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Evaluation of the National Concessionary Travel Scheme for Older and Disabled People

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Introduction

The National Concessionary Travel Scheme for Older and Disabled People (the Scheme) was introduced in April 2006. The Scheme is accessed via a National Entitlement Card (NEC) which provides free bus travel to cardholders with free travel on registered local and long-distance bus services throughout Scotland, at any time of the day for any number of journeys.

There are five separate NEC types:

- over 60
- disabled
- disabled plus companion (+1)
- sight impaired
- sight impaired plus companion (+1)

Bus operators are reimbursed by Transport Scotland for carrying cardholders. More than 140 bus operators in Scotland participate in the Scheme.

In August 2025, Transport Scotland commissioned an independent evaluation of the Scheme. The aims of the evaluation were to:

- understand how the Scheme works, who is using it, how it is being used and the benefits it brings
- identify any differences in usage and experiences between groups of cardholders
- undertake a value for money assessment in order to understand the value of benefits delivered through the Scheme

The evaluation was focused largely on the use and impacts of the Scheme, although a small component considered how the Scheme operates in practice.

The evaluation included a survey and series of focus groups with cardholders, interviews with bus operators and other stakeholders, analysis of existing secondary data, and a value for money assessment. Overall, 2,502 cardholders responded to the survey, which was largely hosted online, and 65 cardholders took part in focus groups (or one-to-one interviews). Six bus operators provided feedback via interview or in writing, and two third sector organisations were interviewed. The [research materials](#) including the survey questionnaire, and focus group and interview topic guides are available on the Transport Scotland website.

This report details the key findings of the primary data collection and secondary data analysis. The [evaluation report](#) and the [value for money assessment](#) are available

separately. In addition, a separate [Annex](#) document is also available which includes additional tabular results from the cardholder survey.

The following percentages are based on those respondents that answered the relevant survey questions. Please note that due to the sampling methodology, the survey findings provide insight into the views and experiences of respondents but cannot be generalised to the wider population. No statistical testing has been conducted and differences between groups of respondents may reflect sample variability.

Unless otherwise specified, references in the report to disabled cardholders/cards relates to the type of NEC held by a person and incorporates all of the following NEC types: disabled; disabled plus companion (+1); sight impaired; sight impaired plus companion (+1).

To ensure the research materials (e.g. survey questionnaire) were accessible to participants, the term “free bus pass/bus pass” was used, as this is more readily and easily understood, and reflects what the NEC and the Scheme is referred to colloquially. When reporting directly on the survey findings, quoting the survey question and response options, and providing quotes from the focus groups and interviews, “ free bus pass/bus pass” is used throughout the report to ensure consistency with what participants were asked about and their responses. Elsewhere in the report, NEC, card or Scheme is used depending on the context to align with Transport Scotland and other stakeholder terminology.

Evaluation findings

Cardholders and use of the Scheme

The total number of cardholders increased from nearly 1.3 million at 31 March 2017 to nearly 1.56 million at 31 March 2025 (the maximum number of years for which data was available). Meanwhile, the number of journeys made decreased, from 140.85 million in the financial year 2016-2017 to 108.57 million in 2024-2025. Both the numbers of cardholders and journeys were impacted by the Covid pandemic, but while the number of cardholders had more than recovered, the number of journeys made using the NEC remained lower than pre-pandemic levels. This in line with overall trends in bus passenger journey numbers in Scotland following the Covid pandemic. More information can be found in [Scottish Transport Statistics](#).

The number of cardholders by Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) deciles shows that the number of disabled cardholders was higher in more deprived areas.

Conversely, the number of over 60 cardholders and the uptake of this type of card was higher in less deprived areas.

Over half of the survey respondents (59%) used their free bus pass about once a week or more often, while 18% had used it only a few times or not at all in the last 12 months. Disabled cardholders were more likely to use their free bus pass more often, with higher instances of multiple uses per week (55%), compared to those who held an over 60 card (34%). Similarly, those who were finding things difficult financially were more likely to use their free bus pass multiple times per week (56%) compared to those who managed very or quite well financially (34%).

The Scheme was used by most survey respondents to support social and leisure activities, followed by shopping and personal business, and for reaching health and medical appointments (these were also the most frequent types of journeys made). However, there were differences by card type. Those with an over 60 card were more likely to use their free bus pass for social and leisure purposes (82%) compared to those with a disabled card (64%). Meanwhile, disabled cardholders were more likely to use it for health and medical appointments/services (73%), just to get out (39%), for commuting (23%) or other work related travel (10%), and for education/training (21%) compared to those with an over 60 card. Focus group participants across different sessions outlined similar patterns of use to survey respondents, with shorter, local journeys being made most often.

The NEC can be used to access additional benefits. These are determined and provided for by local authorities and other organisations rather than Transport Scotland. This can include age verification/ID, discounts on other public transport and to services, activities or attractions, and access to library and leisure services. The evaluation feedback showed that knowledge of other uses/benefits of the card were highly mixed, and there was some criticism that different people are able to access different benefits, either based on the type of card they had or where they lived.

Meeting the expected outcomes

Transport Scotland developed a logic model to guide the evaluation. This identified the expected short, medium and long term outcomes for the Scheme. Key findings related to each of the outcomes are considered in turn below.

Reduction in carbon emissions

It was expected that the Scheme would result in an **increase in bus usage** (both for new and existing journeys), along with **modal shift from car to bus** and a

reduction in car kilometres. This would, in turn, be expected to result in a reduction of carbon emissions.

While the evaluation findings did not consider carbon emissions directly, feedback from cardholders provided strong evidence of both an increase in bus use and a reduction in car (and taxi) usage.

Most survey respondents (81%) reported using the bus more often because of the free bus pass. This was consistent for both over 60 and disabled cardholders. It had also encouraged modal shift away from car use. Overall, 61% of all respondents stated they used a private car less often because of the free bus pass, with 64% of those with an over 60 card and 53% of disabled cardholders travelling by private car/vehicle less often. Meanwhile, 76% of those who had access to a private vehicle whilst holding their free bus pass noted that they used their vehicle less often, which was again consistent for both over 60 and disabled cardholders. In addition, just over half (55%) of all respondents noted that they used taxis less often because of the free bus pass, with 61% of disabled cardholders, and 51% of those with an over 60 card using taxis less often.

Across both the survey comments and focus group feedback, cardholders reported travelling by bus more frequently for both essential and existing journeys, as well as for new journeys, including travelling further afield than they would have gone without the Scheme. Even where cardholders had access to private vehicles, it was evident that many opted to use the bus due to cost, convenience and to reduce stress compared to driving.

Improved health, mental health and wellbeing

A key aim of the Scheme was to improve the physical health, mental health and wellbeing of older and disabled people. Cardholders overwhelmingly agreed that the Scheme met this aim, at least where access to high quality, reliable and frequent bus services were provided.

There was strong evidence across the survey and focus group feedback that the Scheme had positively impacted cardholders' physical health, mental health and wellbeing. Overall, 57% of survey respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that they were more active because of the free bus pass, while 52% either agreed or strongly agreed that the free bus pass had improved their mental health and wellbeing. This was particularly the case among the disabled cardholders, with 66% agreeing that they were more active, and 68% agreeing that it had improved their mental health and wellbeing, (compared to 52% and 44% respectively of those with an over 60 card).

In addition, survey and focus group respondents discussed the positive impact that getting out and being in social spaces had on their wellbeing, often linked to the outcomes below.

Improved confidence, freedom and independence

The evaluation findings indicate that the Scheme delivers on the aim to improve confidence, freedom and independence.

Many survey respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that the free bus pass gave them independence/freedom (69%), as well as the confidence to travel (58%). Again, these gains were felt slightly more strongly among disabled cardholders (81% and 70% respectively) compared to those with an over 60 card (62% and 52% respectively).

Across the survey and focus group comments, cardholders repeatedly highlighted feelings of freedom, independence, autonomy, choice and confidence provided by their access to free bus travel. They indicated that the Scheme meant they could travel as and when they needed to, and removed the feeling of being a burden to others, either financially or practically. Many had travelled further afield, to places and areas they would not have gone to otherwise, with some exploring across Scotland. Cardholders were less nervous to travel due to the removal of cost barriers, and said they would not feel stuck while travelling with their NEC.

There was also evidence that the companion NEC supported disabled children and young people to become more confident and independent in their travel as they got older. Companion cardholders reported that their card gave them the confidence to travel, made them feel safer, and meant they could travel as often as required without having to worry about the cost of the companion's ticket or feeling like a burden by asking the companion to pay their own fare.

Reduction in social isolation

The evaluation provided strong evidence that the Scheme helped to reduce social isolation among cardholders.

Survey respondents largely agreed or strongly agreed that the free bus pass got them out/out more often (63%), and that they felt less isolated or lonely because of the free bus pass (51%). This was greater among disabled cardholders (79% and 66% respectively), compared to those with an over 60 card (54% and 42% respectively).

Comments among survey and focus group respondents also stressed that the Scheme reduced social isolation and loneliness. Many suggested that they made trips they would not otherwise have made, and indicated that they would not get out as often if they did not have their NEC. Free bus travel allowed them to meet family and friends more often, even when they lived some distance apart. It also allowed cardholders to meet up with their peers, join clubs, and be part of a wider community (which was particularly important for some disabled people). It also supported people during changing circumstances (such as newly diagnosed illnesses/disabilities, coping with bereavement, etc.), helping them to access support, to reintegrate socially and build their confidence.

Even where the purpose of the journey was not a social activity, some noted that they would meet and speak to other passengers on board the bus. This social aspect of bus travel was considered important in combating loneliness and isolation for some older and disabled people.

Increased physical activity levels

There was mixed feedback regarding the impact of the Scheme on physical activity levels.

Many survey respondents (60%) felt there had been little change in terms of their personal levels of walking, and 12% walked less often as they took the bus rather than walking short distances. However, 28% suggested they walked more because of the free bus pass (either to get to/from the bus, because they now got out more often, or used the pass to access more active leisure pursuits). These results were relatively consistent between those with an over 60 card and those with a disabled card.

As noted above, 57% of survey respondents also said they were more active because of the free bus pass. There was also evidence across the survey and focus group comments that the Scheme was used to support active pursuits, such as going to the gym, taking part in sports and accessing parks or the countryside for walks.

Reducing inequalities

Reduction in travel costs

The evaluation findings showed that the Scheme had reduced travel costs for cardholders and removed the financial barrier to travel.

Most survey respondents (93%) agreed that the free bus pass saved them money in the last 12 months, with results largely consistent by card type. However, the amounts that respondents thought they saved varied. Disabled cardholders were more likely to think it saved them higher amounts of money (i.e. over £50 and over £100) compared to those with an over 60 card. These cost savings helped with household finances, and enabled cardholders to better afford other essentials. Companion cardholders also highlighted the cost savings as neither they nor their companion needed to pay. This removed the financial barrier to travel, and removed anxiety for cardholders who required support to travel.

One third (33%) of survey respondents also said that their main reason for choosing to take the bus was because it cost less than other travel options/was free. This was a larger driver for those with an over 60 card (37%), while a lack of alternative travel options was the main driver for disabled cardholders (47%). In general, both survey and focus group respondents felt that the Scheme had removed the financial barrier to travel.

Access to social and leisure activities

There was strong evidence that the Scheme helped to improve access to social and leisure activities for cardholders. Overall, the most commonly cited 'main journey purpose' (i.e. the journey made most often) in the last 12 months was for access to social and leisure activities (35% of frequent users, i.e. those using the free bus pass around once a month or more). The highest proportion of survey respondents also said they used the free bus pass for this reason (75% of frequent users). However, there were clear differences by card type.

Eighty-two percent of respondents with an over 60 card had used the free bus pass for this purpose in the last 12 months, and nearly half (47%) stated this was the type of journey they made most often. Conversely, for disabled cardholders, social and leisure activities was the third most popular use of the free bus pass, behind healthcare and shopping and personal business. The majority (64%) of these cardholders reported using the free bus pass for social and leisure purposes and 18% indicated that this was their most common journey type.

There was also evidence that the Scheme helped cardholders to socialise and to access leisure activities more often. Almost three-quarters (74%) of disabled cardholders agreed or strongly agreed with this along with 57% of those with an over 60 card.

The survey and focus group comments confirmed that a wide range of different social and leisure activities were accessed. Many used the Scheme to socialise, either travelling with friends and family or to meet them, while several also used it to

support hobbies or to attend sports activities/clubs. Some also noted that they used the Scheme to travel significant distances to stay in touch with/meet friends and family, which they would not do otherwise.

Access to services, including health

There was strong evidence that the Scheme helped to improve access to services for many cardholders. One of the main uses of the Scheme in the last 12 months was to access services, including shopping and personal business, as well as healthcare and medical services.

Around two thirds (67%) of frequent users (i.e. around once a month or more) used the free bus pass for shopping and personal business in the last 12 months. This was the second most common use (behind social and leisure purposes).

Meanwhile, over half (56%) of frequent users indicated that they used the free bus pass to access healthcare in the last 12 months. This journey purpose was among the top three types of journeys made, and the most common journey purpose for disabled cardholders. Similarly, half of all survey respondents (50%) either agreed or strongly agreed that the free bus pass had improved their access to healthcare. Access was more greatly improved for disabled cardholders, where 70% either agreed or strongly agreed that the free bus pass had improved access to healthcare, compared to 38% of those who held an over 60 card.

For many, the Scheme was a vital resource to allow them to make these journeys. Without it, several survey and focus group respondents suggested that they would not be able to attend medical appointments, would either shop less often and have to carry heavier bags home, or would have to rely more on online deliveries. Taxis would also be used more, incurring higher costs.

Increase in domestic tourism (day trips and holidays)

There was evidence that the Scheme was used for domestic tourism, including day trips, weekends away and longer holidays around Scotland. One third (33%) of survey respondents had used the free bus pass for this reason in the last 12 months, with relatively consistent results by card type. Many survey and focus group respondents also discussed travelling more often in general and travelling to new and different destinations because of the free bus pass, including for days out and holidays. The ability to use it on long-distance services and multiple modes (e.g. ferries and trains, where applicable) was welcomed, as this allowed cardholders to travel further afield.

Access to education, work and volunteering

There was evidence that the Scheme had improved access to work, volunteering and education for some cardholders:

- 27% of survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the free bus pass had improved their access to **volunteering** opportunities.
- 20% of survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the free bus pass had improved access to **education and training**.
- 18% of survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the free bus pass had improved access to **employment** opportunities.

Across all aspects, the gains were greater for disabled cardholders, where around a third agreed that access had been improved in each case compared to those with an over 60 card where between 23% (for volunteering) and just 9% (for employment) noted improved access.

Among the survey and focus group comments there were reports of cardholders finding new jobs, accessing part-time work, staying in work longer, accessing and maintaining volunteering opportunities, accessing university, and parents/grandparents being able to take children to school because of the Scheme. It was suggested that the Scheme had opened up new geographical areas to some cardholders, and made travel for these purposes cost-effective and sustainable.

Feeling safe using the bus

The evaluation provided mixed results with regard to whether cardholders felt safe using the bus.

While most (78%) survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they felt safe travelling by bus, some (45%) agreed or strongly agreed that there was anti-social behaviour on buses. There were however, differences by card type, with disabled, cardholders less likely to feel safe (65%) and more likely to think there was anti-social behaviour (56%), compared to those with an over 60 card (85% and 39% respectively).

Among the qualitative feedback (across both the survey and focus groups), cardholders discussed feeling unsafe due to anti-social behaviour and the number of Young Persons' Scheme cardholders now using buses. Issues around feeling unsafe at bus stops or interchanges that were poorly maintained or poorly lit were also reported in some cases.

Reasons for not using buses or the Scheme more often

Survey respondents were asked about their reasons for not using the bus more often, with multiple responses possible. Different questions were asked depending on whether respondents used the free bus pass about once a fortnight or more (i.e. frequent users, n=1,709) or less than once a fortnight (i.e. less frequent users, n=793). While a long list of options were offered, responses were also collated into themes for analysis purposes.

The reasons for not using the bus more often were largely consistent between more and less frequent users, with the most common issues being related to **service provision** (56% of frequent users and 61% of less frequent users identified one or more related issues). This included buses not running when or as often as needed, a lack of direct routes, that buses were unreliable, and that they took too long. These issues were also commonly discussed by focus group respondents as limiting their use of the Scheme.

Issues relating to the **on-board environment** (such as being busy, concerns about anti-social behaviour, not feeling safe, and concerns about illnesses) were also noted by 27% of more frequent users and 21% of less frequent users. Comments from some cardholders (of all types) also suggested that the busyness of services or anti-social behaviour resulted in them avoiding certain bus services and/or travelling by bus at certain times of day. Many of these cardholders attributed this to the introduction of the Young Persons' Free Bus Travel Scheme (Young Persons' Scheme).

Accessibility issues were highlighted by 17% of frequent users and 18% of less frequent users. These included difficulty physically accessing the bus, buses not being suitable for the respondent's condition, a lack of information/accessible information to help journey planning, and information during journeys not being available or accessible. Again, these accessibility issues were also commonly discussed across the focus groups. In addition, in both survey and focus group feedback, several disabled cardholders described negative experiences where they felt judged, or had been questioned/challenged by bus drivers regarding the legitimacy of their disability or right to access free bus travel (especially companion cardholders).

It should be noted that accessibility issues were reported despite the Public Service Vehicles Accessibility Regulations (PSVAR) requiring that buses and coaches be accessible to disabled passengers. The Public Service Vehicles (Accessible

Information) Regulations 2023 (PSVAIR) now mandates the provision of audible and visible information on board local bus and coach services in Great Britain.

When considering the full list of reasons, the survey responses were broadly similar between more frequent and less frequent users, with fewer than five percentage point differences between the two groups at most of the response options. The only exceptions were for 'buses take too long' (19% of frequent users and 27% of less frequent users), 'prefer/need to use other modes of travel' (8% of frequent users and 33% of less frequent users), and there being 'no specific reason' (16% of frequent users and 8% of infrequent users). These broadly similar responses by more and less frequent users means it is difficult to determine the extent to which these issues actually impact usage, and suggests that frequency of use did not necessarily impact on the reasons for not using the bus more often.

Differences were more prevalent by card type, however, with several issues being more common among disabled cardholders compared to those with an over 60 card. These included perceptions that buses were unreliable, the physical accessibility and suitability of the bus for respondents' conditions, that buses were too busy, concerns about anti-social behaviour, not feeling safe, and being concerned about catching illnesses. These differences were largely consistent between frequent and infrequent users by card type. The only exception was the physical accessibility and suitability of buses, where the issues were more common among less frequent disabled users compared to more frequent disabled users. This suggests that these elements may present tangible, physical barriers which impact on usage, with a lack of access reducing the frequency of travel and buses being unsuitable for conditions making travel less practical and desirable.

In addition to service provision issues, a **lack of bus services** and/or stops or stations nearby was an issue for 19% of less frequent users (this option was not available to more frequent users). This challenge was also confirmed across the qualitative feedback (from survey and focus group respondents). Service provision was a particular issue for those living in rural areas where respondents often highlighted the lack of availability, frequency, reach and accessibility of bus services. This discrepancy created a strong sense of frustration, inequity and unfairness that people in certain areas could not access the benefits of the Scheme in the same way as their peers in other areas.

A few respondents, particularly community transport operators, also discussed the exclusion of Section 19 (S19) door-to-door community transport services (operated by non-profit making bodies) from the Scheme. They felt this resulted in some of the most vulnerable older and disabled people being excluded from the Scheme, as they could not access scheduled bus services and could not use their NEC on the S19 services.

Process and administration

Bus operators were generally positive about the operation of the Scheme, although a few expressed views related to the reimbursement rates.

Most cardholders (86%) reported that they found it easy to get information about the free bus pass, although disabled cardholders were slightly more likely to find it difficult compared to those with an over 60 card. There was also evidence of misunderstandings and conflicting advice being provided to cardholders about eligibility, applications/renewals/replacements, and other uses/benefits of the NEC.

Most respondents found the application process (85%) and the renewals and replacement process (74%) either very or fairly easy. Disabled cardholders were less likely to find both the application and renewals and replacement process easy compared to those with an over 60 card. Indeed, the difficulties that were highlighted with applications and renewals were largely related to the disabled cards. It was noted that significant evidence was required to apply for/renew these cards, making the process time consuming and difficult. In addition, the expiry date on these cards was often difficult for cardholders to read, meaning they were often unaware that their card was about to expire. There was a general consensus among respondents from all groups (including survey and focus group respondents, the third sector organisations and bus operators) that it should not be necessary for those with lifelong and unchanging disabilities or conditions to have to regularly renew their card.

Overall Satisfaction

Overall, the vast majority (94%) of survey respondents said that they were either very or fairly satisfied with the Scheme. Only 2% were dissatisfied. Results were largely consistent by card type.

The main issues which reduced levels of satisfaction or drove dissatisfaction were the lack of bus services or routes available to respondents, poor local services, or problems with the accessibility of services, which meant that cardholders could not use the Scheme or access the benefits it provided.

Suggested improvements to the Scheme from cardholders and operators

Across the evaluation feedback, common suggestions for improvements to the Scheme included:

- Improvements to the application and renewal processes to ensure accessibility and consistency.
- Greater consistency and clarity on additional uses/benefits of the NEC to provide equity for all cardholders.
- Provision of a digital NEC to sit alongside, but not replace, physical cards. It is currently only possible for people to have access to the Scheme in one format.
- Expanded scope of concessionary travel to trains, trams and the subway for all cardholders, as well as night buses and S19 door-to-door services.
- Additional driver training in relation to the different types of cards to reduce negative experiences by cardholders.
- Consideration of a higher reimbursement rate for operators.

Operator feedback in relation to reimbursement also suggests that improved communication and ongoing engagement between Transport Scotland and operators may be needed to ensure the reimbursement rates and reimbursement methodology are more clearly understood and that both remain aligned with legislative requirements and appropriate for the operating context.

In addition, a small number of respondents thought that eligibility should be tightened, with the over 60 card linked to retirement or means testing.

Conclusion

Overall, the evaluation suggests that the Scheme is highly successful and valued. The results show that the Scheme is largely meeting each of the objectives, driving modal shift and contributing to a reduction in carbon emissions, improving physical health, mental health and wellbeing for cardholders, and tackling inequalities. In general, it operates smoothly for both bus operators and cardholders, although a few areas were flagged to deliver direct improvements to the Scheme. The findings show that the Scheme is well used, with most survey respondents using it with some regularity. The Scheme is also used for a wide range of purposes and provides a variety of benefits.

There were differences in some results, largely by card type and the extent to which households were experiencing financial difficulties or not. In particular, disabled cardholders found it more difficult to get information about the Scheme, and the application and renewal process was more difficult for this group. Disabled cardholders were also more likely to experience difficulties with physical access to buses, and were more concerned about safety and anti-social behaviour. However, they also appeared to experience the benefits to a greater extent, for example saving

larger amounts of money, improvements in access to services, and improvements across the health and wellbeing measures.

The Scheme was described as excellent by those who use it, and as a 'life-line' for many. However, for those with no access to services, or where services did not run when or as often as needed, where direct routes were lacking or services were unreliable or slow, or presented accessibility challenges, the value of the Scheme was severely diminished. Better service provision and more accessible services would be needed in some areas, or expansion of the Scheme to support wider travel options (such as discounts on taxis or the inclusion of S19 door-to-door community transport services), in order to ensure greater equity in people's ability to access, use and benefit from the Scheme.



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