



**TRANSPORT
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CÒMHDHAIL ALBA

Young Persons' Free Bus Travel Scheme - Year 1 Evaluation: Professional Stakeholder Feedback

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Executive Summary

Introduction

On the 31 January 2022, the Scottish Government launched the Young Persons' Free Bus Travel Scheme (also known as the Under 22s (or U22s) scheme). This entitles all young people aged between five and 21 resident in Scotland to apply for free bus travel across the country.

Transport Scotland commissioned an evaluation of the scheme to consider its first year of operation. The research involved:

- An online survey of young people and their parents/carers, which allowed comparisons with the [baseline survey](#) conducted ahead of the scheme's launch;
- A series of focus groups with young people and their parents/carers, as well as other bus users not eligible for the scheme (i.e. aged 22+);
- An online consultation survey with professional stakeholders and other interested professional organisations; and
- Analysis of secondary data sources.

This report outlines the findings from the stakeholder consultation survey. Feedback from the other research elements are included in a separate report. A summary report also draws together the key findings from all research strands.

Stakeholder Survey Sample

Fieldwork for the stakeholder survey occurred over five weeks during June and July 2023, and 46 responses were received in total. This included responses from across a range of different sectors, although local authorities, bus operators and Regional Transport Partnerships (RPTs) represented nearly two thirds of the sample.

Key Findings

Policy Awareness

Overall awareness of the scheme and its aims and objectives was high. Respondents were also highly supportive of the scheme generally, and of its aims in relation to encouraging more environmentally friendly travel behaviours, and to provide benefits to young people and their families. It was also noted that the

scheme aligned well with other national and local policies and priorities, particularly in relation to tackling poverty and encouraging greater equality/equity.

It was felt, however, that the main limitation of the policy/scheme was the differing provision of bus services across the country. It was suggested that the scheme was only as good as the bus services available to young people.

Application and Other Scheme Processes

Stakeholders with a role/responsibility for directly supporting the delivery of the Young Persons' Free Bus Travel Scheme were asked to outline any setup and early implementation challenges. Overall, 19 respondents outlined operational challenges, five discussed infrastructure challenges, and 11 noted funding challenges. Most of the respondents were local authorities.

The main challenge discussed across all aspects was the application process. This was noted to have placed an unexpectedly high burden on local authorities during the initial launch of the scheme. Respondents highlighted that the online application process had been challenging for young people and their parents/carers to complete, and had resulted in a high volume of queries, and requests for support and updates on their application directed towards the local authorities. It was also suggested that no additional funding or resources were available to support this. Similarly, other organisations felt that the funding they had received to support the launch of the scheme was not sufficient.

Some local authorities noted that they had adapted to try and deal with the application issues. This included introducing alternative processes for verifying applicants' identification, the ability to apply via schools (again to support ID verification), and changes to how queries were dealt with. A few indicated that similar changes had been made to other application and query processes, bringing wider benefits. Despite such local changes, and updates/improvements to the online via the [getyourNEC](#) application process, there was some concern that the negative perception around the process persisted. It was also suggested that there was scope for further improvements to be made, and that greater guidance and support should be made available to applicants.

Capacity issues on buses were also discussed, particularly on services used by school pupils around the start and end of the school day.

Impact on Young People and their Families

The Young Persons' Free Bus Travel Scheme was felt to have brought cost savings, and reduced anxiety over travel costs/removed the cost barrier to travel for both young people and their families - indeed, this was considered to be one of the main benefits of the scheme. The universal nature of the scheme was also considered positively, avoiding any stigma for users.

In particular, respondents felt that the scheme had helped to remove some of the cost barrier to accessing education, especially further and higher education. It was felt this provided greater equality in access and supported students to continue with their studies and attend all classes, where previously they may not have been able to afford the travel costs to attend.

Respondents across a range of sectors also felt that the scheme was highly beneficial for young people and their families during the current 'cost of living crisis'. It was suggested that the money saved on travel would be available for other household expenses, and that young people could continue to access activities and opportunities without being restricted by travel costs.

Another main benefit brought by the scheme was considered to be increased freedom and independence for young people. It was noted that they could travel more often, more independently and without relying on others, do more with their friends, and travel further afield. Many stakeholders noted that more young people were travelling by bus more often since the introduction of the scheme.

Stakeholders also felt that the scheme had supported young people to access a wide range of opportunities. This included access to social and leisure activities, education, employment and support services; supported students to visit home more often; and for some island residents to access activities on the mainland.

It was also suggested that the scheme had wider benefits by encouraging more families to travel by bus due to the financial savings of not paying for the child's/young person's ticket.

Impact of the Scheme on Others

In relation to benefits for local communities, several stakeholders suggested there had been a positive impact on employment in local areas as the Young Persons' Free Bus Travel Scheme meant young people could now access job opportunities more easily. Others suggested that young people were now accessing local areas and spending money in local shops and services, thus boosting the local economy. It

was also felt there would be environmental benefits caused by a reduction in car use, due to parents having to drive their children to locations/venues less often.

The impacts on bus operators generally related to increased numbers of young people using their services. This was said to have generated timetable delays as buses spent longer at stops to scan the travel cards. It was also suggested this had generated capacity issues on some services/routes, and had resulted in increased problems with anti-social behaviour. A few, however, noted the increased revenue generated by higher numbers of passengers/young people using services, and suggested that the scheme had helped to support post-Covid bus patronage recovery and the sustainability of bus services.

Impacts of the scheme on other modes of public transport were also discussed. It was suggested that rail patronage had declined among those now eligible for free bus travel, and that lower proportions of young people had been using the Glasgow Subway over more recent months. However, the extent to which this latter change could be attributed to the Young Persons' Free Bus Travel Scheme is unclear as the timing of the change did not coincide with the launch of the scheme.

As noted above, the main impact of the scheme on local authorities was the additional resource requirements to support and manage applications and enquiries for the scheme. Capacity issues and anti-social behaviour were also noted as issues for some local authorities, along with impacts on school transport provision (discussed below).

A range of impacts/benefits for others were also outlined. This included funds being reallocated from covering travel expenses to other requirements and discretionary payments, for example for third sector and support organisations, as well as skills, training and educational establishments who previously awarded travel grants/emergency payments or covered travel costs for service users to attend.

Scheme Challenges and Suggested Changes

A range of additional impacts, challenges and possible changes to the scheme were discussed by respondents. These included:

- Differences in access to bus services and the scheme, both due to general service provision and the risks/impacts of reductions in service provision in some areas. It was suggested that the scheme be extended to include ferries (in order to support island residents), and rail travel;
- Impacts on school transport. This included a range of issues, including:

- Local authorities revising and adapting how school transport was offered to integrate the scheme and offer updated/amended routes;
 - Pupils choosing whether to use their allocated school transport service or a regular service bus; and
 - Local authorities using registered/subsidised local bus services to provide school transport (via school issued bus passes) highlighted capacity issues on services, making it difficult for some pupils entitled to free school transport to access services. A few local authorities noted they had had to pay for additional capacity in the form of additional buses/services.
- A perceived rise in instances of anti-social behaviour on-board buses, at bus stops/stations, and in new areas. Respondents suggested there was a need for greater policing of the scheme and penalties for perpetrators, such as suspending access to the scheme, or implementing the times of day when the free travel applies;
 - Concerns that the scheme may have a negative impact on other passengers, mainly due to capacity issues and the perception of anti-social behaviour. A few were also concerned that student discount tickets may be withdrawn, impacting students aged 22+, which led to suggestions that the scheme be extended up to the age of 26 and/or to all students regardless of age;
 - Concern that current bus service/scheme provision did not fully meet the needs of young people, and a desire to ensure that future provision meets the needs of all users; and
 - Concerns were also raised about the welfare of young people able to travel far from home without parental consent, and in relation to reimbursement rates where it was stressed these should be maintained at sufficient levels to support service provision.

Conclusion

The consultation highlighted a wide range of benefits brought by the Young Persons' Free Bus Travel Scheme, principle among these being the financial benefits for young people, as well as increased independence and access to services and opportunities. A range of other elements that will require further monitoring were also identified, including capacity issues on some services/routes, instances of anti-social behaviour, and the impact on school transport provision. The application process was also highlighted as remaining problematic for some, while access to bus services was flagged as creating inequalities in delivering the benefits of the scheme. Overall, however, the scheme has been well received to date, and was strongly supported by professional stakeholders. It also appears that many of the scheme's aims and expected outcomes are achieving positive progress or are being met, although ongoing and longer-term monitoring will be important to establish any further impacts and the full extent of any changes.

I. Introduction

Background

On the 31 January 2022, the Scottish Government launched the Young Persons' Free Bus Travel Scheme (also known as the Under 22s (or U22s) scheme). Through this scheme, all children and young people resident in Scotland (including asylum seekers and refugees) are eligible to apply for a National Entitlement Card (NEC) or Young Scot National Entitlement Card (Young Scot NEC), which provide access to free bus travel. Around 930,000 children and young people are estimated to be eligible. The scheme provides free travel on any bus in any part of Scotland, with young people able to travel on buses both locally, and outside the area they live - although a few services, such as premium-fare night buses and City Sightseeing buses, are not included within the free travel scheme.

The scheme aims to encourage more sustainable travel behaviours and tackle issues related to transport poverty and access to services by:

- embedding positive sustainable travel behaviours;
- opening up social, education, employment and leisure opportunities; and
- reducing household outgoings to aid children, particularly those living in poverty.

A series of expected outcomes were also established when designing the scheme in order to monitor and measure success. These were split into short, medium and long term outcomes, as follows:

Short Term Outcomes:

1. Increased numbers of young people registering for a card/aware of the scheme
2. Fewer young people learning to drive
3. Increased awareness of bus as a viable travel option
4. Increased awareness of bus as a viable travel option amongst young women
5. Reduction in travel costs for young people and their families

Medium Term Outcomes:

6. Increased numbers of young people using the scheme for journeys otherwise paid for
7. Journeys which would have been made by car (driving/lift from parents etc.) are made by bus
8. Young people have increased access to services

Long Term Outcomes:

9. Reduction in poverty rates amongst young people
10. Improved access to education and employment opportunities
11. Improved access to social and leisure opportunities/activities
12. Reduction in private car kilometres

Transport Scotland are committed to monitoring and evaluating the scheme as it progresses. A baseline survey was conducted before the scheme was launched to establish young people's pre-implementation travel behaviours and attitudes towards bus use. This was followed by an evaluation of the scheme after it had been operational for a year.

Methodology and Sample Profile

Wellside Research Ltd. (an independent social research consultancy), supported by Stantec (a transport planning consultancy), were appointed to undertake the Year One Evaluation. Work was conducted between April and August 2023.

Both primary data collection and analysis of secondary data sources was required, with a mixed methods approach adopted, as follows:

- A survey with young people and their parents/carers;
- Focus groups with young people, parents/carers, and other bus users;
- A consultation-based survey with professional stakeholders and interested professional organisations; and
- Analysis of secondary data sources.

This report presents the findings from the professional stakeholder consultation survey only, and includes feedback on both the process of setting up and implementing the scheme, as well its impact. Feedback from the other evaluation strands (which largely focused on feedback from young people and families) is presented in the Year One Evaluation Report.

Professional Stakeholder Survey

In order to provide the opportunity for inclusive and widespread feedback from scheme partners, professional stakeholders and other interested organisations, an online consultation questionnaire was designed. This consisted of mostly open questions which allowed for the collection of qualitative data, and sought feedback on any impact the scheme had had on their own organisation or services, impacts on young people and families, impacts on the local area more generally, unintended consequences, and any lessons that could be learned going forwards.

The survey was live for five weeks, and ran from 12 June to 16 July 2023.

A wide range of stakeholders were identified and were invited to participate in the consultation survey by Transport Scotland, including:

- Those currently delivering the scheme;
- All local authorities;
- Regional Transport Partnerships (RTPs);
- Bus and other public transport operators;
- Active travel organisations;
- Representative bodies; and
- Other special interest organisations (such as those focused on/working with children and young people, families, education and skills, etc.).

In total, 46 responses were received. Responses were categorised by sector for analysis purposes, as follows:

- 9 bus operators;
- 1 other public transport operator;
- 14 local authorities submitted 19 responses (5 local authorities submitted different responses for different departments);
- 6 RTPs;
- 2 active travel organisations;
- 2 representative bodies;
- 2 children and families' rights/support/campaign organisations;
- 4 organisations related to skills, training and education; and
- 1 other type of organisation.

Of these responses, 30 indicated they had a role or responsibility for directly supporting the delivery of the Young Persons' Free Bus Travel Scheme. This included bus operators, local authorities, those organisations responsible for managing the scheme, and a small number of other organisations across other sectors who were responsible for delivering bus services or represented bus operators, or who supported young people to access the scheme.

Research Caveats and Report Presentation

It should be noted that not all stakeholders responded to the survey, meaning not all sectors were represented equally within the results, with some sectors only including responses from a small number of organisations (in some cases just one). As such, some of the impacts or challenges faced by the various stakeholder groups, local areas more generally, and other forms of travel/transport may not have been fully

identified and explored by the research. That being said, it is worth noting that a high level of consistency was found between the views, issues and experiences reported by the different stakeholders who took part. There was also a high level of congruence between professional stakeholders and the views and experiences provided by young people and their parents/carers (as presented in the Year One Evaluation Report).

In most instances, respondents are referenced in relation to their sector, however, due to the small number of respondents in some sectors, there are some instances where the sector is not identified in order to maintain anonymity.

Finally, although some respondents did rely on and reference data sources in their responses, much of the feedback provided represents stakeholder views/opinions.

2. Policy Awareness

Professional stakeholders were asked to detail their views about the policy behind the Young Persons' Free Bus Travel Scheme. While a few issues were discussed at this question (and are outlined below), many of the responses focused the impact of the scheme and/or its benefits - this information was analysed and is included under the relevant coverage across the subsequent chapters.

Awareness and Areas of Support

Encouraging Sustainable Travel Behaviours

Overall, awareness of the scheme and its aims and objectives was high, and there was overwhelming support for the Young Persons' Free Bus Travel Scheme:

“Strong and laudable policy objectives in terms of accessibility to opportunities, inclusivity, and embedding environmentally sustainable behaviours from a young age.” (Bus Operator)

In particular, respondents were supportive of the aim to encourage greener and more environmentally friendly travel behaviours among young people, with several being optimistic that these changes would be sustained in the long term.

One Active Travel Organisation, who noted the inter-connected nature of walking and bus use, also supported the scope of the initiative, focusing on behaviour change:

“...we are pleased that there has been greater recognition of the need for behavioural initiatives to achieve mode shift from driving to walking. Indeed, research shows that while increased investment in active travel infrastructure is important, it is ‘insufficient’ without behavioural changes. Therefore, providing people with encouragement, support, and guidance to change their behaviour is essential to maximise positive changes for our communities, health, and environment in the long term.” (Active Travel Organisation)

Supportive for Young People and their Families

One area that garnered large levels of support was the various ways that the scheme aimed to benefit young people and their families. Respondents were generally supportive of the focus on providing greater access to transport, greater access to

opportunities, including work, education and social and leisure activities, and removing the cost barrier/bring cost savings to young people and their families:

“Free bus travel for young people across Scotland is very welcome, allowing for local and national travel, increasing access to extra-curricular activities, community-based activities, travel for students studying elsewhere in Scotland, access for young people who might not be able to afford bus travel.” (Local Authority)

“Affordability is a key consideration in choice of transport. The Young Person’s Free Bus Travel Scheme is a great policy initiative that removes the cost constraint of bus travel for those young people under 22 [years old]. Providing this support allows young people across Scotland to have enhanced access to opportunities. This can be access to education, to work or to leisure activities without the need for the support and availability of a parent or guardian with access to a car.” (RTP)

This impact is discussed in more detail at Chapter 4.

Other Positive Aspects of the Policy/Scheme

Respondents were also supportive of a range of other aims or aspects of the scheme. This included:

- The appropriateness of the policy at a time of a ‘cost of living crisis’;
- That it supported the sustainability of bus services;
- That it encouraged modal shift away from car use and onto public transport, and would provide positive environmental impacts as a result; and
- That it aligned well with organisations’ own corporate plans and objectives.

Alignment with Other Policy and Priority Areas

A few respondents, across the course of the consultation survey, also highlighted that the Young Persons’ Free Bus Travel Scheme either integrated well with, or was supportive of other policy or priority areas, both at national and local government level. This included environmental policy and health and wellbeing, however, the main areas the scheme was considered to contribute was in tackling poverty and providing greater equality/equity between young people from different backgrounds and economic means:

“It ties in with Council aim and objectives for child poverty, increasing opportunities for young people, removing cost barriers for those on low income, etc.” (Local Authority)

One respondent was also highly supportive of the universal nature of the scheme and its capacity to support those experiencing poverty in a non-stigmatising manner:

“This policy was very widely welcomed in principle... especially because of its potential to be a very practical way to enable children and young people experiencing poverty to grasp many of the same opportunities as those who don't experience poverty... It was important that the policy didn't stigmatise those experiencing poverty in the way that it was implemented, and so the universal approach was also supported.”
(Children and Families' Rights/Support/Campaign Organisation)

Another stakeholder also highlighted links between the use of public transport, and bus use in particular, and active travel, and suggested that this would ultimately help to tackle both health and transport inequalities, as well as environmental issues:

“Active travel and public transport are intricately linked, particularly for pedestrians. Virtually every trip by public transport involves walking at some stage... We know that encouraging public transport increases peoples' physical activity compared to car use, and we support systems and schemes that allow residents of Scotland of all ages to make sustainable travel choices... We believe that walking and other modes of active travel play a vital role in Scotland's response to the current challenges posed by health and transport inequalities and the climate emergency.” (Active Travel Organisation)

Policy/Scheme Limitations

While largely supportive of the scheme overall, several stakeholders highlighted limitations. One of the main issues was related to access to bus services, with respondents highlighting differences in provision across the country (this issue is explored in more detail at Chapter **Error! Reference source not found.**), and the current lack of resources to fully realise the benefits of the Young Persons' Free Bus Travel Scheme for all:

“...benefits are only accrued where bus services are available and in rural areas commercial bus services are currently under extreme financial strain with many... being withdrawn. Given the current financial constraints on local transport authorities there is little opportunity to

replace these withdrawn services/journeys with supported bus services/journeys, far less expand the bus network to maximise the benefits of the U22 [Under 22s] Scheme... The policy is of greater benefit for those... living in large towns or cities and/or those wishing to use inter-city coaches for longer-distance travel.” (Local Authority)

Indeed, a few respondents, typically RTPs, stressed the importance of good quality, “stable and reliable” bus networks to the overall success of the scheme in the long term, with others noting that the lack of services in some areas rendered the scheme practically “worthless”:

“...in order to realise the full benefits of the policy, the sector has to grasp the challenge of providing an effective and reliable bus network that provides viable transport links to all our settlements, across the day and evening, on weekdays and weekends. The policy does not work if there are no buses in the first place.” (RTP)

“The policy is a positive step, however, the lack of bus routes and the timing of buses in the rural areas of our authority can make the pass almost worthless.” (Local Authority)

Another common issue discussed by stakeholders was the scheme’s limitations with regards to the lack of inter-modal connectivity/use. Stakeholders suggested that greater integration/inclusion of other public transport modes would be beneficial, particularly for train and ferry travel (this is discussed in more detail at Chapter 6).

3. Application and Other Scheme Processes

The 30 organisations that had a role/responsibility for directly supporting the provision and delivery of the Young Persons' Free Bus Travel Scheme, were asked whether they had experienced any challenges during the setup and early implementation of the scheme. Overall, 19 reported operational challenges, five highlighted infrastructure challenges, and 11 noted funding challenges. Stakeholders also discussed other issues related to the processes involved in setting up and delivering the scheme (mostly the application process) throughout their consultation feedback, which is also presented here.

Setup and Implementation Challenges

Operational Challenges

Of the 19 organisations that indicated they had experienced operational challenges, 14 were local authorities.

The main challenge highlighted by local authorities was the high staff resource and increased workload required to deal with the volume of applications. The perceived complexity of the online application process, implemented and managed by the Improvement Service, also meant that local authority staff needed to deal with a high volume of queries and requests for support. It was suggested that requirements in this respect were far greater than expected, with local authorities not having sufficient resource to tackle this. In addition, it was also noted that the support they could offer to applicants was limited as they did not have access to partial applications:

“We were relying on most of the applications being applied for using the online webpage created by the Improvement Service, however, applicants experienced a lot of issues applying online therefore looked to the council office for support. We didn't have the resources to employ any additional staff to assist with the high demand.” (Local Authority)

Due to the difficulties experienced by applicants in relation to verifying documents and identity, some local authorities said that they had introduced alternative verification processes through schools to aid the application process. However, it was felt that the overall difficulty/complexity of the application process had put some people off applying:

“We decided to introduce a process where all school aged pupils could verify their identity and apply through [the council] to receive their entitlement as opposed to applying through the Get Your NEC website.”
(Local Authority)

One respondent also discussed practical challenges of the application process and adjustments that were needed to deal with cross-border situations (i.e. where pupils/students lived in England but accessed education establishments in Scotland). They highlighted the need to implement systems which ensured these young people were not signed up to the Young Persons' Free Bus Travel Scheme but could still be provided with a card for cashless catering, etc. within their establishments. This same respondent also noted that, while they offered residents the ability to have schools verify parentage/identification, an alternative route was needed for those who did not attend schools within the area.

While one respondent suggested that variation in uptake of the scheme was driven by the differing provision of bus services, other responses suggest that uptake variation could also, in part, be linked to the extent to which local authorities were resourced and/or were able to support the application process. One local authority with uptake levels below the national average indicated that, while they had worked with schools and their local authority customer service teams, they lacked the resources to support parents/carers with applications. They noted that they continued to receive feedback that the application process was complicated for some applicants and that they had “given up on applying”. Meanwhile, another local authority with uptake figures above the national average indicated that they had provided facilities to allow face-to-face applications, and persevered in supporting applications despite the resource challenges this created.

Another local authority also suggested that differing application methods and variable levels of support provided to applicants may contribute to local uptake rates:

“We initially experienced fairly low take up, with anecdotal evidence suggesting a difficulty in applying as one of the key reasons. We worked closely with partners across the Council, with additional support from the Scottish Government, to implement alternative arrangements and this has proven to be successful in encouraging greater participation. In addition, the department's high engagement rate with ParentsPortal enabled an improved experience for families in signing up to the scheme. We recognise that not all authorities have similar levels of engagement with ParentsPortal which may result in further difficulties in signing up to the scheme.” (Local Authority)

Other organisation types also noted the challenging application process for young people with limited support available for those applying.

Infrastructure Challenges

Of the five organisations who experienced infrastructure challenges, four were local authorities.

These local authorities again noted the increased staff resource required to facilitate the scheme and the difficult application process. In addition, one highlighted that not all buses were equipped with the necessary ticketing machines, particularly in remote rural areas. Another noted that service capacity issues were being experienced as the demand for services had increased, particularly on services which coincided with school start and finish times (this issue is discussed in more detail in Chapter 6).

The non-local authority respondent that cited infrastructure challenges highlighted an issue with regards to the quality of information on the cards - they noted that the hologram rubbed off too easily - although this was noted to not impact on the scheme itself.

Funding Challenges

Again, most of the respondents who indicated they had experienced funding challenges were local authorities - seven out of 11 respondents.

The core funding challenge faced by local authorities centred around the high demand for applications and queries/support in relation to applications with no increase in funding to facilitate this. Some cited the need to pay for additional staff to manage the demand, while others moved resources within the council to manage the application process (to the detriment of other services):

“We had to move our resources to deal with the high demand which had a negative impact on our other services and continues to have an impact.”
(Local Authority)

One local authority needed to provide an additional bus on a route servicing a school to ensure sufficient capacity was provided, at an additional cost to the council. This same local authority also noted “a slight loss in fares from fare-paying pupils on some registered school transport services” (i.e. on service buses used by the general public but where school issued bus passes were accepted to provide free travel to pupils entitled to free school transport). Issues related to school transport

services are discussed in more detail at Chapter **Error! Reference source not found.**

Whilst not an actual impact to date, concerns were also raised over the potential for operators of subsidised services (in rural areas) to request increased payment if there was a large increase in demand/passengers:

“With our services being remote rural and a number of services currently pre-bookable requests, contracted operators have raised concerns (currently only verbal) that if there is a large increase in these services due to this new entitlement we should consider increasing their payments... any changes to contract terms will be of concern.” (Local Authority)

One bus operator noted the need to change ticket offerings such as college, school and child tickets as a result of scheme implementation, which resulted in the need for processing ticket refunds and had created redundant ticket types. The need for additional driver training was also highlighted.

Among organisations tasked with managing the scheme, two indicated that, while they were funded, this did not cover the full extent of input that was ultimately required. For example, it did not cover the necessary input from senior managers, and the delay to the roll-out of the scheme (due to the Covid-19 pandemic) meant that staff were committed to the scheme for longer than anticipated. Another felt that insufficient early prospective user research had impacted their ability to forward plan and left them exposed to increased financial risks within the supply chain - they suggested this resulted in stockpiling of materials needed for the production of the NEC cards.

Benefits of the Application Process

While practical challenges were discussed by stakeholders (particularly for local authorities), some benefits were also identified.

It was suggested that the national roll-out of the Young Persons' Free Bus Travel Scheme and integration with local authorities had encouraged all areas across the country to adopt the online application approach via [getyourNEC](#). This ensured a standardised approach for applicants, and encouraged wider uptake of online applications for other NEC cards as well:

“Young people and parents are able to apply for a NEC with free bus travel in the convenience of their own home, via a national online

application process. Prior to U22s, not all Local Authorities had signed up to use [getyournec.scot](https://www.getyournec.scot), resulting in a “postcode lottery” approach for citizens... U22s pushed the agenda for a national application process which encouraged all 32 Local Authorities to sign up, benefiting both young people and parents who were required to apply... The U22 scheme essentially forced Local Authorities who had not adopted [getyournec.scot](https://www.getyournec.scot), to sign up to use the service to avoid complaints that an online application process was not available in their area.” (Representative Body)

Other stakeholders noted that improvements and/or streamlining had also been made to the application process, verification of identification, and/or in dealing with queries relating to the scheme. Again, a few indicated that this had resulted in similar improvements being made to other application and query processes, suggesting that benefits in this respect were more widely applicable:

“We developed and moved to an online contact form which allows all YPFBTS [Young Persons' Free Bus Travel Scheme] requests to be processed more efficiently. Prior to this the majority of contact was via email to [a] service mailbox which was unmanageable and inefficient.”
(Local Authority)

A few stakeholders also acknowledged that improvements had been made to the main [getyourNEC](https://www.getyournec.scot) application process since its introduction. However, an RTP suggested that continued monitoring was required in relation to the application process, with them concerned that a negative perception around this persisted:

“At the beginning of the rollout of the scheme, it was challenging to obtain a Concession Card. This hopefully is now improving but it is important that all partners continue to monitor this going forward. However, a general community perception persists that it is hard/difficult/complex to get a card.” (RTP)

Continued Development of the Application Process

Despite the improvements noted to already have taken place in relation to the application process, both in relation to the [getyournec.scot](https://www.getyournec.scot) and local systems, several stakeholders felt that this could still be problematic and needed to be further simplified. In particular, it was suggested that the application process was complicated by the need for parental involvement for children aged 12-15, noting that this had previously not been necessary. Others noted difficulties in the initial application and/or replacement process for those who cannot access the documents needed to verify their/their child's identity.

A few suggested that greater guidance and support was required for applicants, both in general and for specific groups that might find the process difficult/have difficulty providing the required documentation. In particular, it was suggested that schools and libraries could be more involved in supporting or facilitating applications or to develop pilot programmes where cards could be automatically issued to school children within the school setting:

“More information/assistance on helping young people struggling with access to identification documents i.e. Refugees, Asylum Seekers, Looked after Young People, etc.” (Local Authority)

One stakeholder also suggested that a simplified approach was required for those aged 12-15 that already held a photo style Young Scot/NEC. It was felt there needed to be an easier method available for parental approval to be provided (both online and offline) to add the travel element to existing cards.

Positive Aspects of the Process

Despite the challenges that were faced during the early implementation phase and in relation to the application process, it should be noted that several respondents also felt that the scheme had been well managed overall:

“It has generally been well managed and positive.” (Local Authority)

A few local authority respondents also commented positively about regular meetings that had been held during the design and setup of the Young Persons' Free Bus Travel Scheme. (It is expected that respondents were referring to meetings of the NEC Stakeholder Forum which was chaired by Information Service/NECPO. This forum was implemented during the Covid-19 pandemic and held regular meetings during the scheme's implementation phase.) While these had been helpful at the time, it was also suggested that similar meetings would provide a useful way to identify and understand local impacts of the scheme, and that such meetings would be useful to incorporate during any other new transport/policy developments:

“Regular meetings such as the ones held for the YP [Young Person] scheme would be good. Even one-on-one meetings with LAs [local authorities] as we won't always share the same issues so would be good to converse about the issues or impact of a scheme that might be felt specifically within our LA.” (Local Authority)

4. Impact on Young People and their Families

All professional stakeholders were asked what the main impacts of the Young Persons' Free Bus Travel Scheme to date had been for children and young people and their families, if any. While four respondents did not provide a response, one said there had been no impact, and six indicated they either did not know or did not have enough direct contact with young people and their families to be able to answer. A total of 35 respondents discussed such impacts.

Financial Savings/Removing Cost Barriers

Consistent with the findings from young people and their families, professional stakeholders identified cost savings for young people and their families as one of the main benefits of the scheme. It was also suggested that the scheme had removed any anxiety or worries around the cost of travel, and removed the cost barrier to travel and transport for young people:

“As a result of the U22 scheme, more young people are accessing free bus travel, which creates more opportunities to stay active, socialise and travel for education or work purposes. Not having money for a bus fare is no longer a barrier to a young person being able to travel.”

(Representative Body)

“The U22 ticket will allow more freedom to the user as they have peace of mind they can travel/explore whenever they need despite their financial situation.” (Bus Operator)

It was also suggested that the scheme avoided any stigma that might have been felt by young people and their families had the scheme been means tested or involved other limited eligibility:

“Has allowed less of a worry about travel to opportunities and also enabled some families to settle due to access. Less of a stigma as it is a scheme for all young people.” (Skills, Training and Education

Organisation)

Similarly, the scheme was said to provide peace of mind for parents/carers around their children's travel. It was felt that parents/carers no longer had to worry about the cost of their children's travel, and that the scheme had removed the financial strain on families of paying for bus tickets for their children.

Those representing island authorities noted that, while the benefits and cost savings available were not generally realised from on-island travel, the scheme was beneficial for resident families with young people studying or visiting the mainland:

“As services are limited within our area...The real benefit to families is from mainland journeys and travel while on holiday or doing further education.” (Local Authority)

The financial savings were also said to support young people and their families more generally, allowing them to have money to spend on other things.

Tackling Cost Barriers to Education

One stakeholder organisation that had undertaken an informal feedback survey among young people noted that the financial benefits of the scheme often coincided with improved access to education or work opportunities:

“We have substantial evidence that young people have hugely benefited from the Young Persons' Free Bus Travel... The most common theme to appear in feedback was around the financial benefits of the scheme. Around half of responses mentioned this in some manner, mostly showing the financial strain that is taken off of travel for young people. This often coincided with a common mention of improvement to their educational and working life with young people stating frequently that the scheme allowed them to travel to school/university/college/work much more easily and without concern of financial implications.” (Children and Families' Rights/Support/Campaign Organisation)

Another respondent indicated that the provision of free bus travel had been beneficial for school children in ensuring that they could access educational opportunities, namely school trips, due to removing the financial barrier. They felt this had been particularly valuable for families experiencing poverty.

The main benefit reported by respondents in this respect, however, was in relation to further and higher education. Several respondents perceived the scheme to be a 'leveller', providing greater equality in access, particularly in terms of access to educational opportunities and supporting students to continue with their studies by removing the financial travel barrier. It was again noted that the universal nature of the scheme ensured there was no stigma for those who would have otherwise had to seek help with their travel costs:

“Our students face so many barriers and their previous travel allowance would be spent on other things, which meant they had no money to travel to classes, now they know they can always have their bus pass to travel to college.” (Skills, Training and Education Organisation)

One RTP, however, noted that, although the scheme was supporting those in higher and further education, not all students were eligible (i.e. those aged 22 and over). As such, the above benefit of removing the transport cost barrier to further and higher education was not necessarily available to all who attend these institutions:

“It is worth noting that not all students will be eligible for the Young Persons' Free Bus Travel Scheme such as those in later stages of study, postgraduate and mature students.” (RTP)

Cost of Living Help

Throughout the consultation survey, many respondents, across all sectors, suggested that the Young Persons' Free Bus Travel Scheme was highly beneficial for young people and their families in helping them through the current 'cost of living crisis'. Some noted that it saved them money, which was then available for other household expenses/needs:

“For parents whose children travel frequently on buses, there is a significant saving for the family, especially at a time where the cost of living crisis affects many. Money saved on bus travel can be used to pay for other family expenses.” (Representative Body)

Others suggested that the free bus travel meant that young people could continue to access activities and opportunities, without being restricted by travel costs:

“With the cost of living I would say this will have been a huge help to families being able to send their children places without worrying about the cost of a bus ticket.” (Local Authority)

Independence

Also consistent with the findings in the Year One Evaluation Report, increased freedom and independence for young people was highlighted as another one of the main benefits of the scheme:

“For some children and young people, the availability of free travel has enabled them to travel by bus more often to access services or meet up

with friends, thus providing them with greater independence.” (Bus Operator)

“Freedom, independence, relief that they do not have to budget for travel. It also promotes and supports, for some individuals that struggle[d] to travel independently... to now be able to access this.” (Skills, Training and Education Organisation)

It was felt that the scheme had created “greater opportunities for travel” (Local Authority), and facilitated greater access to travel generally, buses in particular, and supported young people to travel more often and further afield. Indeed, many stakeholders indicated that there had been an increase in the number of young people both travelling by bus and travelling more often since the introduction of the scheme.

Accessing Opportunities

The stakeholder survey also highlighted positive impacts of the scheme on supporting young people to access a wide range of new opportunities. This included a range of social and leisure-based activities, as well as improved access to education and employment:

“Young people are able to access free bus travel which means they can attend clubs and activities outwith school hours; travel to work and college for young workers and students; travel on the mainland, particularly for young people studying away from home.” (Local Authority)

The organisation that had conducted a feedback survey with young people also highlighted improved social opportunities and access to services and activities for young people living on islands with good links to the mainland. They noted that this had allowed young people in these areas to meet friends, attend events, have shopping trips, and essentially behave like their peers who lived more centrally.

This same organisation noted that there had also been increased opportunities for young people to visit family and friends more often. While this was welcomed by younger people who were able to visit and travel with other family members, this also allowed young people living away from home (often students) to visit their home/parents/carers more often:

“The ability to visit family and friends more often was also a common discussion for respondents. From travelling home from university to visiting relatives who lived further away, young people seemed to view

this as another common way the scheme has impacted them.” (Children and Families' Rights/Support/Campaign Organisation)

In addition to supporting students in further and higher education (discussed above), one respondent also noted that the scheme allowed children to attend schools outwith their catchment areas, while others suggested it had supported young people to look for and access both education and work opportunities that were further afield.

One local authority also indicated that young people and their families had been able to access support services as a result of the scheme:

“Social Work have been able to take advantage of this. Families that couldn't afford placements for young people with additional needs have now been able to get to workshops, placements, etc.” (Local Authority)

It was also suggested that the scheme was beneficial for young people in terms of being more active and improved mental and physical health as they were able to access parks, walking routes, etc.

Family Travel

Several respondents highlighted that one of the benefits for families was that there would be a financial saving when travelling together (as the children/young people would travel for free) and there was an expectation that family travel would increase as a result:

“The scheme incentivises travel by bus for young people and this will also stimulate travel by bus by parents and carers. This is positive... The scheme is a positive intervention that will increase bus use by whole families.” (RTP)

Others indicated that families were indeed now travelling more by bus as a result of the Young Persons' Free Bus Travel Scheme:

“The impact has been really positive with families getting out and about together, parents not having to worry about paying out for bus fares, being able to take part in more events with not having to worry about how to get there.” (Local Authority)

One professional stakeholder also suggested that grandparents using the bus to travel with grandchildren was an aspect of the scheme that should be further promoted:

“We should be promoting the scheme in conjunction with the older people’s concessionary card to encourage grandparents to get out and about using the bus, particularly during school holidays or at weekends.”
(Local Authority)

Young people and families who took part in the Year One Evaluation also reported that this was something that the scheme had already encouraged, with young people said to be travelling more often by bus with siblings, grandparents, and their families.

Wider Savings for Young People and Families

The general travel savings or affordability of transport and travel was not the only cost savings said to be available to young people and families, with stakeholders highlighting the other discounts that could be accessed and used in combination with the Young Persons’ Free Bus Travel Scheme via the Young Scot card. It was noted that the Young Scot card provided access to discounts across many national and local shops and for services, that the Young Scot NEC is also the European Youth Card with discounts across Europe, and that the Young Scot NEC also provided free legal proof of age:

“Young Scot National Entitlement Card is a shared asset to give young people personalised enhanced entitlements, opportunities, incentives and services in a non-stigmatising way - free bus travel for Under 22s is one of a number of services currently available on the card.” (Children and Families’ Rights/Support/Campaign Organisation)

5. Impacts of the Scheme on Others

All stakeholder organisations were asked what the impacts of the Young Persons' Free Bus Travel Scheme had been on local areas more generally, as well as invited to provide feedback on the impacts on their own organisation/services.

Impacts on Local Areas

Wider Economic and Community Impacts

Several stakeholders suggested that there had been a positive impact on employment in local areas as young people could now access job opportunities more easily. Others suggested that young people were now accessing local areas and spending money in local shops and services, thus boosting the local economy:

“Free bus travel allows young people from more rural areas to access activities or meet friends in central areas... which will have a positive impact on local businesses, e.g. shops, arts centre, cinema.” (Local Authority)

“When events etc. are on it is bringing more footfall to them [the events]! Overall I think it is a positive scheme for the local area and community as it is allowing people to get out more which means people are spending money in the community!” (Bus Operator)

In addition to the possible economic impact, it was also suggested by a few respondents that the scheme had helped (or was perceived to help) young people to feel part of, and engage with or be more involved in their local community, or that it had provided a sense of inclusion:

“Has enabled mobility and access to opportunities. Must be enabling engagement in local/community and wider activities so helps young people and families think wider.” (Education, Training and Skills Organisation)

Reduced Car Use/Environmental Benefits

Another positive impact of the scheme for local areas was the reduction in car use, due to a reduction in parents driving their children to locations/venues. This was considered to bring environmental benefits, both in relation to climate change and

increasing the use of greener, sustainable modes of transport - although it was felt that congestion levels had not reduced to date:

“More U22 that we see, will no doubt reduce the amount of cars on the road, simply because there is less need for parents to drop kids off to school or to the cinema, etc. if bus is free and easy for them to use.” (Bus Operator)

While most of the comments in this respect appeared to be speculative, representing perceptions or expectations only, one local authority suggested they had received anecdotal evidence that such modal shift was taking place:

“More parents reporting that they are not having to use their cars as much.” (Local Authority)

The organisation that had conducted a feedback survey among young people also noted that young people themselves had highlighted environmental benefits as one of the positives of the scheme. Young people were pleased that it allowed them to use a greener and more environmentally friendly form of transport.

Impact on Bus Operators/Services

In terms of the impacts of the scheme on stakeholders own organisations/services, bus operators typically noted an increase in the number of young people using services:

“We have had an increase of passenger numbers since this scheme was introduced on all our service runs.” (Bus Operator)

“Carry a lot more young persons.” (Bus Operator)

Two operators suggested that the scheme had resulted in increased boarding times/bus dwell times at stops, with one suggesting this was due to card scanning and then manual input of destination data. This, in turn, meant that overall journey times had been impacted, particularly during peak periods on certain corridors. This was not necessarily considered as problematic, however, with one respondent suggesting this could be managed through their internal review processes:

“The slower boarding process for national concessions (versus our products which might have been used before) has led to some significant increases in dwell times and associated capacity challenges for some morning peak services, however, these are fairly localised to certain

routes and/or corridors and are mitigated by our standard network review and optimisation processes.” (Bus Operator)

One RTP also highlighted that some operators/services were moving to paperless concessionary ticketing systems which could help to provide time savings in relation to boarding and bus dwell times at stops, benefiting all passengers if successful.

As also highlighted in the quote above, capacity issues on peak time services were reported by one bus operator. Another indicated there had been an increase in anti-social behaviour on board buses (although it was felt this could not be entirely attributable to the implementation of the scheme), while one other noted that the scheme had impacted on the ticket types they were able to provide:

“Changes to our product strategy - most of those now eligible for free travel in our operating area would previously purchase a season ticket product from us, and so this scheme has had a direct impact on how we might wish to structure and offer certain products in the future, since many of these are volume dependent.” (Bus Operator)

Other bus operators felt there had been no impact or implications for their organisation/services, while two felt there had been financial benefits, with one indicating it had provided a “good source of income.” (Bus Operator).

Covid-Recovery

While not discussed by bus operators directly, RTPs and other bodies representing bus operators suggested that the Young Persons' Free Bus Travel Scheme had also supported post-Covid bus patronage recovery and the sustainability of bus services. It was noted that there had been a drop in patronage among concessionary bus pass holders (i.e. over 60s and disabled passengers), as well as adult passengers, since the Covid-19 pandemic, but that the significant increase in usage by young people had helped to compensate for this:

“More generally the introduction of the scheme has helped with recovery of passenger numbers on local bus services post-Covid, therefore contributing to sustainability of the local bus network, particularly in urban areas.” (RTP)

“The policy has been successful in terms of take up and has filled a large drop in concessionary journeys by the elderly and disabled post-Covid. As such, it has been critical in terms of revenue for many bus routes.” (Representative Body)

Similar views were expressed in focus groups with young people and their families.

Impact on Other Modes

While bus operators reported an increase in patronage by children and young people, trains were noted to have seen a decline in patronage by this age group. This was caveated, however, by the observation that use of the Young Persons' RailCard had remained strong despite the option of free bus travel.

Similarly, it was noted that lower proportions of young people were using the Glasgow Subway over more recent months - although it was not clear to what extent this was attributable to the Young Persons' Free Bus Travel Scheme as the reduction did not coincide with the introduction of the scheme. It was indicated that a higher proportion of journeys on the Subway were made by those aged under 22 during the first half of 2022/2023 (i.e. following the introduction of the scheme) compared to the same period in 2019/2020. However, a lower proportion of Subway journeys were attributed to the under 22s age group during the second half of 2022/2023 compared to the same period in 2019/2020 (data was based on estimates for the proportion of Subway customers who were aged under 22).

While two active travel organisations responded to the consultation survey, they did not highlight any impacts of the scheme directly on them or their services. As outlined in Chapter 2, one discussed the integral part walking plays in any bus trip, while the other was concerned that the option of free bus travel may negatively impact on cycling:

“We heard from families in our research that the free bus pass made young people more likely to take the bus for local journeys e.g. to school. The benefit of cycling being ‘free’ for local journeys (once they owned a bike and could afford to maintain it) was therefore seen by some families as a less significant advantage as the bus was also free.” (Active Travel Organisation)

Impact on Local Authorities

The main impact on local authorities and their services was, again, the additional resource requirements to support and manage applications and enquiries for the scheme. One noted the need to increase processing times for other concessionary card passes as a result, and another stated this had negative impacts on other work commitments more generally:

“We have had to increase our service standard processing times for NEC card application and other application services... i.e. Blue Badge.” (Local Authority)

Others, however, suggested that this had led to them streamlining services to make them more efficient for both the Young Persons' Free Bus Travel Scheme and other applications and enquiries:

“The creation of our online form allowed us to use this a template to be able to take online applications for over 60s, disabled [passengers], etc. This also helps streamline the process and is easier for customers unable to attend a Contact Centre.” (Local Authority)

One suggested there were localised capacity issues, while another had received more requests for bus stops/shelters and bus services.

A few local authorities also noted an increase in anti-social behaviour both on buses and at stops/bus stations, and a few noted impacts on school transport provision - both these issues are discussed in more detail at Chapter **Error! Reference source not found.** below.

Several local authorities felt that longer was needed to fully establish the impacts on their own organisations/departments.

Impact on Other Organisations

While RTPs indicated that they were generally not impacted directly by the Young Persons' Free Bus Travel Scheme, one suggested the scheme may affect the policy decisions of bus alliances. While others also responded to this question, they typically set out impacts or benefits of the scheme for others - these have been included under the relevant sections elsewhere in this report.

In terms of responses from those not involved directly in scheme delivery or transport service provision, a range of positive impacts were noted. One third sector organisation indicated the positive impact on those delivering community projects with young people - they suggested that funds were being reallocated to support activities as a result of no longer having to cover travel expenses, and that activities had become more accessible to service users as the travel cost barrier had been removed:

“...where they had previously budgeted for participant travel costs this is now covered, meaning that they can use funds on other valuable things;

that it has increased accessibility of activities like trips and outings, meaning that these can be arranged knowing everyone can take part and that families living in poverty will not be stigmatised.” (Children and Families' Rights/Support/Campaign Organisation)

Similarly, Skills, Training and Education Organisations noted that there had been a reduction in the extent to which they needed to support students with travel expenses. This had resulted in “large savings on our travel budget”, time savings with regard to processing such expenses, and the reallocation of funding away from transport to support other requirements and discretionary payments, including the provision of translation services and support for students during the current cost of living crisis:

“It has given us a surplus of student support funds that we can now use on discretionary payments during the current cost of living crisis.” (Skills, Training and Education Organisation)

For those organisations responsible for managing the scheme, the impacts were generally the increased number of cards issued, and increased volume of queries from applicants that required to be addressed. However, most considered the high uptake to be a positive impact overall, strengthening the position of the NEC scheme generally, and increasing the number of young people with the Young Scot Card (and the numbers who carry this with them more often) and who are therefore able to access the other associated discounts available.

6. Scheme Challenges and Suggested Changes

Across the consultation feedback a range of other challenges and possible unintended consequences of the Young Persons' Free Bus Travel Scheme, as well as possible aspects for change/improvement were identified and discussed. These are outlined below.

Differences in Access

As outlined in Chapter 2, several stakeholders discussed issues related to differences in access to bus services and the Young Persons' Free Bus Travel Scheme. Others also highlighted issues related to the availability and accessibility of activities and opportunities. While the issues were generally raised by those representing rural and island areas, the issues were also more widely applicable.

Some respondents highlighted that young people across the country had different access to the scheme due to differences in the availability of bus services. It was considered particularly difficult for some young people to access bus services (and therefore the Young Persons' Free Bus Travel Scheme) in some areas:

“Some children and young people are unable to make use of free travel because of their circumstances, e.g. if they do not live close to a bus route. The availability of the U22 scheme has highlighted the differences in levels of bus services in different areas.” (Local Authority)

Further compounding this issue, it was noted that reductions in bus services made use of the scheme challenging in some areas, limited its use, and made accessing activities and opportunities difficult, particularly in the evenings.

In addition, a general lack of opportunities in some areas, combined with limited or reduced bus services, was considered to limit both use of the scheme and young people's ability to access opportunities:

“The limited commercial bus service in most rural areas also affects communities... Rural areas and region wide [we are] seeing a decline in opportunities for young people. This means that bus services are infrequent especially during the evenings and weekends, making what opportunities are available hard to access by bus.” (RTP)

School Transport

Several respondents (largely, but not exclusively, local authorities) discussed the impacts that the Young Persons' Free Bus Travel Scheme had had on the provision of school transport, with mixed responses provided. It should be noted that different models and types of school transport were outlined by respondents, largely consisting of:

- the provision of dedicated school transport/buses - buses (and/or taxis) provided/contracted by local authorities to provide travel to and from school for those pupils eligible for school transport (based on how far they lived from their school or due to any medical conditions and/or disability). These services are not shared by the general public, fare paying passengers, or any young person travelling on the Young Persons' Free Bus Travel Scheme; and/or
- registered and/or subsidised local bus services which are used by the general public and fare paying passengers as well as school pupils accessing the service for free via a school bus pass due to their eligibility for free school transport.

As far as possible, respondent comments have been assigned to the relevant model in the discussion below. However, it should be noted that respondents were not asked to identify the model used and it was not always obvious within the comments, there is also a possibility that different models are used within local authority areas to meet the needs of different schools and different pupils.

Impacts on Dedicated School Transport

Where dedicated school transport was provided, it appears that the introduction of the Young Persons' Free Bus Travel Scheme provided local authorities the ability to adapt how school transport was offered, to integrate the scheme and provide a greater range of travel options and updated/amended bus routes:

"The scheme introduction has impacted the delivery of free bus travel for... entitled school pupils who stayed more than 2/3 miles from their catchment school. Being [a small local authority] this only impacted on a small number of school pupils." (Local Authority)

"Directly, the introduction of the scheme has enabled the department to withdraw previously provided bus passes for school transport access. Whilst not a hugely significant number, there has been a moderate financial saving made in this regard. Given the increase in free bus travel access, the department has been exploring the opportunities to use

existing bus services as an alternative to dedicated school contracts. This has initially been small scale, however, will continue to inform our approach to the delivery of school transport in the coming years.” (Local Authority)

Another respondent also suggested that young people were choosing which bus service to use (exercising a choice between dedicated school transport and registered bus services) rather than using the one they had been assigned to:

“We have become aware, through feedback, that some schoolchildren now choose to travel on local bus services rather than taking dedicated school transport. There is also some evidence to suggest that, schoolchildren who do not qualify for dedicated school transport, are now using supported and/or commercial bus services.” (RTP)

One local authority described ‘streamlining’ the way they delivered school bus services as a result of the Young Persons’ Free Bus Travel Scheme, while another felt there may have been a potentially negative impact on home to school transport (although neither respondent elaborated any further). Concerns over possible detrimental impacts on dedicated school transport provision were also expressed by a respondent in another sector, with changes to catchment areas for eligibility noted as a risk. However, it should be noted that this was not evidenced within the stakeholder feedback, as no local authority who took part identified this as an impact.

Other observers felt that it would be important to monitor the impact the scheme has on free school transport provision going forward to ensure suitable services continue to be available where required:

“It [is] important to monitor the impact it is having on contracted school services and if it has seen a change in the services being provided. In particular, in rural areas...where the frequency of commercial bus services can be limited. It is important, even during the current financial challenges, to make sure a frequent and reliable bus is still available for those young people entitled to one.” (RTP)

Capacity on Registered/Subsidised Local Bus Services

Where local bus services open to the public were used to provide school transport, it was noted that, in some areas there had been an increase in the numbers of young people using the services, creating capacity issues on certain routes around the start and end of the school day. This made it difficult for those children entitled to free school transport to access their allocated services. In some cases, this had caused

difficulties for pupils being able to get home, and school staff were said to have to manage the process in some areas:

“At some schools the increase in demand for seats has resulted in senior school staff having to manage numbers to ensure that entitled pupils can travel. At some primary schools, staff have had to take pupils home because the buses were full. There is now an expectation from pupils and parents that transport will be available for all because they can travel free. Pupils are choosing which bus they want to travel on rather than sticking to the bus they have been allocated. This potentially affects the distribution of passengers and causes capacity issues that wouldn't exist normally.” (Local Authority)

Other local authorities noted that capacity issues created by school pupils using services buses to travel to/from school had impacted them. In this instance, the issue is likely caused by pupils using the Young Persons' Free Bus Travel Scheme rather than being an issue relative to those eligible for free school transport. A few suggested they had had to provide additional capacity around the school day in order to cope with increased demand from school pupils, with one also noting that the scheme had resulted in a loss in fares from those pupils that had not been eligible for free school transport:

“We have seen capacity issues being created on [routes servicing schools] which has impacted on the local authority having to provide additional capacity to cater for demand... we have required as a local authority to increase the capacity of... school day bus services to cater for pupils who would have previously walked but can now avail themselves due to the free cost of transport.” (Local Authority)

“A duplicate vehicle was required on a registered school transport route... contracted by the Council. This resulted in additional costs... per year for the Council. There was a slight loss in fares from fare-paying pupils on some registered school transport services.” (Local Authority)

Anti-Social Behaviour

Consistent with perceptions of increased anti-social behaviour highlighted by young people, parents/carers, and other bus users (presented in the Year One Evaluation Report), a range of professional stakeholders, including bus operators, local authorities and RTPs discussed anti-social behaviour as an unintended consequence of the Young Persons' Free Bus Travel Scheme. This issue was discussed by respondents throughout the survey feedback. Issues included a

perceived increase in young people 'hanging around' bus stops, travelling together in large groups, and/or focussing anti-social behaviour and vandalism on-board buses and at stops/stations:

"There have been security issues around [city] bus station, behaviour issues and groups of young people travelling collectively. These have been linked to the introduction of the bus card, enabling more young people to more easily congregate in larger groups in the city centre."
(RTP)

A few respondents also suggested that the Young Persons' Free Bus Travel Scheme, in facilitating young people to travel further and to new places, may have resulted in anti-social behaviour becoming increasingly problematic in some areas:

"Larger volumes generally of young people in and around bus stops or key interchange locations. Locally, this has also led to increases in anti-social behaviour in locations where previously this didn't occur to the same extent." (Bus Operator)

One respondent suggested that anti-social behaviour issues in and around buses fluctuated across the year, with increases in both bus usage and instances of anti-social behaviour being experienced during the winter. It was more generally felt that some young people were using the bus as a "meeting point" (Representative Body) and a place to hang out, or as a "mobile gang hut" (RTP), rather than as a mode of transport per se.

Professional stakeholders suggested that the instances of anti-social behaviour negatively impacted their own organisation/services, other bus passengers and bus drivers:

"The largest unintended impact on our services is unfortunately a significant increase in reports of anti-social behaviour on our services which corresponds with the introduction of the scheme... This has a corresponding negative impact on our paying customers, with increased reports of customers feeling less safe when travelling on our services than they used to. Additionally, and at a time when driver recruitment has faced some well publicised challenges nationally, this has had a negative impact on the wellbeing and safety of our drivers, particularly those working on backshifts." (Bus Operator)

One respondent also suggested that this issue may be pushing some passengers to use other modes of transportation, typically rail - although it should be noted this was based on perception and anecdotal evidence rather than patronage data.

Several respondents, however, did indicate that any increase in anti-social behaviour on and around buses may also be partly driven by other factors, including the reduction/removal of Covid-19 lockdown restrictions. Others indicated that anti-social behaviour existed before the introduction of the Young Persons' Free Bus Travel Scheme and so had not been caused by this:

“Whilst the introduction of free travel is considered a success, with more younger people travelling by bus, anecdotal evidence and some feedback from bus operators suggests that there have been increases in anti-social behaviour involving younger passengers on buses at some times of the day and in some locations. This spike does appear to correlate with the timing of the introduction of free travel, however, we also recognise that other factors may have been at play including post-Covid lockdown restrictions being reduced.” (RTP)

In some areas, it was felt the issue was not severe and only had a minimal impact, while one respondent felt that the benefits of the scheme outweighed any issues caused by anti-social behaviour:

“I believe the benefits have outweighed any negative impact the scheme may have created. Whilst we have seen an increase in anti-social behaviour by a small minority of older young people we have seen an excellent take up of the travel pass within the city.” (Local Authority)

Impact of Challenges on Other Passengers

While a few professional stakeholder organisations suggested that bus use had reduced for other groups, including adults, those aged 60+ and disabled passengers, compared to pre-Covid periods, this was not necessarily attributable to the introduction of the Young Persons' Free Bus Travel Scheme. Rather, the pandemic, changes to working patterns/locations (e.g. the rise in home working), and potential health risks for those vulnerable to Covid-19 were cited as contributory factors:

“It is difficult to tell what the full impact has been as bus services continue to be impacted by low passenger numbers as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, whilst we have seen an increase in Under 22 journeys on some services, older people are travelling less.” (Local Authority)

There was some concern, however, that increased incidents of anti-social behaviour and large volumes of young people travelling on-board buses may make some travellers less likely to return to bus use or to avoid using certain services/travelling at particular times:

“There are some unintended consequences, especially in relation to the discouragement of older people and women from travelling at certain times of the day. We have received anecdotal evidence... about young people congregating on buses, especially on colder days, to take advantage of the warmth, free wifi, and charging facilities - and the impacts this has on other users.” (RTP)

In addition, capacity issues were also highlighted as problematic for other bus users. This was an issue for particularly busy services at peak times (as noted above, often corresponding with the start/end of the school day), as well as for rural areas or where demand responsive transport (DRT) services were provided. It appears that the scheme has created competition for such services:

“At the time that U22 was introduced the Council was piloting a digital demand responsive transport service... The introduction of free travel led to more young people booking the service to the detriment of other customers who were unable to book... Some adult/older customers complained about this, especially in some instances where young people booked the DRT service to travel to/from school rather than using their school bus passes to travel on the school bus.” (Local Authority)

Potential negative issues for other bus users, particularly older students, were also raised in relation to the continued availability of particular ticket types. There were concerns that some ticket options (for example student discount tickets) may be removed as most of the passengers previously using these were now eligible for the Young Persons' Free Bus Travel Scheme. However, such a change would negatively impact older students, with respondents keen to ensure that such ticket options were retained to ensure older students can afford to use the bus.

Policing Scheme Users' Behaviour

In order to tackle perceived anti-social and other poor behaviour perpetrated by young people travelling on buses, several stakeholders suggested that penalties needed to be introduced. While this issue was discussed by a range of sectors, respondents tended to come from those responsible for operating the scheme (such as bus operators and local authorities), or those representing operators and travel/transport delivery in their region (such as representative bodies and RTPs).

Suggestions put forward were generally consistent with those given by young people and their families, with the main suggestion being a way to either temporarily suspend or permanently remove a young persons' access to the scheme if they behaved inappropriately:

“Take steps to address the increase in anti-social behaviour by developing a process or mechanism which works alongside operators and the police to suspend or permanently remove access to the scheme for those involved in such behaviour.” (Bus Operator)

One respondent also suggested that consideration should be given to limiting the times of day when the Young Persons' Free Bus Travel Scheme could be used.

Extended Coverage and Eligibility

A common theme for those representing island communities was a desire for the Young Persons' Free Bus Travel Scheme to be extended to include free travel on-board ferries. It was felt this was necessary to provide equity for young people living on islands, to allow young islanders to access opportunities similarly to those who live on the mainland, as well as to access mainland Scotland and the opportunities provided:

“Scheme should be extended to include ferry services to island communities. (No public bus services on smaller islands). The ferries are the 'bus service' for our young people. Children and young people still have to pay to travel within community.” (Local Authority)

A few respondents also expressed a desire for the scheme to be expanded to include rail travel (or for a similar product/provision to be established):

“We would welcome the expansion of the scheme to also include train travel given the high levels of train use within our local authority.” (Local Authority)

In addition to expanding the scheme to additional travel modes, a few respondents suggested that the upper age restriction for eligibility should be raised (with up to age 26 being suggested), and/or that the scheme should be extended to all students/those still in education and training, regardless of age:

“While free travel for U22s has been welcomed in supporting positive outcomes for younger people, it must be recognised that transport affordability remains a key issue for young people beyond this age-group,

many of who continue to be in education or training and new into employment and are more likely to be on lower incomes. It may therefore be pertinent to consider either extending the free scheme or introducing a transitional fare scheme that continues to support affordable travel for young people beyond the age of 22." (RTP)

This same RTP highlighted that financial barrier to transport remained prevalent for other groups, and stressed the need for this to be considered within transport policy:

"It is important however to recognise that public transport affordability remains a barrier for many other vulnerable and potentially low-income groups aged 22 and above, such as unpaid carers, volunteers, job-seekers and young people leaving care who are seeking employment opportunities. It is therefore paramount that discussions around fares and any opportunity for making public transport more affordable for wider groups, remains high on the transport agenda." (RTP)

Meeting Needs of Young People and Others

It was suggested that current service provision did not meet the demand generated by, or travel patterns of young people, and that operators would need to try and adapt delivery in future:

"Think the U22 is starting to create completely new travel patterns, so for our organisation it is learning the trends/demands and ensuring we have a network that caters to it." (Bus Operator)

Related to this, another respondent suggested that there was a need to include night-buses within the scope of the scheme, both to support evening travel and the safety of women and girls:

"Whilst recognising the challenges of providing night bus services and offering concession card holders access to premium fare services, it would provide benefits... For example, making it more affordable to come into the city centre on a regular basis for evenings out. Also, it will help with city centre safety, especially young women and girls who may choose to walk home and avoid the cost of a taxi." (RTP)

The inclusion of night buses was also desirable to a few focus group respondents, as outlined in the Year One Evaluation Report. In addition, focus group respondents noted that they preferred using the bus at night (compared to walking or other modes

of public transport) due to the accessibility of the driver and other passengers, making them feel safer.

While developing bus services to meet the demand from/needs of young people, one stakeholder highlighted the importance of ensuring services continued to meet the needs of, and benefit, all users going forward. They stressed that changes should not be to the detriment to of others.

Welfare Concerns

While welfare concerns were discussed with more frequency by young people and their families (with findings presented in the Year One Evaluation Report), a few stakeholders also noted that the Young Persons' Free Bus Travel Scheme generated concerns about young people being able to travel some distance from home without parental consent:

“Only concern is with regards to Child Protection and ability to travel around Scotland free and access areas not normally accessible to them.”
(Local Authority)

It should be noted, however, that bus driver [guidance and training](#) was developed and delivered by Barnardo's Scotland. This included general safeguarding and the signs of exploitation, as well as reporting protocols for any concerns. A Child Rights and Welfare Impact Assessment was also conducted before the introduction of the scheme.

Reimbursement Rates

Finally, a few stakeholders discussed the need for reimbursement rates to be maintained at sufficient levels to support service provision. It was also suggested that consideration of the economic differences between rural and urban operation was needed:

“In areas where services are more frequent, there is scope to grow patronage. Conversely, in rural areas where services are less frequent, transport operators are possibly worse off... Consideration should be given to the economic differences between rural and urban operation when considering the reimbursement rates.” (Local Authority)

It was stressed that any reduction in the reimbursement rate would be likely to negatively impact the sustainability of services and place them at risk:

“What can't happen now is that government chooses to manage costs of the scheme by reducing operator reimbursement as has happened with the scheme for older and disabled people. If this scheme follows suit it puts more pressure on fare paying passengers and puts services at risk.”
(Representative Body)

7. Conclusion

Key Impacts

One of the main impacts of the Young Persons' Free Bus Travel Scheme were generally considered to be the financial benefits for young people and their families. It was felt that the scheme had removed the cost barrier to travel and transport, and had helped to remove the anxiety and stress associated with financial concerns related to travel and transport. It was felt to be particularly supportive for families during the current cost of living crisis, and especially so for those experiencing poverty.

Other equally important impacts were that the scheme was considered to have provided young people with increased freedom, independence and the ability to access more services, opportunities and activities both locally and further afield. Importantly, it was felt that the scheme provided equality of opportunity for young people, regardless of their financial circumstances, with the universal nature of the eligibility criteria said to ensure that no stigma was attached to using the scheme.

Secondary to these elements, the scheme was also felt to be more widely supportive in a range of different ways. This included:

- Being supportive to bus operators as they recover from the Covid-19 pandemic and associated drop in passenger numbers;
- Encouraging more family travel by bus; and
- Bringing wider economic benefits to local areas as young people and their families had more disposable income to spend on other things or in shops/on services when using the bus to get around.

Respondents were also optimistic that the scheme would result in a reduction in car use, and a more sustainable modal shift towards bus use among young people, which would also then result in environmental and climate change benefits.

Several elements, however, were identified which will need to be monitored going forward, including instances of anti-social behaviour and how this can be tackled, capacity issues on some routes/services, and the impact the scheme has on school transport provision. Further, potential difficulties or inequalities in access also need to be considered going forward, both in relation to the application process and the provision/accessibility of quality bus services, with perceptions that those in rural and island areas are particularly disadvantaged in this respect. Calls for the scheme to be extended to include ferry and train travel were also common in certain geographic

locations, and it was felt that the age range should be extended to include all those up to the age of 26 and/or all students regardless of age, with other vulnerable groups also given consideration.

Conclusion

Overall, the Young Persons' Free Bus Travel Scheme has been well received, with most professional stakeholders generally viewing it as a positive policy. While a few challenges were noted in relation to the implementation of the scheme, and some negative unintended consequences were identified, stakeholders appeared, on the whole, to suggest that the benefits largely outweighed the negatives.

Although empirical and verifiable evidence of actual impacts from stakeholders was limited, with some relying on perceptions or expectations, many of the expected outcomes appear to be achieving positive progress or are being met. Others, however, will require ongoing and longer-term monitoring to determine any impacts and the extent of any changes. Results should also be considered alongside the findings in the Year One Evaluation Report which will provide a more holistic view of experiences of the scheme. Overall, the scheme is undoubtedly perceived to have had a positive impact on young people and the families across its first year of implementation.



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