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Transport Committee
Committee Office
House of Commons
London
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Dear Sirs,

This letter forms the response of the Longsight Transport Project (LTP) to the current inquiry of the Transport Committee on bus service provision.

By way of background, the LTP is a community project in innercity Manchester that has been working on local transport issues for four years. The area, Longsight, has a high ethnic population and low car ownership. The first piece of work was a detailed consultation of the local community to find out what transport and related issues local residents were concerned about, culminating with the report 'Better Buses and Safer Streets for Longsight.' Since this report was published, in 2003, a community group has formed and, with the facility of a paid worker and support from Friends of the Earth, has begun to take forward the issues raised in the report. These issues include not only public transport but also walking, cycling, traffic and parking. Its activities include a website to encourage participation, a monthly radio show, ongoing monitoring and consultation work and involvement in key policy mechanisms including the Local Strategic Partnership and Ward Coordination Meetings. In June and July, the project will be carrying out independent monitoring of buses in the area, by means of postcards for commenting on individual journeys. We would be happy to share this information with the Transport Committee once it is compiled. More information about our work can be found at the website www.transportlongsight.org.uk, from which the 2003 report and a recent update to it can be downloaded.

Those involved in the project were very interested to learn that the Government is reviewing the quality of bus service provision because this is an issue that arises frequently when discussing transport issues in the local community. On first sight, the area is relatively well served by bus routes. There is a quality bus corridor, the 192, along the A6 with a frequency of roughly every 10 minutes. The 53 route is cross-city and connects many important areas of Manchester which are vital for the local community's links to work, health care, education and networks of family and friends and the timetable gives a frequency of roughly every 20 minutes during the day. There are other less frequent services that take different routes into the city centre and, especially considering that they pass hospitals and universities, are equally as important. The two main companies who operate in the area are First, who run the 53, and Stagecoach, who run the 192. The area is also a short walk and or trip on some of the bus routes to the Wilmslow Road corridor, which is known as the busiest bus route in Europe, along which many companies compete for the buoyant student market.

Despite the apparent wealth of bus services, there are a number of reasons why we would advise this inquiry to very seriously consider the development of much firmer regulatory powers to improve and maintain high standards of performance of bus companies and control the routes they take. This is a conclusion that we and others have arrived at over a number of years of trying to get improvements in the bus services and offer the following pieces of evidence in support of our

advice:

- 1) The 53 route has a reputation for performing extremely poorly in terms of punctuality. This was one of the most frequent complaints during our consultation in 2003 and again during vox pop interviews for our radio show in 2006. A recent project carried out by students at the School of Environment and Development at the University of Manchester confirmed that reliability is still poor. This is despite the fact that the 53 has been subject to a Performance Improvement Plan since January this year. Discussions with GMPTE about this service have confirmed this but we have been unable to see the data on reliability because of commercial sensitivity. First have been unwilling to discuss this issue with us and GMPTE and Manchester City Council are as powerless as we are to penalise the company for poor performance.
- 2) As part of the Performance Improvement Plan, Moss Side, an area of Manchester with high levels of social exclusion and low levels of car ownership, was removed from the route. Very little information was given about this to the community or to the bus users and what information that was provided was at very short notice. The route went instead along part of the busy Wilmslow Road Corridor, and First argued that this was intended to improve the performance of the route as a whole. In the aforementioned student project, the authors considered this claim and concluded that this change of route did not cut out significant traffic congestion from the route. A community meeting formed as a result of this decision and, with the involvement of a Manchester City Council Councillor, signatures were collected for a petition to ask for GMPTE to either order First to return to Moss Side or to put on a replacement service. Residents expressed frustration at not being able to get to Longsight Market, to work and to educational opportunities. Many were relying on private taxis, which they could scarcely afford. With the limited funds GMPTE has available for such interventions, it arranged a subsidised route, the 54, which runs less frequently and with sparser coverage throughout the day as a whole. Because of tendering rules, GMPTE had to accept the most competitive bid, which was from First, despite the fact that the situation had been created by First and their record of poor performance on this route. One might suggest that First has had its cake and eaten it: not only shedding a presumably low profit section of the route, but also then being paid by GMPTE to bring it back. It is an example of GMPTE, to whom most people direct their complaints about bus services, having no powers to regulate the performance of buses and very limited funds to pick up the pieces when private companies pull out of areas that desperately need bus services.
- 3) There has recently been an issue on the A6, the quality bus corridor, whereby a new operator, GM Buses, have run a route to compete exactly with the 192 run by Stagecoach. Stagecoach's reaction was to put even more buses onto the route, at times creating congestion and chaos at bus stops. At one point there were Stagecoach representatives in what looked like riot gear at one of the busiest bus stops because of fears of arguments that might result from this direct competition. Since the buses ran at the same times and were priced approximately the same as the Stagecoach buses, there is little to support a claim that this is healthy competition. It has been reported to me that the hospital at the Stockport end of the route, Stepping Hill, has felt that the number of buses passing through the site was simply inappropriate in terms of traffic management and air quality. It is difficult to see how this competition is helping the people who live on that corridor and/or use the route. Greater regulatory powers and a franchising system, as is in place in London, would mean that the authorities could keep bus traffic to acceptable levels.
- 4) The Wilmslow Road corridor, although enjoying a level of service that no other route in England has in terms of the frequency of buses, is chaos. This is because many companies are running the same route and competing for passengers. Various estimations of patronage have been suggested from research, one as low as 3.5 passengers per bus on average. In actual fact the exact figures are not available to us because of commercial sensitivity. Stagecoach prices along this route are high and smaller companies buy up cheaper, older and dirtier buses and carry passengers for as

little as a third of the Stagecoach price. Some of them still carry London posters because they are rejected stock from London, where standards are higher. Observations reported to us suggest that they will wait to fill up with as many passengers as possible rather than sticking to a timetable and there have been reports of some companies waiting at a stop until another company's bus is just behind and then pulling off. Although one has to wait literally seconds for a bus, the congestion at certain junctions because of too many buses and the unwillingness of these buses to stick to timetables makes travelling on this route an unpleasant and stressful one. At the point where the Metrolink track shares road space with buses, trams have been known to have to wait behind a queue of up to ten buses, whilst the buses wait to get into Piccadilly Bus station, which is overcrowded to the point of congestion, therefore adding to the levels of congestion throughout the City Centre and presenting danger to the pedestrians who share this space with the buses. As long as any company can run any route they choose at any time for any price with any standard of bus, this is likely to continue.

- 5) Price increases on most services have been well above inflation and this again is something that the authorities have no regulatory powers to stop. At the same time, the city council pursues a strategy of sustainable development and should therefore be encouraging cheaper bus prices to promote modal shift away from the private car.
- 6) Similarly, the effect of exhaust fumes from buses, particularly the older buses on the Wilmslow Road corridor, goes unchecked and this is a major public health and environmental impact. In fact, Manchester gets London's older buses since emission standards in London are higher.

I trust that the above is evidence enough of the need to give authorities such as GMPTE more regulatory powers and of the need to learn from some of the successes of London and apply them to conurbations such as Greater Manchester. In particular, more powers must be given to penalise poor reliability, regulate unfair price rises and clean up the dirtier buses. A franchise system, whereby companies cannot just cherry pick the more profitable routes would help protect communities such as Moss Side from the sudden loss of their services.

Of those organisations currently dealing with public transport, GMPTE seems to us to be the most appropriate to receive additional regulatory powers. However, it is important that this inquiry reviews the composition of the PTEs and the way they operate, in order to ensure that they are accountable to bus users.

The Committee asked what the future of the bus is and it is clear when working in communities, particularly those who have poor quality services, that the bus is essential in tackling social exclusion. It has the unrealised potential to provide affordable transportation not only to the city centre but also to work, education, shopping, health and social needs throughout the city. To do this though, it needs to offer an integrated network of services that go where people need to go and offer easy to understand through-ticketing. Given the urgent need to reduce climate change emissions, the bus is also part of the integrated transport system required to provide an attractive alternative to the ever increasing use of private cars.

Thank you for the opportunity to present our views on this. I look forward to seeing the result of this inquiry.

Yours Faithfully,

Graeme Sherriff
on behalf of Longsight Transport Project