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Oyster users face 'rip-off' summer

By Mark Odell, Transport Correspondent



Tube and rail passengers using Oyster pay-as-you-go swipe cards stand to be “ripped off” this summer as the capital’s transport system struggles to cope with the millions of extra people using it during the Olympic Games.

Caroline Pidgeon, the London assembly member who has chaired its transport committee for the past year, issued the

warning as Transport for London revealed it had refunded just £11m of the £66.6m charges it had levied on Oyster cards in 2011 for what it terms “incomplete” journeys.

Passengers typically face an automatic £6.50 charge for the maximum fare if TfL’s software fails to pick up that Oyster cards have been swiped at either the start or the end of a journey.

The overcharging commonly occurs when barriers are left open at stations to prevent overcrowding. This can occur during large public events, such as football matches, but data reveal commuters passing through the City’s busiest public transport interchanges were among the hardest hit last year.

The prospect that TfL may have to implement the “open barrier” policy to cope with enhanced passenger volumes across the network during the Olympics has prompted Ms Pidgeon’s latest concerns about the Oyster system.

“Transport for London continue to blame Oyster overcharging on passengers and deny that there are faults with how the system operates, despite widespread evidence that honest passengers are frequently ripped off, especially when stations are incredibly busy,” she said.

“This summer during the Olympic and Paralympic Games many stations will be more crowded than usual and I fear that even more people travelling around London could end up being ripped off.

“TfL must ensure that if the problem can’t be resolved, then at the very least, claiming back a refund is made far easier,” she added.

Shashi Verma, TfL’s director of customer experience, denied customers were being ripped off. He estimated that about £46m of the revenue collected from “incomplete” journeys should have been paid in fares anyway, and that the system for refunds had been improved over the past year.

“It is not in our interest at all to charge an incorrect fare,” he said. “It’s not as if we’re trying to generate a profit and walk off with the money.”

He rejected Ms Pidgeon’s claims about the Olympics. “We are ready for the games,” he said, adding that the extra passenger demand “would make no difference at all”.

He said customers should check their journey history online and claim a refund either over the phone or at a London Underground ticket office. Calls to the Oyster helpline are charged at local rates, but Mr Verma said TfL would unveil a way of claiming refunds online this year.

He said the issue affected about 14m out of total of 576m pay-as-you-go Oyster journeys in 2011.

Mr Verma denied claims the technology behind the Oyster card system suffered glitches and said the best way of reducing the number of incomplete journeys was to ensure all railway stations within the Oyster charging zone were gated.

Mr Verma estimated that 200 of the 652 stations in the Oyster card network were ungated and said that was an issue for the train-operating companies and the government.

The proportion of incomplete Oyster journeys on National Rail stood at 4 per cent last year, compared with 1.4 per cent on the Tube network.

Even the most advanced metros in the world have similar problems, he said. “We have just had a delegation in from Hong Kong this week and they have the same problem with incomplete journeys, although they couldn’t tell us how many, and their system is entirely gated.”

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