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Rt. Hon. Louise Haigh MP
Secretary of State for Transport
Great Minster House
33 Horseferry Road
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5th August 2024

Dear Madam,

May I congratulate you on your appointment to this key Cabinet role? I write on behalf of the Travel Action Group of Transition Tavistock (Devon). Transition Tavistock is a small voluntary group, working towards a sustainable future for Tavistock and its local area, and the Travel Action Group seeks to promote ways of getting to, from, and around the Tavistock area that are better for people and the planet than over-dependence on fossil fuels. We prioritise active travel, in particular for pedestrians and cyclists, and support the use of buses and other forms of public transport.

We are therefore pleased to note the five priorities outlined in your address to DfT staff on 8th July, and also significant points you made during your visit to Manchester on 11th July: “Buses are the lifeblood of communities… “This new government will give local leaders the tools they need… “Our plan will create and save vital bus routes (etc).” Whilst our local circumstances in a medium-sized market town surrounded by very rural areas are markedly different from those in Manchester or your own city of Sheffield, the principles remain the same.

In the light of the above, I should like to ask whether our local leaders – should the paused Devon and Torbay Combined Authority be given the go-ahead – will indeed have similar responsibilities with regard to bus services as those to be enjoyed by elected mayors? As an aside, given that the city of Plymouth is our nearest major conurbation, whereas we are a long way from the county town of Exeter, or from Torbay – with Dartmoor lying between us in both cases! – we would welcome any reconsideration by Plymouth Council to join the combined authority as this would give greater coherence to the planning of bus services.

Before moving on from bus issues, the capped one-way £2 fare has been in our view the single most significant policy initiative to encourage the use of buses, not only as part of the pandemic recovery programme, but in an ongoing way too. Whilst I recognise the severe financial constraints facing the Government, Transition Tavistock would welcome its continuation beyond the current period (already extended). Are you able at this stage to provide any indication of the future prospects for this scheme?

I turn back now to one of your five priorities, namely “transforming infrastructure to work for the whole country, promoting social inclusion and tackling regional inequality”. Your officials will confirm that the reopening of the Dartmoor Line from Okehampton to Exeter has been an

enormous success, with passenger numbers greatly exceeding forecasts. This was seen locally and nationally as the first stage of reinstating an inland route (Exeter/Okehampton/Tavistock/ Plymouth) as an alternative to the only rail route serving southern Devon and the whole of Cornwall. No doubt you will recall that this latter was severed a decade ago at Dawlish by a catastrophic storm, and although since rebuilt it remains at risk to the longer-term effects of climate change.

Thus, we were very disappointed to learn in the past week that the second stage of reinstatement of the inland alternative, namely that between Plymouth and Tavistock, which was very close to being given the final go-ahead, has now been stopped as a consequence of the Chancellor's announcements. The route passes through, and includes stations within, the north-western suburbs of Plymouth, one of the most deprived urban areas in southern England. It is generally accepted that such transport infrastructure projects can contribute significantly to addressing regional inequality and contributing to the economic changes desired by the Government, and hence we sincerely hope for reconsideration of this particular case.

[Signed by secretary and Travel Action group representative]