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SUBMISSION TO LABOUR'S LIVING STANDARDS & SUSTAINABILITY POLICY COMMISSION

Introduction

As the MP for Birmingham Northfield I welcome the opportunity to make a submission to Labour's Living Standards and Sustainability Policy Commission. This submission comments on the Agenda 2015 Policy Paper – "Our Buses and Railways: Giving communities more of a say" – and responds specifically to the issues of the accountability for, and access to, public transport services. In summary:

- *I commend the intent to put communities in control of public transport, as too often centralised infrastructure projects fail to provide tangible benefits for local people*
- *Labour should build on the success of multi-sectoral partnerships – such as one in my constituency of Longbridge – that unite elected representatives, local businesses and community groups in devolved decision making for public transport provision.*
- *Community control of public transport will be important to address the varying needs of local areas, channelling funding to those most in need – such as young people whose lack of access to transport affects their education and employment opportunities.*

Local Approach

I commend the aims of Labour's Policy Commission to put communities in control of public transport, promote greater integration of bus and rail services, and ensure that transport is kept affordable. Transport infrastructure led by central-government too often fails to respond to the actual needs of the local environment that it serves..

For example, the £600 million nationally-led redevelopment of New Street Station in Birmingham is a crucially important transport project for people in the West Midlands. Because of the way infrastructure projects are delivered in the UK, it has required the involvement and funding of numerous different national and regional partners – with duplication of efforts and increased delays the unfortunate result. Although it has been a recognised priority since 2000, it is only due for completion in 2015.

Moreover, there is a danger that the benefits of infrastructure projects such as New Street fail to reach those that they are targeted at. Although New Street aims to make Birmingham a transport hub for the West Midlands, it will only deliver local growth benefits if it drives improvements in transport access and connectivity throughout the region. For instance, the poor transport connectivity and facilities at Longbridge Station – the site of a major £1 billion new regeneration project – have not been addressed as part of the substantial changes to New Street at all.¹

Without improving accessibility to transport connectivity for places such as Longbridge, a suburb of Birmingham containing areas of high levels of multiple deprivation and urban isolation, the potential of New Street to deliver tangible social and economic benefits to people in Birmingham is limited. We urgently need a more joined up approach that integrates major transport investments with local bus, rail and road infrastructure and the local economy.

Devolved Accountability

It is therefore essential that communities are thoroughly consulted on transport services that affect them – whether that it is a new local bus route or a national infrastructure project like HS2. We need to devolve accountability to a local level to ensure public transport networks are properly responsive to people’s needs and uses.

The experience of the ‘Longbridge Connectivity Group’, a cross sectoral local partnership working to improve the transport network in my constituency, has demonstrated that devolved accountability requires cross-sector involvement to work effectively. I have taken an active role in bringing elected councillors, public bodies such as Network Rail and Centro, and private sector partners together ensure to that local transport infrastructure will unlock Longbridge’s potential for growth, development and inward investment.²

Our multi-sectoral partnership has developed practical proposals to improve passenger experience, widen transport connectivity and promote sustainable development in the area. These proposals were submitted as a transport bid to the Greater Birmingham and Solihull Local Enterprise Partnership – another vehicle of devolved power.

Labour’s Policy Commission should focus on how elected representatives and other public and private partners can work together to ensure devolved decision making on public transport is successful, and has the buy-in of the whole community. It will be essential that elected individuals and public bodies can take a leadership role, with the power and authority to convene and mobilise private sector partners and the wider community, to ensure decision making is accountable.

Accessibility

Improving access to public transport is a rightly identified as a crucial priority for Labour’s Living Standards and Sustainability Policy Commission. This is particularly important to address the barriers facing young people not in education, employment or training (NEET), of which there are currently over a million. Poor or costly transport restricts opportunities in education and employment for young people, who are often unable to afford to go to job interviews or even visit the job centre.

The rise in bus prices has made the problem acute, as research has showed that young people rely on buses more than any other age group. Bus prices have increased by a national average of 33% over the past seven years – with a rise of 6.5% between 2011-2012 alone.³ With concessionary bus fares for the over-60s still ring fenced by the Government, but only a third of local authorities outside of London currently offering concessionary travel to young people, there is clearly a major debate to be had on public transport provision at a community level.

Addressing the access and affordability of public transport again requires a devolved community approach, which can respond to local demands rather than national averages. Where there are areas of acutely high youth unemployment – such as in my Northfield constituency – the provision of free travel for NEET individuals may be considered to be a priority for local people, with resources allocated accordingly.

Looking at both issues of infrastructure and access, there is a clear need for Labour to drive a devolved approach to public transport networks. Without the perspective, involvement and buy-in of local people, public transport will be unable to meet the needs of the community which it aims to serve.

¹ Greater Birmingham and Solihull Local Enterprise Partnership, The Greater Birmingham Project – the Path to Local Growth, March 2013

² Longbridge Connectivity Group, Longbridge Connectivity Package, June 2013

³ Campaign for Better Transport, ‘Transport Barriers Facing Young People’, March 2013