

Encounters of a reassuring kind



IN a bid to eliminate antisocial behaviour and make passengers feel safer on the rail network, Transport for London (TfL) is trialling a radically different approach.

By introducing 20 travel safe officers to the London Overground network, TfL has invested in a highly visible and enlightened response to passenger security. These new officers have been recruited for their supportive approach to customer service.

As part of a 12-month trial to reassure people that London Overground is a safe place to be, day and night, the officers' role is to engage passengers with a friendly 'hello' as they patrol trains and stations. This extends a helping hand and provides extra eyes and ears on the network.

Since the trial started last summer, there have been more than 500,000 such reassuring encounters. These range from assisting older people with luggage and making sure that vulnerable teenagers are safe, to asking passengers to stop drinking and smoking at stations and on trains.

Team effort

Overall, the number of uniformed staff seen at stations across the network has increased by 27 per cent since November 2007, when London Overground was launched.

While the new officers also work closely with revenue protection inspectors, police community support officers and the British Transport Police's

neighbourhood policing teams, their remit is uniquely on customer care. As Trevor Hill, London Overground's retail and commercial manager, explained: 'They offer a different approach. They are able to focus on passenger perceptions and provide intelligent feedback, identify distressed people and prevent unfortunate incidents.'

Typical of this new style of officer, who work in pairs, are Hannah and Taj (pictured left). Both are graduates and, with the flexi-hours the job entails, Hannah is also studying for her Master's degree in forensic medicine, while Taj has a law degree and four years' legal experience. When asked what drew them to this role, Hannah said: 'It's great to be proactive and go home feeling you've done something to make others feel good in the course of your day.' Taj added: 'You certainly have the opportunity to deal with all sorts of people in all sorts of situations and this I find satisfying.'

A quiet word

Describing her shift, Hannah said: 'Between 4pm and 1am, Taj and I travel constantly between stations and trains depending on where we're needed, usually dealing with inconsiderate behaviour. This can range from someone not offering a seat to a pregnant woman to dirty feet on seats. We generally use a quiet word to explain why the behaviour is inappropriate.'

Stephanie Anderson, customer services director of STM Security Group (UK) Ltd, which recruits the new officers, said: 'We specifically look for people who are able to tolerate difficult behaviours and handle the situation with a soft approach. Training plays a big part as we have to recruit people



who will respond under pressure in the right way.'

The right way, in this instance, is a friendly approach with intuitive people skills. As Hannah explained: 'We both undertook the Railway Safety Accreditation Scheme which included a five-day course plus modules geared to community policing, dealing with conflict management and engaging effectively with people.'

Lessons learned

'I guess my most important lesson has been never to take first impressions for granted. A large group of young people can look threatening to other passengers, but I can understand perceptions from both sides. Neither party is in the wrong, after all, young people also feel vulnerable and we are there to help them, too.'

Now, more than halfway through the 12-month trial, London Overground's travel safe officer programme has meant that since July 2009, passengers across the network have seen a 200 per cent rise in uniformed staff patrolling their trains. These numbers will increase further as travel safe officers head into east and southeast London when the East London line opens as part of London Overground this summer.

■ For more about keeping safe on the transport network, go to tfl.gov.uk/gettingaround

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