who pay for all calls.
- 2.9. The 0845 number is also included in most BT landline call packages and so costs nothing extra to ring from a BT landline. However it is usually excluded from mobile call packages and will cost, from many mobiles, in the region of 40 pence per minute (exact charge varies according to operator).
- 2.10. The alternative of freephone numbers (0800) offer no advantage as, although free to landlines, they again cost a high rate to mobile users. As they would also represent a charge to TfL there is really nothing to recommend them.

2.11. Social exclusion

- 2.12. The move from an 020 number to an 084 number raises issues of social exclusion as passengers dependent on mobile phones experience the highest charges while being in disproportionately low income households¹. London TravelWatch has previously contacted Ofcom to raise concerns about non-geographic numbers. London TravelWatch also made enquiries in the voluntary sector, through The Helpline Association, to see if some better provision was already available, to find that for Government agencies, it was not.
- 2.13. Ofcom notified us that concerns similar to ours had been expressed by a number of consumer bodies relating to a number of agencies and companies, and that a consultation was under way. The consultation identifies the problem of social exclusion created by use of these numbers across the whole of Government and discusses this in summary form in paragraphs 1.12 and 1.13 (attached). We are now invited to respond to the consultation.

3 Recommendations

- 3.1. The following response is recommended:
- 3.2. We welcome the consultation and outline our particular concern with the impact of the use by TfL of non-geographic numbers.
- 3.3. We recommend the introduction of universal freephone numbers, that is numbers free from all phones. These numbers would have to be tarified at a level to be affordable by the organisations using them. They might be restricted to not for profits and be essentially part of a service obligation just as all operators carry 999 calls without charge.
- 3.4. We recommend that the 0843/5 range become included in call packages and charged on the same basis as geographic numbers to all phone users.
- 3.5. Should these recommendations, or something like them, be accepted and implemented by Ofcom, we could then re-open discussions with TfL.

¹ Ofcom's 2010 Communications Market Report

4 Equalities and inclusion implications

4.1. None – report is for information only.

5 Legal powers

5.1. 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 the Committee to be desirable, to make recommendations with respect to - any matter affecting the functions of the Greater London Authority or Transport for London which relate to transport (other than of freight).

6 Financial implications

6.1. None – report is for information only.