

By email

5 September 2024

Hon Erica Stanford
Immigration Minister
e.stanford@ministers.govt.nz

Bus drivers and immigration settings

Tēna koe Minister,

I write to express my concern at announced changes to New Zealand's immigration settings, which included the decision to discontinue the pathway to residence for skilled bus drivers entering the country on the Accredited Employer Work Visa (AEWV).

We have a long-standing shortage of skilled and qualified bus drivers in Wellington and New Zealand's largest cities, which requires a sustainable solution. I am concerned that this decision will negatively affect people who rely on public transport to get to work and to get around, particularly our young people and ageing population.

Job opportunities for people able to meet the bus driver entry criteria have always been there for New Zealanders. I am not aware of any evidence that more immigrant bus drivers leads to fewer job opportunities for suitably qualified New Zealanders on the Job Seekers allowance.

I welcome the amendment circular in May in which changes were made to the Transport Sector Work to Residence instructions to allow people who signed an employment agreement to work as a bus or truck driver before 7 April 2024 (but had not yet started work) to remain on the work to residence pathway.

However, the overarching decision still does not recognise bus operators' need for regulatory support to build a sustainable bus driver workforce and, through transporting our citizens, contribute to the prosperity and economic growth of our cities and regions.

Classification of bus drivers

Making bus driving a more attractive job and creating a sustainable workforce are ongoing areas of work for public transport authorities and operators.

Drivers need to have the appropriate licences, which includes a medical and a fit and proper person check (police vetting). They also need to pass a pre-employment drug and alcohol test. Finally, they need to be willing to do the job.

We welcome and need motivated applicants with customer skills and a genuine interest in the job. We do not need people being forced into a role that they may not want, particularly when that involves driving a large vehicle and entrusted with the care and safety of people, including school children.

In the Wellington region, bus drivers are responsible for 900,000 journeys a day by passengers including children, older people and people with disabilities. They drive large vehicles, weighing around 15 tonnes and worth around \$1 million, around steep, narrow streets to get those thousands of people safely to school, work and home. They work on their own, and therefore need to know how to de-escalate tension and be motivated and able to deal with customers from all walks of life. It's not an easy job.

Changing the bus driver to be classed as skilled in the Skilled Migrant Category would be an important piece in the puzzle in encouraging the sector to offer bus drivers the pay and conditions that truly reflect the value and contribution they make to our communities. I would welcome the opportunity to discuss this further with you.

Ngā mihi nui



Daran Ponter
Heamana | Chair