

Mandatory Concessionary Fares Scheme in Wales – Consultationa Third Sector Response

The Economy and Transport Third Sector Group were given the opportunity to respond to the consultation seeking views on free bus travel for older people, disabled people and veterans.

This briefing paper consolidates responses and highlights some key considerations received from a wide cross-section of national third sector bodies and volunteer-led local community groups - including community transport groups, disability support groups and groups supporting older people.

Welsh Government becoming the Travel Concession Authority for the administration of the scheme.

Some support was shown for this change to address current inconsistencies in the awarding of passes and evidence required, particularly for companion passes. Although others were concerned that such a change could potentially cause delays in issuing passes and withdraw the opportunity for the public to contact local officers directly, where the system was working well.

Allowing more than one companion to travel with a disabled concessionary pass holder.

Those responding were in agreement with this suggestion which could potentially provide more people with disabilities the opportunity to use public transport to access services, support and activities.

The pass holder is currently not required to travel with a companion but consideration should be given to introducing a system that identifies people who must be accompanied because of their condition for their own safety and the safety of others, including those with dementia.

The eligibility of carers to travel when not accompanying a pass holder should be considered, which could allow carers to travel to their place of care and on behalf of the cared for.

Current issues and inconsistencies within the current system of issuing companion passes across Wales have been highlighted by a number of groups including Guide Dogs Cymru.

Changes to eligibility age and disability criteria.

There has been an overwhelming response to keep the criteria for age and disability as it is, but extend eligibility to include veterans.

Many of our older residents contribute their time as volunteers, care providers, child minders or work part-time to supplement their pension. Any change could have a significant impact on the local economy and community services.

Any changes to the entitlement for disabled people could cause further distress and hardship to those who are most vulnerable in society at a time when the UK Government's Welfare Reform is being implemented.

Discounted bus travel for volunteers who volunteer for at least 30 hours a week.

Volunteers are playing an increasingly vital role in sustaining essential services to keep our communities vibrant and our citizens as resilient, connected and independent as possible. The expense of travel can have an impact on the frequency of volunteering and restrict volunteers from taking up placements further field. Travel expenses are also a significant cost heading for very many voluntary and community groups.

Although the suggestion was welcomed, consideration should be given to reducing the number of suggested hours volunteered per week from 30 and agreeing an average monthly figure as other commitments can often impact on the ability of volunteers to contribute regular hours on a weekly basis. A reduced number of hours per week would include those who are also seeking work and those who may have other commitments, such as carers, and could positively encourage more people to volunteer and increase hours contributed.

The practicalities of overseeing such a scheme could inadvertently place a heavy administrative burden on third sector groups and would need a great deal of consideration.

Travel off-peak or anytime?

A move to off-peak travel only would disadvantage those who work, volunteer, provide care to allow others to access work or need to access early medical appointments as specialist services move to central locations.

In isolated communities, particularly rural areas, timetabled public transport routes are limited and many of these services are reliant on those who travel by concessionary fares. Restricting travel times could risk the viability of further vital transport routes.

Extension to other modes of transport

There is wide support for an extension to include vital community transport services such as dial-a-ride, social car schemes or taxi operators in areas where there is little or no other transport for people to access. There are many people who are currently disadvantaged by a lack of available transport options where they can use their entitlement to free transport, extending to other community services would be of benefit to more pass holders and help to further integrate and sustain transport services.

Such an extension would also enable community groups to support beneficiaries to access social community activities and encourage social inclusion.

However, efforts should be made to ensure that this doesn't displace free travel for hospital appointments where the patient meets the NEPT criteria but chooses not to use the free transport already provided by WAST.