

**Options for strengthening bus passenger representation:  
TravelWatch East Midlands' response to the DfT Consultation paper**

1. TravelWatch East Midlands (TWEM) is an independent regional body which aims both to represent the interests and concerns of public transport passengers across all forms of transport, and to assist local and regional authorities' work towards an integrated and seamless quality public transport network for the East Midlands region.
2. As the sole regional body seeking to represent the interests and concerns of public transport passengers across all forms of transport in the East Midlands region, TWEM welcomes the DfT consultation on bus user representation.
3. The consultation paper correctly identifies a major gap in consumer representation and support. Subject to the promotion of good regional links in any new arrangement and appropriate recognition of Bus Users UK, we favour vesting the responsibility for improved bus consumer advocacy in an established national body with existing representational expertise - Option 3 in the consultation paper.
4. However, before answering the specific questions raised, we feel it important to make the following more general statements:
  - i. **We strongly support the Government's aim of strengthening bus passenger representation, indeed it is long overdue. The overall aim of the bus passenger's "champion" should be "to make things better for passengers".**

It should:

- a) Be an advocate for the provision of quality bus, tram and scheduled coach service provision, which meets the perceived needs of users, founding its views upon robust research and analysis;
- b) Work with passengers, operators, government, local authorities and other key stakeholders to ensure that the passenger's voice is heard when key decisions are being made; and
- c) Make suggestions about the future direction of service provision and where appropriate press for improvements.

Specifically, it should:

- offer passengers help and advice on getting the best out of public transport services
- explain passengers' rights when things go wrong
- ensure that complaints are properly handled by operators and local authorities and mediate where cases cannot be settled
- undertake research & publish reports on services
- press for improvement to services
- shape the development of policy, procedures and (where applicable) regulation

- ii. **The remit of the new “bus passengers champion” should extend to coach and light rail.** Passenger Focus currently represents the needs of ‘heavy’ rail customers and the new ‘bus passenger champion’ should also represent coach and light rail passengers. Most rail journeys involve more than one mode of travel and a passenger champion ought to be able to address the full journey experience. In an ideal world therefore, a single multi-modal passenger body would adopt a joined up approach to domestic public transport.
- iii. **The new body should operate at both a national & regional level.** It is important, to align consumer representation with the level at which decisions are made. We are mindful that the issues which give rise to most legitimate bus passenger concerns emerge at a more local level than for rail. Bus services involve many more routes, are disparate and local, often with many small local operators.
- iv. **It should adopt an evidence based approach.** The effectiveness of TW-EM has been achieved through its evidence-based approach to regional strategy development. This has been aided by its membership base of users’ groups throughout the region and close working relationship with the organisations of regional government, local authorities and transport providers.
- v. **The bus passengers champion should have a wider remit than punctuality and reliability.** The quality of the overall journey experience for passengers needs to be raised. A good bus service is not just about punctuality and reliability, but a wide range of combined factors: frequency, fares, journey time, security for passengers (and staff), helpful drivers, clean and non-vandalised buses and shelters, accessible buses, and information that is readily available and easy to use.
- vi. **It should with operators & local authorities, develop & recommend ‘national minimum standards’ for bus operations – A Bus Users Charter.** These standards would function as a benchmark for bus service provision and would be raised (or changed) over time in line with bus user priorities. They could cover frequencies, route, timetables, journey times and accessibility as appropriate, for population density, plus modal interchange, information, security, customer care, cleanliness of bus shelters and buses etc.. The standards would be used to influence government policy and to hold bus companies and local authorities to account. The expectation should be that these national minimum standards would be incorporated over time into the government’s own standards on buses.
- vii. **It must address the complaints issue:** Passengers want action to be taken when they complain and part of a champion’s role must be to drive the complaints mechanism, set standards and encourage operators to develop sound response processes. It should have powers to refer operators to the commissioners / DfT where they fail to comply. Specifically:
  - Bus users should be able to complain about and have a voice to draw attention to bus services that are inadequate. Complaints and comments relating to local bus services are best handled by the appropriate bus company and local authority, but it is clear that many bus companies and local authorities currently fail to respond fully and promptly to customer comments or complaints. Passengers often find it difficult to ascertain who to approach about a particular issue (many bus companies fail to provide adequate contact details for customer feedback). Anyone with a complaint needs to feel that they have been taken seriously and not “fobbed off”, especially if they want an apology rather than any redress.
  - The bus passenger champion should establish a ‘complaints charter’, designed to meet the reasonable expectations of passengers, establishing clear procedures for bus operators and local authorities – the bus passenger champion could then monitor adherence to the ‘complaints charter’.

- Complaints' data can generate useful feedback to both the operators and the new body BUT the best consumer representation is based on tackling systemic weaknesses in a proactive way from a robust evidence base and it is imperative that the new bus passenger champion undertakes properly funded user research.

viii **Whilst we agree with the DfT that the introduction of the new body should not be to the detriment of the work that local authorities carry out, its powers should extend to those activities of local authorities which contribute to the performance of bus services provision.** It is essential that its remit is clear, avoiding duplication of responsibilities,

ix **Passengers expect a champion to act as a conduit, so that their input is fed into decision making – in a transparent, accountable and consistent way - and potentially results in wider policy change.**

X **We would envisage the new organisation having similar powers & duties with regards to buses as that currently granted to Passenger Focus for rail,** namely the power to:

- investigate any matters that relate to the provision of:
  - bus (or other modes as may be its responsibility) services; and
  - bus stops / interchange facilities etc
- investigate representations made by a user of the services (possibly including passenger appeal complaint handling – see vii above);
- refer any breach (or likely breach) of operator licence conditions to the traffic commissioner.
- refer any matter that has not been resolved to its satisfaction to the Department for Transport;
- keep under review any matters affecting the interest of the public in relation to services;
- co-operate with other bodies representing the interests of users of public transport services
- produce an annual report; and
- hold public meetings.

In addition it would have the right to be consulted by local authorities on key decisions that may impact on the passenger, for example the introduction of a quality contracts scheme.

5. **Response to DfT's questions**

We have marshalled the remainder of our response in the same order as the questions are posed in the consultation document.

**Q1a Do you agree with the aim of our proposal?** -\_Yes, we broadly agree.

**Q1b Do you feel that the body should cover any items not included above?** -\_Yes

- The bus passenger champion should also represent coach and light rail passengers.
- It must have a wider remit than punctuality and reliability. The quality of the overall journey experience for passengers needs to be raised. (see note (v) in the introduction above.)
- It should ensure that bus operators and local authorities respond fully and promptly to customer comments and complaints.

**Q1c Do you think that there are any items covered above that shouldn't be?** -\_No

**Q2a Is option 1 - Working with Existing Bus Passenger Bodies (e.g. Bus Users UK) - your preferred option and why?** -\_No, we believe that the new body should have statutory powers and that this could best be achieved by either setting up a new body or expanding the powers of an existing statutory organisation.

**Q2b Do you have any further comments on the role that existing non-statutory bodies may have in representing the interests of bus passengers?** - Yes, it is our considered view that:

- The issues which give rise to most legitimate bus passenger concerns emerge at a more local level. Bus services involve many more routes than rail, are disparate & local, often with many small local operators. Consequently, a national body, whether standalone or based upon an existing organisation, must align consumer representation with the level at which decisions are made.
- As an absolute minimum, it will need to work with local or regional user bodies such as the developing TravelWatch movement. In the East Midlands for example, TWEM is an independent regional body which aims both to represent the interests and concerns of public transport passengers across all forms of transport, and to assist local and regional authorities' work towards an integrated and seamless quality public transport network for the East Midlands region.
- As stated in para 4 (vii) above, "It must address the complaints issue: Part of its role must be to drive the complaints mechanism, set standards and encourage operators to develop sound response processes". This would necessitate a complete rethink of the present BUUK-managed bus appeals body, which is currently funded and recognised by some operators.

**Q3a Is option 2 - A new standalone Statutory Bus Passenger Champion Body - your preferred option and why?** - No, we feel that separate bodies for rail and road services, whilst feasible would result in some duplication and inefficient use of the limited expertise available. A new standalone body for buses, would need to be accountable, with a governing board, well-developed and effective governance and finance procedures, IT and HR systems etc. Passenger Focus already has these and with some changes could be expanded to incorporate other modes of travel as offering a value-for-money option for both its existing and new responsibilities.

**Q3b What do you think should be the key features of the statutory bus passenger champion body?**

The Vision of any public transport consumer body should be of services that are available when and where needed; affordable and socially inclusive; accessible to everyone; and attractive to users.

As a bus passengers champion, the new body should:

- a) Be an advocate for the provision of quality bus, tram and scheduled coach service provision, which meet the perceived needs of users, founding its views upon robust research and analysis;
- b) Work with passengers, operators, government, local authorities and other key stakeholders to ensure that the passenger's voice is heard when key decisions are being made; and
- c) Make suggestions about the future direction of service provision and where appropriate press for improvements.

Specifically, it should:

- offer passengers help and advice on getting the best out of public transport services
- explain passengers' rights when things go wrong
- mediate in complaints that cannot be settled by the operators
- undertake research & publishes reports on services
- press for improvement to services
- shape the development of policy, procedures and (where applicable) regulation

**Q4a Is option 3A - Conferring additional functions on Passenger Focus - your preferred option and why? - Yes, we believe that a body dealing with both bus and rail travel is the right solution and that it is logical to base this on Passenger Focus.**

- Combining bus, coach and rail passenger representation is logical. Passengers will use whichever mode of transport is most convenient to them and issues with interchange will always be present. Many of the issues facing rail and bus passengers are similar – e.g. information, punctuality, value for money. Passenger Focus has built up considerable experience and expertise and is an effective model of rail passenger consumer representation based on research and influencing change. While the bus and coach industries are very differently structured, funded and regulated there is no reason why the key elements of the model cannot apply to bus.
- There is an opportunity to build upon a sound national body to develop a true multi-modal body, covering all public transport. Passenger Focus is established and sponsored by the Department for Transport. Extending Passenger Focus's remit would be the best value-for-money option while retaining the level and quality of work done on rail passenger issues.
- Creating a new national consumer organisation will help plug three major gaps in representation by a) representing passengers in the debates with Government and others about bus service provision, b) adopting a national, regional and local evidence-

based approach to drive change and c) developing and maintaining effective partnerships with and between national, local and regional passenger and industry organisations to use this research to drive change.

- An evidence-based approach has proved fruitful in rail passenger representation. This research and knowledge will then be analysed, prioritised and focussed back to the bus and coach industry and, equally forcefully, to the various levels of government and other stakeholders who affect bus and coach travel.
- However, the new national body must align consumer representation with the level at which decisions are made. As an absolute minimum, it will need to work with local or regional bodies representing consumers, such as the developing TravelWatch movement, to research/address local/regional issues, lobbying and facilitate/liaise with local interest groups.

**Q4b What changes do you think will be needed in order for Passenger Focus to take on bus work?**

- If Passenger Focus duties were to encompass buses, the new organisation must from the outset relate to the needs of individual bus and rail passengers. This would best be achieved through a restructured board and a "re-launch" of the organisation.
- Alongside the existing rail structure, there would need to be an equivalent network of *regional bus passenger managers*, charged with securing positive change for passengers at a national, regional and local level. In order to deal effectively with the range of local commercial and political decision making pressures, a strong competent local voice is necessary and these *passenger managers* will need to work with local or regional user bodies such as the developing TravelWatch movement, who could be commissioned to undertake this role. Otherwise the new passenger champion must go out and generate a local consumer body.
- These affiliated bodies could be empowered to deal with the more local aspects of public transport and its' provision. The funding for this system could be by subvention from Passenger Focus or from a "*Regional Transport Consumer Fund*" created by "top-slicing" the LA transport allocations at a regional level.
- The combined body must adopt a cohesive approach to bus and rail, with close liaison between the bus and rail teams to ensure a consistent approach to regional transport planning.

**Q4c Do you have any further comments on the role that Passenger Focus might take in relation to bus travel?**

- The new body must align consumer representation with the level at which decisions are made. We are mindful that the issues which give rise to most legitimate bus passenger concerns emerge at a more local level. Bus services involve many more routes than rail, are disparate and local, often with many small local operators. Many of the issues facing bus and coach passengers are complex and subject to decision-making by a wide range of organisations.
- The bus industry itself is structured, financed and regulated in very different ways to the rail industry. Equal attention must be given to the role of local authorities as well as the bus industry itself. It seems that effective provision of bus services is very much the result of close partnership (possibly more contractual in the future) between industry and local government.
- This new body would cover bus, coach and light rail passengers in England (but outside London where London TravelWatch are the statutory representatives of bus and other transport users.)

**Q5a Is option 3B - Creation of a new multi-modal Public Transport Users Committee - your preferred option and why?** - No. Whilst combining bus, coach and rail passenger representation is logical, Passenger Focus has already build up considerable experience and expertise in representing rail passengers and rather than subsume this into a new body, it is more logical to extend Passenger Focus's remit to create a new national consumer organisation.

**Q5b How do you think that we can ensure that there is no duplication between this committee's interest in rail and that of Passenger Focus?**

In an ideal world there would be a single multi-modal body (rail, light rail, bus, coach and ideally all forms of public transport). Whilst much of the focus of rail is upon inter-city travel and buses are primarily providing local services and there is much overlap and interchange. Having two parallel bodies would lead to duplication and possible conflict of interests. Most journeys involve more than one mode of travel, often on public transport and a passenger champion must be able to address the full journey experience.

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