

Glasgow Centre for Population Health response to the Scottish Government Consultation on free bus travel for people resident in Scotland aged under 19

November 2020

1. Do you think extending national concessionary travel to include free bus travel for under 19s in Scotland will contribute towards our objectives to increase opportunities and reduce inequalities?

Yes.

As outlined in the consultation document, free bus travel for under 19s in Scotland offers a number of potential benefits. This entitlement should help under 19s from across Scotland access education, employment and leisure. It will potentially encourage greater life-long use of public transport and provide a more affordable and sustainable alternative to private car use, thus contributing to reduced air pollution and climate emissions.

Making this an entitlement for all under 19s in Scotland helps ensure that this is a universal benefit that all young people in this age range can access.

2. Do you think there are any disadvantages to introducing free bus travel for under 19s in Scotland?

No.

We believe that this proposal will benefit under 19s in Scotland overall. We assume that the scheme is affordable and will be implemented. Therefore, we have not considered alternative measures to achieve the same types of broad outcome.

Nevertheless, there is the potential for some unintended consequences arising from the scheme which might create some new transport inequalities. For example, in places where there is a limited or infrequent bus service or none at all, young people living in such areas would gain little or no benefit from the scheme. In this scenario it is possible to envisage that transport related inequalities for some young people could be exacerbated.

For areas where bus services are less frequent or are limited, which is more likely in rural localities, we would want to see some viable alternatives offered. With this in mind, we believe that community transport services should be recognised as part of the scheme.

Another potential unintended consequence of the scheme might be to create crowded buses and bus stops at particular places and times of day; for example, at the end of the school day. The safety implications of this sort of situation would have

to carefully managed and service adjustments might need to be considered, such as staggered school finishing times.

3. Should a smart card, such as the widely used Young Scot card, be used to establish eligibility for free bus access?

Yes.

We agree that using a national smart card would have a number of advantages. It would enable overall usage and journey patterns to be analysed and would allow analysis of usage in relation to various demographic and protected characteristics. Access to this sort of data would facilitate detailed evaluation of the impact of the scheme, specifically in relation to the scheme's aims of increasing opportunities and reducing transport inequalities.

4. Should children under a certain age need to have their application for a travel card approved by a parent or guardian?

Yes.

5. If you answered 'yes' to question 4, at what age should parental or guardian approval be required?

Under 16 years of age. In some cases where family circumstances are difficult or chaotic it may worth considering if schools or other agencies could have a role in providing the card.

6. Are there any likely impacts the proposals contained within this Consultation may have on particular groups of people, with reference to the 'protected characteristics' listed above? Please be as specific as possible.

Evaluation of the scheme in relation to usage by different protected groups will be necessary to assess potential impacts. It is possible that some young people with disabilities may have more difficulties in benefiting from the scheme where they face barriers to using buses. Additionally, some young people with disabilities may need to travel with a carer; this should be catered for within the scheme to avoid additional barriers.

7. Do you think the proposals contained within this Consultation may have any additional implications on the rights, wellbeing and safety of children and young people that is not picked up above?

This proposal aims to encourage more young people to use buses. For this to happen bus services will need to run to a high standard and to be perceived to be safe, accessible, convenient and attractive to use.

8. Do you think the proposals contained in this Consultation are likely to increase or reduce the costs and burdens for bus companies, public bodies, third sector organisations or businesses? Please be as specific as possible.

We note that bus operators will be reimbursed for carrying passengers under this scheme. As long as this is done in a fair, timely and efficient manner we believe this should be a satisfactory arrangement.

In a wider sense and in the longer term, the costs of this scheme should be balanced against potential related benefits, such as reductions in carbon emissions, air pollutants and congestion if less people travel by car as a result.

9. Are there any other issues you wish to raise which are not covered in the points or questions above?

As proposed the scheme includes free travel for under 19s. However, we would urge consideration to be given to widening the eligibility of the scheme – if affordable – to include all young people under 26, people on Universal Credit and parents over the period of their pregnancy.

The young adult age group not currently included under the scheme – 19-25 year olds – are a group that has been particularly affected socio-economically by Covid-19 restrictions. People on Universal Credit are likely to be affected by low income and transport affordability will be an issue for them. Given the closure of many job centres across Scotland, there is a strong case for providing free bus travel for people accessing their local job centre, to attend a job interview or to reach employment prior to a first pay cheque.

Including parents during the period of pregnancy and in the months immediately after a birth in the scheme would help address the cost of pregnancy. A recent GCPH report, the Cost of Pregnancy Pathway¹, highlighted that the cost of travel to access antenatal care was a barrier particularly in rural areas. The authors suggested providing vouchers or bus passes to women, and ideally their partners too, over the period of the pregnancy (or longer if they had complications), in order to remove the reliance on reclaiming expenses.

Targeting the scheme at a broader group of children and young adults, adults on Universal Credit and parents in pregnancy could provide a greater positive impact in increasing sustainable travel, making public transport more affordable and addressing transport inequalities.

Linking free bus travel with free bike hire might be another useful extension to the scheme to consider. Access to free bike hire has been introduced in some cities, including Glasgow, in response to Covid-19. Linking free access to these two modes of travel could help encourage more people to make the shift to sustainable public and active transport options.

¹https://www.gcph.co.uk/assets/0000/7967/Exploring_the_Cost_of_the_Pregnancy_Pathway_report_Sept_2020.pdf

The proposal will importantly increase the mobility of young people. However, with this may come additional risks, as there will no longer be a financial barrier to them travelling. Consideration should be given to the appropriate age at which young people should be accompanied by an adult.