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More over 65s are encouraged to 'Ask-Annie' for help planning their journeys

Volunteers over the age of 65 are being encouraged to sign-up to a trial of a new personalised travel assistant, provided by West Midlands Trains and Viaqqio.

Ask-Annie is a journey planning service aimed specifically the over 65s, providing tailored itineraries across all modes of public transport. A dedicated phone line helps customers discuss specific details for any journey, including

accessibility requirements, personal preferences and the use of concessionary passes.

Ask-Annie is an extension of Car Freedom, a successful trial held in 2015-2016 in which over 60s in the West Midlands area tested a range of services to support their travel and lifestyle.

West Midlands Trains and Viaqqio are working together on the project, which enters its second phase this summer. From 31 August, it's hoped that up to 50 participants will be recruited to trial the service – which will include a website, mobile app and online journey planner alongside the current phone option.

A select group of 10 participants have been using the Ask-Annie since May and meeting together to discuss their experiences. This has proved incredibly useful for informing the development and future scope of the service. Now this group is looking to expand, with a cash incentive for those who take part.

One participant in the initial trial said: “The Ask-Annie project is an opportunity for users to find cost-effective ways to get out and about the country and to visit areas of interest or friends or just to discover more about where the area where you live. I would recommend that users take advantage of this useful service.”

Steve Cassidy, Director of Viaqqio, said: “We are thrilled to be back in the West Midlands and offering another trailblazing service for older people. By developing the Ask-Annie service with more and more users we aim to change the face of travel for over 65s. It is exciting to co-design features of the service with users. By improving awareness of what transport exists, providing a way of obtaining support from other travellers as well as operators, and helping people get the best deals and access to new and existing services, members of Ask-Annie will find travel easier. That is our goal!”

Francis Thomas, Head of Corporate Affairs at West Midlands Trains said: “Everyone is welcome on our trains but a lack of confidence and unfamiliarity can be major barriers among some groups. Ask-Annie is an important part of our commitment to making travel on our network inclusive. We also want to make it easier and simpler for passengers to connect with other types of public transport. Giving our older customers the confidence to take new

journeys is a part of that. We appreciate all the feedback from the initial trial group and welcome anyone else who wants to be a part of Ask-Annie to come forward.”

Anyone over the age of 65 who lives in the West Midlands area can register their interest to be part of the next phase of the ‘Ask-Annie’ trial launching 31st August by going to www.ask-annie.co.uk or by calling the Freephone number **0808 169 1701**.

For further information on West Midlands Trains, London Northwestern Railway or West Midlands Railway call our **newsroom** on **03300 955150**.

About ‘Ask-Annie’

‘Ask-Annie’ is an integrated mobility service for over 65s. The service aims to improve how older people relate to, use and combine modes of transport services to meet their lifestyle needs.

The project is a partnership between Viaqqio, part of the ESP Group and West Midland Trains.

About Viaqqio

Viaqqio is part of the ESP Group. From getting a travel pass into the hands of your customers; being on the end of a phone; or responding to webchat, email or social media enquiries – ESP supports the passenger on every step of their journey. We work hard to anticipate their needs today and tomorrow, helping you deliver a first-class service every time.

About West Midlands Trains

West Midlands Trains Ltd. will be running the West Midlands rail franchise

from 10 December 2017 until 2025/6. Abellio has a 70.1% share of the company, East Japan Railway Company (JRE) and Mitsui & Co., Ltd. (Mitsui) own the remaining 29.9% in a 50:50 split.

About Abellio

Abellio is the international passenger transport subsidiary of the Dutch national railway company, Nederlandse Spoorwegen. Every day our people provide rail, bus and tram services to 1.7m customers across the UK, Germany and in the Netherlands. In the UK we operate buses through Abellio London, as well as ScotRail and Greater Anglia train services, and Merseyrail in a joint venture with Serco. In Germany we operate Abellio Deutschland, serving communities in North Rhine Westfalia, Saxony, Lower Saxony, Saxony-Anhalt, Hesse and Thuringia. Our role in transport extends beyond the journey from a-to-b. With our international heritage and our policy of sharing best practice, not just amongst ourselves, but across the wider transport industry, we provide thought leadership and truly innovative ideas which make a positive contribution to the communities we serve. For more information on Abellio visit www.abellio.com

About Mitsui

Mitsui is one of the most diversified and comprehensive trading, investment and service enterprises in the world with 139 offices in 66 countries as of March, 2017. Utilising our global operating locations, network and information resources, we are multilaterally pursuing business that ranges from product sales, worldwide logistics and financing, through to the development of major international infrastructure and other projects in the following fields: Iron & Steel Products, Mineral & Metal Resources, Infrastructure Projects, Integrated Transportation Systems, Chemicals, Energy, Food Resources, Food Products & Services, Consumer Services, IT & Communication, and Corporate Development Business. Mitsui is actively taking on challenges for global business innovation around the world. For more information, visit www.mitsui.com.

About JR East

East Japan Railway Company (JR East) was established in 1987, when Japanese National Railways was divided as part of a package of railway reforms. JR East's railway business covers a 7,500 km (approx. 4,660 miles) network in the eastern part of the Japanese main island, including Tokyo Metropolitan area, and provides transportation services, comprising urban, suburban and high speed operations, for 17 million passengers on a daily basis. JR East also undertakes non-transport commercial activities,

which account for more than 30% of the total revenue of JR East Group. JR East contributes to passengers and communities it serves by delivering high degrees of punctuality, reliability and comfort and also continues to pursue higher levels of safety and service quality through technical innovation. For more information, visit www.jreast.co.jp/e.

Contacts



Press Office - Media Use Only

Press Contact

press.office@wmtrains.co.uk

0330 095 5626