

Nationwi'de Free Travel Campaign Update

(Arising from the National Conference, Birmingham, 24 January 2006)

Introduction

On 16 March 2005, the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced the introduction of free local bus travel for all pensioners in England from April 2006. £350m has been given to local authorities to administer the scheme and councils are currently deciding exactly how this can be done.

However, many pensioners are concerned that the introduction of free bus travel only within their local authority boundary area will lead to a further postcode lottery in concessionary travel. In areas where services are currently better than the statutory half-price bus travel, some local authorities may also consider reducing these concessions in order to pay for the Chancellor's new proposal.

That is why pensioners and their organisations need to get active now to safeguard existing services and continue the campaign for a truly nationwide free travel scheme

On 24 January 2006, the NPC, in conjunction with Help the Aged, staged a one-day conference to consider these issues. This briefing paper is based on the discussions at that conference and aims to outline the main concerns surrounding the introduction of free local bus travel, reiterate the case for a truly nationwide free travel scheme and recommend further action.

Main areas of concern

- The additional £350m allocated by government to local authorities is not ring-fenced and could be used on other environmental expenditure.

- Some local authorities are threatening cuts in other concessions or increases in council tax in order to meet the new commitment.
- Furthermore, money already allocated for concessionary travel is being used to subsidise unprofitable routes generally, rather than concessionary travel in particular.
- Existing cross-boundary concessionary bus travel arrangements in some areas have been threaten with withdrawal after April 2006. Some local authorities also believe they are only able to issue concessionary tickets up to their boundaries.
- Numerous anomalies also exist across England in relation to journeys, routes and distances qualifying for concessionary travel.
- Time restrictions on concessionary travel in some areas are penalising those who have early hospital appointments. There is no consistency of application on this issue.
- Some areas are considering means-testing concessionary travel.
- Trams will not be included in the new concessionary arrangements, unless paid for wholly by the local authority.
- In areas where bus services are limited or non-existent, it is unclear what additional provisions are being made to improve community transport
- Pre-emptive cuts are being made by some bus companies in advance of the new scheme being introduced.

- Some taxi and car hire firms are being required to register if they wish to participate in the **Token** scheme and to only accept Tokens from registered disabled users.

The case for free nationwide travel

- Transport has a major part to play in enabling older people to continue to live in their own homes and participate fully in the life of the community.
- The presence of pensioners in the town centres and shopping areas is good for local economies and business.
- The older person travelling out of the peak times can improve the marginal costs of services and thus retain services to the good of the community as a whole.
- Evidence from Wales shows that free travel has resulted in:
 - a) More investment in new vehicles
 - b) Service enhancements
 - c) Non-concessionary passenger growth
 - d) Increased demand
 - e) Increased frequencies
 - l) Improved non-concessionary revenue
- The need for transport increases with age. The use of cars for short journeys is a high pollution factor. An assessable free transport system would solve both problems.
- There is a proven link between improved health and the ability to be included in the community rather than isolated at home.
- The administrative cost of the many different schemes which takes up several hundreds of administrators issuing tickets and tokens to different sections of the community could for the most part be saved.

Recommended action

The NPC encourages all its affiliates and supporters to continue the campaign for free nationwide travel by considering the following:

- The NPC has written to Alistair Darling MP; secretary of state for transport, raising our concerns about the introduction of free local travel from 1 April 2006 and calling for an urgent meeting. Local groups should lobby MPs in the same way.
- Contact local councils and passenger transport authorities to find out exactly how they intend to introduce the new scheme.
- Propose that your local authority approach neighbouring councils to promote the idea of free cross-boundary travel.
- Consider undertaking research into the local transport needs of pensioners and disabled people in your area as a way of influencing local authorities and transport operators. Guidance available on request.
- Monitor the introduction of the new free local bus travel scheme from April onwards in your area. Continue to raise any concerns with your local authority.
- Take part in the special session on transport at the 2006 Pensioners' Parliament in Blackpool from 16-18 May.
- Keep the NPC office informed of any local developments or campaigns.

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