16 December 2025

Hon Erica Stanford
Minister of Immigration
E.Stanford@ministers.govt.nz

Hon Chris Bishop
Minister of Transport
C.Bishop@ministers.govt.nz

Tēnā Koe Ministers

Sustaining Wellington's Bus Driver Workforce and Reliable Public Transport Services

We are writing to raise concerns about the impact of last year's immigration policy changes on the sustainability of our public transport workforce. These changes, particularly the higher English language requirements for visa extensions and residency applications, are making it harder for bus drivers recruited during the 2022–23 driver shortage to remain in New Zealand. This follows our letter of 5 September 2024 where we raised concerns about the proposed immigration changes https://www.gw.govt.nz/document/22858/letter-to-immigration-minister-bus-drivers-and-immigration-settings/

While our operators always look to employ New Zealanders first, the reality is that there is a limited pool of people able to work in the transport and logistics sector. During the critical shortage period, overseas recruitment was essential to maintain reliable services and keep our communities connected.

Currently, around 100 drivers employed by our two largest operators are working to extend their visas and meet new language requirements. If these experienced drivers are unable to stay, we risk shortages that may impact service delivery in 2026 and will affect access to work, school, and university, and undermine the regional economy.

We understand that nationally, around 20% of the public transport bus drivers in New Zealand are here on temporary visas. 72% of those expire in 2026.

Public transport not only helps people to get work but also relieves pressure on the transport network, including the Crown's state highway network. However, our bus driver workforce faces long-term challenges:

- A significant proportion of drivers are nearing retirement age (this isn't an issue isolated to New Zealand).
- Economic upturns reduce the availability of local drivers.

To ensure reliable services, we need flexibility to recruit and retain overseas drivers while continuing our collective efforts as a sector working with our operators, partners like NZTA Waka Kotahi and stakeholders like the Bus and Coach Association (BCA) to make bus driving a more appealing job for New Zealanders.

We ask that the Government:

1. Review the English language requirements for visa extensions and residency for current bus drivers. An IELTS score of 6.5 reflects an academic standard that many drivers may not meet, even if they can communicate fluently in spoken English.
2. Maintain pathways for overseas recruitment to prevent future driver shortages, which affect our ability to run reliable bus services.

We would welcome the opportunity to discuss practical solutions that support sustainable public transport services for our communities.

Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Ngā mihi

Daran Ponter
Heamana | Chair

Ros Connelly
Chair Public Transport Committee