

Concessionary Travel Scheme

Director/Head of Sue Bamforth, Head of Finance and Business
Department: Development
Report Author: Catherine Nicholson, Accountancy Services Manager

Recommendation: that

- (A) the information on the new national free off-peak local bus travel scheme be noted,**
- (B) Members consider the options for continuing the local discretionary schemes for the 2008/2009 financial year, and**
- (C) an update report be submitted to the next meeting on the six month take up of the concessionary fares schemes along with, if possible, an indication of the likely government funding for the national scheme.**

1. BACKGROUND

- 1.1 Back in April 2006, the Government decided to amend the statutory concessionary travel scheme, from half price bus travel in the district, to free bus travel in the district for eligible pass holders (people aged 60 and over and eligible disabled people). Copeland, as a member of the Cumbria Wide Concessionary Travel Group, along with Allerdale and Eden, have extended the statutory scheme, to offer free travel at all times within Cumbria.
- 1.2 In addition to the statutory scheme, Copeland also operates a local discretionary scheme. This scheme was changed in April 2005, with Travel Vouchers replacing Travel Tokens. Travel vouchers, for taxi and/or rail usage to the value of £15 are offered as an alternative to the bus pass.
- 1.3 At the recommendation of the Social Well Being Overview and Scrutiny Committee, from 1st April 2007, an additional option of a Senior Citizen's rail card has been offered on a one-year trial basis. This was financed from an underspend on the 05/06 budget subject to there being sufficient revenue support grant. As this was a one year only decision, it now needs to be considered whether this scheme can continue.
- 1.4 The Government is now pressing ahead with further changes to the statutory concessionary scheme. It is proposing that from the 1st April 2008 that scheme will change to free national travel.

2. NATIONAL SCHEME 2008

- 2.1 In the 2006 Budget, the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced that free off-peak local bus travel anywhere in England for people aged 60 and over and eligible disabled people would be in place for April 2008.
- 2.2 Under the new proposals, eligible pass holders could be able to board a local bus in England and be entitled to free off-peak travel. This entitlement will apply irrespective of which Authority issued their pass and where they wish to travel, as long as it is within England.
- 2.3 In order for bus drivers throughout England to be able to recognize those entitled to the new concession, the Government is proposing that from April 2008 passes conform to a design and standard specified by the Department for Transport.
- 2.4 Copeland is part of the Cumbrian/Lancashire NOWcard project. This group has responded to the Government's proposals on this issue of the new passes. It is intended that we will continue to issue cards as we currently do – i.e. through the NoWcard bureau. The County Council will be re-equipping the bureau, and it is expected that they will be ready to start the re-issue of all passes in early autumn.
- 2.5 Before any new and replacement cards will be issued, the information held in the databases will be cleansed to try and ensure that it is as up to date as possible.
- 2.6 New National Scheme cards will automatically be produced for all pass-holders who have activated their current cards. It is intended to send out pre-populated forms for pass-holders who have not yet activated (i.e. used) their bus passes.
- 2.7 The Government will be issuing a grant to pay for the replacement cards of approximately £2.85 per card. Cumbria County Council is to provide an estimate of the likely cost of this by September. It may be that this grant will not cover the cost, and if so the County has agreed to make representations to Government on our behalf.
- 2.8 The Government have predicted a high take up for the national scheme, estimating that 91% of those eligible will apply.

3. RAIL CARDS and TRAVEL VOUCHERS

- 3.1 There are two local discretionary schemes currently in place, for those who want to opt out of the statutory bus pass option. These are £15 of Travel Vouchers, or a Senior Citizens Rail Card.
- 3.2 The option of receiving a Senior Citizens Rail Card was agreed to be trialled for in 2007-08. A total of 2,424 railcards were purchased, at a reduced price of £16.50 (bulk order discount).
- 3.2 As at the beginning of July, a total of 1,155 rail cards have been issued. From the Council's point of view, there is no time limit on the issue of these cards, so any un-issued cards can be carried over to the next financial year.
- 3.3 For the first quarter of 2007/08, 3,433 booklets of travel vouchers have been issued as an alternative to the bus pass/rail pass.

4. CONCLUSION

- 4.1 Members need to now consider the options for provision of concessionary travel, particularly with the introduction of free national travel from April 2008.
- 4.2 The current budget for the all the concessionary fares schemes both statutory and discretionary is £546,000. This budget was reduced by £50,000 from the previous year's funding.
- 4.3 The Government has announced that it intends to spend an extra £250m nationally to fund the new national scheme. It is yet to be finalised as to what this funding will cover or whether it will go the County Council or the Borough Councils.
- 4.2 As part of the Council's budget process for 2008/09, the Chief Executive has requested that all Service Departments, undertake a Service Review of their areas. As there is to be no increase in grant settlement from the Government, these reviews will be looking at options available to make savings in the base budget.

List of Appendices

Report to Overview and Scrutiny Committee Social Well-Being 11/09/06
Scrutiny Report to the Executive 19/12/06

List of Background Documents:

None

List of Consultees:

None

CHECKLIST FOR DEALING WITH KEY ISSUES

Please confirm against the issue if the key issues below have been addressed. This can be by either a short narrative or quoting the paragraph number in the report in which it has been covered.

Impact on Crime and Disorder	None
Impact on Sustainability	The Government intends to put an extra £250m in the budget to fund the new national scheme. It is unclear whether this will be sufficient to meet the costs.
Impact on Rural Proofing	The discretionary schemes of Travel Vouchers and Rail Cards are offered to address those areas where the bus services are limited.
Health and Safety Implications	None
Impact on Equality and Diversity Issues	The scheme is open to all people over 60 years of age and those disabled.
Children and Young Persons Implications	None
Human Rights Act Implications	None