

Our ref: TO00000364577

Your ref: ME/VW

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Councillor Mike Exton
Chairman
South Kesteven District Council
Council Offices
St Peter's Hill
Grantham
Lincolnshire NG31 6PZ

28 November 2008

Dear Councillor Exton,

Thank you for your letter of 4 November to Alan Johnson about primary care services. As you will appreciate, Mr Johnson receives a large amount of correspondence daily and it is not always possible for him to answer all of his letters personally. I have therefore been asked to reply on his behalf.

The Department notes your concerns about changes to primary care services locally. Ministers said last autumn that they would like every Primary Care Trust (PCT) area in England to establish a new GP led health centre – open twelve hours a day, seven days a week – and extra GP surgeries in those areas with the fewest GPs. These are being funded with £250million of new money. These services will be in addition to, not instead of, existing GPs.

However, the Government has not required local GP surgeries to be merged into one large GP-led health centre. The Department of Health is not prescribing a national specification for the services the new GP-led health centres will provide, although a small number of core requirements have been established to ensure some consistency across the country. The Department has made it clear that these developments will take place only where it is ascertained after local consultation with the public and with GPs and other healthcare professionals that they will improve patient care for local communities.

Ministers have consistently emphasised to Strategic Health Authorities and PCTs the need for strong public and clinical engagement in making decisions on the location of these services and the range of services they provide. The Department has asked PCTs to undertake fair and open tendering processes during 2008/09 to ensure the fullest range of providers can bid, including existing GP practices, voluntary and independent sector providers.

It is entirely up to the local NHS, working with the public and with GPs and others, to decide how to develop these services and where they should be located. I must

therefore advise you to raise your concerns with the PCT, if you have not already done so.

The new GP-led health centres will provide over two and a half million extra GP appointments per year. This is not about replacing or centralising existing GP services. It is about listening to patients who have said they want better access to GPs. This is additional investment for additional services, and it will mean more GPs and nurses, more appointments, and longer and more convenient opening hours.

Patients will be able to remain registered with their own GP but also use the services provided by the new health centre if they wish. This means people who would like to see a GP in the evenings, or at weekends, or during the day when they are away from home, will be able to do so, either by booking ahead or by just turning up. This will be of particular benefit for people who work full time and whose own GP does not offer evening or weekend appointments. The new service should also reduce unnecessary visits to accident and emergency departments.

Access to GP-led health centres will not be a substitute for local family doctors but will complement them. Investment in new services, as well as improving access and helping to address inequalities, will help provide greater choice for the public.

I hope this helps to clarify the Department's position.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Kate Roy'.

Kate Roy
Customer Service Centre
Department of Health

Mr Paul Morrison
Principal Democracy Officer
South Kesteven District Council
Council Offices
St Peter's Hill
Grantham
NG31 6PZ

22nd December 2008

Dear Paul

South Kesteven District Council resolution re; rural areas

Many thanks for your letter of the 26th November.

The Local Government Association's Rural Commission was formed to represent the interests of rural local authorities and campaign on their behalf. Members and officers are working hard to ensure that the Government is aware of the concerns expressed by rural local authorities on a wide range of issues.

Whilst the focus of the Rural Commission changes over time, outlined below are some examples of work currently being undertaken by the Commission.

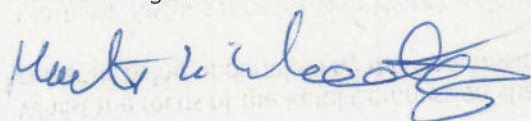
Matthew Taylor's recent *Living Working Countryside* report was welcomed by the Commission and we are lobbying Government to ensure that many of his recommendations are taken forward into legislation. More broadly members and officers continue to communicate local authorities concerns regarding the volume and affordability of rural housing to the government. Elsewhere the Commission is working closely with the Commission for Rural Communities on their work to rural proof Government and the LGA continues to campaign against the closure of post offices in rural areas.

The LGA's Regeneration and Transport Board has undertaken work on the provision of public transport and Members and officers understand this is a key factor in ensuring the sustainability of rural communities.

I will forward your letter to colleagues who work on the SPARSE Special Interest Group as set out at Decision 2 of your letter.

In the meantime further details of the work being undertaken by the Rural Commission and Regeneration and Transport Board can be found at www.lga.gov.uk

With kind regards



Martin Wheatley
Programme Director

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Department for Transport

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Our Ref: BAT 1/2/2
Your Ref: SL/PM/DS

23 December 2008

Dear Mr Morrison

Thank you for your letter of 26 November to the Secretary of State for Transport concerning a resolution passed by your council about local transport in South Kesteven. I have been asked to reply.

It is appreciated the difficulties the lack of reliable public transport can cause for those who use these services to travel to work, school, shops or to visit medical facilities. The Department recognises that bus services have an important role in offering an alternative to use of the car and that the Government is committed to improving bus services including those in rural areas.

Around 80 per cent of bus services outside London are provided by private operators on a commercial basis and decisions on service provision are mainly a matter for their commercial judgement. Local authorities do have powers to subsidise those bus services which are not being provided commercially. However, it is a matter for each authority to decide which services to support in the context of local circumstances and needs and their own priorities.

The Government has invested heavily in bus services, including those in rural areas. Local and central government spends £2.5 billion a year on supporting bus services, double the level of support in real terms as compared with 10 years ago.

Specifically for rural areas, Rural Bus Subsidy Grant was introduced in 1998 to assist local authorities in providing new or enhanced local bus services in rural areas. This is allocated to local transport authorities on a population based formula and is now included within area-based funding. It is then for each authority to decide which services and communities to support. This grant has provided for nearly 2000 new and enhanced services on which some 38 million passenger journeys are made annually. The total funding available for this financial year is £57 million.

In rural areas innovative services such as demand responsive services using smaller vehicles, (e.g. taxibuses), can be particularly important. The Government has stimulated the development of such services by providing more than £100 million to projects under

the Rural Bus Challenge scheme. Community transport organisations also have an important role to play and we have made many community transport services eligible to receive Bus Service Operators Grant.

However, it is recognised though that there is room for improvement in many other areas and that local authorities should have a bigger role. Under the terms of the Local Transport Act 2008 there are opportunities for local authorities to secure better local bus services by means of:

- more effective partnerships with bus operators;
- making the introduction of quality contracts (i.e. franchising as in London) a more realistic option;
- a new regime to deliver improved punctuality; and
- measures to support development of the community transport sector.

The Department is also creating the first statutory national passenger champion for bus users by extending the remit of Passenger Focus, which currently represents rail passengers, to include the role of representing bus passengers.

I hope this reassures you that the Government is committed to improving bus services throughout the country.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'A Neilson', with a stylized flourish at the end.

A NEILSON
BUSES AND TAXIS DIVISION