

London Assembly Transport Committee – 10 July 2019

Transcript of Item 7 – London's Transport Now and in the Future

Florence Eshalomi AM (Chair): I will ask our guests from London TravelWatch to come down, please. I welcome our two additional guests for this last session, which we will keep quite brief: Joanna Simons, who is the Interim Chief Executive of London TravelWatch, and Arthur Leathley, who is the Chair of the London TravelWatch. Can I ask Joanna and Arthur to briefly introduce to the Committee your updated progress report?

Arthur Leathley (Chair, London TravelWatch): Thank you, Chair. I know time is short. Very briefly, I wanted to say that since we last came there has been a lot of change within London TravelWatch. We have had a new Board constituted with three new members. They have brought a new dynamic to London TravelWatch in terms of focusing on the customer. That has helped us develop a new relationship with yourselves. I know we have had meetings with both yourselves and members of your staff, which has been very important.

As you also know, Janet Cooke [former Chief Executive, London TravelWatch] left in April [2019] after 11 years with London TravelWatch. We have moved very quickly from that. Joanna Simons, who will speak in a moment, has hit the ground running in terms of working with our team and with our staff during an unsettled period. It has needed some work to work with staff, but it has been very important to get them to think in a way that involves the [Transport] Committee here but also other partners organisations. Joanna will talk a little bit more about that.

I would like to voice my appreciation of the support that the Committee has given in recent months. There has been a lot of change and your work with us has been extremely helpful, so thank you for that.

Looking forward – Joanna will mention a little bit about this – clearly we want to expand that relationship with yourselves in a meaningful way that works for transport users. It is absolutely key that anything we do has a meaningful impact. The work with yourselves in terms of particular programmes of work, prioritising, but also working with other partner organisations such as Transport Focus and others to really develop our knowledge so that we can bring immediate improvements.

I will not say anything more for the moment. I am sure you will have questions, but I would like to introduce Joanna, if I may, who will go into a bit more detail.

Joanna Simons (Interim Chief Executive, London TravelWatch): Thanks very much, Arthur, and thank you again, if I could echo the thanks to the help that we have received from the staff thus far. We have a little bit of a way to go, but I am very confident that by the end of this financial year we will have some very strong links in place at officer level to make sure that the joint planning is carried forward in a better way in the future.

If I could highlight three issues in relation to the report, again mindful of time, firstly, it is important that we have a big focus in future on the arrangements in the existing memorandum of understanding. There has been some misinterpretation in the past, and our requirement to have an independence from operators has rather unfortunately got misinterpreted and led to some distance appearing between some of the team and the

Committee. That is something we are absolutely committed to putting right. What we want to see in the future is that we become a resource, particularly with the specialist knowledge that some of the staff had that we can feed into future work here. I thought very much, listening to the previous debate, there is a lot more we can do, particularly around buses.

Secondly, briefly, to improve resilience, one of the recommendations the Committee has made in the past has been for us to look at ways to reduce duplication, particularly in relation to rail consultation work with Transport Focus. The Board has taken this a little bit further and we are now proposing a strategic partnership that will enable us to streamline the back office. We do have cost pressures at the moment, and the only way we can tackle those is by minimising behind the scenes the joint work that we do, reducing duplication, because the really important thing is making sure that our policy and casework team has more time to spend on the very specific nature of London issues. The report does go into detail about the proposals in relation to the partnership. I am very happy to take questions.

Again, I am very mindful of time. Finally, in terms of current priorities, we appreciate the difficulties last year with the previous business plan. Clearly work is needed to continue this year, and in addition to the general business as usual we have highlighted a few measures of current activity. I would particularly draw your attention to the bus safety research. What this has been doing is to look at occupant safety on buses. In many ways these are very small-scale problems that happen for people, but they are particularly vulnerable people that suffer. There have been a whole range of different recommendations coming out of this. I am pleased to say the team is talking to some of your scrutiny officers in a week or two about the detail. We are very hopeful that some of these can be taken forward and will form part of our future work programme over the next couple of years.

Other than that, the rest of the report is fairly self-explanatory but clearly we are very happy to take questions on any aspect.

Florence Eshalomi AM (Chair): Thank you. Were there any questions from Members? No. The only thing I wanted to flag up is to thank you for the progress. It is good to see a lot more focus in terms of London TravelWatch's purpose and your aims and that closer collaboration and making sure there is not the duplication.

One thing I did want to pick up on is this proposal for a joint Chief Executive arrangement with Transport Focus. I understand that was mentioned, but now it seems like it will be a firm proposal with the Chief Executive of Transport Focus taking the interim role first.

Joanna Simons (Interim Chief Executive, London TravelWatch): Yes. The intention behind it - obviously subject to approval by this Committee and also the sponsoring body for Transport Focus - would be to enable us to reduce the cost of that top level of management. The difficulty for somebody, and I am doing the post at the moment, running a very small organisation, is there is a disproportionate focus on things like the necessary corporate governance. I have been spending a lot of time recently on the budget and with the auditors, and this detracts from having time to be where it really counts, which is the work in relation to specific transport-related activity. The intention would be - I am here on an interim basis - that we would have a shared arrangement similarly to many local authorities and health trusts that have been doing this recently. Some of those bigger-picture things would be partially taken up by Anthony [Smith, Chief Executive, Transport Focus] but it would free up resources to enable us to have more dedicated focus and concentration on working closely with you. Very briefly --

Florence Eshalomi AM (Chair): What are the timescales for that, please?

Joanna Simons (Interim Chief Executive, London TravelWatch): Subject to your approval, we would be putting that into place to start towards the end of this financial year [2019/20].

Florence Eshalomi AM (Chair): OK.

Joanna Simons (Interim Chief Executive, London TravelWatch): Following through in terms of the next bit of business planning, we will be in touch with your relevant group policy leads over the next coming week to make sure that we are feeding into relevant thinking for Assembly Members in the next iteration of the plan.

Florence Eshalomi AM (Chair): Great. That is something we will discuss further. OK, great. Thank you very much.

Joanna Simons (Interim Chief Executive, London TravelWatch): Much appreciated. Thank you.