

LONDON ASSEMBLY

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Emma Best AM
Chair of the GLA Oversight Committee

Mary Harpley
Chief Officer
(Sent by email)

CC:
Sadiq Khan, Mayor of London
David Bellamy, Chief of Staff, GLA
Enver Enver, Acting Chief Financial Officer, GLA
Rory McKenna, Monitoring Officer, GLA

15 November 2023

Dear Mary,

Re: GLA international and domestic trips

I am writing to you as Chair of the London Assembly GLA Oversight Committee regarding its investigation into GLA international and domestic trips. This follows a meeting held by the Committee on 20 June 2023, which was attended by GLA officers, including yourself.

The Committee's investigation sought to understand the scale and nature of GLA international and domestic trips, and the GLA's approach to selecting and scrutinising such trips. On behalf of the Committee, I thank you and the relevant GLA officers for responding to our request for data on GLA trips and travel, and for attending and giving evidence at the meeting.

From the outset, may I reiterate comments made at the Committee meeting that international and domestic trips can add genuine value to the work of the Mayor and the GLA. As an internationally important and competitive city, the Mayor should continue to represent London in other parts of the world. However, the Committee believes there are opportunities to strengthen the processes in place to undertake such trips.

This letter summarises the Committee’s views and recommendations in light of the findings made during the investigation.

GLA Expenses and Benefits Framework

The GLA’s Expenses and Benefits Framework is the primary source of guidance to the GLA when determining whether a trip should take place.¹ The GLA already recognises the importance of the London Assembly’s views on the content of the Framework, as it formally consults the Assembly as part of its biennial review of the document.

The Committee has examined the Framework in detail and heard evidence in the meeting about how it is applied in practice. The Committee has concerns that GLA officers were unable to demonstrate how the GLA applies the Framework consistently across the organisation. This was particularly the case when officers discussed how they determine which trips to approve, and the extent to which the decisions of senior GLA officers are quality assured across the organisation.

The Framework is scheduled to be reviewed in April 2024.² With the publication of this Committee’s investigation findings and the appointment of a new Monitoring Officer, who is copied in to this letter, the Committee believes now is the natural opportunity for the GLA to start the review process.³ This will ensure any proposed amendments to the Framework are given thorough consideration ahead of the formal consultation process next year. The Committee would welcome the opportunity for the Assembly to be involved at an early stage in the development of this work. Some initial recommendations about areas for further consideration are set out below.

External sponsorship of GLA business trips

There are occasions when the GLA receives partial or full reimbursement for its international and domestic trips from third party organisations. Most recently, this was the case in the May 2022 Mayoral delegation to the USA, in which the American airline company, United Airlines, paid for the cost of flights for the Mayoral delegation.⁴ The Committee was informed, ahead of its meeting, that this formed part of a ‘partnership agreement’ with United Airlines. This appeared to allow United Airlines to promote its business. The Mayor’s press release from May 2022 includes the following note to editors: *“United Airlines is proud to be flying the Mayor of London Sadiq Khan and his team on their trade mission to the United States. United Airlines is set to operate 22 flights per day from London Heathrow to the United States for Summer 2022.”*⁵ The Mayor’s personal and official Twitter accounts also posted a photo with United Airlines staff advertising ‘22 in 2022’, a reference to the number of daily flights United Airlines runs from Heathrow Airport to the USA.⁶ At the Committee’s meeting, the Mayor’s Chief of Staff stated he ‘would not describe’ the trip to the USA as United Airlines sponsored, and agreed to check whether there was a formal partnership agreement in place and, if so, publish the agreement.⁷ No entries to the Mayor’s gifts and hospitality register were

¹ GLA, [Expenses and Benefits Framework](#), May 2022

² GLA, [Expenses and Benefits Framework](#), May 2022

³ London Assembly, Mayor’s Question Time, [Appointment of the GLA’s Monitoring Officer](#), 15 December 2022

⁴ GLA, Freedom of information, FoI response, [FOI – USA Trip \[Jun 2022\]](#), June 2022

⁵ GLA, Press Releases, [Sadiq heads to America to bang the drum for London](#), 8 May 2022

⁶ <https://twitter.com/MayorofLondon/status/1523379536766795776>

<https://twitter.com/SadiqKhan/status/1523359833432330241>

⁷ London Assembly, [GLA Oversight Committee meeting](#), 20 June 2023

made, despite the GLA Gifts and Hospitality Policy and Procedure stating: “Where travel or accommodation associated with attendance at an international function, event, conference or similar is made on GLA business or as a GLA representative and paid for by a third-party, a gifts and hospitality declaration should be made”.⁸

At the 22 June 2023 Mayor’s Question Time, the Mayor was asked about Pride in London’s decision to appoint United Airlines for a second year running as the main sponsor for its annual event, which took place on 1 July.⁹ ¹⁰ The sponsorship for Pride in London for 2022 was announced shortly after the Mayoral delegation in 2022.¹¹

As the Committee noted in its meeting, there are obvious positive benefits of the GLA identifying opportunities to reduce the overall expenditure on business trips. However, the Committee is concerned that there is insufficient guidance to support the GLA in determining how such partnerships should influence business trip proposals.

Environmental impact and carbon offsetting

Notwithstanding the financial cost of business trips that the GLA must consider, it must also understand the environmental impact of trips, particularly when they involve overseas flights. The Expenses and Benefits Framework provides guidance on the factors the GLA must consider when evaluating the case for a trip and the mode of travel.¹² Officers explained that the GLA procures a third-party company, Agiito, to book its travel.¹³ Officers also explained that Agiito implements a carbon offsetting policy to offset the carbon emissions generated from the travel. Whilst the Committee is aware of the high-level objectives of Agiito’s policy, it is not clear how the policy operates in practice for GLA travel.¹⁴

Additionally, the Committee is concerned that carbon offsetting is not being applied to all GLA trips, as officers explained that some trips paid for and booked by external organisations do not go through Agiito.¹⁵ As a consequence, the Committee cannot be confident that the GLA’s approach to carbon offsetting is working and is effective.

Collection, analysis and publication of data

The GLA holds data on GLA domestic and international trips in different places and presents it in different ways. The Committee is aware of the individual travel expense claim data that is submitted to quarterly Audit Panel meetings though this data represents only a portion of the overall trip activity in the GLA.¹⁶ The Committee has been keen to understand the full extent of trips, whether claimed as expenses by individuals, paid out of GLA directorate budgets or paid by third parties.

The Committee welcomes your evidence at the meeting, in which you reflected that the exercise to

⁸ GLA, [Gifts and Hospitality Policy and Procedure](#), July 2022

⁹ Ireland Travel Trade Network, [United Airlines Signs Up as Headline Sponsor of London’s Pride Festival](#), 19 May 2023

¹⁰ London Assembly, [Mayor’s Question Time Appendix 1](#), 22 June 2023, p45

¹¹ [United is official airline for Pride in London 2022 | Travel Weekly](#), 22 June 2022

¹² GLA, [Expenses and Benefits Framework](#), May 2022

¹³ London Assembly, [GLA Oversight Committee meeting](#), 20 June 2023

¹⁴ [Agiito, Carbon offsetting your travel, 23 June 2021](#)

¹⁵ London Assembly, [GLA Oversight Committee meeting](#), 20 June 2023

¹⁶ London Assembly, Audit Panel, [Meetings](#)

respond to the Committee's request for the data had identified several issues with the current reporting arrangements. In this context, the Committee hopes you will seriously consider its recommendations in this area.

Through the investigation, it has become clear that the current arrangements for collecting, analysing and publishing this data require substantial improvement. The additional travel data provided by GLA officers ahead of the meeting, for which the Committee is grateful, was extremely difficult to analyse due to the limited detail and raw nature of the information. For example, it was not always clear whether individual travel journeys related to single or return journeys and domestic or international journeys. In addition, the data did not specify the rationale for the travel and the subsequent impact of the trip as requested by the Committee. Also, the data only related to travel from 2018. The Committee was informed that data relating to travel before 2018 was stored in a different way that made it more difficult for GLA officers to analyse and share with the Assembly.

In the context of the issues identified in the investigation, the Committee makes seven recommendations:

Recommendation 1

The GLA should start work to review its Benefits and Expenses Framework in anticipation of the formal adoption of amendments in Spring 2024. The review should encompass the issues and recommendations mentioned in this letter.

Recommendation 2

The GLA should provide explicit guidance on the interaction of external sponsors and business trips. This should include specific arrangements for the timely publication of details relating to such sponsorship and what sponsors receive in return. The guidance should make it clearer to officers about how they should consider the potential adverse implications of accepting funding for trips by external organisations when such funding would reduce the burden on the public purse.

Recommendation 3

The GLA should publish the partnership agreement reached with United Airlines ahead of the trip to the United States in May 2022.

Recommendation 4

The Mayor and all ten senior staff who attended the trip to the United States in May 2022 should consider declaring the flights in the Gifts and Hospitality register.

Recommendation 5

The GLA should publish data on GLA trips in one place and in an accessible way. The data should cover: purpose and anticipated outcomes; names and number of persons attending; cost breakdown; mode(s) of travel and rationale; any details of external funding and rationale; and carbon impact of the travel (excluding offsets). The GLA should also subsequently publish information about the outcomes achieved following a trip to ascertain whether the anticipated outcomes were achieved.

Recommendation 6

Ahead of the next contract renewal decision, the GLA should review Agiito's carbon offsetting policy and compare it with offsetting best practice. The GLA should report on its findings to the Committee.

Recommendation 7

The GLA should ensure that effective carbon offsetting is in place when travel costs are covered by external sponsors. This should also be formally incorporated in the next version of the Benefits and Expenses Framework.

The Committee would welcome a response to this letter by 7 December 2023. Please send your response by email to the Committee's Clerk, Nikoleta Kemp (Nikoleta.kemp@london.gov.uk).

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Emma Best', written in a cursive style.

Emma Best AM

Chair of the GLA Oversight Committee