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Dear Valerie,

Performance of Dial-a-Ride

Thank you for sending me a copy of your letter of 12 March 2009 to the Mayor. I am responding on the Mayor's behalf.

As I outlined during our session on 10 March, TfL recognises the importance of the Dial-a-Ride service and we are determined to further improve its performance. There has been a great deal of change within Dial-a-Ride over the last few years, mostly involving the formation of a new centralised booking and scheduling centre. This led to a number of technical difficulties which were very disruptive and as a result Dial-a-Ride users have been inconvenienced. We have understood and shared the frustrations of our customers during this time.

Dial-a-Ride is a hugely important service which our users rely on. We realise that if the service does not function correctly then the social mobility of our customers could be reduced. This is a tremendous responsibility which we take very seriously indeed. I want Dial-a-Ride users to feel that they can rely on the service; if that is not the case then we need to find solutions.

The Committee's scrutiny was useful in highlighting to us a number of areas of dissatisfaction that some of our users have. We are working on resolving these and I will go on to explain the initiatives we have in hand. I think it important that Dial-a-Ride customers see a complete picture, and I hope that the Committee recognise that there have been successes in addition to the difficulties. For example, during 2008/09 there has been a 5% increase in the number of Dial-a-Ride trips compared to 2007/08. We also achieved the lowest level of trip cancellations, due to operational reasons, than at any time since Dial-a-Ride has been part of TfL, at 0.3%.

The Dial-a-Ride service does present challenges. The number of drivers and vehicles is limited and there will be occasions when we are simply unable to

meet every trip request we receive. I extend an invitation to all of the Committee Members to see these challenges for themselves, and visit our Management Control Centre (MCC). I will ask Andrew Miles, TfL's Scrutiny Activity Manager, to contact the Committee secretariat to organise such a visit.

I will turn now to the specific issues the Committee raised, and adopt your own subject headings for ease of reference.

1. Availability

The formation of the MCC allows us to apply consistent service standards and access across London, thereby making the best and fairest use of the limited Dial-a-Ride resources available. However the disruption from the centralisation project has adversely impacted on trip fulfilment in recent years. Now that this project is complete we are focused on reducing the number of trips we are unable to accommodate across London. We currently accept over 91% of trips requested.

Demand can become peaked and at busy times it can be difficult to satisfy every request we receive. Particular peaks in many parts of London are weekday afternoons between 2pm and 4pm when social clubs start and finish. Shopping trips on Thursday and Friday mornings at around 9am are also popular. In most cases a return journey is the users' preferred or essential requirement and wherever possible we do try to achieve this. Where resources are already committed a one way trip is offered, giving the customer the option to make other arrangements for the other journey, such as via Taxicard. The evidence from the Committee was that this approach was not considered helpful. We will therefore canvass users' opinions on the subject.

During 2008 we have increasingly encouraged our customers to consider alternative days/times when booking non-time critical journeys. During the coming year, and with the benefit of robust management information, we will be introducing targeted publicity to promote flexibility for travel arrangements. We expect this to increase our trip fulfilment rates further.

Dial-a-Ride is predominantly a multi-occupancy local service but as per our Charter we endeavour to satisfy requests for journeys of more than five miles wherever possible. Such journeys however are normally made by only a single passenger and commit a vehicle and driver for significant periods with a resultant reduction in availability for other users. We strive to find the right balance when allocating our resources.

2. Efficiency

You raised concerns that the number of drivers employed by Dial-a-Ride has increased without a corresponding increase in the number of journeys operated. In previous years there has been a shortage of Dial-a-Ride drivers so that a much greater proportion of trips were undertaken by taxi than is the case today. Dial-a-Ride drivers are trained to a BTEC standard with an

emphasis on providing transport services for elderly and disabled people. With the recruitment of these staff there has been an 85% reduction in the use of private hire services whose staff are generally not similarly trained. Another factor contributing to changes in the number of trips per driver shift includes the move away from group bookings to enhancing independent travel opportunities for all users.

We recognise that during the migration process there were far too many instances of multiple vehicles arriving at a pick up point. Following resolution of many of the computer system problems we have been actively addressing this issue to ensure it only occurs where it is in the interests of consistent service standards or is operationally more efficient, taking account of other trip demands. Wherever possible we seek to “lock” regular journeys to/from a location as one group. Other users however may only wish to undertake the same journey on an occasional basis and it may not then be practical to include them with the usual group of regulars. Our booking system provides a daily report to show instances where multiple vehicles are scheduled to serve a particular destination simultaneously. This report is reviewed to ensure that the scheduling is valid.

3. Flexibility

The introduction of the MCC has in fact increased flexibility for Dial-a-Ride users. Prior to its introduction, trips were scheduled according to how well they suited operational schedules. Subject to availability trips can now be booked in real-time as they are requested.

Delivery of consistent service standards can mean that we are not always able to identify an automatic solution to a booking request. Where we receive a request for a trip from two or more passengers travelling from the same address and an automatic solution isn't found then the Reservationist taking the booking would refer it to the scheduling team for manual scheduling.

We find that the majority of users travel to/from the same personal locations. Our booking system holds these as “favourites” in a user's personal profile which can be accessed by the Reservationist at the time of booking. As customers migrated to centralised booking this profile has had to be populated either from the data bank of 20,000 common locations in the system or by clarifying details with users.

I have explained under point 5 below how the introduction of new technology will enable us to increase the local knowledge of Reservationists.

4. Punctuality

Dial-a-Ride's service standards are challenging compared to some other door to door services. Our Customer Charter confirms our target for Dial-a-Ride buses to arrive within +/- 15 minutes of the agreed pick up time. Although current systems do not allow this to be monitored automatically we use

Mystery Traveller and Customer Satisfaction Surveys to monitor our customers' satisfaction with this aspect of the service. The most recent Customer Satisfaction Survey indicates that users' satisfaction with the punctuality of vehicles is high (at 90 out of 100 points) and rising.

We will continue to strive to improve reliability and minimise the impact of external factors (e.g. local congestion arising from a road accident) on our timekeeping.

5. Booking Process

Although as you say our own figures show that the performance of the Dial-a-Ride call centre has improved, it is naturally a concern that this appears not to be reflected in the experience of some users. You might recall that statistics gathered from integral call centre telephony tools indicate that for the Next Day & Advance booking line, calls took on average 106 seconds to answer in January 2009, compared to 224 seconds in January 2008. Around 48% of calls to this line were answered within 60 seconds in January 09, compared to 20.47% in January 2008.

We recognise that it is important to answer calls as quickly as possible and we are introducing new 'Voice over Internet Protocol' technology to our call centre to improve this aspect of our performance even further. The new technology will allow us to deliver a range of initiatives to our call centre, including:

- Allowing Reservationists to work from home during peak hours to increase our ability to answer calls. This would also allow Dial-a-Ride to employ more people with disabilities.
- Introducing "self service" telephony features for those users who are comfortable with such facilities. This will be especially beneficial for automatic passenger generated cancellations (nearly 1 in 8 booked trips) and those enquiring about previously booked trips.
- Telephone number recognition to facilitate a degree of localisation for Reservationists. The telephone system could automatically direct calls from one area to a particular Reservationist. This would allow Reservationists to 'specialise' in a particular area and enhance their local knowledge of it.
- Provide opportunities for enhanced queue management information for callers including, for example, approximate time to wait for a Reservationist.

Detailed design of this new system is underway and is due for introduction by the end of March 2010.

We are also continuing to explore the potential use of the internet to book journeys.

6. User Satisfaction

I wrote to you on 27 March 2009 to confirm how TfL undertakes Customer Satisfaction and Mystery Traveller surveys, and to explain how we take into account the views of users who have not recently used Dial-a-Ride. I also provided copies of the questionnaires used in the surveys.

As you know, every quarter, GfK/NoP survey 600 randomly-selected passengers who travelled with Dial-a-Ride in the week prior to the survey being conducted. This survey assesses these users' satisfaction with the trip they most recently made. There is, however, additional research conducted to measure the performance of the service from the point of view of users who may not have been successful in booking a trip. Every six months we produce a Mystery Traveller Survey Report, through which we measure the total experiences of a group of mystery travellers in booking and undertaking trips. This includes mystery travellers recording their experiences of the booking process whether or not they had been successful in booking the trip they had wished to make. During our last Mystery Traveller Survey Report, 88% of the bookings requested by the travellers were accepted at the time of their call (56 calls out of 64); with three bookings confirmed later during a follow-up call from a Dial-a-Ride operator. During the previous survey, 65% of bookings requested were accepted at the time of the call.

Further to this, and approximately every two years, we survey a sample of users who are registered with Dial-a-Ride but who have not travelled either because they have not requested a journey or because their request(s) have been unsuccessful. We call this the 'non-active user survey' and are undertaking one currently. Results are expected in early May and I would be happy to share these with the Transport Committee. It is designed to inform my officers and our stakeholders the reasons which have resulted in users not using the Dial-a-Ride service and highlight any barriers that may exist. Our last survey was conducted in December 2006 and it found that the most common reasons for not using Dial-a-Ride relate to personal circumstances such as deteriorating health, or that users were using other forms of transport or simply had no need to travel.

Having had the opportunity to study this information, I hope the Committee agrees that TfL's surveys are robust and comprehensive.

7. Consultation

We recognise the importance of consultation with users in developing the Dial-a-Ride service. We are in fact increasing the scope of our activity in this area and are doing so with the support of our customers. For example, we previously held Local Area Panels three times a year. This will now be reduced to two meetings a year with the sole intention that we can use our existing resources to widen our engagement to groups who have not previously been represented.

The Committee was concerned specifically about what consultation there had been with users prior to the introduction of new Dial-a-Ride minibuses. For over a year prior to commencement of tendering a supplier we consulted with a range of users and stakeholders on initial specifications for the new vehicle. This involved setting up four discussion groups with users and specialist researchers travelling on existing vehicles. Tenders produced a shortlist of suitable vehicle types which were then presented to users and drivers. The pre production model of the selected vehicle was then subject to further scrutiny and comment by a group including Dial-a-Ride drivers before the final specification was confirmed.

I hope this is useful and I look forward to continuing to work with the Committee.

Yours sincerely

David Brown
Managing Director – Surface Transport