

Strathclyde Concessionary Travel Scheme Joint Committee



Scottish Parliament Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee: Information Request

Date of meeting 17 March 2023

Date of report 7 March 2023

Report by Treasurer

1. Object of report

To inform the Committee of an information request by the Scottish Parliament Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee (“the Petitions Committee”) to SPT for information and views regarding the provision of ‘free’ rail travel for disabled people who meet the qualifications for ‘free’ bus travel.

2. Background

On 9 February 2022, a petition (PE1928¹) was lodged with the Petitions Committee calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to provide ‘free’ rail travel for disabled people who meet the qualifications for ‘free’ bus travel.

The petition was first considered by the Petitions Committee at its meeting on 20 April 2022, where written supporting evidence from Sight Scotland was also reported, highlighting the need for a consistent national policy for rail travel across Scotland that entitles blind and partially sighted people and their companions to ‘free’ rail travel. Sight Scotland in its submission points to differences in concessionary and companion schemes, which they say can cause confusion to passengers and rail staff.

Furthermore, written evidence submitted by Transport Scotland (TS) was reported to the same meeting indicating that ScotRail has no plans to introduce ‘free’ travel for disabled people while pointing out that discounted fares are offered through the disabled persons railcard and that there is ‘free’ travel for blind passengers via a scheme that is operated by local authorities. Further, TS referred to their current Fair Fares review, designed “to ensure a sustainable and integrated approach to public transport fares in the future”. It is understood that existing discounts and concessionary schemes across a range of transport will be considered as part of that review.

An in-person evidence taking session of the Petitions Committee was subsequently held on 7 December 2022 where the petitioner, along with Sight Scotland, presented further evidence regarding challenges faced by disabled persons on the transport network including issues pertaining to companion travel and the cost of travel.

After hearing this evidence, the Petitions Committee wrote to those local authorities² offering local concessionary discounts to find out more about each scheme. SPT, on behalf of the Strathclyde Concessionary Travel Joint Committee, provided responses to a number of

¹ <https://petitions.parliament.scot/petitions/PE1928>

² SPT acting as administrator of the Strathclyde Scheme on behalf of local authorities

specific rail-related questions including levels of companion travel undertaken, the support given to rail passengers to ensure they can access reduced fares, as well as rail staff training to ensure companion travel policy is being applied consistently. The Petitions Committee also sought the views of SPT as to the affordability to the Strathclyde scheme to provide 'free' travel for people with disabilities who were National Entitlement Card holders. A copy of SPT's full response, published on the Petitions Committee website, is attached for noting at Appendix 1.

The response further highlights:

- Governance and financing of the Strathclyde Concessionary Travel Scheme.
- SCTS patronage and fares.
- Funding pressures, the review of the Scheme and the planned changes to the fares approved by the Joint Committee in March 2021 which are currently paused.

3. Conclusion

SPT made clear in its response that, whilst the financial cost of providing 'free' rail travel for disabled concession cardholders is not established at this time, the uncertainties regarding current budgetary pressures would mean that the petition's proposal would not be financially viable under the current Strathclyde Concessionary Travel Scheme.

At the time of writing, the petition remains under consideration by the Scottish Parliament.

4. Committee action

The Committee is asked to note the contents of this paper, specifically SPT's response to the Petitions Committee.

5. Consequences

Policy consequences	<i>The Scheme will continue to meet the RTS Objective "Access for All".</i>
Legal consequences	<i>None at present.</i>
Financial consequences	<i>Figures presented in this report present a major financial risk to the future viability of the Scheme in its present form.</i>
Personnel consequences	<i>None at present.</i>
Equalities consequences	<i>None at present.</i>
Risk consequences	<i>None at present.</i>
Climate Change, Adaptation & Carbon consequences	<i>None directly.</i>

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Strathclyde Concessionary Travel Scheme Joint Committee

For further information, please contact *Martin Breen*, Senior Transport Planner at martin.breen@spt.co.uk

Strathclyde Passenger Transport (SPT) submission of 23 January 2023

PE1928/D: Provide free rail travel for disabled people who meet the qualifications for free bus travel

Thank you for your letter of 12 December 2022 and for giving the opportunity for Strathclyde Partnership for Transport (SPT) to respond to your request for information subsequent to the meeting of the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee 7 December 2022 where the above petition was considered. Please now find below observations on each of the points raised:

1. **the number of passengers making use of the companion travel discount scheme for rail journeys in the Strathclyde area;**

Specifically, the number of passengers who make use of companion travel is not recorded at point of rail travel, however based on journey information obtained from ScotRail showing a breakdown of the number of journeys undertaken by companions, this is currently just under 45,000 companion journeys for disabled and blind cardholder are made annually within the Strathclyde area.

However, by way offering some additional information on card types, across the SPT area there are currently around 650,000 National Entitlement Cards (NEC) in circulation and where cardholders are eligible for discounted rail travel across the Strathclyde network. Of this total, just over 60,000 NEC cards have been issued through disability with just over 50,000 of these cards having companion entitlement.

2. **the support provided to passengers to ensure they can access the reduced fares when travelling with a National Entitlement Cardholder, particularly where staffed ticket offices are not available at the beginning of their journey**

Information relating to accessing concessionary rail fares is available on SPT and ScotRail websites and can be found at:

- SPT website information:
<https://www.spt.co.uk/tickets/concessions/>
- ScotRail website information:
www.scotrail.co.uk/tickets/railcards

Fares information can also be obtained online, from station ticket counters (at staffed stations) or from onboard train staff where concessionary tickets can be purchased. Furthermore, ScotRail stations in Strathclyde have push button help points on platforms where customer assistance can be provided.

3. **what guidance and training is provided to rail staff to ensure that the policy on companion travel is being applied consistently across the region?**

ScotRail, as the rail operator and participant within the Strathclyde Concessionary Travel Scheme, issues a concessionary fares scheme guide and handbook to area managers, booking office, and on-train staff giving details of schemes operated in all authorities which includes photos of all different card types. We are aware that this guide is shared during ScotRail's regular operational communication briefings to ensure application of travel discounts is applied correctly across the rail network.

With regard to providing a view on whether there is scope within the existing concessionary travel scheme budget to provide free rail travel to all holders of National Entitlement Cards for people with disabilities, it may be helpful to provide some background information.

The Strathclyde Concessionary Travel Scheme is administered by SPT but funded entirely out of local authority budgets by the twelve local authorities that make up the SPT area¹. The concessionary travel scheme provides Strathclyde residents who hold a National Entitlement Card (NEC) with discounted fares on rail, ferry and Subway, with a basic concessionary fare offered across all modes and alternate fares charged for longer distance concessionary journeys.

For rail, this means concessionary rail journeys under 10 miles are charged the basic rate of £1.00 single and £1.50 return and for journeys

¹ www.spt.co.uk/corporate/about/history-background

over 10 miles, half the standard rail fare is applied. Concession fares are reviewed annually and set by the scheme's Joint Committee.

The scheme, which sees in excess of 5 million journeys made each year² costs around £4.5 million annually to operate by way of the reimbursement payments that are paid to all participating transport operators for each concessionary journey made.

It should be highlighted that the Scheme's Joint Committee, made up of elected members, has over recent years reported on-going budgetary pressures and financial risk to the future of the Scheme which resulted in an in-depth review being carried out in 2020/21. The outcome of the review was such that the fare structure was found to be financially unsustainable, resulting in only one to two years' worth of funding reserves remaining, thereby putting the immediate future of the Strathclyde Concessionary Travel Scheme at serious risk.

Whilst concessionary travel demand, and resultant reimbursement costs have yet to return to pre-Covid-19 pandemic levels, the reduced demand has enabled the planned new half fare structure, recommended in the 2020/21 review, only to be deferred. However, most recently reported scheme performance figures³ indicate recovery in concessionary travel demand, therefore the scheme and its funding partners continue to experience on-going budgetary pressures.

Whilst the financial cost of providing free rail travel for disabled concession cardholders is not established at this time, the uncertainties regarding current budgetary pressures, would lead us to conclude that the suggestion, as it stands, would not be financially viable under the current Strathclyde Concessionary Travel Scheme.

I trust this is of assistance, however, if the committee consider it would be helpful to discuss any aspect of this response prior to its next meeting, please advise.

² Figure based on pre-covid levels

³ https://www.spt.co.uk/media/ve4oc3ly/sctsjc300922_agenda8.pdf