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*Dear Maggie*

## **THE IMPACTS OF THE BUS SERVICES BILL ON RURAL AREAS**

I would like to thank you for taking part in the debate on the Bus Services Bill at its committee stage on 29<sup>th</sup> June. A number of Noble Lords raised specific points on rural proofing which I will do my best to address.

My understanding is that the purpose of rural proofing policy is to make sure that the needs and interests of rural people, communities and businesses in England are properly considered, and that policies and the design and delivery of publicly funded services achieve equally effective and successful outcomes for communities, businesses and individuals, regardless of their size or location.

As the Government's guidance specifies, "effective rural proofing does all this because:

- it designs out unintended gaps in service accessibility;
- it ensures that you take best advantage of all available local resources and assets;
- it identifies opportunities to innovate in collaboration with communities and neighbourhoods;
- it demonstrates your commitment to provide fair access to all; and
- it embeds good practice into the heart of your organisation."

The impact assessments were published on Monday 27<sup>th</sup> June, as they were reviewed to ensure that additional policies and full details could be provided.

The impact assessments were comparatively light in relation to rural proofing because the outcomes in rural areas will be heavily dependent on which authorities take up the powers in the Bill and the use that they make of them.

The issues identified in the bullet points above relate primarily to the way in which a local authority implements the powers in the Bill in their particular local circumstances; and given the nature of this Bill they are not factors that the Government could provide certainty on. What we have instead sought to highlight in the impact assessments is where the Bill would provide particular benefits or have particular consequences for rural communities. As was identified in yesterday's debate, those circumstances are limited. Please accept my assurance that this is by no means a comment on the importance of bus services in rural areas or the important part that rural issues have played in shaping the policies in the Bill.

My view is that the Bill can provide some significant opportunities in rural areas. Partnership arrangements are available for any area to take up, and a number of predominantly rural areas, including Cornwall and Greater Lincolnshire, have agreed bus franchising as an element of their devolution deals. Since the devolution deal with Cornwall was signed there have already been noticeable improvements in local bus services in the county, including in rural areas. New double decker buses for key routes within Cornwall have also been ordered by the main commercial operator.

Both partnership and franchising arrangements require consultations to take place before either can be implemented. Local bus user representatives and neighbouring authorities must be part of these consultations, to ensure the impacts and benefits to passengers and the wider community are fully considered and captured.

I envisage that these powers could be used in practice in rural areas to:

- co-ordinate bus services with rail services, which is likely to be particularly important where both are likely to be less frequent than in more urban areas. This "one public transport" vision is at the heart of what Cornwall Council is seeking to achieve through its consideration of using the new bus partnerships and franchising powers in the Bill;
- ensure that areas of rural population have a bus service which link to regional or county shopping or employment centres at the right times of day;
- ensure that commercial or franchised bus services are planned alongside community or demand responsive services and with consideration of other types of transport – such as home to school or patient transport. We are currently funding a series of "Total Transport" trials in rural areas across England to demonstrate the financial and service improvement benefits that this sort of approach can bring.

We have also taken care to ensure that the Bill will not have an adverse impact on community transport services which are of vital importance to many rural areas. These services generally operate under a permit regime provided for by either section 19 or 22 of the Transport Act 1985. Such services are not

affected by either the enhanced partnership or franchising provisions, either by way of explicit provisions in the Bill (in the case of services operated under section 22 permits) or by being outside of the definition of "local services" (in the case of services operated under section 19 permits).

I am particularly keen that the open data proposals under Clause 17 of the Bill - which will enable the better provision of information on routes, timetables, fares and punctuality - bring benefits to rural areas. Much of the existing information available is focussed on major conurbations and we want that position to change. We have therefore made a very conscious decision to make this requirement apply across England outside London.

The open data provisions in the Bill have the potential to have real benefits in rural areas, where bus services may be less frequent and facilities and bus stop less suited to waiting in inclement weather or for particular passengers – especially those with accessibility issues. These provisions will enable people to readily access information to let them know when their bus is due to turn up. But we also recognise that there may be more practical issues in those areas with the availability of mobile phone reception or broadband.

Following the debate in committee on these important points I have set work in hand within the Department to consider how best we could ensure that local transport authorities undertake a rural proofing exercise in deciding whether and how to use the new powers in the Bill. As I have highlighted above, it is those authorities who will determine how the Bill impacts on rural areas in practice. This might be achieved through inclusion of appropriate text in the statutory guidance to support the Bill or potentially through an amendment to the Bill at report stage.

I am confident that the measures in the Bill will – with appropriate support from local authorities – be capable of making a real positive difference to bus services in rural areas.

I hope that this clarification provides a fuller picture of the position than I was able to give during the debate on Wednesday evening.

I have placed a copy of this letter in the Libraries of both Houses and I am also copying the letter to colleagues who spoke in the debate.

*Yours truly*  
*Tariq*

**LORD (TARIQ) AHMAD OF WIMBLEDON**