

Testing the Walters

Claire Walters has been working as the Chief Executive at Bus Users UK since 2012, and shared some of her opinions and ambitions for the future, with **Elizabeth Howlett**

Omet Claire at the CPT UK offices at Chancery House, London. We sat down and talked about her four years at Bus Users, as well as her thoughts on the impending Bus Services Bill. Having previously worked as a chief executive at a credit union, Claire was new to the passenger transport sector. However, since joining the organisation in 2012 she has put all her efforts into improving bus services.

Bus Users' mission statement is to champion the interests of bus and coach users and campaign for better services. The non-profit organisation works to ensure that the views of users are considered when decisions are made which will affect them. It aims to give passengers a voice and helps to have it heard by the relevant people, be that Government or operators.

It runs events around the UK called Your Bus Matters, which gives passengers the chance to discuss their views directly with decision makers in the local area. Alongside handling complaints, Bus Users campaigns to highlight issues and aims to drive up standards/perception of bus and coach travel.

Describing herself as 'blotting paper', Claire spent her initial months absorbing everything she could. Her passion for bus and coach travel was most apparent when she recalled her own experiences, both in her home country of Wales and in London. She has gone from long journeys on the school bus through Rhondda Valley as a child, to being able to hop-on and off London bus services - enabling her to understand and empathise with passengers.

Claire's passion was most apparent when she described a trip with Brighton & Hove. She enthused: "I boarded the bus and I was beaming at the driver, who was not behind a protective screen. It made all the difference as I was actually able to talk to him, and we shared a joke. I was happy, and so was the driver."

Role

CBW How did you get into the industry?

CLAIRE WALTERS (CW) I saw the advert for Chief Executive at UK Bus Users and applied. Maybe it wasn't quite that simple. I saw it the first time and thought to myself "I don't know anything about it, why would they hire me?" I was looking at moving on from where I was before and this role sounded interesting but I decided they wouldn't interview me as it's not my area. Then I saw the advertisement a few more times before eventually convincing myself to give it a go.

They seemed to be looking for someone to bring the organisation forward and develop it. That's what I had been doing for many years,



In her own words, Claire would like, "The whole of the UK to be aware of the fact that we exist, the main role we carry out and that if anyone has a question about buses or coaches, that they can contact us. We want people to know about us."
BUS USERS UK



According to Claire, "You can't just pick up a London service model, apply it to Manchester and hope it will work. It's not going to happen and there isn't enough money." A Go-Ahead London MCV eVoSeti-bodied Volvo BSLH is seen at Elephant and Castle working route 63 to King's Cross on November 29, 2016. ANNE SREATHER

so I convinced myself to give it a chance. The role wasn't entirely about having industry-specific knowledge, but it was about people. That's what appealed to me about the job.

As a passenger organisation we have a lot of staff who are fascinated by buses themselves which is useful. It is incredibly important to understand how this industry works. My background is social inclusion and social cohesion so as a marriage it works quite well. Between us, we have been working to turn this into an organisation that's fit for that purpose, and it's been around for 30 years so it's not like we don't know what we are doing.

We have set ourselves up quite differently now to have a national impact in each country. We are also looking at working with the Consumer Council in Northern Ireland so we can truly be considered a UK-wide organisation. I'm Welsh, as you can probably hear. My husband is Scottish and I have Irish relatives, so I am a very 'UK person' and quite keen to broaden our scope.

We are all working and pushing in the same direction. There's not a lot of consistency between one week and the next. The industry

is different in each country so the way you would do it in each area is different. Quite a lot of it is answering questions and queries, and working through them as a team. I get the 'difficult complaints' that take longer to resolve, so I could be at a resolution meeting from a complaint or I may be doing an operator visit.

We have only recently separated our headquarters activity from our England activity. My predecessor Stephen Morris tried to do both and it's very difficult. We are currently working on registering as a charity and becoming an ADR (Alternative Dispute Resolution) body. On top of that we have people trying to figure out what is going on in Europe amid the Brexit situation, such as how it will affect the coach and bus world or cross border travel – especially in Northern Ireland, as there are a lot of grey areas.

We aim to ensure enough people out there know us and that enough understand and care about their local bus routes. We try to empower them by giving them the right language and skills to get their voices heard. Banging tables and saying 'I want' rarely

'Passengers need buses, communities need buses. In fact, we all need buses. Let us have buses. We haven't got any Central Government funding for England, but we have for Scotland and Wales. England is the biggest country in the UK but we get the smallest amount of funding. If we were given it, we could do more'



FACE TO FACE > CLAIRE WALTERS

Buses are a cornerstone of communities, according to Claire. Passengers are seen here disembarking from a Lothian Buses service on Princes Street, Edinburgh an operator she holds in high regard. **GARETH EVANS**

goes very far. This is especially true for people who have had their buses terminated by local councils or authorities. You need strength in numbers to make a service viable again once it has been cancelled – that's where we come in.

When I first came into post, my colleague Gavin Booth was in Scotland meeting people and talking about issues, but no official operation as such – which didn't seem fair to me. Therefore, the first thing I did in my new role was talk to the Scottish Government to set up a Scottish office, with Gavin as the Director.

CBW What were your main agendas in your new role?

CW One of my first was to enhance communication, structure and coverage. It is important because if you are going to talk about issues from a UK perspective, you need an understanding from all areas. It can be challenging, especially when buses are a very local thing. For example, the issues in location A and location B could be very different. Essentially they centre on the same thing. People need to trust the bus is going to run on time, be able to physically get to the bus stop and be able to afford the fares.

There's an awful lot to do. We've been focusing on young people as they are a big issue. I know what it is like to live in a rural area with no car. You have no option but to use the bus service. If you don't cherish that market and understand it very well, or put crummy vehicles on their school routes that rattle and bang, then how can you persuade them to be your future commuters?

Operators often have a shortage of readily available information so passengers don't know what the situation is. This can also be said for young passenger schemes or concessionary tickets for young people. The campaigns are sometimes haphazard at best.

'The ban on new municipals is perverse and I've told Government that openly. If it is an enabling bill then it should enable local people to choose the right model for them. Why exclude one model? It isn't for Government to decide. It's like saying, 'you can make as many cakes as you like, but you can't make chocolate cakes, however popular they may be'

If you can't convince young people to use the bus then there won't be buses around by the time they get to the age of the concessionary fare users.

CBW Can you give an example of a complaint you may handle?

CW I tend to get involved when a dispute goes on for too long. This is sometimes twofold, as the operator isn't empowered to do anymore and the passenger doesn't feel they've been taken seriously. It's not necessarily the substance of a complaint, but the nature of it. Complaints can cause difficulties on both sides as it is often tricky to get to the real heart of what the passenger wants.

It's all about trying to bring people together on common ground and making sure they get the results they want. I essentially try to mediate through disputes so that both operator and customer can walk away with their heads held high.

Bus Users UK

CBW How would you describe Bus Users UK?

CW In a nutshell, we champion the interests of passengers. So when operators want to change routes, they can talk to us beforehand and we will work to get that information circulated to ensure passengers, understand the reasons and have a chance to comment. Generally, if people are informed and they know it is coming, they feel less aggrieved. We need to cherish our bus services because once they have gone they will be incredibly hard to get it back.

The lack of money to ensure that people know we exist annoys me. We haven't got any central Government funding for England, but we have for Scotland and Wales. England is the biggest country in the UK, but we get the smallest amount of funding. If we were given it, we could do more to get involved with more communities, ramp our services up a notch and get more done.

CBW What is Your Bus Matters?

CW We act like a broker between the passengers and the operator, take notes of a problem, direct it to the right person and follow up on those issues to make sure they've had a response. Quite often we

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have had success with rerouting services or combining routes so people don't get left out. It is worthwhile for people to speak up and get their voices heard, even if they don't get the result they want - it's all about acknowledging the problem and trying to resolve it. All people want is someone to listen to them.

We don't do as many events as we'd like due to resources - they are extremely labour intensive. We try to have a programme of at least one a month and we did one in Cambridge recently. In between the ones that we plan, we leave space to react to fast-moving events. If there are cuts to services announced, we will make sure we focus on holding one in that area and try to get the local authority involved wherever possible and get input from different demographics.

If we hold meetings in the town hall only a couple of people will turn up, whereas if we do street events we get to hear from people that aren't usually heard. We try to bring all of the local operators and local authority representatives together and get them there so people have to listen, and it isn't usually a tidal wave of complaints. We get constructive ideas and suggestions on how to improve the service. I think people from the companies come down with hard hats on expecting the worst.

CBW What do you see for the future of Bus Users UK?

CW I want the whole of the UK to be aware of the fact that we exist, the main role we carry out and that if anyone has a question about buses or coaches, that they can contact us. We want people to know about us.

Bus Services Bill

CBW What are your views on the Bus Services Bill?

CW The ban on new municipals is perverse and I've told Government that openly. If it is an enabling bill, then it should enable local people to choose the right model for them. Why exclude one model? It isn't for Government to decide. It's like saying, 'you can make as many cakes as you like, but you can't make chocolate cakes, no matter how popular they are.' I think it is lacking in passenger involvement but I really feel it is lacking in statutory guidance, which was not produced at the same time as the bill, meaning there is a lot of air involved. There is a lot of 'you may do this,' but offers no guidance as to how or what the implications could be.

The policy needs to include proper consultation - by that I mean real consultation, not an airy-fairy couple of town hall meetings. It needs to be done and have weight to it. Monitoring and customer satisfaction needs to be benchmarked before they start. I think this bill is better than nothing at all, but it has got a long way to go. Passengers need buses, communities need buses. In fact, we all need buses. Let us have buses.



I think if you're going to do anything for passengers, then you should work with the passengers and involve them. They need to be included. Transport Focus is the Statutory Consultee because it does things based on results and research, so it's an easy fit for Government and works better. However, Transport Focus is not passenger advocates like we are, but it could dovetail nicely if Transport Focus, Bus Users and CPT could work together. We are all interested in the subject and pushing the same agendas, plus we would be multimodal and cover interchanges more easily.

CBW What would you like to see come from the Bus Services Bill?

CW I feel that the vast majority of people won't understand that buses are the glue holding everything together. They make a massive difference to the everyday lives of people they are trying to serve. It would be nice if by having this bill and having debate, that people are able to brief themselves and educate themselves better when it comes to issues in transport. That's the message we need to get across to certain politicians - and maybe this bill will drag the issues relating to buses further up the agenda for a bit longer. I hope it might make the penny drop.

Thoughts on the industry

CBW How do buses in London effect perceptions?

CW We are spoilt for choice in London. I have lived in London for 20 years. People have no idea how ridiculously unlike the rest of the country the bus services are in London. That's my issue with politicians a lot of the time. The only time they catch a bus is in London, so it gives the impression all buses run on the same model that London does, and that isn't possible.

You can't just pick up a London service model, apply it to Manchester and hope it will work. It's not going to happen and there isn't enough money.

I have made my feelings clear about an elected mayor being held responsible for how franchising worked in an area. The idea that an elected mayor would be held wholly responsible for how the service runs in an entire area just seems bonkers to me. And if that is going to be part of it, then I have suggested that any elected mayor should not be given their own car, but should be expected to travel to any and all appointments on the local bus.

I'm not expecting that to come out in the wash, but the logic doesn't follow through for me. It isn't sensible.

They could follow the progress of the service personally, and should ask all members of their staff to do likewise. If it isn't working - come to us and we will try to resolve it.

Perhaps that way they may actually be more invested in doing something to solve these issues?



Claire cannot understand why buses can normally only carry one wheelchair.
GARETH EVANS

CBW Why do you feel people in elected power aren't acting on the issues?

CW The problem is that most mayors will be based in a city with regular buses, but people in rural or suburban areas will have a different experience. Counties like Cambridgeshire and Norfolk have big population centres, with lots of rural areas in between where people are reliant on public transport.

We need to look after the buses we have. Public funding for tendered services is disappearing. There isn't a focus on buses and yet it's far more important in terms of number of passengers than rail or any other service.

It is by far the most important, and yet even if you look at the Department for Transport, they have a small amount of people working on bus policy, yet there are many more people working on trains - despite them carrying far fewer passengers.

CBW How would you respond if someone argued that buses are majority affected by congestion and are unreliable?

CW That is a choice. Bus priority is a choice made by the local authority. I think buses are the solution to congestion, not the cause. The cause of congestion is one person sitting in one car. If you stopped that by reducing the amount of cheap parking everywhere or if you put freight on the rivers or the railways,

then you would end up with clearer roads.

If you ensure the bus has good funding, marketing and its reliable, then people will start moving over to it. Stick a bus lane in where you can and put a sign on it saying: 'If you were on the bus, you would be home by now.'

CBW Is Park & Ride helping ease congestion or causing it?

CW Park & Ride schemes are great. They do what it says on the tin. I know a lot of operators aren't keen because it's still encouraging people to use their car, but if you keep them on the main roads and away from the built-up city areas, then it is still resolving part of the issue. I think it's a good idea and works really well in lots of places. Why would you drive when you don't have to?

CBW Is the media's portrayal of buses positive?

CW They either get a bad rep or no coverage at all. Operators need to throw more money into marketing but are not prepared to put money where their mouth is, apart from in their own area, to convince people to use the bus again. Get rid of the animosity toward buses and not just for one company's benefit, for the industry as a whole.

I would love to see some of the creative talent in the industry join forces. Even if it is just people contributing 1% of their profit

into an ad campaign to start changing the perception of buses generally. We need to move away from the 'failure if you are on a bus' quote. It was a horrible thing to say and completely untrue, but it's put a lot of people in their middle-years off using the buses.

People in charge may only remember their rattling old school bus and forget that now buses are pretty hi-tech and are extremely comfortable. Being a small non-profit organisation, we don't have a lot of resources, but we did talk about a marketing campaign to estate agents, which I think bus companies could do.

When you move into an area your estate agent should be able to give you help to understand the bus network of that local area, especially if you're unsure of stops and streets.

CBW What are your views on bus design, could anything be different?

CW Bus designers need to change their thinking, especially in terms of buggy and wheelchair spaces. That's a design issue and it should never become a legal one. There is a long way to go, but why should only one person in a wheelchair be able to fit on a bus?

One of the things that spring to mind is when I visited a manufacturer, I asked: 'Why do you never ask the passengers what they want?' They came out with a statement that almost rendered me speechless: 'The passengers are not our customer, the operators are the customer.' It made no sense to me. The operators claim they are given limited choices of design by the manufacturers and it goes in a circle. Lothian Buses has done a good job of having buggy and wheelchair space and everybody seems to have got the message about audio-visual, which is great.

If the bus is for everyone, then make it for everyone. Bus Users UK is here to make the bridge between the people using the bus and the people making the bus. ■

i For more details about Bus Users UK, visit www.busers.org or call the head-office on 0300 111 0001.