

Scottish Parliament Social Justice & Social Security Committee

Inquiry into Addressing Child Poverty through Parental Employment

Submission by SCOTS (Society of Chief Officers of Transportation in Scotland) – 31 August 2023

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1. Introduction

1.1 SCOTS is the Society of Chief Officers of Transportation in Scotland. It is a membership organisation, consisting of senior managers in transport from the seven Regional Transport Partnerships and 32 Local Authorities collaborating to ensure a consistent and effective oversight of transport matters across the country. The Transportation Working Group, which I Chair, considers policy matters and strategy.

1.2 Attractive, safe, and affordable transport links are the lifeblood of a vibrant economy and an inclusive society. The SCOTS membership has an important role in the design, delivery and maintenance of the nation's various transport systems. In doing so, the Membership works alongside other key transport stakeholders, including commercial providers, government agencies, community and voluntary transport providers at a local, regional and national level.

1.3 In composing this submission, it has been helpful reviewing the responses that were received during the Call for Ideas stage of the inquiry, and it is noted how frequently transport as an issue was highlighted. SCOTS are keen to see these issues come through this inquiry, with many respondents highlighting those transport-related issues that affect child poverty through paternal employment, both in terms of how things could be improved and the barriers that can persist.

2. Transport Systems Provide Access to Opportunities

2.1 Scotland's transport systems link where people live to job opportunities, child care opportunities, and wider retail, education, social and leisure opportunities. Accessibility to these opportunities is a fundamental consideration with respect to the Inquiry's focus on parental employment as a means of tackling child poverty.

2.2 It is recognised, that across many parts of Scotland, those fortunate to have access to a car can obtain almost universal accessibility, 24 hours a day, across all days of the week, with an ability to accommodate changeable and complex trip patterns. Wider land use patterns have responded increasing car availability, with employment opportunities and other services increasingly being provided on a scale

and in 2 locations further from town centres, and often in circumstances more suited to car access than active travel and public transport.

2.3 However, those who do not benefit from such private car access can find themselves increasingly left behind and experiencing inequalities with respect to accessing employment, particularly outwith core urban areas. The inherent characteristics of public transport modes can mean longer travel times relative to car, fixed routes and timetabling constraints, and the need for up-front fares payment. Multiple operators and modes can mean multiple fares. These limitations impact the mobility of a community and individuals with access to jobs, child care services, education, and other services.

2.4 Securing improvements to active travel and public transport modes are critical in relation to parental employment, and this is supported in national, regional and local transport policy. In the National Transport Strategy (<https://www.transport.gov.scot/media/47052/national-transport-strategy.pdf>), the sustainable travel hierarchy places active travel being afforded a highest priority, followed by public transport, other shared transport and then private car. This means it is a national priority to put active travel first and make it an easy option for parents as either the main mode or as part of a multi-modal journey, noting that almost all public transport journeys also involve active travel at some point.

2.5 Beyond improvements to the transport systems, there are also wider considerations around Land-Use Planning, Economic Policy, and Housing Policy at both the strategic and local level. These strategic considerations influence the locations of trip origins and destinations, albeit this can often play out over the longer term. At local level it can involve consideration of placements into social housing and education catchments.

3.1 Car ownership and use in Scotland is continuing to grow and a large amount of Scotland's communities can to some extent be considered to be in some form car dependent or car reliant in relation to service access. This means that those without access to a car are impacted negatively and opportunities are reduced. In 2021, on in five of Scotland's households did not have access to car (www.transport.gov.scot/publication/scottish-transport-statistics-no-38-2019-edition/chapter-1-road-transport-vehicles/), often the most vulnerable in society – elderly, single parents, low-income households, and those affected by disabilities. Whilst in some settings not having access to a car may not be a disadvantage due to strong active travel and public transport options, in many communities (particularly those outwith core conurbations) the car has become considered a necessity to move around. Systemic car reliance excludes those for whatever reason are unable to hold a driving licence.

3.2 This can force people in low incomes to own a car that they may struggle to afford and maintain, placing financial pressures on other aspects of their household budget. There are some concerns that the cost of living crisis may force people into not replacing tyres etc when required or regularly servicing and maintaining their cars due to cost which may have road safety implications. There has also been significant recent cost inflation within the used car market. Policy measures targeting older

vehicles, imposing additional charges on drivers, or encouraging a shift to less polluting technologies whilst laudable, could have a disproportionate impact on those already struggling with motoring costs and access.

3.3 Informal lift giving support from family or friends will provide a work-around for families without car access in many communities, although clearly this only suits those with strong and locally available support networks. These arrangements can also be vulnerable to disruption. Formal lift sharing or car sharing schemes also exist in some areas, but usage dropped during Covid 19 with advice not to car share and has struggled to recover to pre-pandemic levels.

3.4 Those with young children and reliant on lift sharing etc can also face the logistical and cost issues related to multiple car seats for their children across different lift providers, and transporting buggies and prams etc. Guidance strongly advises against use of second-hand car seats.

4. The Current Bus Network is Under Significant Pressure

4.1 The most used mode of public transport in Scotland is the bus making up 73% of all pre-pandemic public transport trips ([/www.transport.gov.scot/media/49177/scottish-transport-statistics-2020-publication-final-version.pdf](http://www.transport.gov.scot/media/49177/scottish-transport-statistics-2020-publication-final-version.pdf)). In Scotland, the majority of bus services are provided on a commercial basis under the terms of the UK-wide Transport Act 1985, with Public Transport Authorities (typically Local Authorities outwith the Strathclyde Area) having discretionary powers to support additional socially necessary services that would not otherwise be provided.

4.2 Despite being the most used form of public transport, across Scotland, the bus network is experiencing decline. Bus patronage across Scotland is still recovering from Covid- 19 - the most recent national data collection (2021-22) for bus and coach patronage shows that it is still recovering back to pre-pandemic levels. On-line shopping and footfall decline in town and city centres has hit traditional bus markets; home working and dispersal of employment has taken away commuters from bus services. Even in urban areas, bus services have seen reduced frequencies, reduced operating periods, and route contraction. Local authority revenue cuts have caused significant reduction in the ability to support services through subsidy. Bus operators have also experienced issues with workforce recruitment for drivers and mechanics etc which in some areas has affected the level of services.

4.3 Whilst patronage continues to be a concern, it is still clear that there are significant benefits of bus for access to employment and wider opportunities. The bus provides an alternative for those that do not have access to a car and when available provides a vital mode for movement in all communities that have viable bus services.

4.4 The introduction of the under 22s free bus travel in January 2022 is having a measurable impact on bus travel among young people aged 5 to 21 years. This allows older children to travel independently and free of charge allowing them to access education, work and leisure without parental financial contributions. This could impact paternal employment as it may provide a credible alternative which

does not require their finances or time, with parents often having to adjust their work patterns in order to fit around childcare responsibilities. However, bus concessions are only of value if there is a bus service on which to use them.

4.5 At present bus travel often takes longer than car journeys. This can mean that for parents who are pressed for time, trying to work and commute in between childcare, bus travel or other public transport becomes a less suitable option. Convenience, cost and time pressure can make public transport a less viable option for parents. There are also practical challenges for those that have access to a bus if they need to carry a pram onto a bus alongside large bags whilst looking after children which can be particularly challenging on some busy routes.

4.6 Transport Scotland's Bus Partnership Fund is currently supporting regional groups of local authorities, regional transport partnerships and bus operators develop and implement bus priority measures and bus service improvement partnerships (BSIPs). These hold out the prospect of future improvement in bus journey time and reliability improvements on core routes in urban areas.

5. Rail Services Valued but not Universal Across Scotland

5.1 In communities which have a rail service, these can be important components of the transport mix. The rail network has significantly less coverage across Scotland than the bus network, and fares can be considerably more expensive relative to buses on a trip by trip comparison. Concessions available to bus users are not universally extended to rail users. Rail services provide competitive journey times and greater reliability into city centres, and open up a wider sphere of employment, training and education opportunities without reliance on car travel. The announcement of the trial removal of peak fares on the rail network will help affordability for some.

5.2 However, many parts of the country have scant or no access to the rail network and railways are a hugely expensive commitment for Central Government investment. It is anticipated that in the short- and medium-term, significant spend on railways is likely to focus on decarbonisation and maintaining existing assets rather than expansion of the network, other than existing commitments.

6. Cost Pressures and Timetable Limitations

6.1 The cost of public transport can also be an issue for parents. Whilst there is concessionary travel for some, many have to pay full price for public transport. On top of paying for childcare (longer travel times by public transport may increase these costs), this means that the income they do get from their employment does not cover their outgoing costs or leaves very little left over.

6.2 Public Transport ties to fit in with nursery or out of school clubs' hours is also an issue particularly in rural areas, where the frequency of public transport can be less. There may be a bus or train once an hour, but if the times do not fit in around nursery and childcare opening hours, this may mean that the parent or caregiver has to work shorter hours or rely on others for pick up or drop off, as the public transport gets in

too late or leaves too early for the opening hours. It can also mean additional costs for additional child care cover.

7. The Rural Accessibility Challenge

7.1 A lack of viable transport provision for employment is particularly acute in small to medium sized towns and rural areas across Scotland, particularly for those areas not happening to correspond with established bus route corridors between larger towns. Systemic car dependency significantly excludes those without car access in these areas, with increasing transport poverty being experienced as trends of bus service reduction continue.

7.2 Partners across Scotland are developing new ways to deliver bus services. For example, in Aberdeenshire, there was a pilot demand responsive transport (DRT) system called Ready2Go that allowed individuals to travel around Inverurie and surrounding smaller towns more easily. DRT provided users with app- based on demand pick up and drop off; deviating away from traditional fixed route/fixed timetable bus services. Other similar schemes are also underway across Scotland. This can be very helpful for parents so they have more flexibility and can use the transport system to fit around their childcare opening hours and their work, rather than fit around a fixed public transport timetable.

7.3 The Ready2Go as a pilot came to an end in April 2023, due to the funding challenges to maintain the service, despite achieving key objectives around inclusion and accessibility. The service brought a lot of positive benefits such as improved trip chaining and access to opportunities, and increased the practical availability of public transport for many. It is important for all partners to recognise and support the need for new thinking with regard to how bus services operate in rural areas in order to change a reliance on the car as that does not work for all.

7.4 Other opportunities for innovation exist to achieve social and economic outcomes, including community car sharing, facilitated lift sharing, and community / voluntary bus schemes. Funding for such schemes can be scarce and patchy, and is rarely committed over a number of years. A reliance on volunteers can also stunt the expansion of such schemes, many of which may not be necessarily suited to the day to day requirement of regular work patterns.

8. The Importance of Providing a Transport System Suitable for All

8.1 Parents should feel confident travelling to work during pregnancy and after maternity leave, and when travelling with children on public transport. Safety and personal security, and freedom from intimidation are accordingly important, particularly if employment hours require travelling during the evening / night. It also means safety and security whilst accessing public transport services, or travelling with children on pavements with suitable lighting, crossing points and dropped kerbs. Improvements in journey planning information, and “live journey tracker” information for buses and trains can help improve travel confidence, and recent work promoted by Transport Scotland around rail and women’s safety is leading to a series of actions in this area (www.transport.gov.scot/news/women-and-girls-safety-on-public-transport/).

8.2 Regardless of main mode, all journeys will require some form of walking or wheeling to reach a destination. The system needs to be used by people using wheelchairs or with prams and buggies or carrying toddlers without having to negotiate stairs or too narrow passages.

8.3 Parents are likely to trip chain as part of taking their children to school and in rural communities this may require use of a car in order to do so. Issues escalate if a parent has two children and needs to drop off to school, nursery or childcare at different locations, at different times. The challenge is compounded in lone parent households, or those removed from local support networks.

8.4 Flexible and hybrid working where appropriate and possible is helpful for parents to be able to travel to work and drop off and collect children from childcare, where they require to work around public transport timetables and opening hours of childcare. Positive workforce policies to support parents is also really important, particularly those facing the compounding issues of transport and childcare arrangements.

9. Transport Funding Review

9.1 Significant Scottish Government revenue and capital funding is allocated to the support and maintenance of the transport sector across Scotland, across all modes. The Scottish Budget 2023-24 publication, Table 9.01, notes the following annual allocations across modes (www.gov.scot/publications/scottish-budget-2023-24/documents/):

- Rail Services £ 1,420.8m
- Concessionary Fares and Bus Services £ 425.7m
- Active Travel, Low Carbon and Other Transport £ 349.0m
- Motorways and Trunk Roads £ 801.2m
- Ferry Services £ 440.0m
- Air Services £ 83.5m

9.2 Scottish Transport Statistics 2022 (published Mar 2023) notes that local authorities spent £941m in 2021/22 on the development, maintenance and operation of their transport networks. This is inclusive of statutory School Transport provision for primary and secondary aged pupils.

9.3 To achieve a change in outcomes, particularly for those most vulnerable to the effects of transport poverty, it is necessary to understand if the current distribution of revenue and funding support for transport is delivering for all in Scotland, in line with established policy goals. As one example, support for concessionary bus fares is of limited value to those living in areas without a viable bus service that meets their requirements. Transport Scotland are currently understood to be undertaking a strategic review of funding support for public transport including fares. Ensuring that available budget is most effectively supporting desired outcomes will be a key consideration for this work.

10 Summary

10.1 Scotland's varied transport systems play a key role in enabling access to employment, training, education, and other services. These transport systems are often strongest and most resilient in our core urban areas. Passengers reliant on these services in other parts of Scotland are facing increasing limitations around route choice, frequency and time of journey. Both commercial and subsidised bus services have come under increasing pressure post Covid. Whilst access to private cars can help mitigate some of these issues, this leads to forced car dependence and social exclusion.

10.2 Parents' trip requirements are additionally complex due to the requirement to access and pick up from childcare, nursery and schools. This complexity becomes more difficult if there is more than one child. Lone parents, or those without access to a suitable support network, can be further penalised, when seeking to access employment due to these issues.

10.3 Improvements to transport systems can help to mitigate some of these challenges, with initiatives around fares, improved timetables, travel information and bus accessibility.

Safety and personal security improvements are also important considerations. In more rural areas, there is an urgent and pressing need to support more innovative approaches to public transport provision to support social outcomes.

10.4 Other interventions can also help open up the available transport network as a viable option for parents seeking or in employment. These include hybrid and flexible working patterns, informed consideration of social housing allocations and nursery/education placements, and digital support for home working. In the longer term, strategic policy interventions in land use planning, economic development, and housing are also important considerations. It is important that policies related to decarbonisation do not exacerbate issues around accessibility, particularly the most vulnerable.

10.5 With a goal of reducing inequalities in public transport accessibility and fares affordability across Scotland to support parental employment opportunities, there is also a necessary requirement to review the current distribution of revenue support funding across modes, across different parts of Scotland, and across central and local government.

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