

Transport for London's Customer Service

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Transport for London's Customer Service

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At its meeting on 14 July 2011, the Committee agreed to appoint Valerie Shawcross AM as Rapporteur to undertake an investigation into TfL's customer service with the following terms of reference:

- To assess TfL's effectiveness and efficiency in dealing with customer enquiries, identify any difference in standards across its service and assess how it uses such customer feedback to develop its services; and
- To investigate how Project Horizon and other organisational changes might affect TfL's customer service in the future and make recommendations which aim to increase the quality of customer service.

The Committee welcomes feedback on its report. For further information, contact Ian O' Sullivan in the Scrutiny Team by: letter c/o of City Hall, More London, SE1 2AA; email Ian O' Sullivan on ian.osullivan@london.gov.uk; or telephone: 020 7983 6540. For press enquiries contact Dana Rothenberg by telephone: 020 7983 4603 or email dana.rothenberg@london.gov.uk

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Rapporteur's Foreword

However well-run a service may be, there are always occasions when things will go wrong and customers will need information and advice to make a complaint or suggestion. Handling these essential communications poorly compounds the problem, and can lead to a loss of overall passenger confidence. On the other hand, dealing with them efficiently, with a friendly and helpful manner, builds support for public transport services and can play a large role in maintaining a good relationship between Transport for London (TfL) and Londoners. Complaints are also an essential source of management information to help direct service improvement.



TfL has taken some steps towards untangling the complex and inefficient system of customer information and complaint handling it inherited from its plethora of predecessor organisations back in 2000. Despite this initial good work, it is clear both from the correspondence that we regularly receive and the case work of London TravelWatch, that more needs to be done to improve both the efficiency of the process and, perhaps more importantly, the tone and quality of responses.

As TfL attempts the tricky balancing act of continuing to make improvements while, simultaneously reducing overall costs, we want to ensure that passengers' needs are properly understood and attended to. Londoners have told us that they want a clear, easy to access service that is answered promptly and responsive to their concerns. The principles we have outlined in this report, which draw on best practice across all sectors, are simple, common sense approaches to achieving this.

Ensuring clear lines of communication and accountability, setting challenging targets and then publicly demonstrating how well you have met them, providing an improved 'one stop shop' for all customer service information, and then backing these aspirations up with concrete actions like a new Customer Charter and regular performance reports would do much to improve the service for customers.

But it is the final principle which is perhaps the most important in changing the long-term attitude of TfL management and Board. Customer feedback and complaints are invaluable, real-time evidence of how London's transport system is performing: TfL should be doing much more to both make it easier for passengers to make regular

suggestions and embed those suggestions into the highest levels of strategic decision making.

It is time that TfL made across the board attempts to develop a more customer friendly culture that assumes its passengers have something useful and valid to contribute. TfL senior managers and board need to change what is perceived by some to be a defensive culture which risks alienating its customer base and the wider community by what can appear insensitive reactions to commentary and complaint.

In putting together this report, we would like to particularly highlight and thank the contribution from passenger groups, particularly Bryan Davey of London TravelWatch and David Sidebottom and colleagues from Passenger Focus.

Valerie Shawcross AM, Deputy Chair Transport Committee

Executive Summary

This report examines how Transport for London (TfL) can improve its customer service provision. In particular, it outlines how TfL can ensure that the processes it has in place to handle the tens of thousands of complaints and suggestions it receives each year can ensure the best possible outcome for passengers. This report is published at a time when TfL is undergoing major organisational re-structuring in this area: our goal is to make sure that the passenger voice is paramount during these developments.

The challenge facing TfL

Since TfL was established in 2000, customer services have suffered from the legacy of differing work practices, cultures and locations. As the role it plays in Londoners' lives grows more complex and wide-ranging, TfL must do more to deliver a better and more informative service, which is geared towards satisfying the needs of passengers. This includes ensuring that its responses are timely, easily accessed through a variety of media, sympathetic to the circumstances of passengers, and, crucially, informative about the context of their decisions. The views outlined in this report show that, as TfL recognises, this is not always the experience of those who contact TfL.

Towards a passenger-centred service

This report uses best practice outlined by customer service experts, as well as the valued insights and experiences from passenger groups and Londoners themselves, to establish a set of principles which should guide TfL's current and future customer service provision. These principles will also serve as the basis for the Committee's continued scrutiny of customer service provision in the future.

Principle 1: It should be clear to passengers who they should contact and what they should expect in response.

It is not always clear to passengers how to contact TfL: there are currently 12 phone numbers on the TfL website and an overly-complex online form system. TfL should work towards reducing the current system into one number, form and postal address and ensuring this information is freely available at stations and bus stops. TfL will also have to do more to improve the overall quality of responses to ensure a consistent level of information and context is given to each passenger. A new Customer Charter should be published which outlines TfL's responsibilities with regards to customer services which provides information to passengers on the entire process and which is made available at each station.

Principle 2: TfL should set itself challenging customer service targets which reflect what matters to passengers and publish performance against them.

TfL is currently examining its internal customer service targets to investigate how they can be rationalised across the organisation. Once these targets have been established, TfL should become a standard bearer for publishing performance information on customer service by examining best practice from other transport providers and sectors. These reports should also benchmark performance against a range of organisations to provide reports which offer meaningful information to passengers and help to drive internal improvement.

Principle 3: There should be a one stop shop for TfL customer information.

The forthcoming 'My TfL' online portal is an opportunity to create a resource which revolutionises the relationship between TfL and passengers and reduces the need for passengers to contact TfL repeatedly. To achieve this, TfL should: ensure the site contains all relevant contact and performance information; allow passengers to track their enquiry or complaint online; and provide real-time updates on issues directly affecting customer service. For those with Freedom Passes, who may not have access to online resources, TfL should also provide a free 0800 number for information and complaints.

Principle 4: Passenger complaints should be viewed as an opportunity and not a threat.

Suggestions and complaints from customers are an invaluable source of 'free intelligence'. This intelligence should be embedded at all levels of TfL, helping to both drive day-to-day improvements and the broader strategic goals of the organisation. To help ensure this, TfL must: continue to examine ways to make providing ongoing feedback easier for passengers by examining how other organisations create a more customer focused outlook; and make customer service reporting, particularly around key recurring themes, a part of the TfL Board's regular monitoring activities.

We welcome TfL's commitment to improving how it deals with customer complaints and suggestions. In order to be successful, these improvements must deliver a service which encourages greater participation from passengers, as well as provide the basis for real improvements to service design and delivery in the future.

Introduction

For most people, it is impossible to live and work in London without using a service managed by Transport for London (TfL). The Tube alone carries more than a billion people each year and with around 2.2 billion passengers, London's buses account for nearly half of all bus journeys in the entire country. Our taxes and fares pay for the system: therefore managing the relationship with passengers should be one of TfL's key priorities and indicators of success.

When something does go wrong and customers wish to make a formal complaint, query a decision, or seek specific information, TfL is responsible for ensuring that it has the appropriate systems to deal with these issues in a timely and constructive manner that meets the needs of passengers.

In the context of the number of daily journeys, the volume of people contacting TfL for the reasons outlined above is relatively small. In 2010/11, TfL received:

- Over 25,000 written enquiries;
- Over 3.7 million telephone calls, an average of 10,000 a day;
- 170 million visits to its website, an average of 465,000 a day; and
- Over 2.5 million visits to Travel Information Centres, nearly 7,000 a day.

In absolute terms though, these contacts represent a huge logistical challenge, and one which is likely to get more complex over the next decade. This year alone, TfL will face challenges caused by the Olympics, the introduction of a new ticketing system and the ongoing disruption caused by infrastructure work for Crossrail and the Tube upgrades. The Mayor's Office and TfL recognise that this is a part of TfL's work that needs attention. The Transport Commissioner told the Committee: "we are very conscious that we can improve our handling of complaints and ... a number of steps are being taken to do so".¹ Similarly, the Deputy Mayor for Transport said "Customer service ... is an area where ... I believe there are significant opportunities for improvement".²

¹ Letter to Rapporteur from Peter Hendy, Transport Commissioner, 22 September 2011

² Letter to Rapporteur from Isabel Dedring, Deputy Mayor for Transport, 9 August 2011

Principles for customer service reforms

The aim of this report is to seek to influence the strategic direction and core values of TfL's customer service, and particularly, to ensure that the needs of passengers are central to the design of the new directorate. Our investigation sought to evaluate what a passenger who accessed TfL's customer service should expect.

Passengers expect customer services that are easily accessible, that are handled efficiently, proportionally and transparently by customer service staff and finally, that TfL has the processes in place to systematically review this ongoing feedback to help drive service design and improvement.

This report will help to ensure that those common sense standards are backed up by concrete actions. The following chapters outline four principles which will help to ensure TfL's continued improvement. These principles are:

1. It should be clear to passengers who they should contact and what they should expect in response;
2. TfL should set itself challenging customer service targets which reflect what matters to passengers and publish performance against them;
3. There should be a simple 'one stop shop' for TfL customer services; and
4. Passenger complaints should be viewed as an opportunity and not a threat.

In formulating these principles, the Committee has used expertise and best practice from both general customer service standards bodies such as the Institute of Customer Service, and specialised knowledge from passenger groups to determine what a 'gold standard' for customer service would look like for passengers. We have also used the personal experiences of Londoners who contacted the Committee during our investigation, and case work from London TravelWatch to inform our work.

The operational context for improving customer service

TfL's customer service has traditionally been beset by outdated work practices and structures. When TfL was created in 2000, it inherited various customer service departments with differing methods, locations and targets. This resulted in a system which is "complex and disjointed leading to highly complex complaints handling procedures".³

Improvements to customer service provision have accelerated over the last few years. TfL has brought together most of its customer service staff at two locations and changed call centre training to increase the number of issues any one operator can handle. In 2008, TfL rolled out a new software platform for all customer service functions across London Underground, Surface Transport, Oyster and Travel Information. TfL said this has made operations more efficient, while increasing the ability of various organisations to share experience.

Customer service is also in the final stages of a major re-structure. As part of Project Horizon,⁴ TfL has established a new Director of Customer Experience who will be responsible for most of TfL's customer service activities and will oversee the design and targets for the new directorate.

The principles outlined above will form the core of the Committee's follow-up work in the future as we seek to evaluate the success of TfL's current programme for improvement. We hope to help TfL achieve a cultural shift in how it views customer contacts: we want TfL to see itself as an organisation which primarily provides services to people rather than one that simply manages infrastructure. Customer service reform is one part of this cultural shift and the positive comments and steps already taken by TfL suggest now is very much the time to push this agenda. In doing so we aim to ensure that TfL's statements of intent are followed up with actions which make a tangible difference to the passenger experience and put the organisation at the forefront of customer services.

³ TfL written submission to the Transport Committee September 2011

⁴ Project Horizon is examining how TfL provides various back office functions, including customer service, across the organisation. It is attempting to streamline operations in order to save up to 20 per cent in costs by 2018.

Chapter 1 – Improving passenger communication

Principle 1: It should be clear to passengers who they should contact and what they should expect in response

Creating clear, simple lines of communication is the first step in building a passenger focused complaints and feedback policy. Reducing the number of phone, written or online communication options, ideally down to a single route for each, will help minimise confusion and encourage more passengers to make use of the service.⁵ Customers should also be able to use phone, email or written correspondence for each service.⁶

In this area, TfL continues to suffer from the legacy of confusion and complexity inherited from previous incarnations:

- There are 12 different telephone numbers on TfL's website.
- There is little guidance to help passengers to determine the best route.
- Some services only have a single contact method.
- Customer service contact information given to passengers at bus stops and shelters does not always: include TfL phone numbers for information or complaints; explain what information is required by TfL to make a complaint about poor service; actively encourage feedback of any kind to TfL.
- In some cases the information is out of date and the numbers have been disconnected.⁷
- The online comment system leads to a confused jumble of pages depending on system or mode eg, some skip the comment form and simply take you to a general information page, while others require registration before they can be accessed.⁸

TfL has made attempts at improving access to its information and complaints. In October 2010, it set up a new 0843 Travel Information line, which has allowed it to increase the capacity of its call centre to

⁵ *Fact Sheet Series: Complaints Handling*, Institute of Customer Service, 2007

⁶ *Review of Complaint Handling in Banking Groups*, Financial Services Authority, April 2010

⁷ The Customer Service and Complaints Policy available for download on the website still contains the old 0203 contact number which has been disconnected since 2010.

⁸ TfL's 'Help and Contact' page – as accessed in January 2012 - <http://www.tfl.gov.uk/helpandcontact>

handle large volumes of calls simultaneously.⁹ However, not all issues (such as some Oyster functions) can be dealt with through this number and services run by outside contractors, such as the Cycle Hire Scheme and the Congestion Charge, are subject to separate call centre operations with highly variable levels of quality.¹⁰

Passengers who contacted this investigation described their difficulty in finding the right person to deal with their issue. They expressed frustration at being transferred repeatedly between departments with no resolution available. Likewise, during our visit to TfL's customer call centre in October 2011, we noted that call centre operators still appeared to work across several different systems in order to deal with a single phone call. During one such session, the customer service operator had to switch between two different systems while attempting to deal with a customer issue, before finally transferring the caller to a separate department so a refund could be issued by another call centre. Clearly further work needs to be done to harmonise customer service systems and operations to make it easier for passengers to have issues resolved.

The Deputy Mayor for Transport told us that TfL will review all contact options, and admitted that the online form system in particular, was potentially confusing. Any steps to reduce the current tangle of contact numbers and forms would be welcomed by passengers. In its review of contact options, TfL should examine the example provided by other transport providers such as National Express and Southeastern Rail who have both introduced a single phone number, address and online form for all customer enquiries.

Recommendation 1

TfL should report back to the Committee in May 2012 on how it will make it more straightforward for passengers to provide feedback, including: its plans to reduce the number of contact numbers; how it will continue to improve call centre operations to benefit customers; and how it will ensure this information is more easily available to

⁹ Please see page 25 for further discussion on issues related to TfL's switch to the 0843 number

¹⁰ TfL written submission to the Transport Committee, September 2011. TfL's submission also provides internal performance information for the last three years, along with various contextual information relevant to this performance.

passengers at stations, at bus stops and shelters, and online.

Improving the quality of response

It should also be clear to customers before they contact TfL what to expect in response to their feedback or complaint. Industry best practice advises that responses should be prompt and sympathetic while demonstrating clear lines of accountability and providing details of how an issue has been resolved, and if needed, escalated further.¹¹

TfL's Customer Service and Complaints Policy does set out some of this information: for example, it guarantees an initial response within two days and aims to close all enquiries within ten days, as well as outline some general quality standards.¹² TfL said it has a robust monitoring regime for this across the organisation, which includes 'secret shopper' tests, annual auditing reports and randomised checks from managers on both call centre and written responses.¹³

Despite these checks, views submitted to this investigation from passengers indicate that TfL still has some difficulty in applying this policy consistently across the organisation. The Committee has examined a selection of London TravelWatch's casework from late 2011 when many improvements had apparently already been made to TfL's processes. These indicate that some passengers are being poorly served by TfL's customer service. These issues were also backed up by similar comments from Londoners who responded to the Committee's online survey on TfL's customer service. Criticisms of TfL, along with illustrative case studies, are set out below:

- Failing to respond to repeated requests for information;

¹¹ *Fact Sheet Series: Complaints Handling*, Institute of Customer Service, 2007

¹² *Customer Complaints and Handling Policy*, Transport for London, 2009

¹³ TfL written submission to the Transport Committee September 2011

Case Study 1 – Barclays Cycle Hire Refund

Passenger A had an incorrect charge levied on their Cycle Hire account while working abroad. The passenger emailed the Cycle Hire helpdesk on 14 May 2011. The helpdesk did not reply until 23 May 2011 and advised that the refund department would be in further contact. As of 26 July 2011, no further contact had been received by the passenger to arrange the refund. The passenger then felt they had no choice but to contact London TravelWatch to resolve their issue.

- Failing to sufficiently explain the rationale for decisions, leaving customers confused and unhappy;

Case Study 2 – Passenger rights and refunds

Passenger C travelled from Barking to West Hampstead and then another journey from West Hampstead Thameslink to London Bridge. As the journey exceeded the maximum journey time for a journey between Barking and London Bridge, the passenger was charged for two incomplete journeys instead of one complete. The Oyster Helpline refunded the difference between what he paid and the correct fare for the journey but failed to explain to him what he (or the system, depending on your view) did wrong. If the rules are not explained, the passenger will not be able to prevent a similar thing happening again.

- An abrupt or dismissive tone which can lead to a perception of defensiveness and a lack of ownership of the issue at hand;

Case Study 3 – Providing feedback on policies

Passenger C had some difficulties applying for a discounted Oyster card and in getting a journey history and wished to provide some feedback and suggestions on what could be improved. The passenger was sent a three line email in reply which completely failed to display any empathy or engage with the points raised: instead, the passenger was told to pass their suggestions on to London TravelWatch.

- Providing variable quality of response, depending on the service. Concerns have been raised to the Committee that bus services in particular are more challenging for passengers to receive a satisfactory response. This is as a result of having to liaise with several different bus companies, leading to generally longer lead times and more difficulty in getting the detail needed to give passengers the appropriate context and information. TfL must take

ultimate responsibility for the experience of passengers across all the services it provides, and not use its contract relations as an excuse for poor customer service. Responses from passengers and from our Members' mailbags also show that Oyster card issues continue to be a major problem, particularly with regards to refunds;

Case Study 4 – Oyster Refunds

Passenger D was seeking a refund for an Oyster 18+ card that was wrongly taken from them at a station. The situation was complex, but after failing to receive a reply when contacting the web helpdesk, the passenger rang the helpline and was transferred a total of six times within one call. The level of service from staff was variable, and the information given out about the refund entitlement changed depending on who the passenger spoke with. This also took place while speaking on a more expensive 0843 number.

- Failing to provide guidance or correct information on their products and services.¹⁴

Case Study 5 – Congestion Charge Exemptions

Passenger E is a Blue Badge holder with chronic ill health, who has had previous difficulties with TfL in gaining a Congestion Charge Exemption. Despite being eligible, TfL has repeatedly failed to issue the Exemption, despite interventions from the passenger's local MP. The passenger is on a limited income and has had to miss medical appointments due to TfL. The passenger felt that they were repeatedly blamed by TfL for the difficulties and was still waiting for the Exemption to be issued.

The Deputy Mayor for Transport said that improving the tone of communications, and particularly emphasising empathy, honesty and clarity, would be a priority moving forward.¹⁵ We want to ensure these improvements happen, and to ensure that consistency and standardisation across all parts of TfL is improved.

¹⁴ Information from case studies was gathered through examining casework from London Travelwatch for the second and third quarters of 2011, as well as views submitted to the investigation through the online survey.

¹⁵ Transcript of the 14 June 2011 Transport Committee meeting, page 38

Towards a new Customer Charter

The experiences outlined above suggest that confusion continues to exist amongst both passengers and TfL staff about their respective rights and responsibilities with regards to customer service. A Customer Charter would help to focus TfL on providing quality customer service, whilst also encouraging more passengers to contribute towards improving services. The purpose of the Charter is to provide the foundation for a relationship between customers and an organisation by outlining what customers should expect, particularly when providing feedback or a complaint.

TfL's current Customer Service and Complaints policy suffers from being out of date, over long, and badly formatted for ordinary passengers, as well as being difficult to locate on the website. Additionally, TfL has a series of inconsistent and sometimes contradictory charters and policies depending on the service in question.¹⁶

This new Charter should:

- Clearly state that TfL takes responsibility for the experience of passengers on the services it provides;
- Clearly define all targets for closing correspondence;
- Outline the route of enquiries through TfL – As can be seen by some of the case studies above, and in other responses to the Committee, there is confusion amongst some passengers as to how their complaint or suggestion is to be handled by TfL, leading to frustration and disappointment;
- Provide information on what data TfL needs in order to proceed with a complaint or information request;
- Provide an outline of the type of response passengers can expect and provide information on how to escalate an issue; and
- Be placed prominently on any update of the TfL website or portal and made available at all stations.

During our investigation, Passenger Focus praised the South Yorkshire Passenger Transport Executive as having a particularly good example

¹⁶ For example, the Barclay's Cycle Hire Scheme aims to close all enquiries within three working days, the DLR within five working days, and TfL as a whole within ten days. These commitments are all contained within separate charters and can create confusion for passengers.

of this kind of Customer Charter.¹⁷ It provides all the relevant detail outlined in the best practice in a comprehensive two page format which could easily be downloaded and understood by all passengers.

The Project Horizon review provides an opportunity for a fresh start for passengers and TfL. A new Customer Charter would help to establish the 'ground rules' for communications between TfL and its stakeholders, establish the responsibilities of TfL towards all passengers, as well as help to drive improvements to quality and responsiveness.

Recommendation 2

By May 2012, TfL should report back on: how it will ensure greater consistency in its responses to customers; and, produce a single Customer Charter for consultation which covers all services and gives specific guarantees about the timescale and quality of its responses.

¹⁷ 'Our Commitment to You' – South Yorkshire Passenger Transport Executive – www.sypte.co.uk

Chapter 2 – Publishing customer service performance

Principle 2: TfL should set itself challenging customer service targets which reflect what matters to passengers and publish performance against them

Organisations, and particularly those that deliver a public service or utility, have a duty to demonstrate that they take the public's views seriously and respond promptly and appropriately. Setting demanding targets, properly indexed to industry norms, and reported on regularly and openly, will measure TfL's effectiveness in meeting this duty.

TfL currently monitors its performance against a range of internal targets. The targets are generally within industry norms for responding to customer service enquiries though they vary, sometimes widely, depending on the service and the mode of communication. For example, Train Operating Companies (TOCs) report the percentage of complaints closed within 20 working days to the Office of Rail Regulation (ORR),¹⁸ while the majority of TfL's targets range from 10 to 15 days. Passenger Focus states their operators should aim for 80 per cent of all calls answered within 20 seconds which most, but not all, of TfL's call centres have adopted.¹⁹

TfL's new Director of Customer Experience will begin a review of all customer service targets in early 2012 to examine the historical and service rationale behind each. The aim of the review is to establish a common set of standards across all services. The Director should consider establishing targets that measure the full range of passenger experiences of customer service. Currently, the internal targets are largely related to the process (ie the speed or efficiency) and not to the quality of passenger satisfaction with how they were treated, or the outcome. This review, and any continuing evaluation of targets, should be based on direct feedback from passengers who have been through the system to establish their priorities.

Publishing data and benchmarking

Once established, these new targets should form the basis for regular, published reports. To be effective, consumer rights group Customer Focus said these reports should include both raw performance data

¹⁸ Data available from the ORR website – www.rail-reg.gov.uk

¹⁹ TfL written submission to the Transport Committee, September 2011

and the key operational and industry context.²⁰ This will help drive service improvements, ensure wider patterns and issues are detected and help improve access to complaints channels for customers.²¹

TfL used to publish some customer service information as part of its Board sub-committee papers up to Summer 2010, an issue which the Deputy Mayor for Transport has committed to re-examining. Other sectors and organisations provide valuable lessons to TfL on how to create reports which are meaningful to passengers:

- Train Operating Companies (TOCs) report across a range of customer service targets as part of their regular monitoring by the ORR, which makes these freely available on its website. Passengers can download individual TOCs' data or even create their own comparative reports.
- The Financial Standards Authority (FSA) collects and publishes customer service data for 260 financial institutions and provides some comparative analysis and important industry context.²²
- Ofgem, the electricity and gas regulator, only requires basic complaint numbers and process information to be reported by the 'Big Six' energy companies, a level of reporting which has been criticised as inadequate by consumer rights groups.²³
- The Parliamentary and Health Ombudsman creates a comprehensive annual report which includes a mixture of statistics and case studies drawn from the NHS, which are further broken down into national and regional sub-sets.²⁴

TfL should also look to benchmark its performance against comparable transport organisations. This would help to demonstrate the effectiveness of its systems and how robust its reporting mechanisms are against best practice demonstrated by others. Currently, TfL only benchmarks itself against Train Operating Companies (TOCs) using the metric 'Complaints per 100,000 Passenger Journeys' which is also

²⁰ *Energy supplier performance against Complaint Handling Standards*, Consumer Focus, 2010

²¹ *Energy supplier performance against Complaint Handling Standards*, Consumer Focus, 2010

²² *Review of Complaint Handling in Banking Groups*, Financial Services Authority, April 2010

²³ *Energy supplier performance against Complaint Handling Standards*, Consumer Focus, 2010

²⁴ *Listening and Learning: review of complaint handling by the NHS in England 2010-11*, Parliamentary and Health Ombudsman, 2012

promoted by the ORR.²⁵ Nevertheless, this statistic is a better demonstration of the performance of the transport network, rather than TfL's customer service function.

In addition to TOCs, the Committee would also encourage TfL to be more imaginative in using other industries as benchmarking comparisons. It already does this to some degree: the London Underground Customer Call Centre came 14th in a list of 50 best call centres in the UK as a result of a comparative study undertaken by the customer service industry.²⁶ Major financial institutions and the 'Big Six' energy companies, which face similar challenges of large volumes of complaints and complex data, might cast a different light on TfL's performance and provide an enlightening comparison for passengers.

We welcome TfL's commitment to publishing regular performance data on its customer service operations. The reports should examine what would provide the most meaningful context for passengers, as well as making it easier to compare TfL against both other transport operators and, potentially, other large complex and capital intensive public bodies.

Recommendation 3

By May 2012, TfL should report back to the Committee on how it will work towards increasing transparency, including: confirming the new set of customer service targets; outlining the proposals for published customer service reports; and any work to extend benchmarking beyond the 'complaints per 100,000 journeys' metric.

²⁵ TfL written submission to the Transport Committee, September 2011

²⁶ Information provided by TfL and through the ICMI awards website – as accessed on January 2011 - <http://www.callcentre.co.uk/page.cfm/link=8>

Chapter 3 – A ‘one stop shop’

Principle 3: There should be a ‘one stop shop’ for TfL customer information

Services directed towards customers should be designed primarily with their needs in mind. TfL’s plans for a new web portal, to be launched in 2012, provide an excellent opportunity to create a truly useful, passenger-centred resource that is freely accessible, relevant to passengers’ experiences and timely. Its ultimate aim should be to reduce pressure on call centre operations and allow back office staff to deal with more specialised enquiries.

TfL told the Committee that this new portal, dubbed ‘My TfL’, is intended to make it “easier for passengers to do business with them”.²⁷ While the portal is likely to provide a range of services, this section will deal with proposals for customer service information in general and ways that it can help passengers avoid having to make unnecessary contact with TfL.

- **Information Access** – The ‘My TfL’ portal should be where the new Customer Charter and all performance reports are kept and updated. It should also provide information on all relevant contact options as well as provide a clear, easy to use online form. Network Rail’s Passenger FAQ²⁸ provides a useful, basic example: the site includes the most important information on targets and quality issues as well as general information related to the most relevant issues for customers.
- **Tracking Issues** – A common frustration amongst those in our survey, and in the examples from TravelWatch’s caseload, was a failure to respond to first stage communications. TfL should explore the possibility of allowing passengers to ‘track’ their issue once it has been submitted to TfL, especially for issues which take longer than the standard 10 day deadline. A unique number is already generated for each communication through TfL’s internal system: passengers could use this to keep abreast of their issue and help to ensure enquiries are not ‘lost’. A similar system of order tracking is already available in many retail organisations, such as the award-winning John Lewis site.

²⁷ TfL written submission to the Transport Committee, September 2011

²⁸ Network Rail Passenger FAQ – as accessed on January 2011 - <http://www.networkrail.co.uk/asp/7665.aspx>

- **Relevant updates** – TfL already offers real-time travel information across various modes which is constantly updated and a valuable resource for passengers to check before they travel. In a similar vein, TfL could use the 'My TfL' portal to provide real-time updates on issues directly affecting customer service functions. For example, issues with a local post sorting office in Greenwich led to some major delays in processing discounted Oyster cards in 2011, leading to a larger than normal volume of calls and longer waiting times for passengers ringing the Oyster helpline. Had the 'My TfL' portal existed, this information could have been posted and may have diverted many of these calls and saved passengers time and money.

By combining broad information on customer service processes and performance, with the ability to track complaints and receive real-time updates on issues, the 'My TfL' portal could help to make passengers better informed and potentially help to reduce wait times at the call centres.

Recommendation 4

TfL should report back to the Committee by May 2012 on the development of the 'My TfL' portal, including: how the portal will improve customer service provision for passengers; any study on the opportunity to provide a complaint 'tracking' system; and how TfL can use real-time information to keep passengers informed of general issues.

Accessibility

While the Committee welcomes the development of 'My TfL', and acknowledges the marked increase in mobile web use which makes its development a suitable future investment,²⁹ many Londoners, especially older people and those with sensory or motor disabilities, will continue to rely on TfL's customer information line.

In 2010, the Committee heard about the difficulties many Londoners with reduced mobility face when trying to plan a journey. Due to the complexity and lack of access within much of the transport system,

²⁹ The volume of calls to TfL's Customer Information Line fell by about a third between 2009/10 and 2010/11. TfL estimates that much of this can be attributed to increased use of mobile phone and internet options.

journey planning can be a more complicated task.³⁰ In 2010, TfL switched their travel information line from a local 020 number to a 0843 number. This has led to concern that the increased price of calls will act as a barrier to people accessing information or providing feedback. In its submission to TfL's Draft Accessibility Plan, Transport for All said some older or disabled people, who are often on extremely tight budgets and with lower levels of internet use, would be put off from using TfL's phone services.³¹ Passenger Focus and London TravelWatch have also criticised the increased move towards more expensive 0843 numbers amongst transport operators.³²

An Equalities Impact Assessment was carried out by TfL before the switch to the 0843 number. This acknowledged some effect on older and disabled people.³³ Though a specialised travel information line is run by Transport for All linked to a local 020 number, we consider there is sufficient basis for investing in a free phone number which is geared towards giving information about how to make accessible journeys, and to take specific complaints and feedback related to those trips. To ensure it is geared only to those in most need, access to the service could be linked to a Freedom Pass account.

A dedicated line for passengers of reduced mobility would allow them to make complaints or provide feedback in real time: for example, if a wheelchair user is abandoned at a kerb, or a ramp fails to operate, they could potentially make the complaint immediately, or when they return home, to a customer care operator who is knowledgeable about their issues. While most mobile phone users would still be charged for a free phone call, the free landline service would still provide a separate but valued 'one stop shop' for those who are most vulnerable and in need of advice on navigating London's transport network as well as increasing the amount of data available to TfL about the difficulties people with reduced mobility face.

TfL must do more to help support older and disabled Londoners to access information and make complaints. It should investigate the possibility of offering a dedicated free phone number available to all Freedom Pass holders. This

³⁰ *Accessibility of the Transport Network*, London Assembly Transport Committee, November 2010, page 22

³¹ Transport for All submission to the Mayor's Transport Accessibility Strategy, November 2011

³² *Review of the handling of bus and coach appeals*, Passenger Focus, March 2011

³³ TfL written submission to the Transport Committee, September 2011

would help to target information and resources at groups which need additional support to make use of London's transport network.

Recommendation 5

TfL should report back to the Committee by May 2012 on how it will help to support Freedom Pass holders with a low-cost information and complaint handling resource.

Chapter 4 - Making the most of 'free intelligence'

Principle 4: Passenger complaints should be viewed as an opportunity and not a threat

Thus far, we have been concerned mainly with ensuring that TfL's processes are developed with passengers' needs at the forefront. But these processes can only work if passengers are confident enough that their voices will be heard and acted upon and actually get in contact.³⁴

To ensure that it maximises this valuable intelligence, TfL needs to demonstrate the importance placed on the views of passengers are at the highest levels of the company. This involves continuing to find new ways to gather views and opinions, and ensuring that this information is used at all levels of the organisation to provide meaningful long-term development of passenger services.³⁵

It is useful to examine some ways in which other organisations encourage greater participation from customers on an ongoing basis:

- The customer section of the John Lewis Partnership website³⁶ has a special section outlining its responsibilities to its customers, and goes into depth on the importance of listening to views and criticism;
- Internet bank First Direct has built an online platform, similar to a social network, which allows customers to share information and ideas with other customers and bank employees;³⁷
- British Gas, one of the 'Big Six' energy companies, has set up a continuous online survey for customers that has received over one million submissions since December 2010.³⁸

What these examples share is a public declaration that organisations care about the day-to-day issues of passengers and encourage consistent, regular, feedback. Passengers notice these values: in

³⁴ *Principles of good complaint handling*, Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman, February 2009

³⁵ *Principles of good complaint handling*, Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman, February 2009

³⁶ John Lewis Partnership Stakeholders section – as accessed in January 2011 - <http://www.johnlewispartnership.co.uk/csr/our-approach/engaging-our-stakeholders.html>

³⁷ First Direct 'Talking Point' – as accessed in January 2011 - http://www.interactive.firstdirect.com/talkingpoint.html?WT.ac=FSDT_HB_TalkingPoint

³⁸ *Annual Consumer Complaints Report 2010/2011*, British Gas, October 2011

2011, both John Lewis³⁹ and First Direct⁴⁰ received awards in their respective industries for customer service excellence.

In addition to continuing to find ways to facilitate dialogue with passengers, TfL should examine ways to shrink the distance between those who manage the strategic vision of the organisation and passengers. Some improvements have been made: TfL now uses new technology from the customer service call centre to provide daily and weekly updates to managers about passenger concerns.

Unfortunately, the Deputy Mayor for Transport said that this information is still not used “systematically” throughout the organisation.

To help ensure this systematic approach in the future, TfL’s Board should receive exceptional customer services reports as part of their monitoring duties. These reports should highlight key recurring complaints and feedback received over monthly or quarterly periods, helping to make the Board more accountable to passengers and improve its oversight of TfL’s activities.

A recent example of where high-level customer service monitoring could have been useful occurred during the launch of the Cycle Hire Scheme in Summer 2010. This Committee first raised the issue of poor customer service at the launch of the Barclay’s Cycle Hire Scheme during our investigation in Autumn 2010. This included: poorly trained staff; personnel overwhelmed with the volume of calls; money being incorrectly taken from customers’ bank accounts; and a poor record at returning calls.⁴¹ In 2010/11, specific complaints about the Serco call centre were four times that of any other service. It took almost a year for TfL to force Serco to make improvements when it issued a Critical Improvement Plan in June 2011.⁴²

The Board has not addressed these concerns in public: no mention of customer service issues are made in reports to the main Board, or in the minutes of the meetings until after the Critical Improvement Plan had been issued. An institutional culture which took complaints more seriously at the highest levels may have done more to put pressure on

³⁹ <http://www.johnlewis.com/Help/Help.aspx?HelpId=4>

⁴⁰ <http://www3.firstdirect.com/ourawards/index-non-flash.shtml>

⁴¹ *Pedal power: the cycle hire scheme and cycle superhighways*, London Assembly Transport Committee, November 2010, page 20

⁴² TfL written submission to the Transport Committee, September 2011

Serco to make improvements earlier in the process and save Londoners, and TfL, a great deal of trouble.

Culture change within an organisation must start at the top and continue down to the day-to-day communications with customers. By engaging more directly with customer service information at Executive and Board level, and examining new ways to get that information, TfL can help to ensure that passenger views are the driver behind future strategic development.

Recommendation 6

TfL should report back by May 2012 on how it plans to increase the amount of information reported to the Board about customer feedback and complaints.

Conclusion

The most important relationship for TfL to maintain is with its passengers. Too often in the past, we have found TfL more interested in the technical side of running such a vast transport network, without the appropriate balance and attention paid to those who actually make use of, and are affected by, its services.

Improving customer service is about more than solving day to day issues: it is also vital to changing the entire ethos of the organisation. The Committee welcomes the steps TfL has taken under Project Horizon to address some of the long standing organisational issues. This report looks to support this work by ensuring that the needs of passengers remain paramount as efficiencies are found throughout the customer service function.

The four principles outlined in this report will help to improve the transparency, accessibility and effectiveness of TfL's customer service. They help to address both the processes needed to maintain daily functions and, perhaps more importantly, ensure that recurring issues are used to drive the strategic direction of TfL's service delivery. This is ultimately something which must come from the top: the TfL Board must ensure that it is more actively involved in monitoring broad customer service issues and that this is followed through at all levels of the organisation.

Maintaining good customer service is of huge benefit to TfL in the long term. Not only does it improve communication between TfL and its most important stakeholders, but also provides the type of ground-level feedback which is vital to the continued improvement of services. By responding to these concerns, TfL can ensure it keeps one foot in the present even as it continues to deliver for the future.

Appendix 1 – Recommendations

Recommendation 1

TfL should report back to the Committee in May 2012 on how it will make it more straightforward for passengers to provide feedback, including: its plans to reduce the number of contact numbers; how it will continue to improve call centre operations to benefit customers; and how it will ensure this information is more easily available to passengers at stations, at bus stops and shelters, and online.

Recommendation 2

By May 2012, TfL should report back on: how it will ensure greater consistency in its responses to customers; and, produce a single Customer Charter for consultation which covers all services and gives specific guarantees about the timescale and quality of its responses.

Recommendation 3

By May 2012, TfL should report back to the Committee on how it will work towards increasing transparency, including: confirming the new set of customer service targets; outlining the proposals for published customer service reports; and any work to extend benchmarking beyond the 'complaints per 100,000 journeys' metric.

Recommendation 4

TfL should report back to the Committee by May 2012 on the development of the 'My TfL' portal, including: how the portal will improve customer service provision for passengers; any study on the opportunity to provide a complaint 'tracking' system; and how TfL can use real-time information to keep passengers informed of general issues.

Recommendation 5

TfL should report back to the Committee by May 2012 on how it will help to support Freedom Pass holders with a low-cost information and complaint handling resource.

Recommendation 6

TfL should report back by May 2012 on how it plans to increase the amount of information reported to the Board about customer feedback and complaints.

Appendix 2 – Stages in the Investigation

The rapporteur, Valerie Shawcross AM, held three meetings for this investigation.

- On October 7th 2011, a meeting was held with Shashi Verma, TfL's Director of Customer Experience, Vernon Everitt, Managing Director of Marketing and Communications, and customer service staff at TfL's customer service call centre in North Greenwich. This meeting also provided the opportunity to observe call centre staff dealing with passenger enquiries.
- On November 25th 2011, a meeting was held with the Deputy Mayor for Transport, Isabel Dedring, to discuss priorities for customer service improvements in the coming year.
- On December 5th 2011, the rapporteur explored emerging issues with representatives from Passenger Focus, including Anthony Smith (Chief Executive), Mike Bartram, Policy Adviser, and David Sidebottom, Passenger Team Director.

The Committee received written views and information from various organisations, including: Transport for London, the Deputy Mayor for Transport and London TravelWatch. Recent casework from London TravelWatch was also examined to determine recurring customer service issues. The views of passengers were solicited through an online survey publicly available from September 2011 to January 2012.

Appendix 3 – Orders and Translations

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Greek

Εάν επιθυμείτε περίληψη αυτού του κειμένου στην γλώσσα σας, παρακαλώ καλέστε τον αριθμό ή επικοινωνήστε μαζί μας στην ανωτέρω ταχυδρομική ή την ηλεκτρονική διεύθυνση.

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Hindi

यदि आपको इस दस्तावेज़ का सारांश अपनी भाषा में चाहिए तो उपर दिये हुए नंबर पर फोन करें या उपर दिये गये डाक पते या ई मेल पते पर हम से संपर्क करें।

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Urdu

اگر آپ کو اس دستاویز کا خلاصہ اپنی زبان میں درکار ہو تو، براہ کرم نمبر پر فون کریں یا مذکورہ بالا ڈاک کے پتے یا ای میل پتے پر ہم سے رابطہ کریں۔

Arabic

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فارجاء الاتصال برقم الهاتف أو الاتصال على
العنوان البريدي العادي أو عنوان البريد
الإلكتروني أعلاه.

Gujarati

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