

London Assembly Transport Committee – 9 October 2019

Transcript of Item 5 - London TravelWatch Business Plan and Budget Bid 2020-21

Florence Eshalomi AM (Chair): Welcome to our first guests for this session, we have Arthur Leathley, who is the Chair of London TravelWatch, we have Joanna Simons, who is the interim Chief Executive, and we have Anthony Smith, who is the Chief Executive of Transport Focus.

Colleagues may be aware that over a year ago we, as a Transport Committee, formally rejected the London TravelWatch Business Plan because we had a number of concerns and we felt that the content was not to the standard which we would expect. There have been a number of changes in the TravelWatch organisation. Joanna has come in as an interim executive, and we have a much stronger, more robust Business Plan, looking at the strong direction of travel for the organisation with clearer outputs. This morning we have been asked to approve an increase of a budget bid of £98,000 just to help TravelWatch with some urgent budgetary costs.

I just wanted to get a quick update from Joanna and Arthur in terms of the Business Plan, and then we have some short questions from the Committee.

Arthur Leathley (Chair, London TravelWatch): Thank you very much, Chair. As you say, it has been a year of considerable change, and we have had a close working relationship with yourselves during the year. You have seen the result of a lot of work, particularly by Joanna and her team, in preparing the Business Plan.

I just really wanted to say that we at London TravelWatch now are very much focused on a closer working relationship with yourselves, and I think that is already showing through in terms of work with officers. That will continue, and I hope we can improve that relationship. There has also been a change in the views of the Board itself. We have three new members of the Board, who have come in with a very much consumer-focused interest, and that is showing through in this Business Plan in terms of the rigour with which it has been discussed. There has been some real change in the way that we are focusing much more on the user, rather than the industry itself. I am sure there will be the opportunity to discuss that a bit further. There have been achievements during the year, despite a lot of change. I am sure Joanna can talk through that if you have the opportunity and time for that.

Going forward, we do want to do a lot more campaigning, again focused on the user, looking at bus use, accessibility, and indeed some of the unfairness that is within the rail industry in terms of fares, penalty fares, etc. There is a lot of work, and some of this is contained in the business plan today.

It was really just an opportunity to introduce Anthony Smith as Chief Executive of Transport Focus. We are going to do a lot of work with Transport Focus going forward, and that is going to give us a much richer opportunity to really represent the user in terms of research, evidence, and then actually achieving benefits for users around London.

Florence Eshalomi AM (Chair): Great.

Joanna Simons (Chief Executive, London TravelWatch): If I could just carry on a little bit, thank you very much, Arthur. If I could firstly start by thanking everybody at the Assembly, Assembly Members have been very helpful – bearing in mind the history – in sharing with us your concerns, and hopefully we have reflected some of that direction of travel in the report. I would also very much like to place on record my thanks to Ed Williams [Executive Director, Assembly Secretariat] and his team – obviously Daniella [Dávila Aquije] and Grace [Pollard] are here, and David [Pealing] – and all the other staff and your own support staff. We found it incredibly useful to get some steers back from them, and I hope you are beginning to see that connection. Overall, above everything else, we want to be useful to the Assembly, and I think we do recognise that has not been the case previously. I hope that whoever is sitting here this time next year will feel that we have been both useful and helpful and have got things done for transport users as a specialist resource for you as a Transport Committee.

Moving forward, in terms of the Business Plan, what we have tried to do this year is to take a different approach. I think it is completely fair to say – I almost hate to say this – that previously we got a bit too much into waffle. We have not been clear enough about outcomes. What we have tried to do is to be more honest about telling our story. We are a small organisation, but we have a strong history in terms of the evidence base research that has been carried out over the last few years. We may have lost a bit of direction previously, but there is a lot of good work there for the future. In this plan what we have tried to do is to show you a little bit about the day-to-day work that is ongoing, that carries on year-on-year, and every year we make some progress. Last year we were particularly proud of a number of things.

On a wider basis, the work that we contributed to in terms of the ticket office closures, we were really pleased to see that so many of them remained open after the consultation process. That is an example of some of the bigger-picture things that we can do, working much more in partnership with the Assembly and the Great London Authority (GLA).

Then, very practically, there are a couple of things that are real grassroots, nitty-gritty things. For example, at the London terminals you no longer have to find 30 pence if you want to go to the loo. That might sound like a mad thing, but having 20 pence and 10 pence and being able to use that machine, and you are in a rush -- I know it sounds crazy, but these are the kinds of things that people do not always think about. That stuff is really important.

We are also really proud of pushing Transport for London (TfL) a little bit so that we now have the red vests. If you want to get some assistance, that is clear. Then, just playing into the Healthy Streets agenda, which is really important for us, on the Tube map you now have walking distances. If you do not know the layout of London, it is a fantastic thing, the Tube map, but we all know that some of these places are really close. Now you can look and see, and I hope that that is helping people to have more active lives.

I hope what you see in here is the flavour of some of the ongoing work that we are doing, going back to those first consumer principles, which is where we came from 20 years ago. There is a strong setting out at the beginning of this, and I think we want to come back to that. It is fairly timely now. The Mayor's Strategy is looking ahead for the next 20 years, so we want to really be part of that solution.

Getting into that, Anthony [Smith] is going to talk a little bit about the future, but a key strand of making us more resourceful is coming together with more of a shared service arrangement with our sister organisation, Transport Focus. We have a different geography, a different focus in that sense, but we are dealing with many of the same issues. It just seems completely crazy that we are not trying to make best use of resources. Some of that is going to take a little bit of time. For example, we want to co-locate. At the moment our lease holds us for a period. There are a number of things. We are going to be streamlining back office. We have taken some hard decisions. Our finances have had a thorough review. I know that we are asking for some more money to get us through, but we are actually doing things to put our own house in order and we are making redundancies at the moment. Obviously, that is a tricky thing for the staff concerned. We are quite a small team. It is important that we do try to demonstrate the best possible value for money, because we are very mindful that we are funded by the public sector in a very tight time, and people out there deserve to know they have the most efficient service that can possibly be there and the most useful one.

I will hand over to Anthony to talk a bit about the future.

Anthony Smith (Chief Executive, Transport Focus): Thank you, Chair. As the independent statutory watchdog for Britain's transport users, Transport Focus already has a lot of experience in working in Scotland, Wales, Manchester and Liverpool across all sorts of modes of transport: bus, coach, tram and rail. I think that strong base will be very helpful in our ongoing partnership with London TravelWatch. We have built Transport Focus as a consumer organisation. It is there to stick up for the users of all these forms of transport. We believe in choice and helping people to access better choices in terms of transport. Our aim is to be useful. We have no powers. We do not want any powers, because other people have those. Our job is to influence those that make decisions and who really hold a lot of power over our everyday lives and the transport we depend on.

Crucially, we have a very strong evidence base. We spend a third of our budget on talking to transport users about their current experiences and about their priorities for improvement for the future. We can deploy a lot of that research much more usefully in and around London than perhaps we have been able to do in the past.

The aim of all this activity is to make a difference. At the end of the day, we are not a think-tank. TravelWatch is not a think-tank. The job is to make transport better so that transport users have a better experience, as simple as that. There is lots of good, joined-up work already going on. We are very conscious of the need to preserve the separate accountabilities and identities of the two organisations going forward. That is obviously very important. Adding the two together creates more than the sum of its parts. It is a very powerful, exciting opportunity.

At the end of the year, we will come and ask all of you, "Is London TravelWatch now more useful to you in your role than it was 12 months ago?" I hope you will all be able to say yes. I am not going to say a majority vote, but I hope you are all going to say yes, because you have a very important task in scrutinising what is happening in and around London. We and TravelWatch can really help you do that, I think, in an effective way, based upon evidence and powerful advocacy, and hopefully an increased presence in the media, and social media presence in particular. I think it is a very exciting opportunity. I am very much looking forward to this, and it is going to be interesting.

Florence Eshalomi AM (Chair): Thank you all for that introduction. For Assembly Members who have been in the Assembly prior to my election in 2016, this has been on the cards for quite a while. I was reminded by Assembly Member [Caroline] Pidgeon that it has been ten years. We have finally got there in terms of this proposed closer working relationship with London TravelWatch and Transport Focus, which used to be called Passenger Focus.

Joanna and Anthony, you touched on quite a number of key elements of the Business Plan going forward. Obviously one of the things we have been looking at on the Committee is the future of transport in London now, and the fact that London continues to grow and there continue to be increasing pressures. Transport Focus having that national remit is fantastic. It will bring some additional benefits to us. How are we going to ensure that the new director role will be enough to ensure that London's separate remit within the closer working relationship with TravelWatch and Transport Focus is not subsumed within the work that you are going to be doing going forward?

Joanna Simons (Chief Executive, London TravelWatch): Perhaps if I can start with that, and Anthony can just carry on. I think it is an incredibly important question. It is something that is really very much in the minds of everybody at TravelWatch.

There are a couple of very practical things that we are planning to do. The first one is to revise the Memorandum of Understanding that we have between London TravelWatch and the Assembly, and that is really the guiding force for how we do business, or rather it should be. Sadly, sometimes in the past, if we had lived up to that, we perhaps would not have been where we have been in the last few years, but for the future, it already has a lot of good substance. Obviously, subject to decisions of Members today, the plan will be to amend that to add things in to completely tie that back in in terms of that reporting accountability.

In terms of recruitment, the plan is that this will be a recruitment that is carried out jointly. We hope, Chair, that you will be able to be part of the panel that appoints the new director. That is really important, because for whoever is appointed you have to feel comfortable that this is a person that can work for you. This new person will be the key link person with the Assembly. Anthony will talk a bit more about that. We are also making sure that it is clearly written into the job description and specification. Of course, the monitoring is going to be very important, both by the TravelWatch Board - and Arthur [Leathley] may want to say something about that - but also back here, via the secretariat, back to yourselves as the Transport Committee. It is an incredibly important question and one that is very much in everyone's minds.

Anthony Smith (Chief Executive, Transport Focus): There is a very clear need for prioritisation here in the work plan. You need a sense of what you are getting for the money that you are spending at London TravelWatch. We have a very effective time-recording system whereby we can track and predict use of time. At the outset of the year, we just need to be very clear with you, "This is the number of hours that you have purchased, this is where we intend to spend this money at London TravelWatch, this is what the aim is, these are what the results are". A very tight work plan is very key to that. Obviously, events always happen which blow you off course, but we will start at the beginning of the year, I hope, with a much better sense of priorities which are much better matched to what you are trying to achieve with your own work plan.

Arthur Leathley (Chair, London TravelWatch): I would just like to add, Chair, as Joanna [Simons] mentioned, about the Board. It is key that the Board is separate from the Transport Focus Board, although I am a member of the Transport Focus Board, but that is the link. In terms of recruitment, in terms of holding that person to account, absolutely that will be the role of the London TravelWatch Board.

Caroline Pidgeon MBE AM (Deputy Chair): Maybe we could just ask the secretariat to make sure we have a robust system in place to ensure that we are monitoring it.

Florence Eshalomi AM (Chair): Monitoring, yes. If we note in the minutes that we would want Ed Williams in his role as Executive Director to monitor that and report back to the Transport Committee.

Caroline Pidgeon MBE AM (Deputy Chair): We ought to just make sure we have a clear process on that.

I do not know who would like to answer, but it might be Joanna [Simons] and Arthur, or Anthony [Smith] might want to answer the second half. Can you outline for us three successes you have had in the last year and three areas perhaps you want to focus on in the coming year? I think I asked this last year and I did not really get an answer, so I am hoping, Arthur, to hear some clearer --

Arthur Leathley (Chair, London TravelWatch): Shall I start with the successes? Joanna has touched on a couple of these, and I think they are important and very visible successes, and a mix really of the short-term and the long-term. Joanna mentioned about the free toilets at major stations. That was quite a short-term campaign. We spoke to Network Rail. We said, "This is an unfair system", particularly as people could not use toilets on trains. Quite quickly, Network Rail said, "Yes, we can see the purpose behind that". That was quite a short-term one.

In the longer term, we have campaigned for some time about the visibility of staff at stations. That has been an important issue for users. There has been some resistance to that over two or three years, but we kept hammering away at this, and I think we have seen the success of that as a result of the report that we had for the Mayor about better use of staff and better visibility of staff.

Then we have also had the broader success in terms of what we are doing at station ticket offices. That was a very important announcement in terms of 51 ticket offices closing. We pulled together all the evidence. A lot of evidence for much of that came from Members of the Committee. We said, "This is not going to serve the user well", and, as a result of that, 47 of those ticket offices are remaining open. I think those have been real achievements for users in the last year.

Caroline Pidgeon MBE AM (Deputy Chair): In terms of the uniform point, are you sure at every station the staff are wearing the tabards, and are you doing any monitoring of that?

Arthur Leathley (Chair, London TravelWatch): Yes, and Joanna may want to say more.

Joanna Simons (Chief Executive, London TravelWatch): We do. We have some mystery shopping and spot-checking. We obviously cannot be everywhere all the time, but we do deploy our staff out

there. I think one of the things in the future we need to be a bit smarter about is whether there are other mechanisms. One of the great things about working with Anthony's [Smith] team is the Transport User Panel membership it already has in London. It is much more substantial than ours is. We need to just use the resources that are there and ask the questions and get the voice of the people coming back to us. Just a few staff going out there every so often is all very well, but there are much more modern ways of doing these things now. We will have access to much better resources in the future.

Caroline Pidgeon MBE AM (Deputy Chair): Going forward, we have a much clearer idea of some of your priorities, but what are the three things you hope to focus on in the next year? I do not know whether that is Arthur [Leathley] or Anthony [Smith].

Joanna Simons (Chief Executive, London TravelWatch): If I could pick up, and then Anthony will add some things in, if I can talk about three areas, there are probably more than three things. The first thing, the internal focusing bit, is to get our house in order and to be absolutely certain we have got it nailed, you are happy, and we have sorted the partnership and all the rest of it. That is a given. It is easy not to say it, but it is really important because we need to be demonstrating that. It is partly value for money, but also getting the culture right between the two organisations. If we do not get that right and the relationships right, then everything else is made of sand. We have seen that with the relationships not working previously.

In terms of externally facing, we need very much better use of the transport user's voice. One of the great things that is available at the moment that has never been properly utilised is the National Rail Passenger Survey. It covers London, but has it ever been something that has come back here and we have utilised it in a broader way? We are currently talking about the questions for next year to see whether or not - and the answer is yes - those can be slightly tailored to be a bit more London-specific. For example, in terms of payment types, having Freedom Pass in there, making sure on the disability/accessibility side we are a bit more specific. Showing that back and utilising this is incredibly important. Anthony may want to say a little bit more in the future.

In terms of that more external-facing policy and campaigning, there are two big campaigns. I know this is more than three. One is the work that has come from people in our team on penalty fares, when it has become clear that the operators have been misinterpreting the regulations. People are being overcharged. Somebody in our little casework team sussed this a few months ago, and it is now something that is out there. The Department for Transport (DfT): the letter was rather pathetic - sorry, that is being minuted - that we got back from them the other day. Things are starting to happen with some of the operators. It may be that is all done and dusted this year, but I fear that will go into next year. We need to keep hold of that. The delay and repay: at the moment I think it is 35% of people are claiming. That is way too low. Together, that is something that is really meaningful, particularly at a time of economic difficulty for everybody. That just feels incredibly important. I am stealing Anthony's thunder.

Anthony Smith (Chief Executive, Transport Focus): Three examples, Chair. The delay and repay campaign is a very important thing. All of our research shows and all of your knowledge will back up the fact that people want reliable transport networks. That is the key thing we want. We want the timetable. That is what we have paid for. Getting people to claim the compensation that is due to

them is really, really important because it sends a very clear message to the industry about how important this is. We have started a campaign encouraging people to claim, and also, underneath that, trying to make it easier to claim. Some of the claims processes are Byzantine, to put it mildly. They are very complicated. We are really using that consumer power to reach into the transport industry.

On buses, for example, we have done a lot of work on buses and young people's attitudes to bus use. Members will be aware that bus use outside of London is pretty much declining as well, with some good patches, but it is generally declining. If we are all going to use more sustainable forms of transport, you have to nudge people into bus use in particular. The research we have done around that can be helpful to TravelWatch and to TfL possibly as well. We have just launched a big campaign in the West Midlands, which Andy Street [CBE, Mayor of the West Midlands] came to and kicked off in Wolverhampton about, "Give bus a go", and really finding out what people's experiences are day-to-day.

On roads, the work we do with Highways England, there has been a lot of work around helping Highways England understand the impact of roadworks on users, and getting them to clear them up quicker, get them done quicker, tell people what is happening. "When is it going to be finished?" Investment is great, but when it disrupts your daily drive, it is not great. There are a lot of roadworks around London, I notice. There are lots of those areas.

Longer-term, you will be conscious, and Members will be aware, of the [Keith] Williams Rail Review that the Government is currently conducting into the structure of the rail industry. We have had a huge input into that, making sure it is passenger- and user-focused, and I think in time that will produce lots of benefits.

Caroline Pidgeon MBE AM (Deputy Chair): Lovely. Thank you very much.

Florence Eshalomi AM (Chair): Thank you.

Shaun Bailey AM: Just to go back to the joining of two organisations, in one sense we are going to have a loss of capacity because you said you are making redundancies, but we are looking to take on this director. Are we gaining capacity by losing these people but taking on this director because we will have less people? I am concerned that we have a national organisation that seems very well organised. Are we going to get lost because we just will not have enough bodies to do what you are meant to be doing?

Joanna Simons (Chief Executive, London TravelWatch): That is a really good question, Assembly Member. If I can answer that in several ways, I think it is important that there is somebody at the senior level. One of the important things about making sure the voice is not lost is that there is somebody who is credible enough to work with senior people here, work with others and be credible within TfL. If you just have sent somebody in a junior role, with the best will in the world, they are not necessarily going to get the doors opened in the right kind of way. That is important. In two or three or four years' time, when things are perhaps in a different place, you might want to revisit that. I think everyone is going to be absolutely open in terms of doing that.

We are reducing in terms of staff. We have started by basically stripping away anything left in terms of admin resource we have. What we are getting is being able to reduce some of the duplication that, frankly, does exist between the two organisations who have a similar remit. It is bonkers that we have that, not huge amounts, but there is some duplication. Of course, we are talking about small numbers here. We want to be more effective to say, between us, what do we have in terms of specific knowledge? Where are the things where it is mad?

At the moment, currently, there is a consultation on rail. We both answer it. We have now started to change it a little bit. There was one on climate change recently, and somebody in our office did the most work on it because they had the best expertise. That was then shared with colleagues here. There is a lot more of that that can happen for the future.

I think my fear for our organisation down the line, if we do not do something like this, is that in the search for efficiencies, because we are tied into pay awards and the central Government pension scheme, we cannot contain our costs. It is 80% at the moment - it is going to be 90% next year - of our cost of staffing. We do not really have a research budget any longer, which is mad. We need to be in a position that we can put some money back into that. We are doing mostly secondary research. We have a cost level that is really difficult because we are squeezing down and there is not much left to squeeze back down on, unless we can find more innovative ways of doing things.

One of the other benefits about being nested in a bigger team is the ability to bid for other money and other resources. One of the reasons that we really like Transport Focus is that it is very good at getting other money in. Anthony [Smith] has a great track record over the last few years of diversifying the income base for Transport Focus. You can only do that if you have the capacity for someone to write the grant bids and so on. It is a bit of a vicious circle; the smaller you get, the less able you are to do things. The risks that we both face are pretty similar, and at the moment we are doing things very separately. There is a lot we can do just to be a bit more modern in approach.

Shaun Bailey AM: I understand the cost base. That is a very strong argument. However, when you answer the survey, don't you answer the survey from a national point of view, and when you answer, don't you answer from a London point of view?

Joanna Simons (Chief Executive, London TravelWatch): Yes, but there is a core in the middle that is quite similar. Many of the issues are similar, and some of them are not. If you are coming into London, if you are a commuter, you want to make sure that the train stops all the way into town. If you are from somewhere miles away, you want it to go very quickly. There will be things occasionally that are very different for London. I previously worked in an area that was quite rural. There are very different issues there in terms of transport issues to being in one of the biggest cities in the world. There are some things that are different. Clearly, the nature of having TfL as a transport authority and all the other things too is very different. It is a very different operating environment.

Shaun Bailey AM: I understand it is different. What I am getting at is, will we lose the ability to represent that?

Joanna Simons (Chief Executive, London TravelWatch): No. That is the whole point of having somebody at a senior level to be able to make sure that level is there.

Shaun Bailey AM: We will be adjusting how you --

Joanna Simons (Chief Executive, London TravelWatch): Yes. Sorry. I am not answering properly.

Anthony Smith (Chief Executive, Transport Focus): For example, at the moment, the survey simply asks passengers, "How was the journey you have just completed?" It is not badged as London or elsewhere. It is simply asking rail passengers, "How was the journey you have just done?" Then, behind the scenes, we work out which train they were on, which area they were in, and we can cut the data in that way and put the appropriate badge on it. You will gain more from this, I absolutely assure you. It is very interesting that Arthur's [Leathley] colleagues on the Transport Focus Board and some of my staff colleagues outside of London have exactly the opposite worry, that we will get sucked up by London, because of course London attracts quite a lot of attention. We are very aware of this tension between the two, and we will manage. London and South East are key to the success of the whole United Kingdom (UK), and getting that right is absolutely crucial.

We will get more from the money that you were going to spend on TravelWatch. Yes, the staffing complement might be reducing slightly, but I think by avoiding duplication and increasing productivity you will get more for your money.

Shaun Bailey AM: Thank you, Chair. Thank you.

Florence Eshalomi AM (Chair): Thank you. Thank you very much. Just to note that we will be reviewing this on a periodic basis from the Transport Committee, and we definitely look forward to a closer working relationship, making sure that the focus for London remains central and that we are focusing on the passenger journey.

Florence Eshalomi AM (Chair): Thank you very much to our guests.

Arthur Leathley (Chair, London TravelWatch): Thank you for your time.

Joanna Simons (Chief Executive, London TravelWatch): Thank you very much indeed.

Caroline Pidgeon MBE AM (Deputy Chair): Thank you for coming.