

Briefing for the Public Petitions Committee on petition PE2216: Extend Young Persons' Free Bus Travel to include all under-26s, lodged by James Bond

Background

National concessionary travel schemes in Scotland: Transport Scotland operates two national concessionary travel schemes, under the provisions of the Transport (Scotland) Act 2005. These are:

1. **Scheme for older and disabled people:** Launched in April 2006, this scheme offers free travel on registered local bus services and scheduled coach services within Scotland to Scottish residents aged 60+ or to disabled residents of any age.
2. **Scheme for young people:** Launched in January 2022, this scheme offers free travel on registered local bus services and scheduled coach services within Scotland for Scottish residents aged five to 21 years (children aged 0-4 already travel on buses for free).

As part of these schemes, bus operators are paid a proportion of the full adult fare for each concessionary traveller carried, known as the reimbursement rate. The total amount payable to operators taking part in each scheme is also subject to an annual cap, with no further payments made to any bus operator if the scheme cap is reached. 2026-27 is the first year that the young persons' scheme has been subject to a payment cap. To date, the payment cap has rarely been reached.

The reimbursement rate for the national concessionary travel scheme for older and disabled people for 2026-27 is 53% of the full adult single fare for the journey being taken, with the annual payment cap set at £248.2 million.

The reimbursement rates for the young persons' concessionary fares scheme are 48.1% of the full adult single fare for journeys taken by people aged 5 to 15 and 72.5% for those aged 16 to 21. The annual payment cap is set at £220.6 million.

Trends in concessionary travel: The number of concessionary journeys was on a long-term downward trend between 2006-07 and 2019-20 (the last year unaffected by the covid pandemic) falling from 156 million to 137.5 million trips over this period. By 2024-25, two years after the introduction of the young persons' scheme, there were 184 million concessionary trips made in Scotland – an increase of 28 million trips (18%) on the previous high in 2006-07.

Despite this increase, the introduction of the young persons' scheme has not noticeably slowed the continuing long-term decline in Scottish bus patronage. During 2019-20 (the last full pre-covid year) 361 million bus trips were made, which had fallen to 334 million trips in 2024-25, a reduction of 7.5%. For comparison, during

1999-00, the year the Scottish Parliament was established, 455 million bus trips were made.

The cost of concessionary travel: There has been a significant increase in annual Scottish Government investment in concessionary travel since the introduction of the scheme for older and disabled people in 2006. At constant 2025-26 prices the equivalent of £252.5 million was spent on concessionary fares in 2006-07, compared with £472.8 million for 2026-27 – an 87.3% real terms increase (that is the increase over and above general inflation). Much of this increase can be attributed to the introduction of the young persons' scheme in January 2022.

Cost of extending eligibility for the young persons' scheme: Transport Scotland has estimated that extending eligibility for the young persons' scheme to those aged under 26 would likely cost between £95 million and £113 million per year.

Transport Scotland position on extending eligibility: Transport Scotland has no plans to increase the age of eligibility for the young persons' concessionary travel scheme.

Proposed £2 bus fares cap: Transport Scotland is currently [running a year-long pilot of a £2 bus fare cap](#) for single trips within the Shetland, Orkney, Western Isles, Highland, Moray, and Argyll and Bute Council areas. The pilot has a budget of £10 million. The [2026 SNP manifesto](#) included a commitment to extend this cap across Scotland by the end of this parliamentary session.

Prior to the 2026 Scottish General Election, [the First Minister stated](#) "Within the first one hundred days, we will extend the £2 bus fare cap to Glasgow, Ayrshire, Dunbartonshire, Renfrewshire, Lanarkshire and Inverclyde", a goal that was reconfirmed by the Cabinet Secretary for Economy, Tourism and Transport during [a debate on Bus Fares](#) on 17 June 2026. It is currently unclear when the £2 fare cap will take effect in these areas, or the cost implications of its extension.

Key Organisations and relevant links

Organisations representing people and businesses potentially interested in this petition, such as the bus industry, people aged under 26, local authority transport officers, and younger workers, include:

- [Confederation of Passenger Transport](#): Bus industry representative organisation.
- [Scottish Youth Parliament](#): Representing young people's interests.
- [Scottish Collaboration of Transport Specialists](#) (SCOTS): Organisation representing senior local authority transport officers.
- [Scottish Trades Union Congress](#): Scottish trade union representative body.

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