

Written Response by the Welsh Government to the report of the Petitions Committee report entitled Freedom to thrive: P-06-1346 Provide free and accessible public transport for under 18s in Wales to lower carbon emissions and boost growth.

Welsh Government is committed to the most wide-ranging reform of the delivery of bus services in the UK since the deregulation of buses in 1986. We will be bringing buses back under public control through our plans to franchise buses across Wales. At the same time we will lift the ban on the creation of municipal bus companies, allowing local authorities to form their own bus companies.

This change will reverse nearly forty years of privatisation which has seen the public sector lose control on the routing of buses, the timetabling of buses and the fares that are charged to the travelling public. Ultimately this means that decisions have been made by commercial bus operators which may not necessarily serve the best interests of the travelling public.

In order to provide better value to bus passengers we fund a concessionary fare scheme which offers free travel to people aged over 60 or with certain disabilities. We also fund MyTravelPass which offers a 1/3 reduction to young people aged 16-25 (with people under the age of 16 paying child fares). Of course, we would like to go further than this; and indeed we were planning an introducing a Fairer Fare scheme which would see a heavily discounted fare offering to all passengers but the fiscal outlook has not allowed us to progress this initiative. Instead, we have invested our funding to protect as much as the bus network as possible making sure there are bus services available right across Wales. Without this intervention it is likely we would have seen wholesale cancellations of bus services as the industry continued to feel the effects of reduced patronage and increased costs resulting from the covid pandemic.

I have set out my response to the Report's individual recommendations below.

Detailed responses to the recommendation are set out below:

Recommendation 1.

The Committee recommends that:

The Welsh Government should set out a clear ambition to provide free public transport for young people at the earliest opportunity.

Response: Accept.

We have a programme for government commitment to explore extensions of the MyTravelPass for reduced-cost travel for young people. As we prepare for the introduction of franchising, we will give consideration to whether the financial outlook allows us to introduce such a scheme.

On Transport for Wales rail services, we already provide free travel for young people traveling with a fare paying adult, reducing the cost of public transport for families. Under 11s are free on all our trains, and under 16s are free on off-peak services. Additionally there is a 16-17 Saver Railcard which offers 50% off most rail fares across Wales and England, not just TFW services. It can be used every day of the year with no time restrictions and no minimum fare. Whilst there is an annual cost of £30 for the card, the average saving last year was £367, making it a worthwhile investment for regular travellers.

Financial Implications: None, any additional costs must be drawn from existing budgets.

Recommendation 2.

The Committee recommends that:

The Welsh Government should undertake preparatory work with a view to introducing a free public transport for young people scheme in the future. This should include, but not be limited to, work to understand current patronage and travel habits of young people.

Response: Reject.

We have already undertaken detailed analysis of various fare schemes that we had hoped to introduce earlier in this Senedd term. We are now focussed on making preparations for franchising, which will be the most ambitious reform of bus service provision across the UK. It is right that we focus our limited resources on the planning and delivery of franchising.

Financial Implications: None.

Recommendation 3.

The Committee recommends that:

The Welsh Government should engage with key stakeholder groups to initiate discussions around enhanced concessionary transport for young people. This should include the bus industry, trade unions, concessionary scheme operators, local authorities and protected and vulnerable groups.

Response: Reject.

If we get to position where we are able to introduce free travel for young people we will undertake significant engagement with a wide range of stakeholders and representatives of protected and vulnerable groups. Until then we will focus our efforts on the planning and implementation of franchising.

Financial Implications: None.

Recommendation 4.

The Committee recommends that:

The Welsh Government should ensure that its work to reform the bus sector in Wales does not create any barriers to introducing free public transport for young people at the earliest opportunity.

Response: Accept.

Franchising will give us total control over the fares of Wales's future bus network. As part of our work to prepare for franchising we are considering our fare strategy through two lenses. The first being about the structure of our fares; and the latter the price point. This is a specific choice as it allows us to ensure that we put in place fare structures that can accommodate a wide range of ticket prices including zero fares. This means that should the financial outlook allow we will be able to introduce free transport for young people without delay.

Financial Implications: None, any additional costs must be drawn from existing budgets.

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