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Young Persons' Free Bus Travel Scheme – Year 1 Evaluation: Summary Report

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I. Introduction

The Young Persons' Free Bus Travel Scheme (also known as the Under 22s scheme) commenced on 31 January 2022. All children and young people aged 5-21 resident in Scotland (including asylum seekers and refugees) are eligible to apply.

The policy aims of the scheme are to encourage more sustainable travel behaviours and tackle issues related to transport poverty and access to services by:

- embedding positive sustainable travel behaviours;
- opening up social, education, employment and leisure opportunities; and
- reducing household outgoings to aid children, particularly those living in poverty.

Year One Evaluation

As part of the ongoing monitoring of the scheme, Transport Scotland commissioned a Year One Evaluation. The aim was to consider the short and medium term impacts and outcomes of the scheme after it had been operational for one year, and to provide insights into how the policy was working in practice.

The evaluation adopted a mixed methods approach, as follows:

- A repeat of the pre-introduction baseline survey with young people and parents/carers - referred to here as the 'follow-up survey', where 10,875 valid responses were received;
- Focus groups with young people, parents/carers and other bus users, involving 42 participants in total;
- A consultation-based survey with professional stakeholders; and
- Analysis of available secondary data.

This summary report collates the key findings from across all research strands. More detailed findings are presented in separate analysis reports - one dedicated to the consultation survey with professional stakeholders, and the other addressing all other research strands.

Report Presentation

Full details on the various methodologies used, sample profiles achieved, and limitations/caveats associated with the work are included in the corresponding analysis reports. The remainder of this summary report sets out the key findings as they relate to the three main policy aims.

2. Progress Against Aims and Expected Outcomes

The findings from across the first year of operation indicate that the scheme was making good progress in delivering against most of the aims and expected outcomes.

Embedding Positive Sustainable Travel Behaviours

The evidence showed that increasing numbers of young people were travelling by bus across a wide range of journey purposes because of the scheme. There was some limited early evidence of modal shift away from car use to buses, with young people using the bus both to make journeys they would have made anyway as well as a large volume of new/additional journeys. Females also generated slightly more trips than males, with some also highlighting a preference for bus use at night compared to walking alone or using other modes of transport in the dark, suggesting women view bus use as a viable transport option. Whether this behaviour will be sustained beyond eligibility within the scheme, however, remains to be seen and is an issue which will need to be monitored over the longer term.

Opening Up Opportunities

There was also clear evidence that the scheme had opened up new and additional opportunities and had supported ongoing engagement or more frequent access to existing opportunities and activities. This was particularly strong for social and leisure activities, however, there was also evidence that the scheme had supported access to education (both school and further and higher education), work opportunities, volunteering, and access to support services. The scheme was felt to have provided equal travel access to opportunities by removing the transport cost barrier.

Reducing Household Outgoings to Aid Children

While national datasets were not available to assess the impact of the scheme on poverty levels across Scotland, comparison of the baseline and follow-up surveys provided significant evidence that the scheme had positively impacted travel costs. Cost savings and removing the cost barrier was also one of the main benefits identified as a result of the scheme noted across all respondent types. This was also said to reduce the worry and anxiety related to travel and was felt to be particularly supportive for certain vulnerable household types, including those experiencing poverty, and during the current cost of living crisis.

Expected Outcomes

Evidence showed not only short and medium term outcomes being achieved, but also that some of the long term outcomes were already being progressed.

Expected Outcome	Progress	
Short Term Outcomes		
1. Increased numbers of young people registering for a card/aware of the scheme	✓	Good progress to date
2. Fewer young people learning to drive	?	Mixed results - longer timescale required
3. Increased awareness of bus as a viable travel option	✓	Good progress to date
4. Increased awareness of bus as a viable travel option amongst young women	✓	Good progress to date
5. Reduction in travel costs for young people and their families	✓	Good progress to date
Medium Term Outcomes		
6. Increased numbers of young people using the scheme for journeys otherwise paid for	✓	Good progress to date
7. Journeys which would have been made by car (driving/lift from parents etc.) are made by bus	✓	Good progress to date
8. Young people have increased access to services	✓	Good progress to date
Long Term Outcomes		
9. Reduction in poverty rates amongst young people	?	Longer timescale required to understand if any impact
10. Improved access to education and employment opportunities	✓	Good progress to date
11. Improved access to social and leisure opportunities/activities	✓	Good progress to date
12. Reduction in private car kilometres	?	Impact unclear - longer timescale required

The table shows that good progress is being made to date against all of the expected outcomes, apart from outcomes 2 (Fewer young people learning to drive), 9 (Reduction in poverty rates amongst young people) and 12 (Reduction in private car kilometres), where a longer timescale is required to understand if there is any impact.

3. Embedding Sustainable Travel Behaviours

One of the main aims of the Young Persons' Free Bus Travel Scheme was to embed positive sustainable travel behaviours. In order to support this, a series of expected outcomes were specified, including:

- Increased numbers of young people registering for a card/being aware of the scheme;
- Increased awareness of bus as a viable travel option;
- Increased awareness of bus as a viable travel option amongst young women;
- Fewer young people learning to drive;
- Journeys which would have been made by car (driving/lift from parents etc.) being made by bus; and
- Reduction in private car kilometres.

Awareness and Uptake

Awareness of the scheme was high among young people and parents/carers - 86% of follow-up survey respondents had heard of the scheme, compared to 10% who had not heard of it and 4% who were not sure.

Uptake data indicated that the total national uptake rate was 59% among all 5-21 year olds at the end of April 2023. This ranged from 53% of 5-15 year olds to 70% of 16-21 year olds. Large variations were also found between local authorities. Uptake was also high among survey respondents, where 74% had signed up and used the scheme. A further 8% had signed up but had either stopped using it or had not used it yet, while 15% had not signed up.

The main reasons eligible young people had not signed up for the scheme included that they had not heard of it (22%), that the application process had been off-putting (15%), issues with bus services (14%), that they preferred other modes of transport (13%), and that the child was felt to be too young (11%). Those who had previously used the scheme but stopped noted that this was mainly because they had turned 22 years old and were no longer eligible (45%), followed by, again, issues with local bus services (16%), and the young person not thinking it was safe enough (14%).

Focus group respondents also highlighted a lack of suitable bus services as a key reason for not using the scheme. Many suggested that there were no buses available nearby, or that they took too long/were too slow, were unreliable, or did not go to where they wanted/needed to go.

Use of the Scheme

Usage data showed that a total of **62,178,745 trips** had been made using the Young Persons' Free Bus Travel Scheme between January 2022 and April 2023. Over half of these (59%) were taken by 16-21 year olds, with females generating a higher proportion of the trips than males (46% and 39% respectively).

Follow-up survey respondents who used the scheme also indicated high levels of usage, with 78% using the free bus travel at least weekly. This consisted of 38% who used it five days a week or more, and 40% who used it at least once or twice a week.

Hands Up Scotland Survey data showed that bus use had increased slightly for travel to school since the introduction of the scheme. Similarly, the proportions of survey respondents using the bus had also increased (between the baseline and follow-up survey) across all journey purposes specified. The largest increase was use of bus for social and leisure activities, where bus use rose by 12 percentage points from an average of 33% before the scheme's introduction to 45% afterwards:

“I definitely use it [the bus] more and I never really used a bus before it came out.” (Scheme User)

Many professional stakeholders also indicated that there had been an increase in the number of young people both travelling by bus and travelling more often since the introduction of the scheme.

Impact on Other Transport Modes

While bus use among young people was shown to have increased since the introduction of the scheme, comparison of the baseline and follow-up survey data showed that car use had declined across nearly all journey purposes. Journeys which showed the biggest change in car use included visiting family and friends (a 10 percentage point decrease), and for social and leisure activities (a nine percentage point drop).

While official statistics around car use were not available for the post-implementation evaluation period, there was a strong perception among research participants that car use had reduced. Young people, parents/carers, and professional stakeholders indicated that young people needed to be driven or given lifts less often as a result of the scheme:

“I'm an avid car user myself, but since the introduction of the travel cards it's been fantastic because now I would say that the majority of the travel

that goes on, I would probably say about 90% of it, has changed from car to buses.” (Parent/Carer of Scheme User)

There was also some evidence from ScotRail data analysis, albeit limited in scope, and a comparison of the baseline and follow-up surveys that indicated train use had decreased among young people since the scheme was introduced.

Learning to Drive

DVSA data showed that driving test rates for those aged 17-21 had increased between 2021-22 and 2022-23 (i.e. pre- and post-implementation of the scheme), with rates now similar to or above pre-Covid-19 levels. Similarly, comparison of the baseline and follow-up survey data showed a six percentage point increase in the proportions aged 17-21 who either drove or were learning to drive. However, a significant backlog in demand caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, and capacity for driving lessons and tests will further impact numbers. This may hide the impact of the Young Persons' Free Bus Travel Scheme on the desire to learn to drive.

However, there was evidence among focus group respondents that the introduction of the Young Persons' Free Bus Travel Scheme had impacted some young people's desire and enthusiasm for learning to drive. Several noted that they either planned to delay lessons, or had dropped out of lessons upon signing up to the scheme:

“I think it's delayed the desire to learn. My son is 17 and is now able to apply for his provisional driving licence, and he literally has said to me, 'I'm in no rush as I've got my free bus pass, I can get anywhere'... It's definitely holding him off learning to drive.” (Parent/Carer of Scheme User)

Others, however, remained enthusiastic about starting driving lessons as soon as possible, either because it was considered necessary, or they felt this was a valuable life skill that provided greater autonomy.

Environmental Awareness

In addition to convenience and cost savings as reasons for delaying learning to drive, several focus group respondents noted that they/their young person were also conscious of the environmental benefits of bus use over cars. It was felt the scheme supported young people to make more environmentally friendly travel choices:

“I feel so much better taking the bus compared to the car because of the greenness and feeling that it is more environmentally friendly.” (Scheme User)

4. Opening Up Opportunities

In addition to encouraging sustainable travel behaviours among young people, the Young Persons' Free Bus Travel Scheme also aimed to open up social, education, employment and leisure opportunities. Again, a series of expected outcomes were identified to help support this, including:

- Young people have increased access to services;
- Improved access to education and employment opportunities; and
- Improved access to social and leisure opportunities/activities.

Independence and Autonomy

One of the main benefits identified of the Young Persons' Free Bus Travel Scheme was increased independence, autonomy, confidence and responsibility for young people. Over two thirds (69%) of follow-up survey respondents said the scheme had allowed them to travel and to do so more often without an adult, and focus group respondents frequently identified increased independence and personal responsibility as a benefit of the scheme:

“She [daughter] can take the bus to anywhere in town now and doesn't have to rely on parents to take her. It has encouraged her to be more responsible and take responsibility, e.g. looking up timetables on the app and planning journeys.” (Follow-up survey)

For those living on islands, it was felt that being able to travel locally for free by bus would also help prepare young people for travel on the mainland:

“I think it will really increase their independence and confidence being able to move around the island, so that when they do leave the island to go to college or university, they might already have the confidence to do that elsewhere as well.” (Parent/Carer of Scheme User)

Accessing Opportunities

Easier to Access Opportunities

Comparison of the baseline and follow-up survey data showed a notable drop in the rates of respondents encountering difficulties in accessing opportunities or activities due to travel restrictions. While 29% of baseline survey respondents perceived that they/their child missed out on opportunities or activities before the introduction of the

Young Persons' Free Bus Travel Scheme, this had reduced to 15% of follow-up respondents after the scheme was launched.

Newly Accessible Opportunities

Follow-up survey respondents who used the Young Persons' Free Bus Travel Scheme indicated that they travelled to new places, as follows:

- 57% for social and leisure activities;
- 43% for apprenticeship or training programme;
- 42% for shopping;
- 37% for visiting family and friends;
- 25% for school/college/university;
- 17% for job/work; and
- 16% for healthcare.

In addition, just over a third (34%) of the follow-up survey respondents stated that they had been able to access new opportunities and activities as a result of the Young Persons' Free Bus Travel Scheme. Again, social, leisure and club-based activities were the most frequently cited 'new opportunities'. However, there was also evidence of the scheme opening up new opportunities for education and work, with both survey and focus group respondents sharing examples of this:

“College - free bus travel allows me to attend as otherwise wouldn't afford it.” (Follow-up survey)

“When I was looking for a job, I wasn't limiting myself just to my town. I was increasing it to where the bus journeys might take me, so I would get more opportunities.” (Scheme User)

Several professional stakeholders also stressed the importance of the scheme in supporting young people to access, and then remain engaged in, further and higher education. They perceived the scheme to be a 'leveller', providing greater equality in access, and supporting students to continue with their studies by removing the financial travel barrier:

“Our students face so many barriers and their previous travel allowance would be spent on other things, which meant they had no money to travel to classes, now they know they can always have their bus pass to travel to college.” (Skills, Training and Education Organisation)

A few professional stakeholders also suggested that there had been a positive impact on employment in local areas as young people could now access job opportunities more easily.

Increased/improved access to other services/activities were also identified, including the ability to access support services:

“Social Work have been able to take advantage of this. Families that couldn't afford placements for young people with additional needs have now been able to get to workshops, placements, etc.” (Local Authority)

Even where young people reported that they were not going to 'new' places, they still welcomed being able to make journeys more independently and more frequently.

Missing out on the Opportunities of the Scheme

Respondents who felt that they were missing out on opportunities generally cited that this was due to a lack of local bus services, or other issues with the service provided, such as infrequent, time limited, or unreliable services, unsuitable routes, or long journey times. Problems with bus/public transport were particularly acute for those living in villages and rural areas. Those living on islands also flagged limitations due to the lack of suitable/regular bus services, which was exacerbated by the cost and lack of availability of ferries.

Among the respondents who had previously used the Young Persons' Free Bus Travel Scheme but had stopped (for any reason), 28% indicated they had lost access to opportunities as a result. Again, this mostly related to the loss of social, leisure and activity-based opportunities, however, a few also noted difficulties in getting to school, and others outlined negative impacts on their employment:

“Had to give up a job in [city] as the travel costs to commute made the job unsustainable in terms of earnings.” (Follow-up survey)

5.Reducing Household Outgoings

The final aim of the Young Persons' Free Bus Travel Scheme was to reduce household outgoings to aid children, particularly those living in poverty. The expected outcomes associated with this aim were as follows:

- Reduction in travel costs for young people and their families;
- Increased numbers of young people using the scheme for journeys otherwise paid for; and
- Reduction in poverty rates amongst young people over the long term.

Travel Costs and Affordability

Across all data collection strands, cost savings for young people and their families were identified as one of the main benefits of the scheme.

In terms of total household travel costs, comparison of the baseline and follow-up surveys suggested there had been little change. However, the proportion of parents/carers spending less than 10% of their total spend on their child's travel expenses had increased. There was also a large increase in the proportion of young people spending £0-£10 on travel after the scheme was introduced, up by 26 percentage points. This shows that more parents/carers were spending less on their child's travel expenses, and more young people were spending less on their own travel since the Young Persons' Free Bus Travel Scheme was introduced.

Those who used the scheme also spent less than those who did not use it:

- 42% of parents/carers whose child used the scheme spent less than 10% of their total travel costs on their child, compared to 23% of those who did not use the scheme; and
- 51% of those aged 16+ who used the scheme spent £0-£10 a month on travel, compared to 24% of those who did not use the scheme.

Further, when asked to rate the affordability of travel and transport, aggregate results showed an increase in the proportions who said this was either very or fairly affordable, rising from 26% before the scheme's introduction, to 38% after. Again, those who used the scheme were more likely to feel transport was affordable (39%) compared to those who did not (32%). The proportion of respondents who considered buses specifically to be affordable also increased by 25 percentage points between the baseline (29%) and follow-up surveys (54%), while those experiencing cost as a challenge or barrier associated with bus use dropped by 31 percentage points when comparing the baseline (51%) and follow-up surveys (20%).

Cost savings for young people and their families was also one of the main benefits of the scheme noted by both professional stakeholders and focus group respondents:

“I would say the main benefit of it is to save you a lot of money. Before I used to spend £35 a month and after the bus scheme, I don't need to spend that money. And I have a brother as well, so... for my family, that's £60-£70 a month they can spend it on something else.” (Scheme User)

These cost savings were noted to have wide reaching benefits. This included allowing young people or parents/carers to reallocate money to other things, such as other essential household costs or to spend on activities/in local shops, thereby boosting local economies. It was also said to reduce the anxiety and worry linked to travel. Even parents/carers of younger children who were not yet using the scheme commented that they could foresee longer term financial benefits.

Use for Trips Otherwise Paid For

Between 25% and 49% (depending on journey purpose) of scheme users in the follow-up survey indicated that they would have used the bus, regardless of the Young Persons' Free Bus Travel Scheme. Based on usage data provided by respondents in the follow-up survey, it was calculated that just over one million (**n=1,023,802**) journeys would have been taken regardless of whether the young person received free bus travel or not. Collectively, this represents a significant overall cost saving for young people and their families.

In addition to saving money on journeys that would have been made anyway, the evaluation also indicated that the scheme had generated a high volume of additional/new trips. Among follow-up survey respondents, the majority of scheme users indicated that they now used the bus across most journey purposes because it was free, ranging from 60% of those who used it for healthcare to 74% of those using the bus for social and leisure activities. Over one million (**n=1,000,952**) new bus journeys (i.e. those that would not have been made by any other means if they did not have access to free bus travel) were calculated to have been made by survey respondents since the scheme's introduction.

Reduction in Poverty Rates

National datasets related to poverty levels in Scotland were not available during the evaluation to cover the scheme's post-implementation period. As such, no comment can be made on the impact of the Young Persons' Free Bus Travel Scheme in reducing poverty rates among young people. However, qualitative feedback from the

evaluation suggests that the scheme was largely considered to be beneficial in tackling poverty and in providing support to those experiencing poverty.

A few professional stakeholders noted that the scheme either integrated well with, or was supportive of other policy or priority areas, particularly in relation to tackling poverty, and the Cost of Living crisis, and providing greater equality/equity between young people from different backgrounds and economic means:

“It has given us a surplus of student support funds that we can now use on discretionary payments during the current cost of living crisis.” (Skills, Training and Education Organisation)

A few respondents across the focus groups and professional stakeholders were also highly supportive of the universal nature of the scheme and its capacity to support those experiencing poverty in a non-stigmatising manner. It was suggested this brought financial equality for young people in relation to travel:

“For parents whose children travel frequently on buses, there is a significant saving for the family, especially at a time where the cost of living crisis affects many. Money saved on bus travel can be used to pay for other family expenses.” (Representative Body)

Valuable Support for Particular Households

While the Young Persons' Free Bus Travel Scheme was appreciated by all respondents who used it, it appeared to be particularly beneficial for large families and single parent households, allowing them to access travel and opportunities that were previously too expensive. The scheme was also considered to be helpful for non-drivers and single car households, facilitating independent travel.

Some also indicated that the Young Persons' Free Bus Travel Scheme had enabled more intergenerational travel/outings, with grandparents travelling more with their grandchildren if/where they also benefitted from free bus travel (i.e. the over 60s free travel scheme).

6. Other Issues

A wide range of other issues were also identified and discussed by respondents. This included challenges related to the initial setup and implementation of the scheme, technical and infrastructure issues experienced, wider impacts and potential unintended consequences.

Application Issues

Both the follow-up survey and focus groups identified issues with the application process. Although this was relevant for a minority, the issues experienced were often highly impactful. In the follow-up survey, 25% of respondents who had signed up for the scheme indicated that they had found the application process fairly or very difficult, and 15% of those who had not signed up said the main reason was the off-putting application process. Evidence was also provided in focus groups that lasting negative perceptions in this regard contributed to some eligible families not applying. Professional stakeholders also noted that the application process had created resourcing challenges for them.

Improvements were made to the application process, both to the online NEC application process and the systems of individual local authorities during the first year of operation, and were shown to have had an impact. Those who had applied more recently were more likely to find the process easy compared to those who applied before the changes were made. However, it was felt there remained scope and need for further improvements to the process, and that greater guidance and support was required for applicants, both in general and for specific groups that might find the process difficult/have difficulty providing the required documentation.

Access Limited by Bus Network

While the scheme itself was largely welcomed, it was felt that it had highlighted differences in provision and access to bus services across the country.

Respondents across all typologies stressed that differences in bus service provision meant that some young people benefited more from the scheme than others:

“I’m a bit disappointed that I can’t use the bus pass more often with my daughter, but it’s not because of the scheme, it’s because the services aren’t suitable.” (Parent/Carer of Scheme User)

Indeed, the main issues experienced since the introduction of the scheme were reliability or buses not turning up on time (49% of respondents), and that buses did not run often enough (45% of respondents). There were also increases in those experiencing service provision challenges since the scheme was introduced, including reliability (+12 percentage points), unsuitable timetables (+11 percentage points) and lack of frequency (+10 percentage points).

It was also felt that the scheme excluded some young people who may benefit from it. For example, it was noted that students aged 22+ were most likely to be in similar financial situations to those aged 21 and under, and there was a risk that existing student discount tickets would be removed as they were largely seen as redundant. In addition, it was highlighted that other vulnerable young people, such as unpaid carers, job-seekers, and care experienced young people aged 22+ also faced financial barriers to transport and may benefit from similar free travel support.

Capacity and Safety Concerns

Another common issue raised across all respondent types was capacity and safety concerns.

It was noted that the increase in young people using the scheme had created capacity issues, particularly on certain routes and around the start/end of the school day, as well as on demand responsive transport (DRT) where competition for services had increased. Focus group discussions found evidence that some bus users (both young people and those aged 22+) had changed their travel behaviour in order avoid using services that were particularly busy with young people.

In addition, 54% of follow-up survey respondents indicated that either they/their child or their friends or family had seen or experienced anti-social behaviour when using any form of public transport in the last 12 months, while 14% had seen or experienced bullying or discrimination over the same time period. While the majority of this was experienced on buses the experiences of other public transport users are likely to be under-represented here. Shouting and swearing, people being under the influence of alcohol or drugs, and other aggressive or intimidating behaviour were the types of anti-social behaviour most often experienced. Meanwhile, the most commonly experienced types of bullying and discrimination were sexism/misogyny and racism, followed at lower levels by homophobia and agism towards children and young people.

Most focus group respondents also outlined concerns and personal experiences related to anti-social behaviour on buses. This was also a concern for professional stakeholders (particularly bus operators, local authorities and Regional Transport

Partnerships). It was felt that anti-social behaviour was happening on and around buses more often as a result of the Young Persons' Free Bus Travel Scheme.

Due to the lack of robust data spanning pre- and post-scheme implementation it is not possible for this evaluation to say whether instances of anti-social behaviour had truly increased, decreased, or remained static since the introduction of the Young Persons' Free Bus Travel Scheme.

Survey respondents indicated that they felt safer on buses than any other mode of public transport during the day (76% felt safe on-board buses either always or often during the day). Meanwhile, although buses ranked third (39%) in terms of perceived safety at night, behind trams (44%) and trains (40%), there had been a slight improvement in perceptions of safety using buses at night since the introduction of the scheme. Those who always or often felt safe using the bus at night increased from 37% in the baseline, to 39% in the follow-up survey.

In addition, there was an 11 percentage point drop in the proportion who had experienced safety concerns at night, and a six percentage point drop in those who had experienced safety concerns when travelling alone.

Similarly, several focus group respondents, and young women in particular, indicated that they would feel safer using the bus at night compared to walking alone/using other travel modes. Some were reassured by the presence and accessibility of the driver and other passengers, and others said that the scheme had reduced the stress of travelling alone or worry about how friends would get home safely at night.

Other Impacts

Finally, other notable issues raised, albeit by fewer respondents, included:

- Welfare concerns for young people having access to and using the scheme;
- Problems with cards not scanning on-board buses and inconsistent policies/responses from drivers;
- That the scheme was supportive for both bus operators and young people in supporting recovery from the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic; and
- Professional stakeholders discussed a range of impacts on the provision and use of school transport.

7. Conclusion

Overall, the Young Persons' Free Bus Travel Scheme was considered highly successful and beneficial across the first year of operation. Many more benefits and positive impacts were identified compared to emerging negative issues, with benefits generally being felt more widely than the negative impacts. The scheme will require longer-term monitoring to address all expected outcomes, to determine the sustainability of observed impacts, and to understand any new 'norms' once the scheme has been fully embedded. However, early indications are very encouraging in relation to the extent to which the scheme is positively impacting on young people and their families.



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