
3 March 2014

Concessionary Fares

Bus Users UK policy on Concessionary Fares

Bus Users UK policy

- We support the policy of giving free travel to elderly, vulnerable and disabled people
- We would like to see the anomaly removed of an 09.30 start time for the England scheme outside London, against the 24/7 nature of the scheme in London, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland
- We would also like to see the removal of the 23.00 finish time, which is artificial and unnecessary.
- We would prefer to see a UK-wide scheme rather than the current separate schemes for England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland
- The scheme should not be means-tested. The current universal schemes have reduced car use by older people and the cost of providing free travel to people who would not otherwise use the bus is negligible
- Reimbursement should be adequate to enable bus companies to continue to provide a profitable service without creating an additional burden on fare-paying passengers
- There needs to be recognition in the reimbursement regime that the demand created by the scheme can lead to bus companies needing to deploy extra resources (eg duplicates or increased frequencies) to meet the increased demand
- There needs to be greater consistency between local transport authorities in reimbursing bus companies
- There needs to be a scheme to enable unemployed and newly-employed people to access employment opportunities in an affordable way
- We support the DfT proposal that all under 18s should be entitled to a concessionary rate (not free) and would also wish to encourage bus companies to run schemes that phase-in adult fares over a longer period, ideally up to 25
- We accept that the scheme does not extend to leisure services, park-&-ride etc and prefer that funding is applied to local transport services (including coach services in Scotland where these act as a bus service)
- We would like to see reduced-price concessions for all older and disabled passengers travelling outside the concessionary scheme (eg English people on holiday in Scotland, foreign visitors etc)

We support the policy of giving free travel to elderly, vulnerable and disabled people

Background

In 2000 the Government introduced a guarantee of half-fare travel for eligible England residents within their local authority area. The Concessionary Bus Travel Act implemented the Chancellor's announcements in the 2006 Budget that people aged 60 and over and eligible disabled people in England would get free off-peak travel on all local buses anywhere in England (rather than just within their local authority area of residence) from 1st April 2008.

Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland have separate schemes. The English scheme gives free travel from 09.30 to 23.00 Mon-Fri and any time at weekends whereas the other schemes are valid at any time. The 23.00 finish leads to a ridiculous anomaly at weekends, where the scheme ends at 23.00 on Friday and restarts at 00.00 on Saturday. In the absence of a 24/7 scheme, it should run until the end of service that day.

In Scotland passes can be used on internal coach services and passes issued in Ireland are valid through Ireland, whether issued in Northern Ireland or the Republic of Ireland. In Great Britain passengers can cross a border to certain locations near the border and can travel home again, but cannot make any other journey in the adjacent country without paying a fare.

London residents receive a Freedom Card which is valid on bus services in England (though the national time restrictions apply outside London) and also give free travel on the Underground, Overground, National Rail (not between 04.30 and 09.30 Mon-Fri), Docklands Light Railway and Tramlink within London. However English National Concessionary Passes are valid only on the buses in London, not on other modes, though without time limits. In London there is no time restriction on validity of tickets, apart from on National Rail.

In England (outside London) the age at which you get your bus pass is going up with the female pension age to 66 (it's currently around 62yrs 3 months) though London Freedom Cards, Scottish, Welsh and Northern Ireland residents all get theirs at 60. In Northern Ireland you receive free travel within Northern Ireland at 60 and throughout Ireland at 65.

There has been a lot of talk about means-testing the bus pass and of abolishing it altogether.

Means testing would lose the benefit that a lot of car-owning older people now use the bus, reducing their car dependency. Removal of the benefit from better-off pensioners is likely to put them back in cars so the cost of funding free travel would be unlikely to reduce. The net result seems likely to be an increase in car use and no significant monetary saving, especially when the cost of means-testing is added.

Abolition of this very popular benefit seems unlikely, as it would not go down well with the electorate. However we are often told at surgeries that pensioners would prefer to pay a nominal sum (50p, £1) rather than lose services or lose their entitlement altogether.

Concessionary fares are reimbursed in England through the Local Transport Authorities (primarily county councils and PTEs) at a cost of £898million. In Scotland the cost is £193million and in Wales £67million. The Northern Ireland scheme costs £26.5million (£19million of which is for the more generous over-65s scheme).