

Welsh Government Consultation: *Mandatory Concessionary Fares Scheme in Wales*

Transport Focus is the independent watchdog for transport users. We welcome the opportunity to contribute to this consultation. We have addressed this based on evidence from our research. While our statutory remit with bus passengers only covers services in England, much of this research is equally relevant to passengers and services in Wales. In addition, the Bus Passenger Survey has just been completed in Wales for the first time alongside England and Scotland and once ready, the results will provide further insight into passengers' experience of bus travel in Wales.

RESPONSES TO QUESTIONS

1. Do you think that the Welsh Government should become the Travel Concession Authority for the administration of the All Wales Mandatory Concessionary Bus Travel Scheme in Wales, or should the functions remain with the local authorities?

In principle, and in line with the information available to it, Transport Focus can perceive merit in the Welsh Government becoming Travel Concession Authority, always providing that sufficient resource is/would be available to maintain at least the current level of service. It is important that current and future users of the concession should suffer no worsening of service as a result.

Important also is the need for operators to have the right of easy access to apply to an independent person in relevant cases – e.g. reimbursement matters.

The apparent reduction in overall costs to do so is no doubt a strong incentive. If these matters can be suitably balanced we would accept the proposal.

2. Do you think that the eligibility age for older people who are new applicants to receive free bus travel should be increased to match the UK state retirement age in Wales, or be maintained at age 60 for men and for women?

Those who are approaching the age of 60 will resent the postponement of the concession until they reach UK retirement pension age. Clearly the Welsh Government has to balance its view on the cost of the scheme overall. In Greater London the concession at age 60 has been retained even though elsewhere in England the UK retirement age applies.

However, we accept that life expectancy is increasing and that as a result working lives will be longer. By that token, at some point it follows that the age of qualification will need to be reviewed, especially if the concession is to remain affordable to the Welsh Government and available to those who rely on it. However, any such increase should be introduced incrementally and communicated well in advance. Suddenly changing eligibility from 60 to 65 would be unduly harsh on anyone who is, for instance, 59. A staged implementation would help to minimise frustration for those near 60.

Our work on Bus Passengers Priorities for Improvement¹ shows that value for money is the top priority for paying passengers. Therefore any expectation of passengers continuing to pay for longer needs to go hand-in-hand with improvements in what they are getting in return – key factors being punctuality, reliability and frequency.

3. Do you think that the Welsh Government should maintain the entitlement for disabled people meeting the criteria to be issued with a free travel pass?

Mobility for disabled people is vital. The bullet points on page 6 of the consultation document set out very well the reasons for providing the scheme.

In our Bus Passenger Survey², around a quarter of bus journeys are made by passengers with a disability. Results show that those with a disability were more likely to say they had no other option for making the journey and that the bus pass gives them this ability. Whereas for some, the cost of paying for the journey would present a significant barrier.

4. Do you think that the Welsh Government should allow more than one companion to travel with a disabled concessionary pass holder where more than one companion is needed to make travel by bus possible?

If this can be borne by the overall costs of maintaining the scheme, then those users most in need will be able to travel, if granted one or two companions, whereas without it their ability to access basic social needs will be vitiated. It may be that assistance is required elsewhere, not only when making the journey – e.g. attending hospital appointments. Assessing the needs and entitlement of such individuals will remain complex. If responsibility for this transfers from local authorities to the Government sufficient qualified resource will be required.

From our research³, around one in ten passengers with a disability says this has a high impact on their ability to travel, so measures which make greater provision will be welcomed. However this group also has lower satisfaction with their journey, especially with information provision, the design and comfort of the bus and customer service from the driver. So more effort needs to be made to meet passengers' needs on these aspects. They also have stronger concerns about other passengers' behaviour, with their top priority for improvement being more effort made to tackle antisocial behaviour.

5. Do you think that veterans meeting certain requirements should continue to receive a mandatory concessionary free bus travel pass at no cost?

It seems fair and just that the current arrangements should continue.

¹ *Bus Passengers Have their Say: trust, what to improve and using buses more*, Transport Focus, March 2016

² *Analysis of Bus Passenger Satisfaction for those who have a disability*, Transport Focus, April 2016

³ See footnote 2

6. Do you think that free bus travel should be extended to volunteers who volunteer for at least 30 hours a week?

Within the definition of volunteering and for the minimum qualifying period mentioned, such a scheme would be practicable and welcome if the additional costs can be borne. Priority would have to be given to older and disabled people and veterans if cost became an issue.

7. Do you think that bus travel using a concessionary bus pass should allow free travel only during off-peak times, or should the ability to travel at any time be maintained?

The benefits of allowing travel at any time include the avoidance of sudden peaks when eligibility begins and that passengers do not need to arrange appointments at hospitals etc at times after the concession would be valid. It seems that the system works well enough at present, so it seems unnecessary to vary the terms.

In our research, passengers tell us that having to pay at peak times can restrict their ability to travel, or make this expensive. This is particularly the case when attending hospital appointments or needing to catch more than one bus to make a journey.

8. Do you think that the Welsh Government should introduce an application fee to be paid by some applicants if the fee is limited to the cost recovery for receiving, processing, issuing and auditing passes?

Given the huge benefits which a pass offers its holder, a fee may need to be a consideration versus a reduction in the flexibility (eg peak restrictions) or eligibility of the scheme. However this should balance covering costs with potential consequences of becoming too expensive and raising any barriers that would deter travel.

9. If an application fee is introduced for a free bus travel pass, should it be paid by:
- Older people
 - Disabled people
 - Injured service veterans, or
 - None of the above?

A fee, if it is decided to invoke such a process, should probably be paid by any of the above categories (a), (b) or (c), although perhaps exemptions should be available in cases of hardship.

10. Should the Welsh Government explore the extension of free concessionary bus travel scheme to other modes of local transport services?

It is always worthwhile examining ways of providing for those who live in remoter parts. If no scheduled bus services are available in some areas, it seems fair that entitled residents should receive some concessionary arrangement to allow them to make at least some journeys, even if this is by taxi, though the cost of such travel would need to

be kept within affordable limits for the overall benefit of all concession holders. In some areas there may be scope to consider use of local rail lines where these exist but where bus services are restricted. It is important that the core concessionary pass should not be threatened.

Our research⁴ shows that passengers are confused by different fares, entitlement and validity across differing services and modes, especially when not supported by clear information. Any measures which simplify and standardise provision across modes and address barriers to integrated travel will be welcomed and will encourage more journeys by public transport.

Additional points

Our research⁵ shows that whilst passengers' trust in their bus company tends to increase with age, older passengers still want a better service. In particular, their top priorities are for improved punctuality and reliability, more frequent services, more effort to tackle antisocial behaviour, drivers giving more time to get to their seat, real-time information at bus stops and buses serving a wider range of destinations.

Many of these aspirations are shared across passenger groups, so improvements in service delivery in these aspects will boost satisfaction and provide greater encouragement to travel for all passengers in Wales.

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⁴ *Bus Passenger Views on Value for Money*, Transport Focus, October 2013

⁵ See footnote 1