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**Secretariat memorandum**

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Engaging with local user groups, community groups and specific groups of the travelling public

**1 Purpose of report**

- 1.1 To outline and review the ways in which London TravelWatch can exercise influence, gather intelligence and raise its profile amongst members of the travelling public and businesses in London whilst having regard for the limited resources available.

**2 Background**

- 2.1 The 2013-14 business plan contains an objective of 'Pursuing a programme of stakeholder events that increase engagement with transport users and improve London TravelWatch's evidence base, with a particular focus on areas of potential transport disruption and transport exclusion'. The Board now wishes to revisit this objective.
- 2.2 London TravelWatch's public engagement work helps to inform our 'intelligence led' approach based on the experiences of passengers.
- 2.3 We currently engage with local user and community groups in a number of ways which include holding transport users' engagement events, attending local transport user group meetings or contributing to their newsletters and attending ad hoc events organised by other organisations. Such engagement can help increase awareness of the work that we do and adds credibility when we are able to use local expertise to inform our wider work.
- 2.4 We engage with a variety of different user and community groups:
- Local authority transport groups
  - Other local authority groups relating to crime/neighbourhood partnerships
  - Dedicated transport user groups run by volunteers
  - Other community groups with transport interests
  - Other community groups such as residents associations, civic societies
- 2.5 Each of these ways of engaging with the public and working with local user and community groups is examined in more detail below.

### 3 Transport user engagement events

3.1 As part of its stakeholder engagement work over the last few years, London TravelWatch has held a series of successful transport user engagement events inspired by Bus Users UK's successful and long-running 'bus surgeries'. These have provided an opportunity to speak face-to-face with users of transport services and to explain how London TravelWatch could help them. They have helped the organisation learn more about transport users' journey patterns and concerns in different parts of London. The events have also been attended by transport operators and representatives from local transport user groups. We have held events in areas with specific transport issues, for example, our event in Stratford allowed us to understand usage of the transport network in the main host borough for the 2012 Games while our Harrow event gave us an opportunity to discuss changes to the Metropolitan Line timetable which we thought might be controversial. To date events have been held in Stratford, Croydon, Romford, Tooting, Harrow and Lewisham.

3.2 There are a number of benefits of holding these events. Experience has shown that many of these go beyond the initial aims of engagement and many of the 'spin off' benefits listed below are now even more important after the period of change that London TravelWatch has been through and with our focus on smarter working within the organisation.

- The events offer us the chance to talk to passengers face to face about the transport issues that affect them 'on the ground', for example in Harrow we discussed accessibility issues at the station and hospital transport issues relating to North West Middlesex and Central Middlesex hospitals. In Lewisham, issues we discussed included public transport accessibility, the new Southeastern rail franchise and local bus services.
- The surveys we hand out provide an opportunity to engage with transport users while they fill them in. While not statistically significant, the feedback received provides a useful snapshot of passenger opinion in the local area.
- The events offer the opportunity to engage with local MPs, London Assembly members and councillors as well as local transport user groups
- Local authorities have found these events useful and in some cases, they have actively encouraged us to hold events in their boroughs.
- The events give the opportunity for us to engage with users with less access to social media, who still form an important part of our 'constituency'.
- The events provide an opportunity to build contacts/raise awareness amongst individuals which lasts beyond the immediate event. For example, a number of people from Harrow College found out about us at or because of the Harrow event we held and are now following us on Twitter/retweeting our tweets and we are still receiving a number of website referrals from sites based in and around Harrow.
- We can raise awareness of the work that London TravelWatch does by giving out our branded Oyster card holders, promotional bags and pens and money saving tips which signpost people to our website and the information available there.
- Staff have given very positive feedback from the events which enable them to engage with 'real people' and discuss the issues that affect them on the ground. This has proved really useful in reinforcing the organisation's role as a passenger watchdog and ensuring that staff do not get out of touch with passengers.

- The events also give us new insights into passenger behaviour in specific areas. For example, in Tooting, we were surprised by the number of visitors to the area, many of whom were from abroad and were travelling with luggage. In Croydon and Romford, we engaged with a number of wheelchair users who were not aware that they could use buses.

## **4 Engagement with transport user groups**

- 4.1 Transport user groups have been a major positive influence on transport policy for decades and their contribution towards maintaining and improving standards in the transport network has been invaluable especially as most of the effort they put in is almost entirely on a voluntary basis. These groups are often formed in response to threats or perceived threats to levels of service in particular areas.
- 4.2 However, the membership of many traditional user groups is not necessarily representative of the users they aim to represent. Often, these groups are run by retired commuters with little change in personnel. The most active often meet during the day when working users may not always be able to attend. There is also a danger that these groups can become more interested in campaigning on a single issue which is important to them rather than looking at the bigger picture, which London TravelWatch needs to take account of.
- 4.3 There are probably 50 or more voluntary transport user groups in our area plus local authority transport groups of different types in all London boroughs and adjacent county councils, potentially a hundred in total.
- 4.4 In previous years, when we had more staff and a board that was four times the size it is currently, we were able to have a presence at most transport user group meetings (both volunteer-led and local authority facilitated). However, the number of meetings attended has been reduced considerably in recent years as it is no longer feasible to attend every meeting held by these groups.
- 4.5 London TravelWatch officers now employ a much more targeted approach to attending local rail user groups, drawing on the useful intelligence contained in their newsletters and only attending meetings when we can really add value. An example of this approach was when an officer attended a recent Sevenoaks Rail Group users meeting when the implications of rail devolution were discussed. We attended to ensure that the London commuter benefits were properly explained.
- 4.6 We provide groups with advice and technical information where appropriate and have worked successfully with user groups on a number of occasions to secure improvements for passengers. Examples include:
- We worked with the Barking Gospel Oak Users Group to secure improvements for users of the line.
  - We worked with Ealing Public Transport Users Group to secure improvements to the 607 bus route from Uxbridge to Shepherds Bush.
  - We worked with Charlton Rail Users Group to get South Eastern to amend their proposals to reduce services on the West London Line during the Olympics.
- 4.7 Members of local user groups have attended Board meetings and from time to time they have spoken about issues that affect passengers in their local area. We have considered holding events for user groups to attend but have decided against this, instead only organising meetings when we want to engage on a specific topic such

as the public meeting held to discuss the proposed closure of Watford station last year.

- 4.8 Previous experience shows that, whilst the intelligence gathered from such groups is useful, there is a tendency to try and draw London TravelWatch into considerable detail, resulting in the disproportionate use of London TravelWatch officer and member time and giving rise to conflict with groups when their expectations are not met or where London TravelWatch has a different view of the wider passenger interest. Even when we don't attend meetings, we can continue to draw an overview of issues of local concern via the minutes..

## **5 Using social media to engage with transport groups**

- 5.1 The spread of social media now presents an opportunity for like minded people to form groups in response to particular problems and to keep each other updated in real time. This provides organisations like London TravelWatch with an opportunity to reach out to a wider audience which is perhaps more representative, certainly of the issues faced by commuters today. Social media has enabled busy people with no desire to get involved in the 'letter writing' campaigns favoured by many traditional user groups or attending public meetings held at inconvenient times, to discuss issues at their convenience using forums such as East Dulwich Forum: [www.eastdulwichforum.co.uk](http://www.eastdulwichforum.co.uk) or by becoming involved with 'transition towns'.
- 5.2 'Transition (town) movements' are starting to develop across the UK with the aim of promoting an awareness of sustainable living. They work by using social media to connect people but they also hold some traditional meetings. As such, they potentially have a much younger and wider profile of members compared to more traditional user groups. There are over 30 in London ([www.london-transition.org.uk](http://www.london-transition.org.uk)) and one of the areas that they focus on is travel and transport, with some developing specific transport sub forums. The advantage of such groups is that they have a wider vision than transport and so potentially avoid some of the pitfalls of more specialist groups as previously described, which look solely at transport issues.

## **6 Engaging with wider community groups**

- 6.1 From time to time we might want to engage with a particular section of transport users, particularly when opportunities to work with other organisations present themselves. For example, we had a free stall at the London Pensions Fund Authority (LPFA) annual information fair and we will do it again this year.
- 6.2 There may also be opportunities to engage with other community groups and charities such as the walking and cycling charity, Sustrans, and Living Streets, a charity which focuses on pedestrians.

## **7 Engagement with businesses**

- 7.1 With increasing recognition of the relationship between transport and regeneration and economic development, we intend to engage with key business leaders and the groups they represent as we try to influence key decision makers.

- 7.2 Our new office location has brought us in to a different commuter catchment area, with a number of large businesses in and around Royal Mint Court offering an opportunity to raise awareness of the work that we do for passengers amongst commuters by holding a transport engagement event for our neighbours.

## **8 Financial and resources implications**

### *8.1 Staff resources*

Holding our own engagement events requires more resources than attending events or meetings organised by others. However, experience of organising these events has improved our efficiency, so that a lot of the preparatory work can now be done by junior staff. On the day, we need five members of staff, including one Policy Officer, one Casework Officer and preferably the Communications Officer, supported by other staff and supplemented by staff from other agencies when appropriate. These events have proved popular with staff throughout the organisation.

### *8.2 Financial costs*

- 8.2.1 Our engagement events cost an average of £700 as we have bulk purchased surveys and marketing materials to cut costs.
- 8.2.2 All the other engagement activities considered in this report require only staff time and by employing a targeted approach to attending user group meetings, adopting the broad principles for prioritising our incoming work, we will be able to minimise the resource implications.

## **9 Risk implications**

- 9.1 There are risks associated with not engaging directly with user groups or having reduced contact with them. There is also a risk that by not arranging our own engagement events the organisation would miss out on opportunities to engage with our key 'constituency' of transport users 'on the ground'. Both forms of engagement can add credibility and inform our wider work. We could also miss out on opportunities to increase awareness of London TravelWatch's work.
- 9.2 Likewise, failure to engage with businesses and to take advantage of the new channels of communication available would mean missing out on opportunities to widen the range of people and organisations that we are able to influence.
- 9.3 There is a risk that we could increase our workload as a result of cases taken at our transport users' engagement events but in reality we do not get a large volume of extra casework and caseworkers concentrate on explaining where London TravelWatch fits in in the complaints process.
- 9.4 There is also a reputational risk if we get drawn into highly localised 'non-strategic' issues.

## **10 Equalities implications**

- 10.1 Contact with specialist user groups enables us to be in touch with particular concerns of minority groups and this is particularly important in relation to people with disabilities as we have a specific duty to consider their needs.
- 10.2 The events represent an opportunity to demonstrate how accessible buses in London are to disabled travelers and those with buggies who previously may not have considered bus travel as an option.
- 10.3 Our transport users' engagement events allow us to visit areas where we might reach sections of the community which are hard to reach and who may not be represented in our casework enquiries, particularly non-English speakers. Here, our staff who are native/other language speakers are able to help. Developing links with the emerging 'transition town' movements and other groups focused around social media in London will help us to potentially engage with (younger) people it was previously harder to reach through traditional means.
- 10.4 Attendance at events targeted towards specific groups of people can allow us to reach specific audiences which may otherwise be difficult to engage with.

## **11 Recommendations**

- 11.1 It is recommended that two further transport users' engagement events are held this year; one in autumn and one next spring. Possible locations include Bromley and Bexleyheath, which will be affected by the new Southeastern franchise, and Walthamstow and Ilford, which will be affected by the new Greater Anglia franchise. Alternatively, we could consider locations such as Southall, which would give us an opportunity to reach sections of the community which are harder to reach, especially non-English speakers.
- 11.2 It is recommended that London TravelWatch continues to employ a targeted approach to attending local rail and public transport user group meetings, both local authority and voluntary led, only attending where there are specific local issues to discuss that are of wider strategic interest. We will apply our work prioritisation process to decide whether or not we should attend these meetings.
- 11.3 It is recommended that efforts are made to develop links with the emerging 'transition town' movements and other groups focused around social media in London which will help provide a fresh perspective on local transport issues.
- 11.4 As part of work to refresh the London TravelWatch website, it is recommended that we develop a new webpage giving people details about how they can get involved both with us and groups focused around social media in London.
- 11.5 If the event for businesses referred to above (7.2) is successful, it is recommended that this type of event is adapted and held at other locations in London with a large number of businesses.
- 11.6 Members may wish to revisit this topic later in the year when further information is available arising from the above activities if these recommendations are agreed.