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Boris Johnson
Chair
Transport for London
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12 March 2009

cc. Peter Hendy, Commissioner
David Brown, Managing Director, Surface Transport

Dear Boris,

Performance of Dial-a-Ride

The Transport Committee were very grateful for the attendance of David Brown and Mike Weston from TfL at Tuesday's Transport Committee. This letter summarises our findings and sets out how we would like TfL to respond.

This is an issue the Transport Committee has been considering for some time. The Committee wrote to Transport for London in March 2008 following an earlier meeting with Dial-a-Ride and other door-to-door transport service users and set out many of the problems users were facing. With your Transport Strategy due out in the coming months, there is now an opportunity to consider the relationships between different providers of door-to-door transport to ensure the most effective service for users.

Regarding Dial-a-Ride, it is disappointing that, based on information from users and Transport for London's own performance data, progress to date on improving service performance have been limited. You will also be aware that the Assembly agreed a motion which showed clearly that Assembly Members from all parties have concerns with the performance of Dial-a-Ride.

We appreciate that operating a service such as Dial-a-Ride is a challenging task. Dial-a-Ride serves users with a range of complex needs and the service is vital to allow them to enjoy the benefits of mobility. Certainly, many Dial-a-Ride users are often pleased with the service they receive. It is important, however, that Transport for London recognises Dial-a-Ride has a number of problems, and has done so for a number of years. The move over the past three years toward a centralised management system has brought with it opportunities to make improvements in service delivery, but we are concerned these opportunities may not have been taken.

At our meeting, the Committee agreed we would write to TfL to express our ongoing concerns about Dial-a-Ride. Dial-a-Ride users from right across London have also brought a variety of issues to our attention. The remainder of the letter sets out the evidence we have received about service delivery in seven areas.

I would like to ask that you instruct TfL to provide an initial written response to the Committee by the end of **June 2009** detailing what steps you are taking to address these issues. This will help to inform future Committee work on Dial-a-Ride and other door-to-door transport services.

1 Availability

A large majority of users (74 per cent) responding to the Committee's survey have found that Dial-a-Ride is sometimes not able to take them to their requested destination. Almost half of respondents said this occurred often. Some attribute this to the recent changes in the booking process, with one user saying that since the move to central booking, *"I have rarely been able to obtain a booking."*

We understand that Dial-a-Ride has finite resources, and will not be able to accept all journey requests. We note, however, that refusals have increased by almost 26,000 in the past three years. Many users have also expressed their frustration that Dial-a-Ride can sometimes only offer them a one-way journey when a return trip has been requested.

We are also concerned at reports that Dial-a-Ride is now limiting the distance of the journeys it will undertake. Users have informed the Committee that journeys they have made regularly in the past are now deemed too long, and are refused. The Dial-a-Ride customer charter states that TfL will "do our best" to satisfy requests for journeys of more than five miles. In our meeting, TfL said Dial-a-Ride could accommodate journeys up to six miles in length. We believe it is not in keeping with the charter to state that journeys of over five miles can be accommodated, but only if they are no more than one mile over this threshold.

2 Efficiency

Dial-a-Ride employs more drivers now than in the past, yet there has been no corresponding increase in the number of journeys completed. Indeed, even though the 'cost per trip' has recently been reduced, it has increased from around £12 to over £20 since 2001/02, suggesting that the service is not being delivered in the most efficient way. The number of staff employed by Dial-a-Ride has increased by 19 per cent over the past three years, even as the number of trips completed has fallen by 11 per cent.

The issue of group bookings illustrates our concerns in this area. We have evidence that, on occasion, several Dial-a-Ride minibuses are used to transport groups of users where one minibus could complete the journey. This may not represent the best value for money, and could have negative implications for congestion and vehicle emissions. As one user told us: *"They use too many vans. Instead of taking a few home in the one van, it is a case of four people, four vans. This happens often."* Almost half of respondents to our survey (47 per cent) with more than one Dial-a-Ride user in their household told the Committee that they had found it difficult to book journeys for groups or pairs.

3 Flexibility

It is clearly advantageous if Dial-a-Ride is able to build a degree of flexibility into its service provision. The submissions we received suggest that the service has become

much more rigid recently, especially as the new computerised booking system has been in operation at the management control centre. The technology can offer a range of benefits but over-reliance on it may be the source of problems.

The Committee has heard that human judgement may be missing from the way Dial-a-Ride schedules journeys. At the meeting we learned of one instance where a man was offered a Dial-a-Ride trip, but his wife was refused for the same journey. Having a sufficient level of local knowledge is also vital to providing a quality service, but the changes introduced during the centralisation process may mean this is lacking.

4 Punctuality

Many Dial-a-Ride users are disappointed that minibuses sometimes do not arrive at the allotted time. 65 per cent of respondents to the Committee's survey have experienced Dial-a-Ride minibuses being significantly late (20 minutes or more) when coming to collect them, with over a quarter of our respondents saying this was a regular occurrence. Other users have told the Committee that the minibuses arrive too early, sometimes by up to an hour.

5 Booking process

The telephone booking process has been criticised by users. We note the figures provided by Transport for London suggesting that average call waiting times have fallen, although this does not appear to correspond with the evidence we have from users. Over two-thirds of respondents to the Committee's survey said they have waited at least 10 minutes before speaking to an operator when telephoning the Dial-a-Ride call centre, or not had their call answered at all. Over half said they often experienced a wait of this length, with some users stating that they could wait up to an hour to get through. TfL's own figures indicate that only 48% of calls to Dial-a-Ride are answered at the first attempt.

6 User satisfaction

As we discussed at the meeting, there is some discrepancy between the results of the Committee's survey of around 200 Dial-a-Ride users – which are enclosed for your information – and the customer satisfaction ratings published by TfL. 40 per cent of respondents to our survey rated the performance of Dial-a-Ride service as poor or very poor overall. 37 per cent rate the service as good or very good, with the remainder rating service performance as fair.

In our meeting, we asked for some clarification about how TfL obtains its customer satisfaction figures for Dial-a-Ride. We understand that around 600 Dial-a-Ride members are surveyed by telephone every quarter. We would like to know whether the views of members who have not used Dial-a-Ride in that period are incorporated. We especially feel that members who have attempted to obtain a journey but been unsuccessful should also be surveyed.

It also appears from your survey results that the overall satisfaction figure is derived from an aggregation of user responses to specific questions such as 'vehicle cleanliness' and 'smoothness of ride'. This might not be the right approach to understanding how satisfied users are with the provision of the service overall; it may mask serious difficulties users experience with the Dial-a-Ride call centre and the scheduling of journeys. We would be grateful if TfL could provide the Committee with the questions currently asked in the survey.

7 Consultation

There are concerns that Dial-a-Ride does not consult with its users to a sufficient degree when deciding on ways the service might be changed. Local Area Panels had been reduced in frequency to just twice a year, we have heard. Evidence we received at the meeting also suggested there was a lack of consultation regarding the design of the new Dial-a-Ride minibuses: users have expressed concerns about the buses, but the consultation with users and drivers seems to have taken place on a single day, where consultees had to be present in person to have their views heard.

The Transport Committee is certain that these and other issues need to be addressed if progress against your own goals is to be made. We trust that Transport for London will use evidence received by the Committee as part of a thorough review of its management of the Dial-a-Ride service. A comprehensive action plan to rectify the problems identified should be developed.

On a wider basis, the Committee will be considering options for future work on door-to-door transport including the interaction between Dial-a-Ride, Taxicard, borough community transport, and transport services delivered by health providers. We hope we can work with you and TfL to ensure improvements to these services.

I look forward to your response.

Yours Sincerely,

Valerie Shawcross AM

Chair of the Transport Committee