

## **Citizens Advice Scotland Response to Consultation on Free Bus Travel for Older and Disabled People and Modern Apprentices**

### **Question 1 - Do you think that we should retain the existing age eligibility criteria for the Scheme?**

Regardless of any decisions made concerning the Scheme Citizens Advice Scotland (CAS) recognises the important role that buses play in many people's lives and this should be held in mind in any considerations.

In October 2017, CAS undertook a survey seeking the public's opinion of bus transport and asking about their priorities. This received over 4,500 replies, demonstrating the public interest in this issue. A number of respondents highlighted the positive impact having a bus pass had for them. The below examples demonstrate this:

"I would be stuck without it and my concession card. Couldn't afford to travel otherwise."

"The bus to Inverness is pretty good, and quite frequent. I often use it to meet with friends in town as I no longer drive, and have given up my car. My free bus pass is a god send."

"I would be stuck without it and my concession card. Couldn't afford to travel otherwise. "

However, some respondents highlighted that, although they had concessionary passes, they still struggled to access bus services, either due to the frequency of services or the routes covered by buses. In these circumstances, the bus pass is only as effective as the services that are available to the person. The examples below illustrate these points:

*"I am disabled and have a bus pass because I attend weekly hospital appointments. However, the bus service is so patchy I'm forced to either take a taxi (£5-6) or walk (40 mins) if I'm feeling able and weather permitting. As someone who is short on money, time and energy because of chronic health conditions, this isn't a brilliant situation."*

*"Have an OAP bus pass. No Sunday service. Connection not guaranteed from Inverness."*

*"Service has been curtailed severely. I now have to go to Cumbernauld to get a bus to Stirling .I have no express bus to Glasgow anymore and now have to travel to Croy and get a train .I have a concession ticket but I'm forced to use the train and pay."*

The important role public transport can play is also highlighted in this experience of an elderly consumer visiting a CAB in the West of Scotland:

*A 73 year old client reported that due to a bridge repair public transport in her area had stopped. The repair is expected to take 19 months to complete. In order to be in a position to catch a bus she would have to walk approximately two miles. She reported that she lives on her own and having no bus service could impact on her wellbeing. The adviser commented that the client is currently relying on her son for lifts but he is not always available.*

CAS also held a Rural Bus Summit<sup>1</sup> last year which discussed how the lack of limited transport options in rural areas could result in reduced access to social contact and support which could lead to isolation and poorer mental and physical health. CAS would recommend that the important role public transport, particularly buses, plays in the lives of many is taken into consideration in any decisions made concerning the Scheme.

If it is decided that any changes in the age are to be introduced it is important that there is a sufficient lead in time. An individual who is currently 59 and planning to retire next year could be building free bus transport into their planning. Therefore, CAS would recommend a lead in time of at least two years and a large amount of publicity to ensure all those affected were informed of the changes.

### **Question 3 - Are you in favour of raising age eligibility to female State Pension age gradually over time?**

As mentioned in response to Question One, CAS is not in favour of the sudden introduction of any changes to the age eligibility which might not allow those affected to plan sufficiently. CAS would also emphasise once again the need for a large scale publicity campaign if changes are made.

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<sup>1</sup> A summary of this event is available online here:

[https://www.cas.org.uk/system/files/publications/bus\\_summit\\_summary.pdf](https://www.cas.org.uk/system/files/publications/bus_summit_summary.pdf)

## **Question 4**

**Are you in favour of providing free bus travel to Modern Apprentices?**

**Should this be targeted at Modern Apprentices under Age 21?**

**Is there a better way to provide support to help with the travel costs of Modern Apprentices?**

In 2016 CAS published the "Round the Bend"<sup>2</sup> report which looks at the ability to travel by bus to a number of local services. This report highlighted that the cost of bus travel is one barrier to using the bus to travel to work. Due to the low wages which Modern Apprentices receive, a minimum hourly rate of £3.50, CAS would therefore support the provision of free bus travel to Modern Apprentices.

**Question 5 - Are you in favour of providing a companion card for disabled under 5s where this is needed?**

CAS supports this change on the basis that parents which children under 5 with disabilities receive the same support as those with older children.

**Are there any other issues you would like to raise which are not covered above?**

As discussed in response to Question One, public transport can provide a lifeline, particularly for those living in rural communities.

CAS would like to highlight concerns regarding consumers required to travel to Jobcentres. The "Round the Bend" report looked at the ability to travel to Jobcentres. Transport in rural areas was highlighted as an issue in previous CAS work and we wanted to look at what was happening in public transport in more detail. CAS put out an invitation to all CAB in Scotland in March 2016 to assist in collating information regarding local bus journey routes. In total 16 CAB applied to take part; fourteen provided specific route detail set by CAS with analysis of their findings while a further two provided independent research into public transport issues in their area. This was a collaborative research project with CAB which covered the experience of 113 local communities in Scotland and gathered research on over 1,200 journeys from 133 home locations to key essential services. This research indicated that there was a wide variation between travel time to a Jobcentre, the fastest being 25 minutes and the slowest being 58 minutes. Additionally, there was a variation in the median cost of a return, the lowest being

<sup>2</sup> You can read this report here: [https://www.cas.org.uk/system/files/publications/round\\_the\\_bend\\_0.pdf](https://www.cas.org.uk/system/files/publications/round_the_bend_0.pdf)

£3.90 and the highest being £9. This raises two issues. Firstly, the cost to benefit claimants to ensure they are able to attend the Jobcentre, particularly in relation to the proportion of the benefits they receive. The case below illustrates this difficulty.

*A client in the Borders spends 10% of his Jobseekers Allowance travelling to the Jobcentre to sign on and is struggling to meet these costs.*

Some clients who visit CAB have been unable to meet the travel costs and, as a result, have been sanctioned and lost their benefits. The case below highlights these difficulties:

*A client in the East of Scotland was required to attend the Jobcentre in Stirling once a week. She was unable to attend two appointments as she could not afford the bus fare. She phoned them to inform them of this but they were unsympathetic. As a result of this, she was sanctioned and left with only £10 per week to live on. This meant it was unlikely she would be able to afford bus fares for subsequent appointments.*

Secondly, the experience of Citizens Advice Bureaux shows that there is an issue in relation to the distance benefit claimants are expected to travel as they are frequently asked to travel a long distance. This can be especially difficult for clients living in the north of Scotland and/or on the Islands. The case below is one example of this:

*A client was required to travel from Nairn to Aberdeen for verification so that he is able to receive Universal Credit. Aberdeen Jobcentre is the nearest place this validation could take place. The client reported he was unable to afford the money to travel to Aberdeen but if he does not do so his benefit will not be paid.*

CAS welcomes the existing discounts that jobseekers receive on public transport but, as highlighted above, many benefit claimants struggle to meet the requirements of the Department for Work and Pensions as they are unable to afford the travel costs, both for regular appointments and for assessments and/or verification procedures. The Job Grant proposed by the Scottish Government would assist some benefit claimants with travel costs but is limited in terms of age range and the time claimants have to have been claiming Jobseekers Allowance in order to receive this. Based on the difficulties highlighted above, CAS would recommend more assistance with travel costs is provided to benefit claimants to assist them in meeting their commitments. This could be in the form of a concessionary pass or bus ticket vouchers/tokens.



CAS would also recommend that the Scottish Government give consideration to expanding the scheme to include these groups. CAS recently held a discussion around public transport with CAB staff at our Policy Forum<sup>3</sup> and a number of recommendations were made, including an expansion of the concessionary travel scheme to assist vulnerable groups. The additional groups suggested included carers, students, young people (up to 21) and low earners.

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<sup>3</sup> The Policy Forum is a Standing Committee of the Board. The Policy Forum meets to discuss policy issues and priorities and make recommendations to the Board on issues of policy.