

House of Commons

Thursday 18 January 2018

The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER in the Chair]

Oral Answers to Questions

TRANSPORT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Community Transport: Licensing

1. **Neil Gray** (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): What progress he has made on his proposals to change the licensing of community transport. [903363]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Jesse Norman): In the first Transport questions since the beginning of the year, the Year of Engineering, I would like to put on record my thanks to my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr Hayes) and my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard) for all the work that they have done.

The Government want to protect as many community transport services as possible. We will soon be consulting on the issuance and use of permits, and have been working to interpret the scope of the exemptions to the regulations as widely as the law will allow.

Neil Gray: I thank the Minister for his answer. He will be aware that the proposal is estimated to cost the industry £37 million and each driver £1,500. It rather seems like the Government have taken a sledgehammer to crack a nut. What does the Minister say to Shotts' Getting Better Together in my constituency, which provides essential community transport services; yet has no interest in being a commercial entity and could be lost to the community under these plans?

Jesse Norman: I do not recognise the description that the hon. Gentleman gives. I have been up and down the country talking to community transport schemes. It is not at all clear that the implication for local community transport operators will be anything like as severe as has been suggested, and the one case that has been tested has been referred back for further evidence gathering.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): I am grateful to the Minister for recently visiting my constituency, where he saw the great work being done by Our Bus Bartons. He will know that such companies all over the country are urgently seeking reassurance, but can he clarify whether any action proposed by the transport commissioner

reflects upon the consultation that is taking place, or whether the consultation will be taking place in any event?

Jesse Norman: The consultation will be taking place in any event, and the details will be announced shortly. I greatly enjoyed my visit to see the Our Bus group, which is a model of good practice in local community transport.

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): I welcome the Minister to his appointment. While I understand that the Government have said that they are not going to end the sections 19 and 22 arrangements, the letter they sent out in July last year has caused what the Select Committee on Transport has described as paralysis in the not-for-profit sector. Do we not now need clarity from the Government about what they intend to do, so that they can demonstrate real support for the community transport sector, including for firms such as Shencare in my constituency?

Jesse Norman: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for welcoming me to my job. I have actually been in it for a while, so I am sorry not to have made more impact on him, if not on the sector. In that regard, he will have seen—I am sure he has noted it carefully—the testimony that I and one of my officials gave to the Transport Committee, which put to rest the question of whether the letter was inappropriate or had caused difficulty. There certainly has been concern, and rightly so: it is a reinterpretation of the law. Some people may not be compliant, that is true, but the vast majority will be, and we expect the consultation to be successful in further allaying concerns.

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): North Norfolk Community Transport says that at the moment it is unable to get new section 19 permits because it has bid for some of its services competitively, but those services are cross-subsidising vital community services and it is doing exactly what the county council urged it to do. These vital services could go under unless that uncertainty ends, so can the Minister give some reassurance urgently?

Jesse Norman: The traffic commissioners are acting speedily and effectively and as a unified group on this issue. I expect the consultation to continue to give—through the proposed exemptions and workarounds that we have been looking at—further comfort to the sector.

Rail Improvements: Devon and the South-west

2. **Neil Parish** (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): What progress he has made on rail improvements in Devon and the south-west. [903364]

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Joseph Johnson): We are investing more than £400 million in the rail network in the south-west. This includes a fleet of brand-new trains for services to Devon and Cornwall, which will enter service later this year, transforming journeys for passengers. We are continuing to work with Network Rail and the Peninsula Rail Task Force to explore the potential for longer-term improvements in the south-west.