

10 Downing Street  
London  
SW1A 2AA

8<sup>th</sup> October 2020

Dear Prime Minister,

### **Proposed temporary suspension of free travel for under 18s in London**

We are writing to urge you to reconsider the proposed temporary suspension of free travel for under 18s in London. We are a group of London-based charities, funders, unions and think-tanks committed to tackling relative child poverty in the capital, which stands at 37 per cent after housing costs are taken into account. This is the highest child poverty rate of all UK regions and one that is likely to rise as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Many of us work directly with low income families and see first-hand the daily challenges they face, recently exacerbated by the Covid-related loss of incomes and jobs in London. We welcomed the measures the government has taken to support job retention and incomes, as well as your personal commitment to continue to support the people of the UK while they are going through a very tough time and to keep young people in education, while taking appropriate measures to drive down the virus.

We note the statement from Transport for London Commissioner Andy Byford on 1 October 2020 that the suspension of free travel for under 18s in London will not be implemented until the spring 2021, instead of being brought in after the October half term holiday. This will bring some welcome relief to families at a time when children are still settling back into school after a long absence. We are also pleased to see that certain children will remain eligible for free home to school travel, including those aged 10 and under, those aged 11-17 who live more than two miles from their school/college and those who live less than two miles away and have specific needs or vulnerabilities.

However, we remain very concerned about the likely impact of the suspension, if it does go ahead in early 2021, especially the effect on low income families in London and on Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) families. Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) commissioned a YouGov survey of 1000 children aged 11-18 and their parents in August 2020, which found that over half (58%) of all London children and 61% of London children in BME families would worry they would have trouble paying for public transport if they were unable to continue to travel for free in London. Similarly, 54% of all parents, 68% of low income parents and 58% of BME parents said they would have to cut back on other expenses (i.e. food, daily living expenses or children's extra-curricular activities) to pay travel fares if the suspension goes ahead. We believe that families have already suffered enough during the pandemic and it is not right to further restrict their access to education and training, council services, social opportunities and out-of-school activities.

Furthermore, we are very worried that there is no specific provision for low income families in the latest government proposals – only for those who live less than two miles away and have specific needs or vulnerabilities. While the children who fall into the latter categories are, of course, in particular need and very likely to be disadvantaged, there is no provision for other children who are disadvantaged by living in relative poverty in London – something you will no doubt recognise from your time as Mayor. We understand that the Department for Transport (DfT) is expected to complete an Equality Impact Assessment (EQIA), which will consider whether there are other groups of children that should continue

to receive free transport. Until the impact on all disadvantaged children and young people has been fully considered, we firmly believe that the suspension should not ahead.

There are also other reasons why the suspension is not necessary at this time. We understand that the rationale behind it was to 'protect public health and reduce the spread of coronavirus by avoiding dangerous levels of overcrowding on buses' (letter from the Secretary of State for Transport to the Mayor of London, 3 June 2020). However, overcrowding on buses is not a current problem. Transport for London (TfL) figures reveal that in September 2020, the number of bus journeys taken in London was on average only 58% of the number of bus journeys taken during September 2019. Further, TfL report that zip card use on buses is only at 70% of previous use, due to children finding alternative ways to get to school. Your announcement on 22 September that 'office workers [should] work from home where possible', will only reduce demand for bus travel further.

With social distancing measures already in place on London transport and TfL putting on at least 230 additional 'school service' buses since the beginning of September (with funding from the Department for Education), we do not believe that the London bus network is at risk of 'dangerous levels of overcrowding' and, therefore, there is no longer a public health need for the suspension.

We hope that you will carefully consider the issues we have raised and we would be very happy to facilitate a meeting between you and some of the young people who may be most affected by the suspension in order for you to understand their concerns and consider other options for protecting public health on London's transport system.

Yours sincerely,

Alison Garnham, Chief Executive, Child Poverty Action Group  
Laura Payne, Programme Manager, 4in10  
Alex Donaldson, Filmmaker, Alleycat Films  
David Hughes, Chief Executive, Association of Colleges  
Ben Rogers, Founding Director, Centre for London  
Muna Yassin, Managing Director, Fair Money Advice  
Luke Billingham, Youth & Community Worker, Hackney Quest  
Cheryl Rhodes, Director, Home-Start Southwark  
Deborah Hargreaves, Chair, London Child Poverty Alliance  
Froi Legaspi, Community Organiser, London Citizens  
Mete Coban MBE, Chief Executive, My Life Story  
Pauline Buchanan, NEU London Regional Secretary  
Sharon Long, Director, Partnership for Young London  
Chris Price, Chief Executive Officer, Pecan  
Mick Cash, RMT General Secretary  
Amy Wilkes, Service Manager, Shelter London  
Bill Watkin, Chief Executive, Sixth Form Colleges Association  
Dr Sam Royston, Director of Policy and Research, The Children's Society  
Dr Edie Friedman, Executive Director, The Jewish Council for Racial Equality (JCORE)  
Bharat Mehta, Chief Executive, Trust for London  
Mary-Ann Stephenson, Director, UK Women's Budget Group  
Joanne MacInnes, Director, West London Welcome  
Catherine Mahony, Director, Westminster Befriend a Family