

29 May 2009

Richard Willis
Secretary
Select Committee on Train Services
Legislative Council, Parliament of Victoria
Spring St
MELBOURNE VIC 3002

Dear Mr Willis

Select Committee on Train Services

Thank you for your invitation to provide a written submission to the Inquiry of the Select Committee on Train Services into the factors leading to and causes of failures in the provision of metropolitan and V/Line Train Services.

Role of the Public Transport Ombudsman

The role of the Public Transport Ombudsman is to receive, investigate and resolve complaints about the provision of public transport services provided by public transport operators that are members of the Public Transport Ombudsman scheme. Our members include train, tram and bus companies, and others involved in providing public transport services, such as Metlink, the Transport Ticketing Authority and the Southern Cross Station Authority. We are only able to deal with complaints after operators have the first opportunity to resolve them.

Our role primarily focuses on the resolution of individual disputes. Given this, we are limited in the assistance we are able to provide the Committee about matters we understand are the subject of its inquiry¹. However, I set out below some information I trust will assist the Committee.

Complaints to the Public Transport Ombudsman

The Public Transport Ombudsman can deal with complaints about the provision or supply of, or the failure to provide or supply, public passenger transport. We receive under this category complaints about over-crowding, service reliability and cancellations. While we had seen an increase in these complaints in the first years of operation of the PTO scheme, in the current financial year that trend has not continued.

In complaints we receive, commuters will raise often issues about:

- lateness for work and the impact of this on their employment
- safety and amenity issues associated with crowded public transport

¹ Hansard Victorian Legislative Council, Wednesday 11 March 2009, pages 1408-1418

- the lack of information given to passengers about delayed or cancelled services, including where the cause is systems work designed to improve services into the future.

Particular matters

Information provided to passengers

When commuters complain to the Public Transport Ombudsman about service delays or disruptions, they will often also raise a related issue of providing information about delays. This includes where passengers complain of a lack of information, or no information, about:

- the expected length of any delay
- the cause of the delay
- any other options available to the passenger to reduce the delay.

The importance of providing accurate and up-to-date information to commuters was a matter highlighted in our 2008 Annual Report. We are aware of a range of initiatives across the public transport industry to provide information about service disruptions, including:

- dedicated staff to provide information on platforms
- announcements from train drivers or conductors on carriage
- on station or stop information – including announcements, Passenger Information Display Screens and posters
- website updates
- SMS and email update services
- advertisements in newspapers.

Where these arrangements work well, commuters are less likely to be dissatisfied and complain. For example:

- most commuters are understanding of the need to properly care for persons who become ill on trains
- commuters can sometimes also make adjustments to their schedules or travelling plans where there are disruptions; this reduces the impact of any delay.

A continued focus on providing timely and relevant information to commuters remains critical.

Response to complaints and feedback

Where delays, disruptions or cancellations occur, some commuters will complain. In Victoria, public transport operators have dedicated and skilled staff managing response to this feedback. Information provided by operators to commuters who complain about disruptions will often include:

- an explanation about the cause of the disruption
- an apology for the inconvenience

- sometimes, information about other options for the commuter to consider in the advent of a further service disruption.

Sometimes, commuters will want compensation for the inconvenience caused by a cancellation or service disruption. The *Victorian Fares and Ticketing Manual* ("the Manual") – at page 89 – provides for compensation for severe service disruption. The Manual also provides:

- for Connex and Yarra Trams to develop Customer Codes – which are approved by the Director of Public Transport – allowing passengers to be compensated when performance targets for punctuality and reliability are not met
- for V/Line, that compensation in the form of a complimentary travel ticket will be provided to any affected customer holding a valid periodical ticket of one month or more where monthly performance targets for punctuality and reliability are not met. This is reflected in the V/Line compensation code.

The Connex *Service Commitment Code* provides for compensation in a range of circumstances. By way of brief summary:

- customers with periodical tickets (monthly, six-monthly or yearly) will receive a free daily ticket where:
 - services fail to meet specified monthly performance thresholds – sometimes the customer may be eligible for two tickets if lower thresholds are not met
 - services are suspended for over 2 hours and no replacement bus service is provided
 - bus services replace all rail services on a section of line for more than a week due to matters under the control of Connex
- where an advertised train service is cancelled more than 3 times in a week and is not replaced by a bus, weekly and periodical ticket holders who validated their ticket within a half hour of these services on each of the relevant days will receive a free daily ticket
- where services are delayed by more than 30 minutes, passengers with properly validated 2 hour tickets will be permitted to continue travelling to the end of their journey where their ticket is expired.

The Manual also provides for special consideration of a refund in a very limited number of circumstances, although these are not specified.

We only receive a handful of complaints from commuters about the administration of these Codes, strongly suggesting that they are administered in a prompt and fair manner by public transport operators.

However, the compensation codes are quite restrictive. While the Public Transport Ombudsman's role does not extend to the content of Government policies, a number of complainants state that they are dissatisfied when they

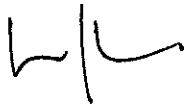
have been significantly inconvenienced by service disruptions, and they are not eligible for compensation.

Conclusion

I have included with this letter a copy of the Public Transport Ombudsman's most recent annual report, and some other information about my office. Full information on the Public Transport Ombudsman is available at our website: www.ptovic.com.au.

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to the Inquiry. If you require anything further from my office, please contact me on 8623 2111.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'S. Cohen', written in a cursive style.

Simon Cohen
Public Transport Ombudsman