

Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee

7th Meeting, 2023 (Session 6), Wednesday 3
May 2023

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 [21 December 2022](#). At that meeting, the Committee agreed to write to the Scottish Government, but to wait until responses were received from local authorities that offer discounted fares for companion travel before issuing the correspondence.
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. The Committee has received new responses from Strathclyde Partnership for Transport (SPT), West Lothian Council, Fife Council, and the Petitioner, which are set out in **Annexe C**.
4. Written submissions received prior to the Committee's last consideration can be found on the [petition's webpage](#).
5. Further background information about this petition can be found in the [SPICe briefing](#) for this petition.

6. The Scottish Government's initial position on this petition can be found on the [petition's webpage](#).

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who meet the qualification for free bus travel cannot actually use buses either because rural bus routes have been withdrawn or because the buses used in rural areas of Scotland have toilets that are unsuitable for disabled people.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 rail 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 21 December 2022

The Convener: PE1928 calls for free rail travel for disabled people who meet the qualifications for free bus travel. The petition was lodged by David Gallant, and the committee heard from David and from Nicoletta Primo of Sight Scotland earlier this month, when we discussed the accessibility issues that disabled passengers face when using rail travel versus bus travel and how an extension of the national entitlement card scheme to provide free rail travel might be financed.

We heard about a lack of consistency in the way that discounted fares or companion travel are applied in different areas and the confusion that that creates for passengers and rail staff. We heard of individuals boarding a train where there is a concessionary scheme in place but getting off the train where there is not a concessionary scheme in place and then being asked to pay for a ticket.

As a result of that discussion, the committee has written to the local authorities that offer discounted fares for companion travel to find out more about the scheme and how it operates in practice. Members might also be aware that the issue of free rail travel for blind and partially sighted people and their companions was the subject of a members' business debate on 13 December. During the debate, the Minister for Transport indicated that Transport Scotland has been commissioned to look into the costs of a national scheme and that it will review the approach to companion travel as part of the fair fares review. In the light of that information, certain questions might present themselves as a way to proceed. Would colleagues like to recommend any?

David Torrance: Given the assurances that the minister gave in the debate, I suggest that we write to the Scottish Government to ask what consideration it is giving to introducing a national policy for companion rail travel, and to ask it to confirm that the fair fares review will consider free travel for companions and people with disabilities.

The Convener: It might be sensible for us to wait for the responses that we are expecting from local authorities and then write on the back of that evidence. Are we all content with that as the next step forward?

Members indicated agreement.

Annexe C

Strathclyde Partnership for Transport (SPT) submission of 23 January 2023

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

Thank you for your letter of 12 December 2022 and for giving the opportunity for Strathclyde Partnership for Transport (SPT) to respond to your request for information subsequent to the meeting of the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee 7 December 2022 where the above petition was considered. Please now find below observations on each of the points raised:

1. **the number of passengers making use of the companion travel discount scheme for rail journeys in the Strathclyde area;**

Specifically, the number of passengers who make use of companion travel is not recorded at point of rail travel, however based on journey information obtained from ScotRail showing a breakdown of the number of journeys undertaken by companions, this is currently just under 45,000 companion journeys for disabled and blind cardholder are made annually within the Strathclyde area.

However, by way offering some additional information on card types, across the SPT area there are currently around 650,000 National Entitlement Cards (NEC) in circulation and where cardholders are eligible for discounted rail travel across the Strathclyde network. Of this total, just over 60,000 NEC cards have been issued through disability with just over 50,000 of these cards having companion entitlement.

2. **the support provided to passengers to ensure they can access the reduced fares when travelling with a National**

Entitlement Cardholder, particularly where staffed ticket offices are not available at the beginning of their journey

Information relating to accessing concessionary rail fares is available on SPT and ScotRail websites and can be found at:

- SPT website information:
<https://www.spt.co.uk/tickets/concessions/>
- ScotRail website information:
www.scotrail.co.uk/tickets/railcards

Fares information can also be obtained online, from station ticket counters (at staffed stations) or from onboard train staff where concessionary tickets can be purchased. Furthermore, ScotRail stations in Strathclyde have push button help points on platforms where customer assistance can be provided.

3. **what guidance and training is provided to rail staff to ensure that the policy on companion travel is being applied consistently across the region?**

ScotRail, as the rail operator and participant within the Strathclyde Concessionary Travel Scheme, issues a concessionary fares scheme guide and handbook to area managers, booking office, and on-train staff giving details of schemes operated in all authorities which includes photos of all different card types. We are aware that this guide is shared during ScotRail's regular operational communication briefings to ensure application of travel discounts is applied correctly across the rail network.

With regard to providing a view on whether there is scope within the existing concessionary travel scheme budget to provide free rail travel to all holders of National Entitlement Cards for people with disabilities, it may be helpful to provide some background information.

The Strathclyde Concessionary Travel Scheme is administered by SPT but funded entirely out of local authority budgets by the twelve local

authorities that make up the SPT area¹. The concessionary travel scheme provides Strathclyde residents who hold a National Entitlement Card (NEC) with discounted fares on rail, ferry and Subway, with a basic concessionary fare offered across all modes and alternate fares charged for longer distance concessionary journeys.

For rail, this means concessionary rail journeys under 10 miles are charged the basic rate of £1.00 single and £1.50 return and for journeys over 10 miles, half the standard rail fare is applied. Concession fares are reviewed annually and set by the scheme's Joint Committee.

The scheme, which sees in excess of 5 million journeys made each year² costs around £4.5 million annually to operate by way of the reimbursement payments that are paid to all participating transport operators for each concessionary journey made.

It should be highlighted that the Scheme's Joint Committee, made up of elected members, has over recent years reported on-going budgetary pressures and financial risk to the future of the Scheme which resulted in an in-depth review being carried out in 2020/21. The outcome of the review was such that the fare structure was found to be financially unsustainable, resulting in only one to two years' worth of funding reserves remaining, thereby putting the immediate future of the Strathclyde Concessionary Travel Scheme at serious risk.

Whilst concessionary travel demand, and resultant reimbursement costs have yet to return to pre-Covid-19 pandemic levels, the reduced demand has enabled the planned new half fare structure, recommended in the 2020/21 review, only to be deferred. However, most recently reported scheme performance figures³ indicate recovery in concessionary travel demand, therefore the scheme and its funding partners continue to experience on-going budgetary pressures.

Whilst the financial cost of providing free rail travel for disabled concession cardholders is not established at this time, the uncertainties regarding current budgetary pressures, would lead us to conclude that the suggestion, as it stands, would not be financially viable under the current Strathclyde Concessionary Travel Scheme.

¹ www.spt.co.uk/corporate/about/history-background

² Figure based on pre-covid levels

³ https://www.spt.co.uk/media/ve4oc3ly/sctsjc300922_agenda8.pdf

I trust this is of assistance, however, if the committee consider it would be helpful to discuss any aspect of this response prior to its next meeting, please advise.

West Lothian Council submission of 8 March 2023

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

Thank you for your letter of 12 December 2022 and for giving the opportunity to respond to your request for information subsequent to the meeting of the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee 7 December 2022 where the petition "*PE1928: Provide free rail travel for disabled people who meet the qualifications for free bus travel*" was considered. I can confirm this is an officer's response.

The following responses relate directly to the current West Lothian Council Rail Concession Scheme. It should be noted that at a meeting of West Lothian Council on Tuesday 21st February a number of budget saving measures were approved. One of these measures was the removal of the West Lothian Council Rail Concession Scheme. The final date for concessionary rail journeys under this scheme in West Lothian is 30th April 2023.

1. The number of passengers making use of the companion travel discount scheme for rail journeys across West Lothian;

The number of Passengers making use of a companion discount is not recorded separately at time of purchase so I am unable to fulfil this request specifically. The reason for this is that this discount reflects the same fare charged on the current West Lothian Council Rail Concession scheme and are charged as such. Additionally, West Lothian Council are billed on the number of journeys which does not reflect the number of individual people making use of the scheme, this will include individuals making multiple journeys. To provide some additional information on the Rail Concession

Scheme in West Lothian, I can confirm that the number of journeys taken in financial year 2021/22 was approximately 116,000 and the current financial year 2022/23 to 5th February 2023 is approximately 85,000. These are a combined total of concessionary cardholders and their eligible companions.

A total of approximately 46,000 NEC cardholders in West Lothian are eligible for the West Lothian Council Rail Concession Scheme which will cease on 30th April 2023. Approximately 3,500 of these have companion eligibility.

Separately to the West Lothian Scheme is The Scottish National Blind Persons Scheme of which approx. 280 cardholders will remain eligible for free rail travel however their companions will no longer receive the discount from the local scheme when this ends on 30th April 2023.

2. The support provided to passengers to ensure they can access the reduced fares when travelling with a National Entitlement Cardholder, particularly where staffed ticket offices are not available at the beginning of their journey

Information relating to accessing concessionary rail fares is available on West Lothian Council and ScotRail websites and can be found at:

West Lothian Council -

<https://www.westlothian.gov.uk/article/34299/Rail-concessions-using-your-bus-pass>

ScotRail website information: www.scotrail.co.uk/tickets/railcards

Fares information can also be obtained from station ticket counters (at staffed stations) or from onboard train staff where concessionary tickets can be purchased.

3. What guidance and training is provided to rail staff to ensure that the policy on companion travel is being applied consistently across the region?

ScotRail have a Concessionary Fares Scheme Guide which is distributed to all members of frontline staff which is updated with

any changes. These details are also covered during ScotRail 'Ops Comms' briefings which take place face to face. It is also featured in ScotRail Ops Comms Handbook accessible via the company intranet.

I trust this provides the committee with the information required however officers would be happy to discuss this in further detail if required.

Fife Council submission of 10 March 2023

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

Fife Council: Companion Rail Travel

If a Fife resident holds a valid National Entitlement Card (NEC) that displays a "C+1" or "Ceye+1" then a companion can travel with the cardholder within Fife, for half fare. If the cardholder travels outwith Fife their companion would require to pay the relevant full fare.

- **Number of passengers making use of the companion travel discount scheme for rail journeys across Fife**

Fife currently has 203,612 valid NEC cards on issue, 06/03/2023. Of these, 159,546, **78%**, have access to concessionary travel services.

Cards issued on age grounds, 60+, or disability, will have access to both bus and rail travel concessions.

Of those cards offering travel concession 7%, **11,270**, are **companion cards (+1)**:

- Disabled (C+1): 10,499
- Blind (Ceye+1): 771

Between 01/04/2022 - 08/01/2023 the number of companion journeys averaged at 76 per 4-week period, equivalent of 38 return companion journeys.

Potential for 11,270 passengers to travel by rail with a companion, it is estimated, from the current use, that the number of single companion journeys made using +1 element during the financial year 2022/23 will be around 1,000.

- **The support provided to passengers to ensure they can access the reduced fares when travelling with a National Entitlement Cardholder, particularly where staffed ticket offices are not available at the beginning of their journey.**

Information can be found on Fife Council Web site

[MyFife Travel Benefits | Fife Council](#)

Tickets may only be purchased on day of travel

NEC cardholders can purchase their ticket at any manned office or if unmanned, on board the train.

Should there be limited guard facilities on board it may be that they are required to purchase their tickets when they arrive at their destination.

- **What guidance and training is provided to rail staff to ensure that the policy on companion travel is being applied consistently across the region**

Scotrail have the responsibility to ensure that all staff working in Fife stations and train staff working on trains which stop at Fife stations have the relevant scheme guidance and training to be conversant with the Fife concessionary travel rail scheme.

- **Committee Members would also welcome your view on whether there is scope within the existing concessionary travel scheme budget to provide free rail travel to all holders of National Entitlement Cards for people with disabilities.**

In addition to the 11,270 C+1 cards on issue there are a further 2,405 C cards issued to those with disabilities who do not qualify for a companion card.

Unfortunately, there is no provision within our existing rail concessionary travel budget to extend what is currently on offer.

Petitioner submission of 24 March 2023

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

I do not feel that the submissions provided by Strathclyde Passenger Transport, West Lothian Council, and Fife Council are relevant to my petition because they are all urban areas. My petition was intended mainly to benefit rural areas.

If necessary, the free rail travel for disabled people could be restricted to specific rail routes such as:

- Glasgow Queen Street – Oban/Fort William and Mallaig
- Glasgow Queen Street – Aberdeen and Inverness
- Edinburgh – Aberdeen and Inverness
- Aberdeen – Inverness
- Inverness – Kyle of Lochalsh, Thurso and Wick

and availability could be limited to those residing in rural areas.