

Rt Hon Rosie Winterton MP
Secretary of State for Transport
Department for Transport
Great Minster House
76 Marsham St
London
SW1P 4DR

20 May 2008

Dear Ms Winterton,

Re: Passenger Focus and bus user representation

I am writing to you about Passenger Focus's new role as the statutory watchdog for bus users.

Campaign for Better Transport is pleased that the Government has decided to give Passenger Focus this role. However, we are concerned that there are key issues regarding the remit, powers and funding of the new watchdog which must be resolved, if bus passengers are going to get the kind of representation they need.

- Appeals role

We understand that the Government is considering whether passenger appeals should continue to be directed to the industry-run Bus Appeals Body. In our view, Passenger Focus must deal with passenger appeals if it is to be a credible watchdog. In London, public transport users can appeal to London TravelWatch if they are unhappy after complaining about their bus services. For national rail journeys, passengers can appeal to Passenger Focus. Bus passengers outside London should also have the right to appeal to Passenger Focus; a clearly independent watchdog that can represent them in the big battles and the smaller ones. The main argument against this is that it would cost too much – but if the Government really wants to improve buses, it cannot do this while treating bus users outside London as second class citizens.

- Access to performance data

Unlike with rail, information about bus services is inconsistent and patchy, coming from different sources and in different formats. Passenger Focus will need to find a way to access better information if it is to represent bus passengers properly. One of the best sources is real time information system data, but this is often unavailable due to confidentiality agreements. It is vital that Passenger Focus is given powers through the Local Transport Bill which will enable it to access performance data from operators, local authorities and traffic commissioners. This should include any real time information data that operators have. Passenger Focus currently has access to information on rail performance – it will need comparable information on bus performance.

- Regional presence

Buses are very local, and if Passenger Focus is to help to improve buses, it will need to work locally and regionally as well as nationally, to influence all of the key players involved: bus operators, traffic commissioners, local transport authorities, passenger transport executives and regional bodies. This work

should involve liaising with regional bodies, cooperating with the traffic commissioners to target areas of concern, lobbying and media work, feeding into local and regional consultations and plans, commenting on service changes and working with local organisations, user groups and campaigns to improve local bus services. If this is going to happen, Passenger Focus needs to have regional offices which have a brief to cooperate with more local bodies. One link manager in each region will not be enough. We would like the Government to explore how a regional structure might be created, possibly with a role for the TravelWatches, which would give Passenger Focus the kind of strong regional presence it needs if it is to represent bus users properly.

- Multi-modal integration

We were pleased to see that in the Committee debate on the Local Transport Bill, you referred to the possibility of Passenger Focus covering light rail as well as bus. We would welcome this. We also think the Government should consider giving Passenger Focus, through the Local Transport Bill, a specific duty to look at the integration (in terms of both connections and ticketing) between all the different modes of public transport.

- Funding

2/3 of public transport journeys are made by bus. That equates to around 4.7 billion journeys being made by bus passengers every year, compared to just over 1 billion made by national rail passengers. In this context, and given the need for an appeals role, a strong regional presence, and the extra work required to provide a watchdog that covers light rail and integration between modes as well as bus issues, the 'bus wing' of Passenger Focus must be well resourced. Government needs to provide at least as much, and probably much more funding than is currently provided for Passenger Focus's rail activities.

We would like some guidance on how plans for the watchdog will be developed, the timing for this, and how we can ensure that the crucial issues raised above are not forgotten. It was not entirely clear from the Committee debate on the Local Transport Bill whether there will be secondary legislation which will apply to Passenger Focus in its new role. If the process of creating the new watchdog is going to be carried out between Passenger Focus and the Department for Transport, without public consultation on the details, we would like to be clear about how we and others can feed into this process.

We welcome the work of the Government in recognising the need for a statutory bus passenger watchdog, and we want to ensure that this watchdog lives up to its potential. We look forward to seeing Passenger Focus as the new bus passenger watchdog that has real clout.

Yours sincerely,

Cat Hobbs
Public Transport Campaigner

Copy to: Anthony Smith, Passenger Focus