

Consultation on changes to the Concessionary Fares Scheme



Workers Party Response

The Workers Party welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Department for Infrastructure's proposals for *Consultation on free and discounted fares on public transport (concessionary fares)*.

Reviewing the provision of free travel for the over 60's and other concessionary travel arrangements should never have been the subject of a cost-cutting consultation exercise.

Free travel for the over 60s and concessionary fares for others cannot be treated as a balance sheet entry – they should instead be representative of core values in our society.

Public transport should be considered and treated as a public utility – just like energy, water and infrastructure. It should be publicly funded and under public control. It is not a cash cow for use in the bail out of banks, failed economics or business write offs.

Universally extended

The Workers Party contends that rather than seeking to restrict and remove free and concessionary travel arrangements that they should be universally extended to provide free travel for school children, students and apprentices, people with disabilities and people in receipt of benefits.

Additionally, significantly subsidised travel should be available to all other groups and tourists arriving in Northern Ireland should be extended a three-day free travel pass. Similar schemes have already been adopted successfully by a number of European cities and countries.

A robust, and universally accessible, public transport system should be not only be a key component of a modern society, it should also be understood as a social and economic investment rather than as a burden and drain on resources. Similarly, a growing over 60s population should be embraced, supported and facilitated to play full and active roles in the community, society at large and in the economy.

Positive effects

The benefits of free and concessionary travel are well known. They support social inclusion and mental health well-being, they enhance social mobility and improve connectivity, they increase the use of public transport, impact favourably on the environment and have a positive effect on the economy.

Investment in a universally accessible, free and subsidised at the point of use, public transport system represents a firm foundation for a healthier, more connected, inclusive and vibrant society.

Therefore, the Workers Party proposes:

- no change to the eligibility rules and no restrictions on times of travel, on bus and train.
- an extension of the current scheme to include free travel for school children, students, apprentices, people with disabilities and people in receipt of benefits.
- free bus and rail travel for asylum seekers arriving in Northern Ireland.
- tourists arriving in Northern Ireland should be able to avail of a 3 Day Free Travel pass.
- a non-fee application process for all groups.
- eligibility on the basis of primary residency.

We are happy to discuss and / or elaborate any of the above proposals and consent to the publication of this consultation response.

August 2023

