



HOUSE OF COMMONS

LONDON SW1A 0AA

13 October 2022

Sharon Graham
General Secretary
Unite The Union
Unite House
128 Theobalds Road
Holborn
London
WC1X 8TN

Our Ref: TT62085

Dear General Secretary

A further 13 days of strikes by Arriva bus drivers, affecting its Maidstone and Tunbridge Wells depots, will cause travel chaos across Tonbridge, Edenbridge and Malling. During those days in the past few weeks when there has been strike action many more children than usual have been late to school and there has been a significant impact on their learning.

Following the closure of schools during the Covid19 pandemic, schools have worked hard to ensure learning keeps up with the high standards teachers set in our schools. This is only possible if children can arrive at school on time and safely each day. The continued industrial action by Unite Trade Union threatens this.

For many years I have worked extremely close with bus operators to ensure that public transport is available and accessible for all across Tonbridge, Edenbridge and Malling. I know that recent issues have impacted this, including the national shortage of drivers and traffic congestion in our county. It is why I am working in Government on finding a long-term solution to these issues. With the cost of living increasing I understand why you are keen for your members to have an increase in pay.

However, the continued industrial action threatens the viability of the bus network that I, and many thousands of parents across Tonbridge, Edenbridge and Malling, have worked hard to support and sustain. In Kent we rely on buses to get our children to school much more than elsewhere because our successful Grammar School system means that parents choose for children to travel a long way to get into some of our nationally leading schools.

In a rural county such as ours, this means the bus is often the only option. Our geography and topography also means that many of our roads and wider infrastructure are strained and this is one of the reasons why we need a reliable bus service. Not one that is disrupted by weeks worth of strikes, as you are planning on w/c Monday 7 November 2022, and for 10 consecutive working days of strikes at the end of this month.

For each day that strikes take place, parents are forced to look for alternative modes of transport. Often this will be by car which will increase congestion, make journeys slower, and add to emissions around schools. In many instances parents will – understandably – agree to continue these arrangements when strikes have finished, as they will have a viable alternative to the bus. All this achieves is reducing bus numbers in the long-term, meaning that Arriva will not be in any position to give a pay award that matches Unite's expectations.

Therefore, I would urge you to get back around the negotiating table with Arriva and find an alternative way to continue your negotiations. While I am sympathetic to your aims, the incredible number of strike dates announced will simply add to congestion, force people away from buses and add considerable cost to travel for school children.

I look forward to your response and for confirmation that cancelling these strikes will help encourage more children to travel to school by bus.

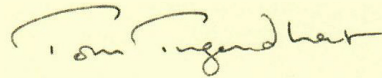
Member of Parliament for Tonbridge and Malling

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Finally, I would welcome confirmation that Unite will contribute towards the cost of the Kent Travel Saver for parents. Many have paid £450 per child for a regular bus journey this year. Given the number of days that services have not been running as a result of your strikes, it is appropriate that you make a financial contribution towards this loss for parents.

Best wishes,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Tom Tugendhat". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'T'.

TOM TUGENDHAT