

London Assembly Transport Committee – 22 July 2020

Transcript of Item 7 – Q&A Session – London TravelWatch Progress Report

Dr Alison Moore AM (Chair): I would like to welcome to the meeting Arthur Leathley, who is the Chair of London TravelWatch, and Anthony Smith, who is the Chief Executive of Transport Focus. I do not know whether one or other of you would like to open the discussion with any brief remarks. If you would like to make some comments, we will then move into a series of questions from Members of the Committee.

Arthur Leathley (Chair, London TravelWatch): Thank you, Chair. It was a very interesting session earlier and so I can understand why it took so long, but a lot of good discussion.

If I could start off, if Anthony [Smith] is OK with that, thanks for inviting us today. First of all, apologies from Emma Gibson, our Director, who would have liked to have been with you today, but she is actually in France on a pre-arranged holiday, so I am sorry that she could not join us today.

I just wanted to remind people last time we appeared, which was in real life back in October, we asked you to take a forward-looking decision to approve the partnership between Transport Focus and London TravelWatch. We had a brief discussion at that point and we did say it would only be worthwhile if it benefited transport users and was useful to you. You took the bold step then and five months ago we set up the agreement between Transport Focus and London TravelWatch, which I believe is already paying dividends. I heard from the earlier discussion one aspect of work that we are doing around Zip cards, but there have been others as well. These have shown real value of the two organisations working together, but real benefits as well, direct benefits to passengers and to users. Unless there are those benefits, there is no point to the arrangement at all.

I would like to pay tribute to both organisations and all their staff in the last few months. Everybody across the country, across the world, has faced great difficulties, but the staff have done amazing work in the last few months to adapt to a very different world. Of course, we only just had the agreement between the organisations a month before we had the biggest ever changes to transport in peacetime and so a bit of a challenge and of course a big challenge to Emma [Gibson], who joined as Director, and this was still in her probation period. We had not mentioned anything to do with pandemics as part of her probation checks. I just wanted to say that to start with as a background.

We are already seeing the changes coming through. We talked earlier about the Zip card research, which has been very valuable to the debate. We have pushed hard for 24/7 bus lanes, which we were delighted to see this week. TfL are introducing it as an experiment. We now have 24/7 access for passengers to an enquiries line, which we never had before. That is something that Transport Focus has had for some time. London travellers have not had access to that in the past and they do now. They are just one or two early wins, but there are many others which I can happily talk through.

Dr Alison Moore AM (Chair): Anthony, would you like to add anything briefly or are you happy for us to move through into questions?

Anthony Smith (Chief Executive, Transport Focus): Chair, thank you very much for seeing us today. I hope your faith in us has been rewarded over the last few months. TravelWatch has made great use of the huge amount of insight work that Transport Focus produces. What I have seen is they have really been driving more of a difference for London's transport users in the last six months than I have seen in the 21 years in which I have been working in this sector, I am proud to admit. I genuinely hope that you are starting to feel that London TravelWatch is being more useful to you. That is absolutely crucial in this relationship. We have not finished this yet; we have only just started.

One interesting pointer for the future of course is Transport Focus is sponsored by the Department for Transport (DfT), very much at arm's length, but given the new prominence of the DfT in debates in and around London, having a voice at the DfT is probably not unhelpful. Thank you, Chair.

Dr Alison Moore AM (Chair): I am sure that must be very helpful. Thank you. I have been on a learning curve in terms of transport issues over the last couple of months, and I have found particularly the omnibus survey very helpful, but also the work around your campaign for the Zip card has also been very impressive.

Could I just kick off with a couple of questions and then Assembly Member Pidgeon will come in after that? How will the COVID-19 crisis impact on your 2021 business plan over the rest of the financial year and how will London TravelWatch overcome barriers to progress?

Arthur Leathley (Chair, London TravelWatch): Yes, like everybody, we are having to adapt financially to what is happening and that is a process that is being done through the Mayor's Office and clearly we are going to be looking at our budget for this current year and beyond. What I would say is that work was already happening regardless of COVID, a lot of work that Anthony and I and our colleagues have been doing to get the best possible value from the two organisations working together. We were already making savings in terms of information technology (IT), sharing finance back office functions, human resources (HR) and London TravelWatch taking on the complaints function for both organisations. There had already been efficiency savings in only the weeks that we had been together ahead of the COVID crisis, but clearly we are going to have to look to other opportunities going forward.

The key really is that we are still giving value to users and to yourselves. We have got to balance that out, I think, in terms of what can we save. Saving money is one thing. If it does not give as good a service, we have got to weigh that up and it is really important that we do give the best possible services to users and yourselves, but Anthony [Smith] may want to add.

Anthony Smith (Chief Executive, Transport Focus): Yes, thank you, Chair. The business plan will continue in one form, which is we will continue responding to the COVID crisis on behalf of transport users, because clearly it is going to be with us for a while. Last Friday and the change in messaging from Government was very significant because the "use public transport" message finally was clarified and is much more consistent. The debate now moves on to getting passengers to feel it is "safe". Our research shows again and again that people do not feel that the public transport at the moment is "safe", although the research shows those people who are using it are finding it quite satisfactory, both in terms of the social distancing, slightly less so in terms of face coverings, because of course my safety is slightly dependent on you wearing a face covering.

I went on the Tube last Friday night for the first time in four months and I cannot say it was a pleasant experience, to be honest. Wearing a mask on the Northern Line is hot and unpleasant and by 11.00pm in the evening coming home on Friday night, some of the younger people who were in the carriage with us were not wearing masks, and that puts me at risk. That enforcement and visible enforcement of face coverings is just going to be an absolutely key issue to restoring confidence. There are lots of ongoing issues, but the research we have got will provide you with a continuous weekly feedback on how transport users are thinking. Thank you.

Dr Alison Moore AM (Chair): Thank you. That is really helpful and you have answered most of my next question. Do either of you have anything to add about how you are responding to the evolving transport environment beyond the comments you have already made?

Arthur Leathley (Chair, London TravelWatch): No. That is how we have been responding so far and clearly we need to keep a close watch on things as they develop. There will be changes in policy happening obviously from Government and from the Mayor's Office. We need to be very adept at dealing with that.

Dr Alison Moore AM (Chair): Thank you.

Anthony Smith (Chief Executive, Transport Focus): Nothing to add, Chair.

Dr Alison Moore AM (Chair): Thank you very much. Assembly Member Russell, if you would like to ask the next question.

Caroline Russell AM: I am wondering how London TravelWatch can play a stronger role in supporting active travel, given the importance that active travel is now playing in order to help maintain our physical distance from each other.

Arthur Leathley (Chair, London TravelWatch): Yes, we are just about to launch, in August, our own proposals for active travel. Some of the discussion that was had this morning will be very useful for us in developing those plans. The advantage we have at London TravelWatch of course is that we do look right across the modes. It is not about putting one mode of travel ahead of any other, it is about how we get that balance. Clearly with the active travel opportunities and the need for social distance, it gives a new perspective, I think, to that. We are going to be pushing very hard around certainly the cycling and pedestrian activities and a lot of this is certainly around the streetscape and the work that TfL are doing. We are very closely involved with TfL, Will Norman's team and others in setting that up.

Caroline Russell AM: There is one thing that in particular came up this morning, that when you have multi-modal journeys - which many people do, they may cycle to the station and then get on a train or the Underground and then the rest of their journey may be on a hire bike or on foot - there is a real need for mapping of the new facilities in particular that are around. TravelWatch can play some kind of part in helping the push to make sure that all of the new facilities are well mapped. You have done a lot of good work on mapping on rail and rail stations, and one of the gaps at the moment in terms of active travel. They are doing so much work so quickly and changing our streets so fast that actually that kind of mapping of what is available and the route choices is something where there is a need for a bit of a push and a catch-up.

Arthur Leathley (Chair, London TravelWatch): You are absolutely right. You may remember there was pressure we put on TfL and London Underground particularly to show on the Tube maps that stations could easily be walked between. It was amazing the difference that that made. You might expect people to know. How would you know if you are travelling in London for the first time? It just made things much clearer. You are absolutely right. As things are adjusting now, we need to do much more of that.

Caroline Russell AM: Thank you.

Caroline Pidgeon MBE AM (Deputy Chair): Could I come to Arthur [Leathley] first and then Anthony [Smith] with the same question? It is, are the new working arrangements with Transport Focus delivering as expected? I guess, Anthony [Smith], it would be the flip with TravelWatch.

Arthur Leathley (Chair, London TravelWatch): Certainly from my perspective, I would say they are working better than I expected, I think especially in view of the changes that started in March. If we had achieved what we have done in normal times, we would have been pretty pleased. To have done that in the midst of the pandemic has been remarkable. There have been things, for instance, penalty fares, when between us we spotted very quickly that penalty fares, people were being charged an unreasonable amount. They were being charged at just the peak rate even if they were travelling off-peak. We were very quick on that. Having both organisations push at that simultaneously and quickly, it led to a very quick change. That is just one example, very quickly, but there will be others that come through as well, but Anthony [Smith], I am sure, will have his own thoughts.

Anthony Smith (Chief Executive, Transport Focus): Yes, thank you, Arthur. Yes, it is working extremely well from Transport Focus's point of view. Having London's expertise and knowledge and experience more clearly located in our national thinking is absolutely important. People often say London is a bubble and it slightly annoys me when they say that, because London is what it is and the rest of the country is different; of course it is. The cross-learning that we are already seeing between London and the rest of the country, particularly on things like bus services, is really, really useful. The organisational energy of both places has really gone up. In particular, I would say that Emma Gibson [Director, London TravelWatch] is an outstanding leader. She is a member of our management team now. She is quite challenging and she has been pushing us on diversity issues, which is great, and it is working extremely well.

Caroline Pidgeon MBE AM (Deputy Chair): I have to say, from my perspective on the Transport Committee, it is like a different organisation, the information we get and also if we feedback suggestions, they are taken up. It is what we had dreamt of many years ago, but it has taken quite a while to get there, but thank you for the work that you and Arthur are doing. Thank you.

Arthur Leathley (Chair, London TravelWatch): Thank you, I appreciate that.

Dr Alison Moore AM (Chair): That is it from us. I know Assembly Member Prince wants to come in, but I have one quick question before we do. How are you measuring the impact of your initiatives and lobbying?

Arthur Leathley (Chair, London TravelWatch): Yes, we are setting up a different system than we have had before, essentially a red/amber/green (RAG) rating, so those elements where we have got indicators of success. If we are not making the progress, we will mark those as red, but so far we are seeing progress and on the whole we are able to put things down as green or amber to show that things are developing. You are

absolutely right to ask the question. How we measure ourselves is one of the challenges, but some of the feedback, such as we have just had from Assembly Member Pidgeon but also from other people is a good indication of how stakeholders see us. We will be doing a survey quite shortly and that will be coming to Assembly Members to understand what people's view of us is and we expect that to be sort of warts and all. We want to know what we are doing well and what we are not doing well and what you want more of. We will work towards that, so that will give us a very clear benchmark and obviously from this year into future years I hope we are going to see improvements.

Anthony Smith (Chief Executive, Transport Focus): Chair, there are only two ways you can really gauge the success of organisations like ours, one of which is to ask any passengers or members of the public who contact us what they think about that experience. Every single complainant who comes to TravelWatch is asked after their case is closed about their opinion of how well it was handled, so that is not bad feedback.

Secondly, you just have to ask your stakeholders, like you, whom you are seeking to influence and be useful to, are we influential and useful? If yes, why? If no, why? We want to improve. It is not utterly scientific, but in the absence of competition, which there is not a lot of in our sector, that is probably about the best we can offer you.

Dr Alison Moore AM (Chair): Thank you very much. That is very much appreciated and we will look forward to the survey now. If nobody else has any questions for Arthur or Anthony, can I thank you both very much for waiting as long as you did to come in and speak to us? We really very much appreciate it and I will cover in my formal remarks at the end the issue around your Board members.