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Den David

IMPACTS ON HOMELESS FAMILIES PLACED OUTSIDE THEIR LOCAL AUTHORITY AREA

During the Committee session of the Bus Services Bill on 29th June, my noble Lord Listowel spoke to his amendment that proposes that local authorities and bus operators who enter into an advanced quality partnership scheme, an enhanced partnership or a franchising scheme should provide free bus travel to homeless families placed outside their own local authority area.

I know that buses provide a lifeline to many people in local communities and I am sympathetic to the arguments that were made in the debate. I think, however, that there may be more appropriate ways to address the issue and would like to request that you provide Lord Listowel with further information on what the Government is doing to mitigate the circumstances in which these families find themselves.

I attach the relevant extract of Hansard for ease of reference.

I have placed a copy of this letter in the Libraries of both Houses

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LORD (TARIQ) AHMAD OF WIMBLEDON

use, the driver is often the sole customer face of the company, and how they deal with passengers can have a big impact on how that bus service, and the bus operator more generally, is perceived. Noble Lords were referred to dealing with those with disabilities, and dealing with wheelchairs and pushchairs. Of course, as has been mentioned, there is a court case pending on that subject—so noble Lords will appreciate that there is little I can say at this time. How bus drivers are perceived, in terms of the service customers get from a driver, is often how the operator is also then perceived. Good customer training ultimately benefits bus operators, and by providing a better service they increase the number of passengers.

In presenting this amendment, the noble Lord may so have had disability awareness training in mind. The mandatory disability awareness training provisions in EU Regulation 181/2011, due to come into force in 2018, would have required all bus drivers to undergo disability awareness training. But I am mindful of the situation that we now find ourselves in. Let me assure noble Lords that we are considering how to take forward the issue of such training in the longer term in the light of the referendum result. This important issue cannot be considered piecemeal, so the Bill is perhaps not the appropriate place to start that process. As I have already said, we are looking into how we can ensure that those mandatory requirements are met.

However, in practice, as noble Lords will know, most bus drivers already undertake this training as part of their certificate of professional competence, for which they must complete 35 hours of training in every five-year period. This is another obligation under European law which we will need to consider over the coming months. We are also developing guidance on disability awareness training to provide consistency across the industry.

In view of this, I believe that, other than with the mandatory requirements, it should be for the bus company, as the employer, to decide what further training is most appropriate, taking into account the type of service, where it runs, and the range of passengers using the service. I hope that with that explanation, and with the assurance that we are looking at certain requirements in the light of the result of the referendum next week, the noble Lord will feel minded to withdraw his amendment.

Lord Bradshaw: I am minded to withdraw the amendment, but I would like to see something being done. Noble Lords will remember the very strong presentations we heard on Second Reading, and I am sorry that no disabled Members are here to press this now, as it is a very serious issue for many people. I am happy to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment 10 withdrawn.

Amendments 11 and 12 not moved.

Amendment 13

Moved by The Earl of Listowel

13: Clause 1, page 4, line 22, at end insert—

"(10) such advanced quality partnership scheme must specify as a standard of service that free bus travel must be provided for homeless families placed outside of their local authority area."

The Earl of Listowel (CB): My Lords, I will also speak to my Amendments 24 and 89 in this group.

The purpose of these amendments is to seek help and advice from the Government and your Lordships on how the Bill might be used to ease the plight of homeless families placed outside their local authority. At the end of 2015, one in four homeless households in England and one in three homeless households in London lived in temporary accommodation in another local authority area. The benefit of these kinds of amendments to these families is clear. Many families moved to a neighbouring borough or somewhere else within travelling distance of their home area could use this free travel to maintain links with their crucial support networks: services such as GPs or a civic centre; employment support from their council, and employment in some circumstances; travel to school—either doing the school run for young children or, less frequently, visiting for parents' evenings and meetings with teachers; and, importantly, visiting friends and family, who may also be a source of childcare.

Over several years I have spoken with homeless families, and I have been struck by how fragile and vulnerable they are, particularly when they are isolated. We all become vulnerable when we are isolated. Perhaps we can particularly appreciate the experience of homeless families at the present time. We all feel uncertain about the future—our future within the European Union and within this country, and the future of our Government—so this feeling is familiar to us all. In some senses we are all homeless at the moment. I am therefore concerned that we do all we can to mitigate the situation of these families.

Over 100,000 children in England currently live in temporary accommodation—the highest level since 2006—so an increasing number of young children are living in such situations. For instance, I am in contact with a mother who was moved out of her local authority to another authority in London and shares one room with her 15 year-old daughter and one year-old granddaughter. Obviously, living with a teenage daughter is challenging. She is somewhere far away from her church, which is important to her and from the community that she knows, having lived for many years in another authority.

I have a couple of questions for the Minister. Will he take away this issue and see whether the Government can do something to help in this area? I recognise that the offer would perhaps need to be made locally and left up to local decision-making, and that perhaps, given the current financial climate, there would need to be a clear cap on how much money could be spent across the country in this regard.

I would also appreciate the Minister's looking at the issue of homeless families and the action taken by the Government. I know that the Government have done good work on preventing families becoming homeless, and of course their homeless housing strategy will produce more houses, which will help this issue to some degree. I am interested to learn what the Government

[THE EARL OF LISTOWEL]

are doing specifically to mitigate the harm experienced by homeless families displaced in this way. What specific preventive measures are in place to prevent harm coming to them? I know that the noble Lord, Lord Freud, periodically meets his opposite number in the Commons to discuss these issues. I would appreciate it if the noble Lord would write to me to say what recent thoughts and developing policy there have been in this area. If he could encourage this matter to be placed on the agenda for the next meeting with the noble Lord, Lord Freud, that would be welcome, too.

I therefore seek noble Lords' advice on how the Bill might be made to mitigate the harm experienced by these families, and I beg to move.

9 *pm*

Lord Kennedy of Southwark: My Lords, this group of amendments in the name of the noble Earl, Lord Listowel, seeks to provide free bus travel to homeless families placed in accommodation outside the local authority they normally reside in, with free bus travel under the various schemes referred to in the Bill. These amendments raise an important point, which is that homelessness and the housing crisis is resulting in people and families being housed in temporary accommodation, many miles away from where they normally reside.

As the noble Earl said, this then brings a whole raft of problems—about living in isolation; about being part of the community and then being taken away from that community; and about having to change schools or make a very long journey to get to school or work, or to see family and friends. Bus fares then become prohibitively expensive. The noble Earl raises a valid point in his amendments, but I think that the situation is much worse, particularly for homeless families in London. These families can find themselves out to Birmingham, Derby, Nottingham and other cities in England and Wales, hundreds of miles away from the place they normally reside, way beyond the distance of a reasonable bus journey.

This is no way to treat people. We have to deal with the housing crisis so that people can have stability in their lives and live in homes they can either rent or buy, be that in the public or private sector. These homes need to be warm, safe, dry and affordable. We all know the rents charged in London can be truly shocking. Our society needs to create a situation where people can live together side by side, in homes where they can be part of the community.

My view is that these amendments raise an important issue due to the crisis we face. I am not sure they solve a practical problem, but I do think the noble Earl is right to highlight this issue. The reality is that people's other problems are compounded by their being placed far away. That is the difficulty. I do not know whether assisting with bus travel will deal with these matters. As the noble Earl said at the end of his remarks, the issue of cost comes into this too, as implementing a proposal could be prohibitively expensive.

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon: My Lords, I join the noble Lord, Lord Kennedy, in thanking the noble Earl for bringing this important issue to the fore. As the

noble Lord, Lord Kennedy, has said, the amendments in front of us require operators of services delivered under franchising or enhanced partnerships, or advanced quality partnerships, to provide free bus travel for the homeless families placed outside of their local authority area. Like the noble Lord, I am sympathetic to the broad aims of the amendment and know that buses provide a lifeline for many in our local communities. However, having listened very carefully to the noble Earl, I think there may be more appropriate ways to address the issue, and I will of course pass on the issues he has raised to my noble friend Lord Freud.

As I have said before, this Bill will enable devolution. Reflecting on the noble Earl's contribution, I would say that it will give local areas more control over their bus services. The issue highlighted may be another of the issues that particular authorities are looking to address. If so, they will be able to explore the options open to them through the tools provided in the Bill. I remain concerned that, as drafted, the amendment will perhaps unnecessarily tie the hands of authorities looking to implement franchising, advanced quality partnerships or enhanced partnerships. I fully accept that that is not the intention of the noble Earl's amendment in requiring authorities to provide free travel where the benefit is not available in other parts of the country. However, like the noble Lord, Lord Kennedy, I believe it is an important point to raise.

I hope our discussion today and my comments have indicated to the noble Earl that we are sympathetic to the broad aims of the amendment. However, I maintain that there are more effective ways of tackling the problem that he has raised. I hope this has assured him to the extent that he feels able to withdraw the amendment.

The Earl of Listowel: I am grateful to the Minister and the noble Lord, Lord Kennedy, for their supportive comments and their recognition that this is a very serious issue for the many families involved. I am also grateful to the Minister for saying that he will raise these concerns with his noble friend Lord Freud. On that basis, I am happy to beg leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment 13 withdrawn.

Amendment 13A not moved.

Amendment 14

Moved by Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon

14: Clause 1, page 5, leave out line 3

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon: My Lords, I will speak also to Amendments 18, 57 and 58, relating to Clauses 1 and 4.

Amendment 57 amends new Section 123H to make it clear that a franchising scheme cannot co-exist in an area where an enhanced partnership or advanced quality partnership scheme is in operation. The amendment is intended to tidy up the Bill rather than change the policy outcome.