



# Has the policy of concessionary bus travel for older people in Britain been successful?



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## ABSTRACT

Older people in Britain are entitled to free off-peak travel by bus over the whole country in which they live. The introduction of the policy was a political decision with the stated objectives of increasing public transport usage by older people, improving their access to services and increasing social inclusion. The objective of this paper is to examine the available evidence to see whether these objectives have been realised. The paper also explores whether there have been other benefits for older people and for wider society. It is concluded that the objectives have been met to a large extent, but that many of the impacts might have happened anyway and that the impacts are probably less than many of the studies claim. © 2014 World Conference on Transport Research Society. Published by Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

## 1. Introduction

In Britain, older people are entitled to receive a pass that enables them to travel anywhere in their country of residence by bus in the off-peak without the need to pay. The scheme was introduced in three stages without significant analysis into the likely impacts. The objectives of introducing the scheme were social with the aim of improving the lives of older people. The purpose of this paper is to examine whether the objectives have been met.

In the next section, the evolution of the scheme is outlined and the objectives summarised. Then the evidence on the impacts of the policy is examined to see the extent to which they have been met, followed by discussion about other benefits to older people and wider society. The extent to which the objectives have been met are discussed and conclusions drawn.

## 2. The concessionary travel scheme in Britain

Concessionary travel on buses has been offered to older people, blind people, children and disabled people since at least the early 1950s (Hansard, 1960). The proposal for a national minimum standard for concessionary travel for older people was put forward in the White Paper entitled 'New Deal

for Transport: Better for Everyone' (Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, 1998) which stated, in paragraph 4.81:

*"We will introduce a national minimum standard for local authority concessionary fare schemes for elderly people with a maximum £5 a year charge for a pass entitling the holder to travel at half fare on buses. This will enable elderly people, especially those on low incomes, to continue to use public transport and to use it more often, improving their access to a range of basic necessities such as health care and shops and reducing social isolation. Local authorities will still be able to offer more generous schemes if they wish to do so. The change will require legislation".*

The Transport Act 2000 gave all those living in England and Wales who had reached the state pension age (then 65 for men, 60 for women) and those with disabilities, a free pass entitling them to half-fare bus travel within their local area all day Saturdays, Sundays and Bank Holidays and between 0930 and 2300 on weekdays. The new rules came into effect on 1 April 2001 within London and on 1 June 2001 in England outside London (Butcher, 2011).

After a hearing in the European Court of Human Rights, the age at which men were entitled to apply for a concessionary travel pass (CTP) was reduced to 60, which was implemented in April 2003.

In the 2005 Budget (H.M. Treasury, 2005), the then Chancellor of the Exchequer, Gordon Brown, announced that the scheme in England would be extended from a half-price concession to free travel on local bus services. Under the heading of 'Building a fairer society', he said, in paragraphs 5.64 and 5.65:

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*“The Government is continuing to ensure that all pensioners can share in rising national prosperity. Since 1997, it has done this through directly increasing the incomes of older people and by indirectly reducing the cost of key public services to older people”.*

*“Budget 2005 continues this policy by announcing free off peak local area bus travel for those aged over 60 and disabled people in England from April 2006. Not only will this reduce the cost of travel for approximately 11 million people aged over 60 and approximately 2 million disabled people, it should also help approximately 54 per cent of pensioner households who do not have a car to travel freely in their local area”.*

This was implemented from 1 April 2006 in England.

In the 2006 Budget (H.M. Treasury, 2006) the Chancellor announced that from 1 April 2008 free bus travel would be extended England-wide. He said, in paragraph 5.50:

*“Budget 2005 announced free off-peak local area bus travel for those aged over 60, and all disabled people, in England from April 2006. Building on this and recognising the importance of public transport for older people and the role access to transport has to play in tackling social exclusion and maintaining well-being, this Budget announces free off-peak bus travel for all pensioners and all disabled people, in England from April 2008, at a cost of up to £250 million a year. The Government will consult with local authorities and other interested parties on the best framework for delivering this entitlement”.*

This was introduced from 1 April 2008. The statutory scheme in England, known as the English National Concessionary Travel Scheme (ENCTS), provides free bus travel on all local buses across England from 9.30 am to 11.00 pm on weekdays and all day at weekends and on Bank Holidays for those eligible (Butcher, 2011). Local authorities can provide extra concessions for those living in their area. The present Coalition Government has given a commitment to maintain the scheme, which it regards as successful (Department for Transport, 2012) but it has retained the policy of increasing the age of eligibility in line with changes in the state pension age in England announced by the previous Government in 2009 (Butcher, 2011).

Similar schemes have been introduced in Scotland and Wales. In London the pass is branded as the ‘Freedom Pass’ and permits older and disabled people to travel free on both buses and the London Underground at all times.

As indicated above, the scheme in England has been introduced in three stages. In summary, the objectives have been:

1. To increase public transport usage by older people, especially those on low incomes and those without a car.
2. To improve access to basic necessities such as health care and shops for older people.
3. To reduce social isolation, reduce social exclusion and maintain wellbeing for older people.

In the next three sections, evidence will be examined to see the extent to which these objectives have been achieved.

It should be noted that it is not possible to establish the effectiveness of the policy unambiguously because of the absence of a counterfactual case: there are no older people in Britain who are not entitled to a CTP whose behaviour could be compared with that of CTP holders. Concessionary passes have been available under local schemes for many years which limits the opportunity for comparisons over time. In the literature there are some examples where comparisons have been made with other populations such as those aged 50–60 or people in northern England when changes were made to the scheme in Scotland prior to the equivalent changes in England but there are weaknesses in such approaches: in the former case people aged 50–60 are much more likely to be employed than older people, and the use of CTPs in different areas will reflect the local bus services and the characteristics of the population. Also, some older people would be using buses even without the CTP, so the fact that the pass is used for a particular travel purpose, for example, does not necessarily mean that the pass has stimulated all the use of the bus that can be identified. Notwithstanding these caveats, there is a large volume of data about the use of CTPs by older people which can be interpreted in terms of the objectives outlined above, but caution is required to ensure that the claims of the impact are not exaggerated.

### 3. The impact of the scheme on public transport use by older people

The first objective identified above was to increase public transport usage by older people. As Table 1 shows, this seems to have happened. Since receiving their CTPs, 54% of the recipients are using buses more, 35% about the same and 10% less. The larger increases seem to be amongst those who used the bus often previously. The picture is more complex than this implies, because the comparison is with the situation before receiving the pass. For many of them, receiving the pass would have coincided with retirement so they might be using buses more because they have more time available or because they no longer have a company car. On the other hand, they are older than they were before obtaining the pass and so might be travelling less than previously. Because CTPs are issued free of charge, obtaining one does not necessarily imply an intention to use the bus. This is illustrated in Table 2, which shows that 25% of CTP holders never use buses: they may have obtained the pass as a former of insurance, for example, in case their car is not available. Alternatively they may have obtained it in order to be able to show that they are entitled to some concessions, for example, reduced price access to some services. Table 2 also shows that those who have a pass tend to use the bus more often than those who do not.

One objective of the policy was to increase bus usage amongst those without a car or on low incomes. Tables 3 and 4 show that those without a car and those with low incomes are using buses more frequently than before obtaining a pass, but not to a significantly greater extent than those who own a car or with higher incomes.

**Table 1**  
Change in frequency in the use of buses in Great Britain since receiving a CTP by previous frequency of use (%).

	Change in frequency of use of buses since receiving a CTP					
	A lot more often	A little more often	About the same	A little less often	A lot less often	Don't know
<i>Previous frequency of use of buses</i>						
At least once a week	53	23	24	–	–	–
Use, but less than once a week	20	40	30	5	4	1
Never	2	9	58	5	22	5
All	28	26	35	3	7	2

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