

ANGUS COUNCIL

COMMUNITIES COMMITTEE – 23 NOVEMBER 2021

INTRODUCTION OF SCOTLAND WIDE FREE BUS TRAVEL FOR UNDER 22s

INFORMATION REPORT

1. RECOMMENDATION

This report provides information on the introduction of Scotland-wide free bus travel for under 22s.

2. BACKGROUND

2.1 The Climate Change (Emissions Reductions Targets) (Scotland) Act 2019 set a target for Scotland to reduce its carbon emissions to net zero by 2045. Furthermore, the Scottish Government's Climate Change Plan update 2020 introduced a target of a 20% reduction in car kilometres by 2030. Reducing transport emissions is a priority if Scotland is to achieve these ambitious targets.

2.2 In March 2021, the Scottish Parliament approved legislation enabling the introduction of a new statutory travel scheme, allowing 5 to 18 year olds access to free bus travel. In August 2021, the scheme was extended to include all Scottish residents under the age of 22.

2.3 The purpose of the scheme's introduction is to embed an increased level of sustainable travel behaviours within Scotland's young people and help contribute towards Scotland 2045 net zero emissions target.

2.4 Confirmation has been provided that the scheme will begin operation on 31 January 2022 and all Scottish residents aged under 22 years of age will immediately be entitled to access the free bus travel scheme.

3. CURRENT POSITION

3.1 Delivery

The scheme will be delivered using existing technology that will be familiar to both passengers and bus operators. The National Entitlement Card (NEC), as well as the Young Scot branded version of the NEC, is available for all Scottish residents to apply for and will be provided free of charge. Those with existing cards are required to have their cards updated but do not need to reapply for a new card.

3.2 Once passengers receive their new cards, or have their current card updated, they will be able to access free bus travel on local bus services in Scotland. The card is required to be scanned by the ticket machine, in exactly the same way as the Older and Disabled Persons Free Bus Travel scheme has been delivered for many years. This will allow bus operators to gather the relevant data and receive reimbursement from Transport Scotland for each eligible trip.

3.3 Impact on Young People

Whilst the scheme is primarily designed to help reduce car kilometres, young people will also benefit greatly from the scheme. Free access to bus travel will remove a significant financial barrier that may exist for many and will help tackle social isolation in young people. Young people will have increased capacity to access education, employment, leisure, shopping and healthcare. Many will also be able to do this independently providing them with the opportunity to be responsible for their own travel.

3.4 The welfare of young people travelling on local bus services is a legitimate concern. Operators will be unable to effectively identify young people who do not have the permission or knowledge of their parents/carers to make a particular journey. This could increase the risk of young people undertaking journeys that could place them at risk and expose their vulnerability.

- 3.5 The ability to travel for free should not be considered as tackling transport poverty, which exists commonly in Angus. Whilst more young people will have the ability to access services, there may not be suitable bus services available to them.
- 3.6 Impact on Bus Operators
As with the Older and Disabled Persons Free Bus Travel Scheme, local bus operators will be reimbursed by Transport Scotland for each eligible trip made. This reimbursement rate has been negotiated between bus operators and Transport Scotland. Operators will be reimbursed at a rate of 43.6% of the adult fare for under 16s and 81.2% for over 16s. The rate is designed to allow operators to incur no increase or decrease in revenue and allow for a small increase in service provision should it be required.
- 3.7 Vehicle capacity at peak times may also be an issue that impacts bus operators and existing passengers. This may be an issue more pertinent in large urban areas, although Angus operators will have to monitor capacity carefully and potentially adapt service provision if required.
- 3.8 Operators both locally and nationally have identified both antisocial behaviour and the welfare of young people as potential risks. Bus services can often be used by young people to pass the time, rather than for the intention of reaching a destination. These trips regularly see drivers and other passengers experience abuse and vehicles suffer vandalism. There is concern that with the increased ability to access local bus services, antisocial behaviour could increase, which may place an expectation and burden on community safety provision and Police Scotland.

4 IMPACT ON ANGUS COUNCIL

- 4.1 Increasing access to services is almost certainly likely to lead to an increase in demand and this may provide a difficult challenge for the council. Positively, it is hoped more of our young people will utilise the existing public transport network in Angus, as well as onward travel options. The scheme's purpose is tied to the sustainable travel hierarchy and should influence our thinking and policies to prioritise sustainable modes.
- 4.2 There may be increasing demand for additional service provision when the local bus revenue budget is already fully committed. The increased demand and expectation may be difficult to manage in future years and will have to be considered as part of any ongoing public engagement regarding transport issues.
- 4.3 The largest impact is likely to be on the council's school transport policy and planning. Currently, there are circa 1900 school pupils entitled to mainstream free home to school transport. School pupils, not entitled to transport, are likely to use bus services more regularly for getting to and from school and this will be monitored by operators to ensure the correct provision is being provided.
- 4.4 Pupils entitled under the mainstream category are mainly transported using closed bus and coach contracts, although some pupils are placed onto registered bus services and provided with a ticket by the council.
- 4.5 From 31 January 2022, school pupils being placed on registered local bus services will no longer be provided with a bus ticket by the council. Instead, they will be provided with instructions to apply for the Young Scot card and information on how to access the free travel. This will provide an immediate saving of approximately £40,000 per school year, although this is a relatively small portion of the school transport budget which exceeds £3m.
- 4.6 The majority of school transport services within Angus are unlikely to be able to lend themselves to providing a local bus service option for the wider community. However, some school transport routes do exist that have already been identified as offering value to the communities they pass through and have therefore been registered as local bus services. The services are paid for from the school transport budget and only offer a small saving compared to procuring a closed contract. To provide a practical example, all of the routes serving Monifieth High School from the Birkhill area are set up in this way.
- 4.7 The impacts of the scheme will be monitored over the next financial year and actions taken accordingly. For example, an assessment will be made to determine whether more school transport routes would offer a better service, and greater value, by operating as local bus service routes and being funded as such, rather than being funded as a school service. This

will require extensive review and a fundamental change in the School Transport Policy for which committee approvals would be required.

NOTE: No background papers, as detailed by Section 50D of the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973 (other than any containing confidential or exempt information) were relied on to a material extent in preparing the above report.

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