

Agenda Item	15
Report No	ECI/24/2021

HIGHLAND COUNCIL

Committee: Economy and Infrastructure

Date: 5 May 2021

Report Title: Consultation on Free Bus Travel for under-19s

Report By: Executive Chief Officer Infrastructure and Environment

1. Purpose/Executive Summary

- 1.1 This report seeks homologation of a response to the Scottish Government's recent consultation on their proposal to extend their free bus travel scheme to people aged under 19. It also outlines implications of this proposal for the Council, and in particular for school transport.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1 Members are asked to:
- i. Homologate the consultation response submitted on 7 December 2020;
 - ii. Note that discussions are continuing between COSLA, ATCO and Transport Scotland on the implications for school transport; and
 - iii. Agree that a further report be brought to the Committee on the implications of the proposal after the Scottish Government's response to this consultation is published.

3. Implications

- 3.1 There are no resource, legal, community, climate change, risk or Gaelic implications arising directly from this report. However, subject to the Scottish Government's decision, there are likely to be resource, legal and community implications arising from the implementation of the proposals, which will be described in a future report.

4. Background

- 4.1 On 26 October 2020 the Scottish Government opened a consultation on extending free bus travel to Scottish residents aged under 19. The consultation closed on 7 December.
- 4.2 The consultation paper is available at <https://consult.gov.scot/transport-scotland/consultation-free-bus-travel-for-people-under19/>. The introduction to the consultation encouraged responses from as many members of the public as possible. An analysis of the consultation responses received is available on the Scottish Government's website.
- 4.3 In the Scottish budget for 2021, Parliament decided that the provision should be extended to include people aged under 22. The Government's intention is to launch the scheme later this year as long as this is compatible with Covid restrictions.

5. Council response

- 5.1 Due to the timescale set, a response was submitted by officers and is attached in **Appendix 1**. The response generally supports the proposals but notes that they are of limited benefit where bus services are infrequent, emphasises the importance of satisfactory reimbursement arrangements, and asks for the provisions to be extended to ferries.
- 5.2 Our response also states that the implications for school transport are complex and outlines some implications which will need further consideration.

6. Further implications for school transport

- 6.1 Transport Scotland are aware that there are complex implications around school transport and are involved in discussions with COSLA and the Association of Transport Co-ordinating Officers (ATCO) on this matter. It is anticipated that pupils travelling to school on public bus services would be covered by the scheme, whereas those using dedicated school transport would not. While pupils who are entitled to free home to school transport under current legislation would not be directly affected, there are potentially various practical and cost implications for Councils, including demand for bus travel exceeding the available capacity, and the ability to continue to charge for "privilege" (non-entitled) places on dedicated school transport. It is proposed that a report be made to a future meeting of the Committee on these impacts of the proposals, once the Scottish Government's intentions for the scheme are confirmed.

Designation: Executive Chief Officer Infrastructure and Environment

Date: 6 April 2021

Author: David Summers, Principal Transport Officer

Background Papers: Scottish Government consultation paper (as linked in para. 4.2)

Consultation: Free bus travel for people resident in Scotland aged under 19 – Highland Council's response

Consultation questions

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| 1 | <p>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?</p> <p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> No</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Please Explain</p> | <p>This is particularly welcome at a time when young people are affected by the economic impacts of Covid-19 and will aid access to full- and part-time jobs, education, training and social and leisure activities. It will also help to promote public transport use, including travel by families as the total cost of fares for adults and children can be quite considerable.</p> |
| 2 | <p>Do you think there are any disadvantages to introducing free bus travel for under 19s in Scotland?</p> <p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> No</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> If yes, please explain</p> | <p>Free bus travel can have a distorting effect on the commercial fare levels and structures. We would hope that reimbursement will be arranged in a way that minimises this.</p> <p>Free bus travel also gives the greatest benefit to people in areas with frequent bus services. It does not address lack of transport provision, particularly in rural areas. There is a potential deterrent to continuing bus use when passengers reach the age of 19 and move straight to paying full fare. This is one reason to avoid distortion to the fare structure.</p> |
| 3 | <p>Should a smart card, such as the widely used Young Scot card, be used to establish eligibility for free bus access?</p> <p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> No</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Please explain</p> | <p>This is a well-established method using existing technology.</p> |
| 4 | <p>Should children under a certain age need to have their application for a travel card approved by a parent or guardian?</p> <p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> No</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Please explain</p> | <p>This would seem appropriate, although parental permission to travel would be more significant than permission to hold a travel card. Younger children would usually be travelling with an adult (except on journeys to school in some cases).</p> <p>Bus companies should have provisions in their Conditions of Carriage about age limits for unaccompanied children travelling, which may not necessarily be the same for all types of route and should allow for provision of entitled home to school transport.</p> |
| 5 | <p>If you answered 'yes' to question 4, at what age should parental or guardian approval be required?</p> | <p>Up to age 12, to align (approximately) with transition to secondary school.</p> |

- 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.
- Apart from the obvious age impact, the only likely impacts are on people with disabilities, who will benefit financially if they have bus services which they can access, but the proposals will not increase physical accessibility.
- 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?
- No.
- 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.
- For Highland Council, it is not expected that there will be a large effect on public bus service contract costs, provided that the reimbursement rate to bus operators is close to achieving the aim of "no better and no worse off". However, it could lead to a demand for additional bus services, especially in evenings and weekends, which would not be commercial and would not be affordable within existing Council budgets. The effect on home to school transport is more difficult to assess – see q9. The effect on bus companies will crucially depend on how reimbursement is calculated. There may also be demand for seats beyond existing capacity on some routes.
- 9 Are there any other issues you wish to raise which are not covered in the points or questions above?
- The effect on home to school transport is complex.
1. There will be no generated travel for pupils already entitled to free home to school transport, and this needs to be taken in to account in setting the financing or reimbursement arrangements.
 2. It may become more difficult to manage pupil numbers on public bus routes, as more pupils who are not entitled to free transport under current arrangements are likely to make use of buses (e.g. travelling for less than the entitled distance or going to visit friends after school).
 3. The proposals may lead to an increased demand for placing requests at out-of-catchment schools, although it is Highland Council's policy that parents are responsible for transport where placing requests are granted, and we do not provide transport if there is an additional cost to do so.
 4. The proposals will accentuate the difference between closed school contracts (available only to entitled pupils) and public routes (where non-entitled pupils can travel on payment of a fare).

These issues will need further consideration.

Also, we would wish to see the provision extended to ferries. Ferries are the equivalent of buses for island and remote peninsula residents, and should be included on the same basis, to reduce the isolation of these areas.