

Briefing for Scottish Government

Debate: The Future of Public Transport – The Fair Fares Review



28th March 2024

About us

The Poverty Alliance is Scotland's anti-poverty network. Together with our members, we influence policy and practice, support communities to challenge poverty, provide evidence through research and build public support for the solutions to tackle poverty. Our members include grassroots community groups, academics, large national NGOs, voluntary organisations, statutory organisations, trade unions, and faith groups.

1. Introduction

In our wealthy nation, it is unjust that so many people do not have adequate incomes for a dignified life. Yet 21% of people in Scotland live in poverty.¹ We all rely on our critical public services, but they are a vital lifeline for people living on low incomes, and so investment in - and reform of - our public services play a huge role in reducing the cost of living. **Reform to our public transport systems is therefore an integral part of tackling poverty.**

Accessible, affordable and sustainable public transport has transformative potential. It is a lever to easing the financial pressures on low-income households by unlocking employment, education and healthcare. This would ultimately raise household income and protect people from being swept into poverty or pulled in deeper. But too often, people living in poverty are locked out of accessing public transport due to rising cost and poor transport links, resulting in many being unable to access vital services.

We were commissioned by Scottish Government to recruit and facilitate a Citizen's Panel - made up of people living in both rural and urban environments with experience of poverty and using public transport - to share their views and shape the Fair Fares Review. Feedback from the panel can be found in the review's supporting paper three and includes the groups aspirations for public transport around cost, availability, reliability, safety and concessionary travel schemes.² It was important that people with experience of poverty informed the review and we see this as a critical aspect of good quality anti-poverty policymaking.

We are pleased that in the Fair Fares Review,³ the Scottish Government recognises the necessity of good public transport systems for daily life. We welcome the continuation of the under 22's concessionary bus travel pass; work to provide free bus travel to those seeking asylum; and changes to extend concessionary travel for young people onto ferries.

However, **the recommendations and actions presented in the review fall short of unlocking the true potential of public transport for those on low incomes.** The review's vision is, in part, underpinned by the priority of "promoting equality" with one proposed outcome being that public transport systems "will be affordable to all". Despite this, there is little commitment to the immediate, large-scale reform that is needed to make these systems work for all people.

Whilst we support the development of a pilot of flat fare ticketing, this does not speak to the urgent action that is needed on tackling rising transport costs across the country. This is a

¹ Scottish Government (2024) *Poverty and Income Inequality in Scotland 2020-23*. Data available at: [Download data](#)

² Poverty Alliance (2023) *Fair Fares Review Supporting Paper 3: Poverty Alliance Report*. Available at: [Fair Fares Review \(transport.gov.scot\)](#)

³ Transport Scotland (2024) *Fair Fares Review*. Available at: [Fair Fares Review \(transport.gov.scot\)](#)

less effective mechanism that a fare cap which would have an emphasis on limiting costs. Furthermore, **we consider it necessary for flat fares to be accompanied by wider action around the extension of concessionary travel.** This would support those who would find the cost of even capped fares unattainable. It is disappointing then that there is limited new commitments for concessionary travel, particularly for those on low incomes.

It is additionally disappointing that many of the areas raised by the Citizen's Panel as a priority for the review are omitted or have not been progressed on the basis of cost. This includes detail on how the accessibility needs and safety concerns of women and girls, disabled people, and Black and minority ethnic people when using public transport are going to be addressed. We would welcome more detail on the costings and modelling that led to policies, such as concessionary travel for unpaid carers, being identified as unaffordable.

2. Key messages and recommendations

The Citizen's Panel supported and facilitated by the Poverty Alliance underscored that the cost of public transport remains the key concern for people living on low incomes. Panel members reported that this cost influenced their decision to leave the house, their employment decisions and how they spend their time.

Several further key messages emerged from the panel:

- A public transport system that is **more affordable, accessible and reliable, and that meets local needs, must be a priority.**
- There is a need for **expanded and easily accessible concessionary schemes** that reduce costs for people who need it most.
- A **lack of safety** on public transport for women and girls, disabled people, and Black and minority ethnic people forces behaviour change and limits participation in society; this should be considered throughout the review.
- **Reliability is critical to people;** public transport must show up, in good condition and on time, with routes that work for local communities.
- **Ticketing should be integrated** to cut costs for the user and to create ease of travel.
- The **participation of people living on low incomes** in public transport reform is imperative.

The Citizen's Panel put forward a number of recommendations for the Scottish Government including:

- Expand concessionary travel to under 25s, people in receipt of low-income and disability benefits, and unpaid carers.
- Integrate our transport systems and expand concessionary travel to include all modes of transport including rail, ferry and tram.
- Ensure that local authority funding enables the design of public transport services and routes which meet the needs of local people.

3. Cost

The prohibitive cost and availability of public transport disproportionately impacts those on lower incomes, highlighted by Transport Scotland statistics which show that **24% of people earning up to £15,000 a year use the bus to get to work, compared to just 4% of those earning over £50,000 a year.**⁴

These issues are amplified in rural Scotland where **transport is the most significant additional cost to daily life compared to those who live in urban areas, amounting to**

⁴ UK Government (2019) *Transport and inequality: An evidence review for the Department of Transport*. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/60080f728fa8f50d8f210fbe/Transport_and_inequality_report_document.pdf

an additional £50 per week.⁵ This is in part due to the reliance on private cars because of unreliable and expensive public transport, with bus fares in rural Scotland higher than those in urban areas.

Citizen's Panel members all recalled times where the cost of transport acted as barriers to their plans:

"It's just over what I make in half an hour - I can't really justify it and I don't really go into city centre as much because the tickets are so expensive."

4. Concessionary travel schemes

The commitment to maintain the existing free Young Person's bus pass eligibility is the right thing to do. Since its introduction, millions of journeys using the under 22's concessionary bus travel scheme have been made.⁶ Expansion of concessionary foot passenger travel for under 22s island residents on inter-island ferries is welcome and will assist with the integration of our public transport system. However, we think this proposal should be broader in scope. This proposal also depends on there being strong public transport links to and from ferries, which we know is not currently available. Members of the Citizen's Panel who were parents commented on the success of the under 22's concessionary bus travel scheme:

"Under 22 has made such a difference and eased and helped us as a family. Cost was the thing that prevented me going to city centre."

However, we note with disappointment that the policy options to expand concessionary travel to all forms of public transport, those who are aged under 26 and those who are unpaid carers are not being progressed. The Fair Fares Review also gives no consideration of concessionary travel for those in receipt of low-income benefits.

There was strong support for concessionary schemes from the Citizen's Panel, and a belief that some population groups – including those on low incomes - require support to the access public transport to allow them to access essential services and take part in society.

5. Availability and reliability

A key message from the Citizen's Panel was that reliability is critical to people. We are therefore pleased that action stated in the review are focused on the principles of improving the availability and reliability of, and integration between, public transport services.

Panel members living in urban environments were less likely to have access to a car reported having to walk when public transport did not show up. This could be late at night or in poor weather conditions, raising important safety concerns particularly for women, children and disabled people:

"As a parent reliability is one of your biggest concerns. You want to teach your children independence, if the buses aren't reliable that is a fear. When it's after dark, you always have that fear that something is going to happen."

The lack of reliability of services meant that some participants had opted out of social events or had been unable to access essential services, with implications for people's health and wellbeing:

"Great music venues in Galashiels but the last bus back is at half-past nine. If I can't get a lift, I can't go."

⁵ Scottish Government (2021) *Poverty in rural Scotland: evidence review*. Available at: [2. Rural poverty in Scotland - Poverty in rural Scotland: evidence review - gov.scot \(www.gov.scot\)](https://www.gov.scot/resources/consultations-petitions/consultations/poverty-in-rural-scotland-evidence-review/)

⁶ Intelligent Transport (2023) *Nearly 45 million journeys made since Scottish government introduced free bus travel for under 22s*. Available at: <https://www.intelligenttransport.com/transportnews/143441/nearly-45-million-journeys-scottish-government-free-bus-travel-under-22s>

“I was late for a hospital appointment last week because the bus didn’t show up.”

Rural panel members highlighted the necessity of cars in remote rural areas. The accessibility and availability of rural public transport necessitates car use, particularly for certain groups such as disabled people and single parents:

“I have just under a miles walk to my nearest bus stop. I have never used public transport to get to my work.”

Improving the availability of public transport for people across Scotland should therefore remain a policy priority.

6. Equality, accessibility and safety

We welcome the Fair Fares Review ambition to “improve the equality of physical accessibility to public transport for all in Scotland.” However, there is a concerning lack of acknowledgment in the review of the different experiences that some groups have of public transport.

Alongside the Citizen’s Panel, our 2022 research with the Scottish Women’s Budget Group into women’s experiences of the cost-of-living crisis in Scotland⁷ highlights the unique way women interact with transport. **These processes again emphasised the importance of cost and accessibility as important factors in the ability of our critical public transport system to meet women’s needs. Additionally, it underscored safety concerns in influencing public transport use.**

Women are the majority of public transport users, being less likely to drive than men.⁸ They are also more likely than their male counterparts to be primary caregivers for children, or to have multiple caring responsibilities which means they tend to make more complex, frequent and multi-purpose journeys which drives up cost.

The availability, affordability and accessibility of public transport is therefore particularly relevant to women’s financial security, and their ability to participate in society and the labour market. This is supported by a key message from our research: **having good public transport services would improve not only women’s individual lives, but their entire household’s life.**

Women are also not a homogenous group, and issues of intersectional inequality came to the fore including compounded issues of safety for Black and minority ethnic women and disabled women. Black and minority ethnic women reported racist abuse on public transport:

“I would never go on the bus in the dark... Once the terrorist attack had happened a good friend of mine had their hijab pulled off in the daytime, not even in the dark.”

A lack of safety on public transport was a key consideration, particularly for women and girls, disabled people and Black and minority ethnic people. Members of the Citizen’s Panel disclosed experiences of sexual harassment and abuse on public transport, leading to an understandable reluctance to utilise public transport in future.

“I used a bus before I was disabled, but now accessibility of public transport is a big barrier and pavement.”

Accessibility is a key barrier to reducing car use and meeting the Scottish Government’s targets in this area. While the review acknowledges that “it is also important that we... increase accessibility to our public transport services” there are limited actions in this area, with the review stating that there is “limited room for manoeuvre given the extent of funding

⁷ The Poverty Alliance and Scottish Women’s Budget Group (2022) *“It’s hard work being poor”: Women’s Experiences of the Cost-of-Living Crisis in Scotland*. Available at: [SWBG_PA_Cost_of_Living_Report_Final.pdf](https://povertyalliance.org/SWBG_PA_Cost_of_Living_Report_Final.pdf) (povertyalliance.org)

⁸ Engender (2020) *Response to the Scottish Government’s consultation on the National Transport Strategy*. Available at: [Engender-response-to-the-Scottish-Government-consultation-on-Scotland’s-National-Transport-Strategy.pdf](https://www.engender.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Engender-response-to-the-Scottish-Government-consultation-on-Scotland’s-National-Transport-Strategy.pdf)

required to maintain the safe and efficient operation of our networks amidst the challenging fiscal climate.” This is disappointing as accessibility was a key message for participants in our Citizen’s Panel. If our public transport system is to work for disabled people, who are already more likely to be experiencing poverty, accessibility has to be a key guiding principle of the Scottish Government’s transport policy.

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