

9th April 2009

Dr. Mike Mitchell
Director General – National Networks
Department for Transport
Great Minster House
76 Marsham Street
London SW1P 4DR

Dear Mike

Future of Victoria – Bellingham Services – failure to disclose

I am sorry to have to write to you about what appears to be serious incident in which information about a significant service change has been deliberately withheld from both London TravelWatch and the public. I regard this matter with some dismay, in view of the previous good relationship between London TravelWatch and the Department for Transport, which has always been characterised by trust.

I refer to an e-mail of 2nd April from Ian Brown to Val Shawcross, in which he explains that as part of the agreement between TfL and DfT for the go-ahead for the East London Line extension to Clapham Junction (ELL2) the proposed service between Victoria and Bellingham (to replace the Victoria end of the present South London Line service [SLL]) will not now be introduced. The effect of this, as you know, will be loss of the direct service between Clapham High Street / Wandsworth Road and Victoria, reduction of the basic Peckham Rye / Denmark Hill to Victoria service from 4 trains per hour (tph) to 2 tph, and (at least when Thameslink works are completed) total loss of this service during early mornings, evenings and Sundays.

I can understand how it is that the funding situation faced by TfL and DfT resulted in investigation of a trade-off between a subsidy for the Bellingham service and a capital input into ELL2. It may well be – although this must be a provisional view because I have seen no figures – that a decision in favour of ELL2 might be justified.

What I cannot understand, and must deplore, is the fact that this decision was not announced to the public on 12th February as part of the joint Mayor of London / Transport Secretary statement on the go-ahead for ELL2, or even revealed to London TravelWatch - a long-standing strong supporter of ELL2 - as the statutory passenger watchdog for London.

This failure to openly report a significant downside of the ELL2 decision is in contrast to the very proper explanation in the 12th February statement about the deferral of a decision to construct the proposed station at Surrey Canal Road.

The decision about the Bellingham service – and the need to be open about it – is important because the rail industry has made it clear to the public that a combined consequence of the Thameslink works at London Bridge and proposed platform lengthening at Battersea Park means that the SLL cannot continue in its present form. ELL2 was vigorously promoted as a means of mitigating the loss of the SLL's London Bridge end, and the Bellingham service as the means of maintaining the links into Victoria (albeit not serving Battersea Park). So far as the public were concerned, ELL2 and the Bellingham service were packaged together and they had a clear right to know of a decision to separate them and opt for one rather than the other.

In light of the above, I would ask the following specific questions:

1. Why was the Bellingham decision not announced as part of the ELL2 announcement?
2. When do you now intend to make a public statement?
3. Who made the Bellingham decision and was a minister party to it, or aware of it, and who was party to decisions about the failure to announce it publicly?
4. Would you please now provide us with the full details of the agreement between TfL and DfT for the ELL2 go-ahead? Are there other features of this agreement which remain undisclosed?
5. What are your plans for handling the closure process for the withdrawal of direct services between Clapham High St. / Wandsworth Road and Battersea Park / Victoria?
6. Would you please provide details of DfT's assessment of the impact of ELL2 on south London passengers both with and without the Bellingham service, to aid our consideration of how to react to the decision?

In conclusion, I consider that the manner in which TfL and DfT have handled this matter is very damaging to the reputation of both, and is a matter of public trust. It is also very much in the interests of the travelling public in London that the relationship between their statutory watchdog and yourselves is one of trust, and not one in which we are denied information which is important in our work on behalf of passengers.

I would ask for an early meeting to discuss this matter, and would ask for your reply by 17th April please. I am writing in similar terms to Ian Brown at TfL London Rail. I do hope you will respond positively to this letter, and thus avoid any need for us to resort to the Freedom of Information Act, a course of action which has been suggested to me by one party.

I reserve the right to place the contents of this letter on our website, and will draw it to the attention of the press, relevant groups and representatives, many of whom are now approaching London TravelWatch.

Yours sincerely

Sharon Grant

Chair

(Dictated by Sharon Grant and signed in her absence by Jerry Gold)