

Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee

19th Meeting, 2022 (Session 6), Wednesday
21 December 2022

PE1928: Provide free rail travel for disabled people who meet the qualifications for free bus travel

Lodged on 9 February 2022

Petitioner David Gallant

**Petition
summary** Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to
provide free rail travel for disabled people who meet the qualifications
for free bus travel.

Webpage <https://petitions.parliament.scot/petitions/PE1928>

Introduction

1. The Committee last considered this petition at its meeting on [7 December 2022](#). At that meeting, the Committee agreed to consider the evidence heard at a future meeting and to write to local authorities who offer the companion travel discount scheme.
2. The petition summary is included in **Annexe A** and the Official Report of the Committee's last consideration of this petition is at **Annexe B**.
3. Written submissions received prior to the Committee's last consideration can be found on the petition's [webpage](#).
4. Further background information about this petition can be found in the [SPICe briefing](#) for this petition.
5. The Scottish Government's initial position on this petition can be found on the petition's [webpage](#).

6. Members may be aware that a debate on motion [S6M-06145: Free Rail Travel for Blind and Partially Sighted People and Companions](#), lodged by Graham Simpson MSP, took place on 13 December 2022. The Official Report of this debate is available [here](#).

Action

The Committee is invited to consider what action it wishes to take.

Clerk to the Committee

Annexe A

PE1928: Provide free rail travel for disabled people who meet the qualifications for free bus travel

Petitioner

David Gallant

Date lodged

9 February 2022

Petition summary

Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to provide free rail travel for disabled people who meet the qualifications for free bus travel.

Previous action

I've written to the First Minister but she did not reply.

Background information

Many disabled people who meet the qualification for free bus travel cannot actually use buses either because rural bus routes have been withdrawn or because the buses used in rural areas of Scotland have toilets that are unsuitable for disabled people. Therefore, there is a need for free bus travel. Here is an example: the bus service from Kyle of Lochalsh to Glasgow has toilets that are unsuitable for disabled people but Scotrail trains have toilets that are suitable for disabled.

I have written to the First Minister about this matter. I explained to her that train fares are unaffordable. I also explained that the cost of providing free rail travel for disabled people could easily be met by raising the starting age for free bus travel for senior citizens from 60 to 61. The First Minister did not reply so this petition is necessary.

Annexe B

Extract from Official Report of last consideration of PE1928 on 7 December 2022

The Convener: Our second evidence session is on PE1928, which was lodged by David Gallant. The petition calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to provide free rail travel for disabled people who meet the qualifications for free bus travel.

We last considered the petition at our meeting on 20 April 2022, when we agreed to write to Transport Scotland to seek an update on the fair fares review. A copy of Transport Scotland's response has been included in our meeting papers for today.

At the meeting on 20 April, we also agreed to hear evidence from the petitioner and from Sight Scotland. I am pleased to welcome to the meeting the petitioner, David Gallant, and Nicoletta Primo from Sight Scotland. It is a pleasure to have both of you with us. The petitioner is not always present when we consider their petition. It is helpful that both of you are here today.

Members have a number of questions that they would like to ask, but we understand that both of you wish to say a few words first. I am happy with that. The clerks will have told you that your contribution cannot be longer than a speech in the chamber. We look forward to hearing from you. Have you drawn straws to see who will speak first? I see that David Gallant will do so.

David Gallant: Many voluntary organisations have supported the petition, and I do not understand why Transport Scotland objects to it. Because of inflation, such a scheme would actually save money rather than cost money. I am sure that members will be pleased to hear that.

With regard to the rules for free rail travel for disabled people, it is important that rail travel should follow the same rules as bus travel as far as possible. Bus travel is allowed as far as Berwick-upon-Tweed and Carlisle. Those who are travelling from Lockerbie to Gretna Green or Annan should be able to change trains at Carlisle rather than have to travel via Glasgow. It is important that Carlisle is included. It is included in bus travel, and it is important to include it in rail travel, even though it is not in Scotland.

The Convener: Okay. Is that all that you wished to say to us in advance?

David Gallant: Yes.

The Convener: Thank you. We are now happy to hear from Nicoletta Primo.

Nicoletta Primo (Sight Scotland): Good morning, everybody. I thank the committee for inviting Sight Scotland and Sight Scotland Veterans to provide evidence on the petition. I also extend our thanks to David Gallant for bringing this important issue to the Parliament.

Sight Scotland and Sight Scotland Veterans are two of Scotland's oldest charities. We are dedicated to ensuring that nobody faces sight loss alone. Some elected members who are here today will be aware of our fair rail campaign, which has one simple call: to provide free rail travel for the companions of those who hold a national entitlement card with an eye and the +1 symbol on it. No national policy entitles companions to free rail travel. That exists only in bus policy, and it is our view that that should extend to rail travel.

On the petition, I will largely be speaking from the perspective of those who are blind and partially sighted, and about their experiences of using the rail network.

I welcome any questions that the committee might have.

The Convener: Thank you very much. Paul Sweeney will lead the questioning on the petition.

Paul Sweeney: There is provision for free bus travel. Why is it so important to extend that to rail travel?

Nicoletta Primo: If David Gallant does not mind, I will answer that question first.

From the perspective of those who have a visual impairment, rail travel will quite often be much more accessible. We have heard from veterans in particular who have said that using platforms and toilets on the rail network can be a lot easier than having to use toilets on buses, particularly on longer journeys. We have also heard from a single mother whom we support, who has spoken about how, when she is travelling with her daughter, it is much easier for her to use a train than a bus.

On the need for companions, some people would simply not be able to use the rail system without having somebody with them. We have heard that they would quite often prefer to use the train but, because of the cost, they simply cannot afford it, so they decide to use the bus instead.

There would be many benefits from extending such a scheme nationally as opposed to having the current situation for companion travel, in which each local authority has a different system in place. Some local authorities offer a concessionary rate for companions and some do not. Even in those that do so, that is not always enforced properly. That causes quite a lot of confusion for passengers and rail staff.

Paul Sweeney: Transport Scotland's submission refers to the disabled persons railcard. You might already have hinted why that is insufficient. Is it insufficient because of the lack of arrangements for companion travel?

Nicoletta Primo: The companion travel element is particularly important. Sight Scotland has picked up on that because, for many people, travelling by themselves is simply not an option. If a person has mobility, sight loss or other sensory issues, having a companion can mean the difference between travelling and not travelling at all. People have said that, because they can get on the bus with their companion and that is provided for, they would prefer to use the bus rather than the train. They would much prefer to use the rail system because of its reliability and accessibility, but it is simply not affordable.

Paul Sweeney: That is very helpful.

I understand that approximately 78 per cent of those who use the disabled bus travel concessionary scheme have a companion allowance, so that seems to be a major aspect of using that scheme.

Nicoletta Primo: Yes. That is significant. Such a high percentage of users who use the companion allowance is evidence that it is necessary. We have that for the bus system, and we know that it works and that it is used, and it would make sense to extend that to the national rail system, particularly as ScotRail is now under public ownership. It should be there for everybody to use, and that means that it should meet the needs of all in society.

Paul Sweeney: I am interested to know what costings you have developed. You hinted that money would be saved. I was intrigued by your point.

David Gallant: As far as I know, the Scottish Government has no power to control bus fares, and bus fares have been going up. If more people transferred from buses to the rail network, that would save money, because the Scottish Government has to pay 76 per cent of the single fare to bus operators. Bus fares are going up, so encouraging more people to travel by train would save money.

Paul Sweeney: Do you have any idea of the total number of people who might utilise such a scheme in Scotland? I want to get an idea of the scale of that relative to the overall passenger cohort in Scotland.

Nicoletta Primo: The cost to cover those who hold the national entitlement card with the eye symbol and the +1 symbol or just the eye symbol would be around £2 million. However, we are in discussions with Transport Scotland about more specific data on that, because that is just an estimate. I think that the cohort of people is approximately 55,000, but I need to double-check that. I would be happy to send the committee the final figure.

Paul Sweeney: I think that we have that.

Nicoletta Primo: Do you have my briefing?

Paul Sweeney: Yes. Overall, we are talking about 146,000 people. If that is broken down into different components, disabled +1 companions number about 105,000. That is helpful.

A point has been made about bus travel versus rail travel, but a lot of journeys are highly integrated, and people might need to take a bus and then a train. Would the approach help to make it more seamless for people who have a visual impairment to navigate the transport system more generally?

David Gallant: I live in a rural area of Scotland that is a long way from any of the big cities, and I find it impossible to use the toilets on long-distance buses, but I can use the toilets on trains.

The Convener: The information that we have about companion travel is that some authorities, such as Fife Council and West Lothian Council, and Strathclyde Partnership for Transport offer a 50 per cent reduction for companion travel. Are you aware of any evidence that that has made any difference to the incidence of companion travel in those local areas?

Nicoletta Primo: No specific data has been gathered on that. However, we have heard anecdotal evidence that that discount system is utilised and is greatly needed. We want to see it go further and mimicking the bus system by being free.

As David Gallant has rightly pointed out, there are differences in rural areas and urban areas in respect of who uses rail and who uses buses. As Mr Sweeney pointed out, there are also integration elements to consider, particularly if we think about the national transport strategy, which mentions the integration of different modes of transport a lot.

In places where there is a companion discount, it is not always enforced. We hear that sometimes when people get on at certain stations, they are told that they can have a discount or that there is no need to pay this time but, at other times, they are forced to pay the full fare. That is confusing for people. Not having a national policy and having each local authority—in SPT's case, it covers many local authorities—set its policy causes confusion and sometimes puts people off, because they just do not know whether the companion discount will be applied. There is no clear policy on whether it will apply on that day, although people are entitled to that.

The Convener: That might be something that the committee can pursue a bit further by trying to find out where those schemes exist, what the uptake is, and what education there has been for an understanding of the schemes among rail travellers and rail staff.

Mr Gallant mentioned that he lives in a rural community. Alexander Stewart is going to touch on rurality.

Alexander Stewart: Thank you for coming to the meeting.

You talk about rurality. Is it not the case that, in some situations and circumstances, there are opportunities to develop processes? Have you given any feedback on the fair fares review, which the Scottish Government is using to look at concessionary travel? Have you been involved in any consultation on that review or had other involvement with it?

David Gallant: It is not a question of fares; it is a question of disability discrimination. I simply cannot travel on long-distance buses because the toilets on long-distance buses that are provided by companies such as Scottish Citylink and Stagecoach Megabus are simply not suitable, whereas the toilets on trains are suitable for persons who have my disability.

Alexander Stewart: Has Nicoletta Primo had any involvement with the fair fares review?

Nicoletta Primo: Yes. Sight Scotland has responded to the fair fares review, and we have made the points that I have mentioned this morning. I am not aware of any update or any report back from that. We look forward to hearing what it says. However, I stress that what we are asking for could be implemented ahead of the results of that review. The review does not necessarily need to be the catalyst through which the change happens. I am here to talk specifically about companion travel for those with sight loss, and it is quite possible for that to be implemented through statutory instruments.

I have something to add on the convener's previous point. You talked about different places having different schemes. I have a quote from one of our service users. They said:

"My travelling companion can travel free on some of the trains Scotland wide depending on which local authority are signed up to the scheme. The problem is, and this had led to not a few arguments with train company employees, is not all local authorities are signed up. So, you can start your journey in a participating local authority but end up in a non-participating one and a train company employee can insist the companion buy a ticket on arrival. This has happened to me frequently. It is a recipe for anguish and anxiety."

That stresses the point that, although some schemes that offer a discount are in place, not having national consistency causes people and rail staff a lot of confusion.

The Convener: That is something that we can explore further, but I am trying to understand it. There is a 50 per cent reduction. I presume that the companion would still have a ticket.

Nicoletta Primo: What normally happens is that a national entitlement card holder will be able to go through the ticket barrier, and sometimes the person who is with them will be able to go through with them because no ticketing system is in place, or they will have to go to the ticket office to purchase a ticket. However, not all train

stations have ticket offices, and the automated ticket machines do not have an option to select companion travel so that the companion can get the discount. Therefore, it is sometimes not possible for a person to obtain a ticket.

The Convener: They cannot access the existing benefit.

Nicoletta Primo: Exactly.

The Convener: I was slightly confused, because they do not get a free ticket; they get a 50 per cent reduction.

Nicoletta Primo: Exactly.

The Convener: I would therefore have expected them still to have a ticket so that, irrespective of where their journey ended, they would be able to present the ticket that they had purchased.

Nicoletta Primo: They sometimes cannot purchase a ticket at the discounted rate in the first place, unless they are at a station in which there is a barrier, the entitled person shows their NEC, and they go through with them. As I have said, there is no option on ticket machines for the companion discount.

The Convener: Do they then get on the train having not paid any fare at all?

Nicoletta Primo: That is quite possible. However, at the other end, they would have to make sure that they paid. That is when they get to the point of finding out whether they get the discount.

The Convener: They try to obtain a discount at the end of the journey in a non-participating authority area.

Nicoletta Primo: Yes.

The Convener: I understand. Mr Ewing will go next.

Fergus Ewing: Thank you, convener, and good morning to our witnesses. Thank you for coming along. If I may say so, Mr Gallant, you make a strong case for the extension of concessionary travel to people with a disability on the grounds of equity and avoiding discrimination. I hope that the Scottish Government will respond sympathetically after the review.

I want to ask about one point that you raised before the petition was lodged. You explained that the cost of providing free rail travel for disabled people could easily be met by raising the starting age for free travel for senior citizens from 60 to 61. I must say that I hope that the Scottish Government will consider that suggestion. Fortunately—or unfortunately—I am 65, so for the past five years I have been entitled to a free bus pass. I have never taken it up, but frankly I am a bit puzzled about why I, as a fairly well-paid person, should need that support, on the grounds of

equity. I would far prefer that people with a disability had access to free rail travel than people who can afford their own public transport costs.

I have got that off my chest, convener. Without revealing secrets, I know that the Scottish Government previously considered that point at my instigation, but nothing ended up happening.

The Convener: Controversies aplenty are being revealed this morning, Mr Ewing.

Fergus Ewing: I guess that there are certain benefits to being an ex-minister.

To get back to the point, did you, Mr Gallant, ever get a response from the Scottish Government about the idea that it could pay for what is being suggested this morning—for which there is a very strong case—by limiting, reducing or shaving off the benefits of people, such as myself and many others, who are over 60 and are entitled to the free bass pass, even though they are well able to afford it? Did you ever get a response to that?

David Gallant: No, I did not. However, due to the slight change in the economic situation, it is no longer necessary to raise the age for senior citizens from 60 to 61. The scheme would now be self-financing because bus fares have been going up and train fares have been static. Therefore, the scheme would actually bring in financial benefits. If more people transfer from buses to trains, the Scottish Government would not have to pay bus operators 76 per cent of the bus fare.

Fergus Ewing: You made that point in response to Mr Sweeney's question earlier. When asked how much it would cost, you said that it would not cost anything and would be self-financing. However, to play the devil's advocate, I will say that your thesis about why it would not cost anything relies on an assumption that people would switch from bus to train. However, if what you want was granted, and there was free rail travel for people with a disability, is it not the case that many of those people do not currently use the bus at all, not least because of practical problems such as a lack of toilet facilities? In other words, some people with a disability would use the benefit of free rail travel but do not currently travel on the bus. Therefore, is there not bound to be some extra cost?

David Gallant: That could be the case for a very small number of people. It is impossible to predict what the economic situation will be in the future. I do not see inflation coming down rapidly.

Fergus Ewing: Okay. It is not a question that I would necessarily expect you to be able to answer because the economics and the calculations here are all pretty complex, as we have seen from the information from the Scottish Parliament information centre.

Thank you for putting your case; you have both made the points very well.

The Convener: I think that the committee is very sympathetic to the case that you have made. We will consider the evidence afresh and decide how best to take forward the petition. Before we draw to a conclusion, is there anything further that you would like to say?

David Gallant: No. I think that we have just about covered everything.

The Convener: Nicoletta, do you have anything to add?

Nicoletta Primo: I will leave you with the words of somebody whom we support, who has a rare eye condition and is a single parent. They said:

“I go everywhere by bus only because of the free companion travel—that’s the reason I use the bus over the train, because of the concessionary rate for whoever is with me. I’d rather take the train as the bus can be so unreliable, especially in the darker nights, which reduces what vision I do have even more. I’d take the train more if I could, but with the cost of living it’s too expensive to always pay the fare for my companion and I can’t expect my sister or whoever is with me to pick up the cost. The train has better facilities too, for example access to a toilet, which makes life much easier when I’ve got my wee girl with me. There is also more space ... as I’m not always able to get on the bus with my buggy if a wheelchair user is already on. If we could get free companion travel on the trains like what we have on the bus, it would make life so much easier.”

The Convener: Thank you.

Colleagues, we would normally consider the evidence at a future meeting, but one issue that has come out of the petition is that of companion travel. Are we content to initiate a series of inquiries of the local authorities that offer this scheme, in relation to its uptake and the understanding of passengers and rail staff of its working practices?

Issues have been identified, and it would be interesting to know whether the supporting local authorities are aware of passengers who are unable to access the ticket at the start of their journey and who then find that they are not entitled to the reduction at the end of the journey. It would be interesting to initiate some inquiries on those points, which would help to inform our next discussion.

Paul Sweeney: It also might be interesting to make inquiries regarding the financing of the scheme. I note that the current concessionary travel scheme for older and disabled persons has a 55 per cent rate against the full adult single fare, and it has an overall budgetary cap of £226 million in the current financial year. It would be interesting to see what the utilisation rate of that budget is and whether the proposal could be funded through the existing provision, if it is the case that it is underutilised.

The Convener: I think that we can agree that it would be interesting to consider those points, and then we will have the information available when we next consider the petition.

I thank David and Nicoletta for coming along. Their evidence is much appreciated and will certainly help to inform our consideration of the petition. I suspend the meeting briefly to allow a change of witnesses.