

# Briefing

## Local Transport Bill, House of Lords Second Reading 20 November 2007

### Background

The Local Transport Bill, if passed, will give Local Authorities greater powers to improve the quality of local bus services and respond to local transport needs. It will enable Local Authorities to review and propose their own arrangements for local transport governance and to develop proposals for local road pricing schemes.

Whilst Help the Aged broadly welcomes the Bill, we are concerned that, despite one of its aims being to improve bus services and increase bus patronage, scant attention is paid to the local transport needs of older people who are unable to use buses or who face barriers in accessing them. 21% of people aged 65+ in the UK feel their life is not as full and active as they would like, because of a lack of appropriate transport.<sup>i</sup> Local bus services are vitally important for older people, in reducing isolation and enabling them to play a part in the community. In practice however, public transport remains inaccessible for too many older people, particularly the oldest and most vulnerable.

Help the Aged would like to see progress on the following areas, during the passage of the Bill, in order to secure action to address the needs of the many older bus users:

- **Improving the quality of local bus services including alternatives to buses for those unable to use them**
- **A strong emphasis on involving older people in consultation**
- **Expanding access to community transport**

### Improving the quality of local bus services

One of the Government's aims in bringing forward this Bill is to improve the quality of bus services and increase patronage. However we are concerned that insufficient action is being taken by Government to address the particular barriers faced by older people in using buses – instead the Government is relying on the provision of free bus passes as a cure-all. We believe this approach will not be sufficient on its own.

Only 56% of pensioners in Great Britain take up their entitlement to concessionary fares on public transport.<sup>ii</sup> Help the Aged has undertaken extensive research on older people's use of public transport. In a recent study just under half the older people questioned, said they did not use the bus as often as they would like because of difficulties getting on and off with shopping. Further reasons for not using buses included:

- Difficulty getting to and waiting at bus stops in bad weather
- Difficulty getting to/from bus stops to home or other destinations
- Difficulty getting to a seat before the bus moves off

These findings were reinforced by case studies collected by Help the Aged at the National Pensioners' Convention's annual Pensioners' Parliament, in May 2007. When asked what problems they faced in using public transport older people commented:

*"Can't walk uphill to the bus stop"*

*"What use is a bus pass to me? I can't get on the bus"*

*"Nottingham City Transport has stopped buses running through the town, so disabled people can't walk from one side of town across the other to catch another bus to the hospital or wherever."*

46% of those taking part in Help the Aged's *Local Bus Services and Travel Concessions* study were either registered disabled or had mobility impairments.<sup>iii</sup> The sizeable proportion of older people with mobility impairments means their needs should be a central consideration of public transport services and travel concession arrangements. The research also found that:

- 30 per cent of those who are registered disabled rely on taxis compared to only 5 per cent of the non-disabled.
- Only 26 per cent of disabled people rely on buses, as compared to more than half of those who are non-disabled, who regularly use buses
- 27 per cent of older people identified themselves as 'not registered disabled, but experiencing difficulties or discomfort either walking more than 200 metres or getting on or off local buses

Clearly these figures indicate the impracticability of bus travel for these groups.

In addition, Help the Aged has heard many reports from older people in both rural and urban areas who were pleased to receive their bus pass, only to discover that the bus services had been discontinued. Again these points were reinforced by comments from NPC delegates:

*"Why have bus passes when there are no buses at all in some areas"*

*"The bus route to the church where I go to lunch one day a week has been removed. I now have to walk over ¼ mile to get to this church. Being not too good on my feet I find this extremely difficult and cannot go if the weather is windy or wet."*

Older people in many rural areas are poorly served by bus routes, the same areas in which the proportion of the older population is growing the fastest.

Our survey found that the physical state of bus timetables also caused problems for older people. Small print, timetables displayed too high, lack of prominent display and information distorted by vandals were all cited by our respondents.

Other barriers cited by respondent include security and fear of anti-social behaviour and buses running at inconvenient or infrequent times.

**We strongly believe that greater flexibility in transport concessions is a practical means to address many of these issues.** We believe that Government should introduce provisions in this Bill for all local areas to provide flexible alternatives to the bus pass. They should also provide the relevant funding to enable this. For instance travel tokens, which could be used on a wide variety of public transport, including taxis, trains and buses could be used to address the diverse transport needs of older people. Travel tokens are currently provided by 60 local authorities across England. According to Travel Tokens Ltd, a supplier of tokens, 80% of tokens used nationally are spent on travel by taxis. According to our survey in *Local Bus Services and Travel Concessions* study, in April 2008 when bus passes will go 'nationwide' in England, 80% of respondents would still choose tokens.

### Punctuality

Help the Aged welcomes any measures to improve quality of bus services including partnership schemes (between local authorities and bus operators); quality contract schemes; new performance regimes – with punctuality as a criteria); and new regulations regarding community transport.

However, we are concerned by the current emphasis on punctuality as the main measure of performance. Punctuality must not be achieved at the expense of other equally important criteria, particularly the safety of older people. Fear of injury caused by the bus moving off before older people can find a seat is a very real barrier to bus use for older people. There are cases of severe injuries sustained on buses. In 2002, 5,638 older people were admitted to A & E with injuries following a fall on a bus.<sup>iv</sup> For an older person, a fall can be devastating, causing serious injury or even death. With awareness and careful driving these can be avoided.

*“90% of bus journeys (not holiday coaches) are fraught with danger, overload of buses is a danger and a very real problem is that most drivers drive too fast to adhere to silly timetables. As a result they brake and accelerate hard causing tumbles, especially with senior citizens.”*

Pensioners Parliament delegate, May 2007

Policies for the promotion of safe and efficient transport must work for everyone, including older people.

Help the Aged would urge that in addition to punctuality and reliability being written into performance agreements, (and/or other arrangements to be fostered between local authorities and bus operators) the following must also be included:

- careful driving

- design for disablement
- adequate information provision

In particular we believe that training drivers on the safety and needs of older people is an urgent need.

### Consultation

An essential tool in creating effective local bus services is of course consultation. Unfortunately too often older people are left out of local consultation arrangements.

We believe Clause 19, which sets out the notice and consultation requirements for the Quality Contracts Scheme, should specifically emphasise the importance of consulting with older people.

### A champion for bus passengers

Help the Aged warmly welcomes the provision for secondary legislation (clause 64) for a champion for bus passengers to provide a more powerful voice informed by the opinions of bus passengers. This has the potential to be an important tool in reducing the barriers to bus use for older people.

It is however essential that provisions for this take into account the specific needs of older passengers. Help the Aged would welcome the opportunity to be involved in the consultation on this.

### Community transport

The value of community transport in providing for people for whom other modes of transport are inaccessible is indisputable. Help the Aged has considerable experience in the field of community transport provision and can cite many examples of highly effective door to door services run for older people under Section 19 or 22 permits. The many obstructions preventing older people from accessing public transport mean that community transport provides a crucial service for some of the most vulnerable and excluded people.

We strongly encourage measures to increase flexibility for community transport providers. Any restrictive measures would only serve to obstruct reduce the efficiency and reach of this most necessary service.

### Summary

Whilst Help the Aged broadly supports this Bill, we believe that to fully address its aims of improving local transport and increasing bus patronage, much greater emphasis should be placed on the needs of older people who cannot currently use local transport. The Government cannot rely simply on the provision of free bus passes to increase bus patronage amongst older and disabled people; as though cost is a key issue, many other practical barriers remain.

We believe the Bill could be strengthened in the following ways:

- **Introducing provisions and funding for local areas to offer flexible alternatives to the bus pass.**
- **Greater recognition of the importance of local consultation, with emphasis on ensuring older people are not excluded**
- **Greater flexibility for community transport operators**

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<sup>i</sup> Spotlight Report 2007, Help the Aged

<sup>ii</sup> Spotlight Report 2007, Help the Aged

<sup>iii</sup> Local Bus Services and Travel Concessions, 2007 Help the Aged

<sup>iv</sup> Home and Leisure Accident Surveillance System

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