OLIVER COPPARD
MAYOR
OF SOUTH YORKSHIRE

Secretary of State for Transport
Great Minster House
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South Yorkshire
Mayoral Combined Authority
11 Broad Street West
Sheffield, S1 2BQ

18th August 2022

Dear Grant,

I am aware that discussions are underway between your department, operators and transport authorities on extending BRG funding for a further three months. Whilst I welcome any additional funding that will help support services, I find it incredible that this is being proposed at such a late stage.

The deadline for registering changes linked to the end of Bus Recovery Grant (BRG) is Friday 19 August. We have, as part of the conditions imposed by your department, worked with local operators to conduct a sustainability review. That review resulted in proposals that will see over a third of commercial services in South Yorkshire suffering reductions. The process of conducting that review to meet your deadline required a significant amount of resource from both my team and local operators. To find out that this work may have been in vain – particularly with so little notice – is quite frankly staggering.

Given the proximity of the deadline, operators have no alternative but to register the changes they are proposing. In turn, working with local leaders, I will have to make impossible decisions over which services we can afford to protect and which can no longer be supported from October.

The way this situation has been handled is simply not good enough. At a time where there are unprecedented pressures on living costs, public transport is an even more important lifeline for South Yorkshire. That is all the more true for those most impacted by the current economic pressures. The uncertainty created by short-term, muddled thinking, makes it impossible for people to make meaningful decisions about their healthcare, work or academic future.

Passenger numbers in South Yorkshire remain at 75% of their pre-COVID levels. We know that more than anything, most people want services to be reliable. If we really want to see passenger numbers recovering, we need a stable and reliable network. The approach to funding being taken by the Department is not allowing us to deliver on that objective.

When BRG was first introduced it was intended that operators maintain at least 90% of pre-COVID mileage in order to qualify for funding. This has not been the case in South Yorkshire. In fact, I have had to provide an additional £1.9m of funding to First South Yorkshire just to maintain vital services, including home to school transport, that were previously provided on a commercial basis. In spite of your department being advised of this issue I am not aware than any action has been taken to recover funding from the operators. I have no confidence that a further extension of funding will prevent cuts to services or in your department's ability to hold operators accountable for delivering the services expected.

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Even if BRG is extended there will still be a reduction in service provision here in South Yorkshire. Those cuts have been confirmed by our major operators and I have already had to make further interventions to protect at risk services, committing £5.1m to protect home to school services that would have been lost from September.

Relying on bus operators to make anything other than decisions which protect their narrow commercial interest will only result in continued over capacity on high-density, profitable routes while services that serve our more remote areas are lost, isolating those in our society with no other options for travelling to work, college or to access healthcare.

We were unsuccessful in our bid for BSIP funding. As you will know, throughout the process we shared our plans, proposals and challenges with your Department. We met all the requirements of the process, including the creation of an Enhanced Partnership (something not seen in many of the areas that have received funding). We have continued to support services through maintaining concessionary reimbursement at pre-COVID levels and have committed additional funding to support a variety of activities intended to grow patronage including a Summer Saver initiative and the extension of our young person's concession to include all 18 – 21-year-olds. I believe I am doing everything within my power to support local transport services, but the scale of the challenge we now face exceeds the limited, local resources that we need to secure services in anything other than the very short term.

Acting earlier would have avoided much of the abortive work which has now taken place and would have provided the travelling public with certainty. As it is, the proposal for a 3-month extension will simply push the cliff edge back to December. To further confuse matters, I read on Sunday that your preferred intervention is a cap on single fares.

Finally, in the Levelling-Up white paper, published just a few months ago, the government committed to deliver a 'London style transport system' outside of the capital by 2030. That ambition was one of 12 core missions that were supposed to define the success of levelling-up. When we first spoke I made clear I wanted nothing more than to work closely with you to deliver on that mission. And yet far from working with metro mayors like me to deliver a frequent, efficient and affordable public transport system in places like South Yorkshire, there is seemingly a poverty of ambition at the heart of this government's plans.

In order to move matters forward I am asking you for 3 things:

- Devolution of any extension of BRG to the SYMCA to ensure those funds are allocated against local priorities and not just used to support commercial priorities, or prop-up profit margins of operators.
- Any extension of funding applies equally to light rail - this is an important part of our local transport infrastructure facing similar challenges to bus services.
- I am again asking you to give serious consideration to my previous request for meaningful, long-term support. Officials from DFT must engage with my team to develop proposals that deliver growth in passenger numbers and lead to a sustainable network, an ambition that I'm sure we both share.

I look forward to your response and would welcome a meeting with you.

Yours Sincerely

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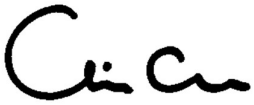

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