



Concessionary Fares

Policy Statement

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Joint Committee on Mobility of Blind and Partially Sighted People

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Joint Committee on Mobility of Blind and Partially Sighted People Policy Update on:

Concessionary Fares

Introduction

The Joint Committee on Mobility of Blind and Partially Sighted People is an independent body consisting of representatives of the principle organisations of blind, deafblind and partially sighted people with a specific interest in mobility. The Joint Committee believes that blind, deafblind and partially sighted people should be able to move around safely and independently.

The Joint Committee believes that currently this is not the position and that blind, deafblind and partially sighted people experience enormous barriers to freedom of movement, seriously limiting their opportunities and choices. The Joint Committee believes that all blind, deafblind and partially sighted people should receive the support and skills they need to enable them to meet the challenges of the external environment.

Concessionary fares are a necessary element in meeting these needs. The Joint Committee welcomes the forthcoming provision of free off-peak local transport for disabled people in England from April 2006, which will bring England more into line with Wales and Scotland. However there remain issues which need to be addressed to provide a national concessionary fares system integrated with all forms of travel and transferable throughout the country.

The aims of the Joint Committee are:

- The encouragement of good practice in relation to transport provision for blind, deafblind and partially sighted people.
- Free travel should be available for a companion where this is necessary for a blind, deafblind or partially sighted person to travel.
- Concessionary fares should not be restricted to certain times of the day.
- Concessionary fares should be easily obtained across modal and local authority boundaries.

Justification for concessions for blind and partially sighted people

There are 8½ million disabled people in the UK, including over a million blind and partially sighted people. Almost 2 million people with significant sight lossⁱ would have difficulty, even with the aid of glasses, in recognising a friend across the street. Many also have additional disabilities, particularly hearing loss, and experience serious problems moving around the built environment. Public transport is essential for the safe and independent mobility of these people.

Mobility, environment and transport are vital in enabling blind, deafblind and partially sighted people to participate fully in society, gaining education and employment and access to goods, facilities and services.

Blind, deafblind and partially sighted people face additional costs being disabled, including increased travel costs as they are unable to use independent motorised travel and are reliant on friends, taxis or public transport for mobility.

Research conducted for DPTACⁱⁱ, the governments advisory committee on transport for disabled people found that, while disabled people travel a third less often than the general public, disabled people use buses more often than the general public. Visually impaired people use buses significantly more than other disabled people with 57% using at least once a month compared to 43% of disabled people as a whole.

It is often necessary, even on short routes which are unsafe or unfamiliar, for blind, deafblind and partially sighted people to use public transport as this option is often the only means for safe and independent travel to the required destination. A bus journey may be necessary simply to cross the road rather than tackle a difficult junction.

Blind, deafblind and partially sighted people are likely to have difficulty finding the correct change and obtaining the ticket particularly where this is automated. Free travel not only avoids this difficulty but reduces the time taken for the bus journey through avoiding such delays.

The difficulties in obtaining accessible information on bus destinations, as the bus display cannot be read, has led blind, deafblind and partially sighted people to get on the wrong bus. Not only is this distressing in itself but if fare money has been put into the automated ticket machine this cannot be reclaimed.

Blind, deafblind and partially sighted people typically have lower incomes due to their lack of employment opportunities and social exclusion from the opportunities and choices available to sighted people. According to the Government's Disability in Great Britain report the incomes of disabled adults were 20 to 30% lower than those of non-disabled people (these figures included disability benefits).

Blind, deafblind and partially sighted people often need to travel with an assistant or companion because of the problems faced when travelling, including moving around the pedestrian environment, which can add to the cost of travel. In addition they may also need sighted assistance to carry out the purpose of the journey, not just for the journey itself.

Research shows that, because of problems encountered when moving about the pedestrian environment or accessing public transport, a quarter of blind and partially sighted adults never go out of their home on their own rising to nearly a third of those over 65ⁱⁱⁱ. This contributes to isolation and social exclusion.

People with sight problems are acknowledged as among the most socially excluded in society. Research published in the British Medical Journal 2002 showed that loss of sight is the third most common reason for suicide, after terminal illness and loss of a partner.

Concessionary fares are only one element in addressing this situation and the Joint Committee are campaigning for improvements in the pedestrian environment and improved access to public transport. Alongside this, free travel for blind and partially sighted people and their companion would enable them to use public transport without worrying about the cost and if necessary be accompanied on journeys without incurring additional cost.

The current situation

Research for RNIB demonstrated that the current concessionary fare system for blind and partially sighted people is confusing, illogical and inconsistent^{IV}.

The Joint Committee welcomes the commitment to move to free off-peak local travel in England. Local authorities will retain their existing discretion to offer enhancements to schemes, including providing travel over a wider area e.g. county-wide schemes, concessions on other modes such as rail, light rail, or ferry and weekday travel before 9.30 am. Authorities will also be able to continue to offer travel token schemes as an alternative to a free local bus pass.

Since the introduction of the minimum scheme in England in 2001, a total of 199 authorities in England offer at least one alternative or additional scheme to their residents, with 62 offering two and 26 three. A total of 70 authorities retained a token-based option in 2001. A charge for the additional or alternative scheme was made in 127 cases^V. While the Joint Committee would not wish these additional schemes ended, where they offer enhancements to the minimum scheme, nevertheless an enhanced national scheme would reduce the confusion.

Transferability - Concessions administered at the local level often do not reflect the travel needs of users, particularly when based on local authority administrative borders. In addition the concession system penalises blind and partially sighted people who travel beyond their local authority area, for example to work, for medical purposes or for leisure.

The situation in devolved areas has improved in terms of cross local authority boundaries. In Wales, since April 2002 there has been an all Wales scheme giving elderly and disabled people free bus travel throughout Wales. In Scotland a national scheme has been announced to come into operation in April 2006, replacing the schemes currently operated by local authorities in Scotland. We would encourage the extension of this to facilitate free travel throughout the UK.

Concession types and restrictions– Concessions vary enormously in the type of reduction they offer and when it can be used.

Discounts offered – At present a half fare reduction remains the most popular form of concession in England, available in 217 districts, 18 counties and 32 unitary authorities. Outside the 33 London Boroughs, and 2 PTEs, 16 authorities offer free travel. All authorities in Scotland and Wales now provide free travel^{vi} and the Joint Committee welcomes the commitment to provide free travel in England, albeit with restrictions.

Some areas offer free or reduced fares for companions where this is necessary to enable the disabled person to travel. Blind, deafblind and partially sighted people often need to travel with an assistant or companion because of the problems faced when travelling, and/or for the purpose of the journey at the destination. While this is particularly the case for older people, blind and partially sighted children are also more likely to need to be accompanied by a parent or other adult adding to the cost of the journey and possibly limiting the opportunity for children to travel or take part in activities requiring travel.

Time restrictions - The minimum standard applies only to off peak travel. This has obvious consequences for employment and the Joint Committee recommend that this restriction be removed.

There has been a reduction in time restrictions on schemes in England since 1998. 115 schemes still restrict travel in the morning peak (down from 137 in 1998). No time restrictions are placed on use by 200 schemes^{vii}. There are no time restrictions in Wales and in Scotland time restrictions will be removed in the national Scotland scheme from April 2006.

The restriction of concessionary travel during morning peak periods has a severely detrimental effect on blind and partially sighted people travelling to work or looking for work. Only half of blind and partially sighted people are in work compared with four fifths of the non disabled population, and for those in work jobs are more likely to be lower paid.^{viii}

In addition to the effect on employment, restricting concessions to off peak times affects blind and partially sighted people travelling to an early medical appointment, appointments for benefit and other interviews, or leisure activity with an early start time.

Other transport modes - In some areas concessionary fare passes can be used in taxis, community transport and other door to door transport. This is particularly important in rural areas and the Joint Committee urge that this be extended. In Scotland some ferry journeys will be entitled to concessionary fares.

Consideration should also be given to integrating concessionary fares on bus and rail travel.

Preferred system

The Joint Committee believes that the Government should integrate a national concessionary fares scheme for all forms of public transport, bringing cost savings in administration and benefits of a single card for users. A national scheme should enable both cross-modal and cross local authority boundary travel.

A National concessionary fare card should also be usable for taxis and community transport. This is particularly important in rural areas.

Concessions should be available for companions where these are needed to facilitate travel.

Concessions should not be restricted to off peak travel as this mitigates against blind, deafblind and partially sighted people who are in or seeking employment, and restricts the ability to participate in leisure and other activities with early start times, thus contributing to social exclusion.

While acknowledging the benefits of a national minimum standard, the Joint Committee believe that this should not be to the detriment of blind, deafblind and partially sighted people who are currently receiving more than the minimum. Where there are existing concessions greater than the national minimum these should continue.

Consistency across the UK should be achieved through levelling up not down, with the aim being free travel for blind, deafblind and partially sighted people who have no option but to use public transport in order to travel independently, and free travel for companions where these are needed.

Accessible Transport

Concessions are only one element in providing accessible transport, the following are also necessary;

- improvements to public transport availability, including services in the evening, weekends and Bank Holidays particularly at Christmas and the New Year period.
- improved access to transport vehicles
- on board audible and visual information
- accessible and reliable travel information
- audible information at bus stops and stations
- increased staffing levels
- staff training in disability issues
- Improved pedestrian environment
- Improved bus stops and stations.

Benefits

Supporting public transport – In the case of buses, concessionary fares support the bus industry, contributing to total revenue and increased bus use often at off peak times bringing additional revenue for marginal costs. Concessionary fares are therefore a vital support to bus services, particularly at off peak periods, supporting the wider availability of public transport for everyone, a key Government objective.

Improving access – In RNIB research, 58% of older blind and partially sighted people felt more awareness of their needs with regard to transport was the single most important factor which would improve their quality of life.

Research commissioned by DPTAC, the government's advisory committee on access in transport and the built environment, showed that poor access to transport was a major cause of concern to disabled people, and that disabled people did not consider that those responsible for providing and operating public transport sufficiently understand their requirements.

Disability Discrimination Act requirements to provide accessible buses through the Public Services Vehicle Accessibility Regulations are important but not on their own sufficient. Audible and visual announcements are needed on board buses and accessible pre-boarding information. Additionally staff training is vital across all forms of public transport. The Joint Committee welcomes the government commitment to extend the DDA to cover access issues on board transport vehicles.

Improvements to concessionary fares schemes will enable and encourage more disabled people to use public transport more often and thus encourage bus and other public transport operators to improve their services for disabled people.

A national concessionary fares scheme will “enable elderly people to continue to use public transport and to use it more often, often improving their access to a range of basic necessities such as healthcare and shops, and reducing isolation.” (DETR press release 950). These benefits also apply to blind, deafblind and partially sighted people. The improved independence this brings may reduce social services requirements and there would therefore be cost savings.

For people of working age it would also enable more people to seek and gain employment, further promoting social inclusion.

Summary & Recommendations

A National Concessionary Fare Scheme should:

- Provide integrated concessions on all forms of public transport.
- Provide transferable concessions throughout the country.
- Not restrict travel to off peak times.
- Provide concessions for companions where these are needed to facilitate travel.
- Be funded by Central Government with Local Authorities retaining the right to enhance provisions. Where Local Authorities currently provide enhanced schemes they should be encouraged and funded to maintain these.
- Concessions, even free travel, do not replace or diminish the need for public transport improvements in availability, physical accessibility, reliability, information provision, and staffing.

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C.J. Thomas

ⁱ Figures from the 1999 DSS Research report No.94 'Disability in Great Britain' indicated there were an estimated 1.97 million people with a significant sight loss.

ⁱⁱ Attitudes of disabled people to public transport, DPTAC, 2002

ⁱⁱⁱ GDBA, 1999, A New Way Forward – available from GDBA 0118 9835 555

^{iv} Rights of way: transport and mobility for visually impaired people in the UK, Baker, M, RNIB 1999

^v TAS research report Concessionary fares 2003 Executive Summary

^{vi} TAS 2003 as above

^{vii} TAS 2003as above

^{viii} GB Labour force survey spring 2004