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**Secretariat memorandum**

Author: Susan James

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Confidential session

Signposting to London TravelWatch

**1 Introduction**

- 1.1. Publicising the existence of a watchdog can help encourage consumers to give feedback about poor service. It gives reassurance that any complaint will be taken seriously because if it is not there is an independent appeals body that will look at the matter again.
- 1.2. Therefore it is important that TfL and the train operating companies clearly publicise the existence and role of London TravelWatch. They do this by including our details on posters in stations and on vehicles which explain how to give feedback or complain. Electronic communications have become increasingly important in recent years and transport operators also need to give clear signposting on their websites.
- 1.3. London TravelWatch has been trying for some time to encourage operators to improve the information they give about us on their websites. In June 2015 members considered a report on information about London TravelWatch included on operators' websites and found the information was patchy. It was agreed at that time to raise these concerns with individual operators during regular bilateral meetings.
- 1.4. Members touched on this issue again in October when they said it was not acceptable for London TravelWatch's details to be included only at the end of an operator's passenger charter, which could be a lengthy pdf document on a website. London TravelWatch's details should be visible on the operator's home page or by searching for the word 'complaint'.
- 1.5. At that time, London TravelWatch's priority had been updating its own website and work had also been done in relation to Transport Focus's and TfL's sites. Problems with individual operators were raised during regular update meetings. It was noted that failure to provide adequate information about London TravelWatch may breach the spirit of the Office of Rail and Road's new guidelines on complaint handling.
- 1.6. There is currently no requirement for operators to have London TravelWatch details in a certain, or easy to find, location on their websites. Rail operators:

- must have the contact details of London TravelWatch within the passenger charter
- must signpost to London TravelWatch within the second substantive response to the passenger
- can choose if they want to place more emphasis on London TravelWatch on their website
- do not have direction or requirement as to where our details should be located on their website other than within the passenger charters

## **2 Rail operators**

- 2.1. Some rail operators have been more open to providing information about London TravelWatch than others. The Casework Manager has encouraged Eurostar and SouthWest Trains to improve the details on their websites. She has also persuaded London Midland to amend its passenger charter to include more accurate information.
- 2.2. The Casework Manager has tried to raise this issue with other train operators but has found that they have not been engaged with it.
- 2.3. There have been some modest improvements in some websites but information is still not consistently presented, which can make it difficult to find.

## **3 Transport for London**

- 3.1. Regrettably, the position in respect of TfL is no different. Theoretically it should be easier to influence their processes because all complaint handling is dealt with centrally and we have a good working relationship with their customer service team managers. However, frequent staff changes within the section mean that many staff do not appear to even be aware of our existence.
- 3.2. An added problem is the reluctance of TfL to mention the word 'complaint' on its website, preferring instead terms such as feedback or comment. This can make it hard for users to understand where to go when they want to make a complaint.
- 3.3. The Chair, Chief Executive and Casework Manager are due to meet TfL's Director of Customer Experience to discuss TfL's complaint handling procedures.

## **4 ORR's complaint handling policies**

- 4.1. The ORR have instigated a new process to formalise (and remind) the railway operators of their responsibilities to passengers and to the watchdogs. Each rail operator is expected to have their complaints handling policy within two or three 'clicks' from the home page of their websites. This policy will detail how the rail operator will manage a passenger complaint including the timescales. It will also include signposting to London TravelWatch and information about the watchdog. The document must be called the complaint handling policy and cannot be renamed to 'feedback' or 'comments'. The document should also be 'searchable' by the word complaint.

- 4.2. There is a timeline for each rail operator to respond with their draft complaints handling process. This is sent to both London TravelWatch and Transport Focus for comments and feedback. These are then amended before the final version is accepted.
- 4.3. The ORR have also asked London TravelWatch (and Transport Focus) to draft an appeals protocol to outline our expectations of the railway operators response details such as how they will respond and managing questions. The working group for this took place on 9 February 2016 although sign up to this protocol is voluntary.
- 4.4. The railways operators have been asked to return complaints handling data to the ORR. This will outline the complaint information and response times. London TravelWatch has requested, but not yet had accepted, a check box for confirmation that the passenger has been referred to the appropriate watchdog.
- 4.5. London Overground and TfL rail are required to participate in this new process. TfL have indicated that, for good practice, they will probably extend a similar policy to all modes.
- 4.6. This new method of monitoring complaints handling should give the passenger one document to look for on any operator website. This should also increase the reliability of reasonable responses within a reasonable timeframe to appeals from London TravelWatch.
- 4.7. London TravelWatch began its activity in this area in a somewhat ad hoc fashion, taking opportunities to influence operators as and when they arose. While this achieved some limited results, we do not have the same ability to enforce our objectives as the ORR, and we welcome the changes that their new approach will bring. We have already approved the complaint handling policies of several operators and hope that this will improve the position for transport users in London.

## **5 Risks to London TravelWatch**

- 5.1. While it is important that passengers should be able to find our details easily when it is appropriate, it can be harmful to us if our details are too prominent.
- 5.2. We have found that our 020 number is one of very few geographic phone numbers that can easily be found when searching for terms such as 'transport complaints London'. We have also found that our email address for complaints is much simpler than many of the webforms that operators require to be completed in order to make complaints. This makes it very attractive for passengers to contact London TravelWatch rather than the appropriate transport operator when they want to make a complaint.
- 5.3. This has led, on occasion, to London TravelWatch receiving larger volumes of initial enquiries than we have the resources to handle.

### **Case example**

A passenger rang looking to speak to Thameslink about a slippery floor in one of its stations. He was asked where he got our telephone number. He advised that although we are not top of the Google result list, we are one of the only organisations whose telephone number is easy to find. A caseworker recreated the steps he took and the following occurred.

Into the search engine the passenger wrote 'train station complaint London'.

Top three results, advert for Trainline, National Rail Enquiries and London TravelWatch

National Rail Enquiries gives the options of complaining about a train station, then gives you the option of finding the operator who manages the station, then enter the station name, then gives lots of station information but not a telephone number.

London TravelWatch gives an option to a menu, then contact us and a telephone number.

The passenger was frustrated and cross that I could not help him. After some explanation and time he accepted my reasons and took the Thameslink telephone number as he then wished to complain.

- 5.4. When TfL put our details at the top of a 'contact us' webpage on their site, we were overwhelmed by enquiries and had to make an emergency request to TfL that they move our number to a more appropriate location, which they complied with very quickly. Most of the contacts we received were not appeals or complaints so London TravelWatch would not investigate them but each had to be read, evaluated and closed on the casework database system.
- 5.5. It is important, therefore, given our limited resources, that we ensure our contact details are in appropriate locations on operators' websites in order that we can focus most effort on our core casework.
- 5.6. It is also important to note that during the 2010 review of London TravelWatch by the London Assembly, one of the Assembly's key conditions was that our phone number be removed from posters on London buses. Assembly members were keen that we did not, in reality or appearance, go out 'looking for work'.
- 5.7. The removal of our number from buses led to a significant reduction in initial contacts by phone and enabled us to delete a full-time junior caseworker post. This was regarded as a beneficial move by the Assembly. There is a political risk attached to any activity that might be seen as seeking to artificially increase London TravelWatch's workload through increased promotion of our contact details.

## **6 Equalities and inclusion implications**

- 6.1. This report poses no specific equalities and inclusion implications.

## **7 Financial implications**

- 7.1. If London TravelWatch's details become more widely publicised, it is possible that we will see an increase in volumes of casework. This may have resource implications for the organisation.

## **8 Legal powers and financial implications**

- 8.1. Section 248 of the Greater London Authority Act 1999 requires London TravelWatch (as the London Transport Users Committee) to consider, and where it appears to it to be desirable, to make recommendations with respect to any service or facility provided by or for (or in the case of hackney carriages and private hire vehicles, licensed by) Transport for London, other than a matter relating to the transportation of freight, if it has been the subject of representations made by or on behalf of users of that service or facility. Section 252b of the same Act places a similar duty on the Committee in respect of users or potential users of railway services provided wholly or partly within the "London railway area" as defined under the provisions of the Railways Act 1993.