

Test of Change for Concessionary Bus Travel Scheme

Summary

SUBMITTED BY AXIOM



What issues are people facing with the cost of transport?

Local residents in North East Fife have raised concerns about the availability and cost of travel and the effect this has had on their daily lives. Much of the employment in the North East Fife area relies on low paid jobs such as social care, hospitality, tourism, retail and farming, with many roles being part-time. This means that, for many people, incomes are lower than the Fife average and money is tight for many families.

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Research with residents between 2018 and 2020 highlighted the difficulties many people face.

Social Justice

A single person on benefits incurred costs of up to £239.20 a year in bus fares to attend the Job centre to sign on for their unemployment benefits.

"It costs a lot just to sign on.... And you can't not do that. I am spending £12 a month just to sign on"

"It costs me £3.50 to get to Anstruther for the Job Club as well as £8.20 to get to Leven to sign on. It's a lot of money and you can't claim it back"

Choosing to eat or not to eat

People were also describing the difficult choices they were having to make, often resulting in them going without food.

"I have a heart condition so I have to see my GP for check-ups fairly regularly. The cost mounts up and I often have to cut down on my other costs to pay for it - I don't go out much because I can't afford it and I have to watch what I am spending on food".

"We just couldn't afford to do anything. My son's friends go swimming and go into St Andrews. We just couldn't give him the money to go so sometimes we went without a meal".

"I can only get by with the help of friends....they are giving me food"

When asked about what difference not having to pay for bus fares would make, one person summed up the views of everyone in saying:

"If it helped save us £4 to £6 a week then I could get more food. You can get an awful lot of food in Aldi for £4"

Getting to health care appointments

People were cancelling appointments with their GPs or at hospitals, or were going without food to pay for the travel costs of attending.

"I have had to cancel hospital appointments, depending on when they are. If they are at the end of the month I have no money left so I can't go. It costs me £9.20 to get to the Victoria Infirmary in Kirkcaldy"

"I just couldn't go and I felt bad about it. I told the receptionist a lie - I said I was ill because I was too embarrassed to say I had no money".

While there is a scheme run by the NHS to reimburse eligible patients for travel costs, it is poorly advertised and difficult to use. It is not well known amongst health care practitioners and not advertised in health care settings. Claims need to be made at hospital sites, which means people have to pay out for their travel fares before they can claim their money back.

Getting to pharmacies

People also found it expensive to get their prescriptions as many pharmacies were some distance away from where people lived.

"I had to walk 7 miles to get the pharmacy.... I had no money left for the bus"

Getting into debt

People were borrowing from others to get by. This person explains how they used the concessionary bus fare vouchers which were recently piloted

"I used the vouchers to sign on and then take the bus into Glenrothes for shopping. It saves me £7.60 a week. This makes a real difference as it helps my benefit money last until I get my next payment. Before I was having to borrow from people to keep me going".

"I can only get by with the help of friends....they are giving me food. I do go to the foodbank but I don't like to do that.... other people might be worse off than me"

Getting a job

The cost of bus travel was also affecting people trying to get work.

"If you have an interview in Dundee it can cost over £12 to get there from Auchtermuchty"

Availability of bus services

Availability of bus services in rural areas has been highlighted by the Citizen's Advice Bureau as making it difficult for people to access essential services, such as healthcare and work opportunities. For some people, this is stopping them getting work.

“I had an interview on a Monday in Leven but I sign on there on a Wednesday. I couldn't afford to travel there twice in one week so I had to ask the employer if I could change the day. It doesn't look goodyou don't seem keen on the job which is not true but you can see why employers would think that”

Real life stories include those of a young carer who had to take time off of their school day each week to shop at a budget supermarket near their school before getting the school bus home in order to help the family with the cost of living.

People are not being made aware of support available

Although there are some schemes which people can apply for to cover the cost of their travel, they are very limited in how they can be used, are not widely advertised and information on the schemes is difficult to find. A scheme run by the Department for Work and Pensions and Stagecoach for people who have been at least 12 weeks unemployed had only around 300 people using it despite covering all of Fife, Perth and Arbroath.

Schemes are very limited

Even with existing support Schemes, there are many people who cannot apply for them because they are not eligible. This includes people who are unemployed for less than 12 weeks or who are long term unemployed. It also includes people who need to travel outwith the NHS Fife area for treatment, such as people with cancer and people who are visiting family (including children) in hospital.

Benefits from a concessionary bus fare scheme

In January 2020, a pilot bus travel Scheme was trialled with 45 residents in North East Fife, offered 100% discount on bus travel with the two local bus operators. People were given up to 25 vouchers, which were based on the ABC multi-operator bus ticket Scheme and on the Day Rider ticket which covered three ticket zones and was valid for unlimited daily travel.

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The people trying out the vouchers included people who were unemployed, parents of children and young people, kinship carers, people living on their own and people who were in education and training.

So what difference did it make

Affordable food

The vouchers also used to travel to larger towns where there is a greater choice of food and where prices are cheaper than local convenience stores.

"I can't afford to shop here – there is only a Co-op and its really expensive. With the vouchers I can go to Aldi. I can get more food now because it's cheaper".

Combating social isolation

"I have angina and mobility problems. I can't get into the town (St Andrews) walking so the bus is my only way in. Having the vouchers has meant that I can come into town and visit friends and family."

"I can get out more. I'm unemployed and live on my own. I am stuck in the house a lot as I can't afford to go out. The vouchers have been fantastic as I can go into St Andrews and meet people."

"I am a single parent and I can't afford to get out much. This has been fantastic. I felt low the other day and I just got on a bus and went into St Andrews. A change of scenery and being amongst people really helped me feel better".

Getting a job

One person, who had been unemployed, had used their tickets **to travel to a new job.**

"I am now working. My money was so tight I don't think I could have afforded the travel to work until I got paid so I probably wouldn't have been able to take the job".

How do services benefit?

Several people had used the voucher to attend local Job Clubs or attend the Job Centres. For one person, it had enabled them to take up employment and stop receiving Job Seekers Allowance, **saving** to the Department of Work and Pensions **£158.70 per month.**

Being able to keep GP, hospital appointments and mental health appointments also saves money. Each missed appointment **costs** NHS Fife **£150 per appointment** and, should anyone have to be hospitalised as a result of repeatedly missing appointments, it would **cost** NHS Fife an average of **£3,210 per person per week** to provide them with care.

Social exclusion also contributes to poor mental health. Many people had used the vouchers to keep in contact with family and friends.

The vouchers were also used in ways which had not been anticipated, including supporting carers and kinship carers in delivering their caring responsibilities.