

SPUTNIC Presentation

Bus Users UK – what is it, and what does it do?

A brief history:

Bus Users UK was formed in 1985 by Dr. Caroline Cahm MBE. She believed that bus users needed a voice, especially with upcoming legislation that would drastically change how buses operated in the UK.

Caroline formed the PORTSMOUTH BUS ACTION GROUP, local to where she lived. She soon made contact with other small groups around the country, and an organisation called the NATIONAL FEDERATION OF BUS USERS was formed.

We changed our name (and logo) in 2004 to “Bus Users UK” – a shorter, snappier title.

The organisation is open to membership from individuals, groups, and organisations, with a yearly subscription. We produce a magazine, 4 times per year which all members receive, and it is also circulated around the bus industry.

We also ask our members if they are interested in taking a more active, voluntary role within the organisation, and this is how we gain our local knowledge. We have many local members across the UK, who all add input to Bus Users UK – some are merely local users who use buses to get to and from work every day, some are recently retired with some time to spare. And we involve them with all sorts of activities from local meetings, to mystery shopping, etc.

One of our main activities are Bus Users Surgeries. This is where we work with a large operator in an area, park a bus in the town or City centre and invite members of the public to come on board and have their say. We don't ask any questions or do any surveys – the public have their say on any suggestions, complaints or comments they may have. We insist that senior managers from the bus company are on board during the day, as well as people from the Local Authority. Everyone gets a written response if they wish. This creates a real link between the users of buses and providers. They are supported by much of the UK bus industry, who see the value in such exercises.

Another arm of what we do are complaints.

The UK Bus Industry is fairly unusual in that it doesn't have a statutory body to resolve complaint issues. This may be changing in the near future, and I'll talk about that more in a while.

What can a passenger do when he / she has a complaint that has not been resolved? Well, Bus Users UK and the Confederation of Passenger Transport

(the operator's trade association) joined forces in 1998 to create The Bus Appeals Body. Our role here is review complaints that have not been resolved satisfactorily. If a complainant has already contacted the bus operator and received a response, and they are still not satisfied, the Bus Appeals Body will review the complaint and make a recommendation. Although that decision is non-binding on the operator, most of the large bus companies in the UK support the concept and usually abide by the decision of the Bus Appeals Body. The Body has a representative from Bus Users UK, one from the bus industry itself, and is independently chaired.

There are restrictions, however, on what can and can't be investigated. For example, we cannot look at fare prices or increases, or routes which have been withdrawn for commercial reasons. We will however look at operational issues such as running to time, charging the correct fare or the behaviour of operational staff.

The Bus Appeals Body regularly finds in favour of the passenger, and an appropriate redress is agreed, such as a week's free travel, for example. As mentioned previously, it is non-binding, so the operator can choose to ignore the recommendation if it wishes.

In recent times, there has been a concern that this arrangement does not go far enough, and some transport campaign groups have expressed this concern. There is currently a transport bill making its way through Parliament that makes reference to this, and it was recently announced that an organisation that currently represents rail passengers – Passenger Focus – will, from next year, take on the role of representing bus passengers too. We are working closely with them to see how this will take shape, but it is still not clear whether Passenger Focus will take on the role of handling complaints. Passenger focus, incidentally, are a statutory body, funded by the UK Department for Transport.

So, it's exciting times for the world of bus passenger representation in the UK!

But what is it really like for our bus passengers?

We know there is still much to do to provide a really top quality, consistent bus service in the UK.

In 1986, buses were "de-regulated" in so far as, outside of London and Northern Ireland, they are responsible for setting their own routes, fares and timetables. Local Councils are responsible for having what is called a "Local Transport Plan". This means they can spend local money on subsidising a service that is termed "socially necessary", for example an evening or Sunday service, which may not be profitable for the bus company, but still needs to operate to get people to and from work / leisure facilities, etc. This system, in operation since 1986, has often been controversial, and there have been calls for local

authorities to have much more control of their local bus service, much like they do in many parts of Europe, and in London.

However, this appears unlikely to be the case for the foreseeable future.

So what does all of this mean for the humble bus passenger?

Because buses are operated for profitable, commercial means, operators will only usually operate where they can make a profit. This leads to a situation where some commuter services in large cities can have buses up to every 2-3 minutes, and other areas with buses every hour or even less than that. Passengers don't always understand why this is.

Also, when there are several operators in any particular area, quite often they sell their own tickets on a weekly or monthly basis, which often can't be used on another operator's service. Large urban areas such as Birmingham and Manchester do have "all operator" tickets, but there are many areas where this is not the case.

What about information?

Again, it varies quite widely from area to area. Cities like London and the West Midlands area, for example, have good quality at-stop information that covers all operators' services, but again, in some areas, there is not comprehensive at stop information. In some areas, it is the operators who own the bus stops and shelters, in others it is the local authorities.

This is not to say we don't have some good things going on!

There has been huge investment in kerbs across the country, and the investment made by bus operators in low-floor wheelchair and buggy accessible buses has been great. But we still don't see significant numbers of wheelchair users using buses. When we talk to wheelchair users, we often find that they don't have the confidence to use the bus for several reasons:

- Lack of driver training / awareness
- Uncertainty that they will get the space they need (the wheelchair space isn't automatically given to the wheelchair user)
- Uncertainty that the next bus along will actually be a low floor bus (some operators still mix older and newer buses on the same route).

Legislation states that all buses don't have to be low floor until 2015, and whilst there is still significant investment by operators in new buses, we will still have step entrance buses for the next few years at least. But with a new bus costing over 200,000 Euros each, they don't come cheap!

How do you put the case forward to operators and local authorities from the passengers point of view?

Well because we use buses very regularly, we can see what issues passengers really have. Our surgeries are useful in gathering comments and opinions, and we also increasingly carry out mystery shopper work to back this up.

Several of the large UK groups have commissioned us to do varying degrees of mystery shopping exercise, depending on what they want to find out. We also do mystery shopping exercises for the UK Bus Awards - the industry's major annual award scheme for good practice.

So what do we find?

Unsurprisingly, reliability is a factor. Traffic congestion is an increasing problem, especially in large cities, and we often talk to local authorities to encourage them to install bus priority schemes or restrict car movement, but this is often difficult as it is very unpopular!

Cleanliness is certainly something within the company's control. People's expectations continue to rise, whether they are going to the supermarket, the cinema or whatever. They expect a certain level of quality. And some operators are better at keeping buses clean than others. It can, of course, be difficult for a bus that goes out on service at, say, 6am in the morning, and stays out in service all day for up to 15 hours to be kept clean, but some operators are tackling this by having cleaners at bus stations for example, where they can nip onto the vehicle and remove any litter before it goes out again. But it all costs money and of course in large city areas, there are literally hundreds if not thousands of buses all in service.

We also look at how good the information is, particularly for someone who may not be local to the area, or maybe hasn't used buses for a while. How easy would it be to make a simple bus journey? Is the information easy to understand? Is it up to date? Does it say how much it will cost? Is it an exact fare system? Can you get information from a telephone number or the internet?

So quite often, you'll find me in various parts of the UK trying out such things.

And some of our mystery shopping is very in depth. For example, an operator commissioned us to undertake 100 journeys for them. Now imagine that you can only possibly do around 3 or 4 journeys per hour, and you can see how time consuming it can be. But by doing this, you can get a real feel for how a local bus service operates, and then talk to the bus operator with real confidence about what you found.

Earlier I mentioned about the Bus Appeals Body. However, we are aware that it is not universally known. The transport bill that is currently being looked at refers to the fact that there needs to be greater awareness on how the general travelling public can make a complaint.

Although some operators are good at being open about how to contact them, there are still a number of companies that don't make this clear. Often, because of financial concerns, some enquiry offices have closed, and a reliance on the company website has been the case, but of course we must remember that not everyone has the internet, and some people still prefer to write.

What's good for bus users in the UK?

Places like Nottingham, Brighton, Edinburgh and Reading all stand out as areas of excellence, and there are many other places where the local bus service is a good one.

Reading, for example, has invested heavily in new buses and a new image that attracts non-users to try the bus. This is important as, quite often, people buy their first car and never go back to buses. They may have a negative image of bus travel they used to experience 20/30 years ago. Encouraging them to try out today's bus services is very important.

Other factors are in play here. The current economic difficulties have seen several marketing campaigns encouraging people to "dump the pump" and try the bus, for example, and there are signs that there is a modest upturn in the amount of passengers in some areas. But the whole experience has to be a quality one, from when they leave their house to when they arrive at their destination.

Since April of this year, UK over 60s have been able to travel on buses, off-peak (i.e. after 0930 Mon-Fri) free of charge. Whilst there is much discussion behind the scenes about how bus companies are reimbursed for this, there is no doubt that it is very popular amongst the older generation, and it has seen a significant upturn in the amount of people using buses who are over 60. And, in turn, if they enjoy it, they'll tell their families about it and encourage them to think about trying the bus for some of their journeys. People of this age coming to our surgeries regularly tell us how much they enjoy travelling around on the buses. The free bus pass for the over 60s has been one of the most welcome aspects of UK bus travel recently.

Elsewhere, there are several schemes underway that involve major investment in new buses, and other initiatives including satellite tracking, SMS facilities, etc. So its not all bad news!!

So what for the future of Bus Passenger Representation in the UK?

Bus Users UK was formed (back in the days of the National Federation of Bus Users) to fill the gap because there was no statutory body. The UK Government has now decided that there should be statutory bus passenger representation, and this will be the responsibility of Passenger Focus, who are the existing rail passenger statutory body.

The details are still to be worked out, and we believe that they will commence in shadow form next spring and be fully operational by 2010.

We are working closely with Passenger Focus to help them as they set up this new venture and we are hopeful that there will be a continuing role for Bus Users UK as we move into the new era. It's certainly an exciting time for us all!