

Social Justice and Social Security Committee

19th Meeting, 2023 (Session 6), Thursday, 7 September

Parental Employment and Child Poverty: transport

Introduction

This is the sixth theme and eighth panel of the Committee's inquiry into how to address child poverty through improving parental employment. Members attended a focus group in Glasgow and visits have been held in North Ayrshire, South Uist and Benbecula. Notes of this work and individual responses are [available here](#) under the Engagement tab.

A call for views attracted 108 responses. [A summary of the responses is available here](#). Individual responses [are available here](#).

The visits and call for views have been used to shape the themes for oral evidence taking. In May and June, the Committee held sessions on childcare, employability, education and training and fair and family friendly working.

The panel today will consider how the transport infrastructure impacts on low income parents' ability to access education and employment opportunities. The Committee will hear from:

- Paul White, Director, CPT ([Confederation of Passenger Transport](#)) Scotland
- Paul Finch, Strategy Manager, [Nestrans](#) (regional transport partnership for Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire) and Vice Chair for transportation, SCOTS ([Society of Chief Officers of Transportation in Scotland](#))
- Mick Hogg, Regional Organiser, RMT Scotland ([National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers](#))

This paper provides some background on witnesses and summarises some key themes in the inquiry so far before suggesting **four themes for discussion from page 5 onwards**.

Context

Previous Consideration

This inquiry has looked across a range of policy areas that impact on the ability of parents to improve their income through work. Some of the key themes have included:

- **Childcare** is key, but recruitment issues in the childcare sector will make it challenging to achieve further significant expansion in a short time frame. There are particular challenges for those with additional support needs and in rural areas.
- **Lifelong learning** improves people's employment prospects. Short courses, community-based college provision and partnership working are all key to this. We need better support for part-time students and better childcare and transport infrastructure to support access to lifelong learning.
- **Social security** rules can be a barrier to both education and employment
- Achieving the employment aims in Best Start Bright Futures will require a huge increase in the **scale of employability activity**. The delay in funding has had an impact.
- Employment is still the best route out of poverty if it's **the right job**. It needs to be sustainable, not just 'any job'.
- There needs to be more **flexible eligibility criteria in employability** programmes.
- **Fair and family friendly working** is crucial. It's not just about home working – flexi-time and predictable shifts are important so people can plan childcare. Good line management and clear, practical advice from government for employers can support flexible working. Procurement conditions are part of the answer, but businesses need support to be able to comply.

Transport issues in oral evidence and call for views

The key theme about transport raised in the Call for Views was the need for a reliable, affordable, more extensive public transport system. Current prices and levels of provision can be barriers to taking up employment.

In the evidence sessions so far, transport has been mentioned as one of a number of barriers to work and education. Particularly in very rural areas, parents may need to travel large distances between home, work, school and childcare and lack of transport infrastructure can make this difficult ([Rachel Hunter, Highlands and Islands Enterprise, 29th June col 17](#)).

Lack of affordable transport was also mentioned in the sessions on education and employability. Jackie Galbraith (West Lothian College) described how reductions to

the local bus service made it difficult for some students to get to college. ([Jackie Galbraith, Colleges Scotland, 15th June, col 9](#)).

Susan McGhee ([Flexible Childcare Services Scotland, 8th June, col 5](#)) suggested that responsive transport schemes which cater for elderly people could be expanded to cater for families with young children.

The Call for Views asked what improvements to public transport would support parents. Answers focused on the need for reliable, affordable public transport – especially outside the main cities.

Suggestions for **further subsidies** included reduced or free travel for children, low earners, job-seekers, new starts, students and during the first six month of work. Subsidy cards should apply across different operators and different modes of travel.

The recent introduction of free bus travel for young people was welcomed, but there are issues with the application process. For example, One Parent Families Scotland included a quote from a parent who said:

“The new free bus travel scheme is great (although difficult to navigate the application process) but where we live the best transport to school is by train which isn’t covered by the scheme and the costs add up.”

Dumfries and Galloway Council commented that:

“DGC are aware that ScotRail in partnership with DWP support free travel for those seeking work and for the first month however the rail network regionally is limited. An expansion of this type of partnership with bus companies and local authorities could improve access to this.”

People also asked for **improved routes and timetabling**. Suggestions included more routes – especially bus links – and more services outwith peak times. This applies in rural areas where there are currently few services but also in the ‘commuter’ belt areas around the main cities, where routes tend to centre on the big cities. For example, one person gave the example of:

“many places in Midlothian that are within about 10-15min car journey can take over an hour on a bus as you need to take one bus to Edinburgh to then take another one out.”

Another said:

“Public transport varies so much depending on which area of Scotland you are visiting and this shouldn’t be the case. If Scotland is to be greener, we need a public transport system that provides a solid foundation and is cheaper and more convenient than running a car “

Lack of transport affects employment. For example, one respondent said:

“there are no direct buses from my area (Whitecraig) to Edinburgh so I lost job opportunities there “

Glasgow City Council gave a list of suggestions which reflected the key points made by many. They recommended:

- Subsidised travel for parents on low income
- Affordable travel passes for all modes of transport – train, underground, bus
- Ensure services run at times to support working parents – some areas are very poorly served in the evening/night and weekends, especially Sundays.
- Cross city transport routes that reflect childcare and employment journey
- First mile/last mile local transport – expansion of community transport to offer free/low cost to connect with transport hubs, childcare, work, cross community travel.

Other research

The evidence received by the Committee aligns with [research from the Poverty Alliance](#) in 2021, commissioned by Transport Scotland, which concluded that:

“Transport provides a critical infrastructure for households when living on a low income and must work effectively for household circumstances to help alleviate poverty.

[...]

Solutions to help alleviate poverty raised by families utilising transport within this study suggested approaches such as discounted travel for families, integrated provision of tickets across different suppliers and types of provision as well as improvements to rural infrastructure and services.”

Transport issues in [Best Start Bright Futures](#)

Best Start Bright Futures (BSBF), the Scottish Government’s strategy for tackling child poverty, recognises the contribution of good transport infrastructure, saying that reducing child poverty:

“will require the transformation of our economy, further investment in key infrastructure such as childcare and transport”.

Noting the publication of the [National Transport Strategy](#), BSBF highlights that the Scottish Government is:

- continuing to deliver support through concessionary fares for eligible groups (including free bus travel for under 22s)
- undertaking the Fair Fares Review.

- procuring the next generation digital travel data systems needed for users to plan their journey across all public transport
- providing a £1m community bus fund
- reviewing how Demand Responsive Transport (DRT) can be used to support low income families
- supporting access to transport as part of the expanded employability offer to parents.

The [BSBF Progress report](#) (June 2023) included an update on “enhancing access to and the affordability of public transport.” This highlighted the following progress over in 2022-23:

- Fair Fares Review is progressing
- Marketing campaigns for under 22 free bus travel and encouraging bus use generally
- Procurement process completed for a digital travel data system
- Collaborative Mobility UK are undertaking a wider review of existing and planned Demand Responsive Transport (DRT) services in Scotland. (A [report was published in March 2023](#)).

Priorities for 2023-24 include:

- Completing the Fair Fares review and reporting by end 2023
- Six-month pilot removing peak time rail fares from October 2023
- Review of under 22 concessionary travel, to consider its effectiveness
- £900,000 for the Free Bikes Partnership Fund for school age children
- Community Bus Fund providing £0.75m resource and £5m capital in 2023-24.
- Starting delivery of new digital travel data systems to improve journey planning.

Suggested themes

The following suggests four themes for discussion.

Theme 1: National Transport Strategy and child poverty

The [National Transport Strategy](#) (2020-2040) set out a twenty-year vision:

“We will have a sustainable, inclusive, safe and accessible transport system, helping deliver a healthier, fairer and more prosperous Scotland for communities, businesses and visitors.”

There are four, equally weighted, priorities:

- **Reduces inequalities** – everyone in Scotland will share in the benefits of a modern and accessible transport system. This includes making the system more affordable. “We will target actions to deliver the strategy towards those needing most help, including those living in poverty.”
- **Takes climate action** – and help deliver ‘net-zero’
- **Helps deliver inclusive economic growth.** This includes: “allow(ing) people fair and affordable access to reach the jobs where they can be most productive and boost both business growth and household incomes through improving access to employment.”
- **Improves health and well-being.**

The strategy recognised the need for large scale change, saying:

“At the heart of the NTS is the recognition that we need to make a step-change in behaviour and provide attractive, affordable, accessible and sustainable travel options.”

It discussed the connection between transport policy and poverty:

“In many cases, those on low incomes are excluded from maintaining social connections or accessing employment or training opportunities due to the affordability and availability of transport options. The single most important factor cited by those on low incomes as the greatest transport-related barrier is cost.”

The [latest delivery plan \(2022-23\)](#) included the following specific policies of particular relevant to socio-economic inequalities.

- Fair Fares review, looking at the range of discounts and concessionary schemes, and taking into account the cost and availability of services.
- Under 22 free bus travel from January 2022
- Supporting local authorities to look at ways of using their powers to run their own bus services
- Developing the Community Bus Fund scheme.

One of today’s witnesses, SCOTS, sit on the [National Transport Strategy delivery board](#) Their submission notes that:

“Transport Scotland are currently understood to be undertaking a strategic review of funding support for public transport.”

They also note that:

“With a goal of reducing inequalities in public transport accessibility and fares affordability across Scotland to support parental employment opportunities, there is also a necessary requirement to review the current distribution of revenue

support funding across modes, across different parts of Scotland, and across central and local government.”

Members may wish to discuss:

1. **What are some of the key challenges in delivering the vision of the National Transport Strategy?**
2. **The National Transport Strategy’s priorities are wide ranging and include tackling inequalities. To what extent is tackling poverty – including child poverty – a consideration in the specific policies set out in the latest delivery plan?**
3. **Does the next delivery plan need to have a greater focus on tackling poverty or is the current balance between priorities about right?**

Theme 2: Concessionary Fares

The [national concessionary travel schemes](#) entitle people to free bus travel and comprise:

- Young Scots (under 22)
- Disabled travellers
- Over 60s
- Ferry passengers.

According to [Intelligent Transport](#), around a third of the Scottish population is entitled to free bus travel. The Scottish Government 2023-24 budget for concessionary fares is £359m ([Scottish Budget, level 4 data](#)).

The submission from CPT explains how operators receive a lower percentage of the cost of a fare for carrying an eligible passenger than when the schemes first started – down from 73.6% to 56.8%. This:

“may lead to fare paying passengers having to cover the differential through increased fares.”

Many low income parents would not be eligible for current concessions, (although their children might be) and would therefore have to pay any such fare increases.

Concessionary travel is one of the workstreams being progressed through the Fair Fares Review, which is due to report at the end of this year. The submission from CPT calls the review “opaque”, saying:

“At this stage we are not yet clear on the government’s objectives for the Review or what actions are being considered.”

A recent (August 2023) report from Transform Scotland, ‘[Off Track](#)’, criticises the time taken to complete the ‘Fair Fares’ review saying:

“The delayed progress on the Government’s Fair Fares Review is deeply concerning, especially during a cost of living crisis which sees more and more Scots struggling to meet their transport costs. This rise in transport poverty, in combination with falling passenger levels post-pandemic, means interventions to make public transport more affordable and accessible are essential and urgent. Given the First Minister’s focus on tackling poverty, it’s imperative that we see action to support those on low incomes who are particularly reliant on buses for their travel needs.”

Across Great Britain

[Great Britain wide rail cards](#) provide concessionary fares for a range of groups – including young people, family rail-cards and the over 60s. Around 20 million people in Great Britain are entitled to a rail-card.

The [Jobcentre Plus Travel Discount Card](#) provides 50% discount on certain bus or rail tickets. It’s available to those unemployed and claiming Job Seeker’s Allowance or Universal Credit. The Job Centre’s [‘Flexible Support Fund’](#) is a discretionary fund which can be used for a range of items including the cost of travelling to work for the first few months of a job.

Call for Views

In the Call for Views, suggestions included reduced or free travel for; children, low earners, job-seekers, new starts, students and during the first six month of work. Subsidy cards should apply across different operators and different modes of travel.

English Bus Fares Cap

The UK Government is currently operating a [£2 bus fare cap](#) on certain bus routes. Participation is voluntary. The cap will rise to £2.50 from November and is due to continue until November 2024. Operators are given a fixed grant, based on previous usage, rather than getting a ‘per fare’ payment.

Members may wish to discuss:

4. **Around a third of the population are entitled to free bus travel – focusing on older people, young people and disabled people. What are witnesses’ views on whether these are the right groups to focus on?**
5. **The Fair Fares review is currently underway. What would you like to see recommended in terms of concessionary travel?**
6. **Do witnesses have views on the bus fare cap currently operating in England? Would such a scheme be suitable for Scotland?**
7. **What is the scope for integrating concessionary travel entitlements across different modes of transport? What are some of the barriers to achieving this?**

Theme 3: Subsidised bus services

As SCOTS note in their submission:

“support for concessionary bus fares is of limited value to those living in areas without a viable bus service that meets their requirements.”

The Scottish Government provides funding to subsidise bus services. It also provides a Community Bus Fund to support them to introduce local authority run/franchised services.

Network Support Grant

The [Network Support Grant](#) is a discretionary grant that subsidises commercial and community bus routes. It aims to keep fares at affordable levels and networks more extensive than would otherwise be the case. It also contributes to the operation of Community Transport Services, allowing people who cannot make use of conventional bus services to access local services.

In response to COVID, additional temporary funds were available to support bus routes. These came to an end in March 2023. Therefore less funding is available overall this year. The [Sun reported in March](#) that:

“Hundreds of Scotland’s bus services could be axed and fares set to rise amid vital government funds drying up next month. The Scottish Government plan to cut their bus support budget by 37.1% - from £99.4m to £62.5m as the COVID-19 Recovery support for the sector comes to an end.”

A Parliamentary Question answered by Fiona Hyslop in July stated that a review of the Network Support Grant is being taken forward in this financial year ([S6W-19417](#)).

Community Bus Fund

A Community Bus Fund is expected to provide £74m over the course of the Parliament. This fund will assist local authorities make use of the powers granted them in the Transport (Scotland) Act 2019. In particular, it is intended to assist them use the power to run bus services either directly or through a franchise.

[Friends of the Earth](#) have called the £1m allocation in 2022-23 a “scandalously small amount of money.” They have estimated that:

“For the 7 RTAs (regional transport authorities) to develop a business case for franchising could be around £100m. Yet, the Scottish Government has committed to £74m for all councils, for all new powers. Such a small fund condemns most councils to not exploring their full suite of powers, and leaving residents reliant on a failing, expensive, unreliable and unaccountable bus network.”

Reduction in bus services

In their submission SCOTS describe the decline in the bus network:

“Despite being the most used form of public transport, across Scotland, the bus network is experiencing decline.”

[...]

“Local authority revenue cuts have caused significant reduction in the ability to support services through subsidy. Bus operators have also experienced significant issues with workforce recruitment.”

CPT note that the amount of subsidised mileage is declining more quickly than commercial mileage:

“15.6% of bus mileage in Scotland is supported, with 84.4% being operated commercially. Over the last 5 years supported mileage has dropped by 34% while commercial mileage has dropped by 7%.”

Members may wish to discuss:

- 8. How has the end of COVID support funds affected the availability and affordability of bus services?**
- 9. What are witnesses' views on the effectiveness of subsidising bus services as a means to tackle child poverty?**
- 10. Do witnesses have any comment on the potential of the Community Bus Fund to impact on services given its level of funding?**

Theme 4: Demand Responsive Transport

Where there are no or few existing bus services, then local authorities can run [Demand Responsive Transport](#) schemes. In their submission, CPT state that:

“For some routes or locations Demand Responsive Transport (DRT) may be a more suitable option rather than scheduled services.”

A [report by CoMoUK published in March 2023](#), commissioned by Transport Scotland looked at Digital Demand Responsive Transport (DDRT) schemes in Scotland. One of the arguments it makes for DDRT schemes is affordability:

“More DDRT schemes could help reduce barriers to employment by allowing citizens to travel to work in an affordable and convenient method.”

Scotland’s first DDRT service, ‘Pingo’, was launched in Dunoon in April 2021, replacing a ‘dial a ride’ service. The new service saw a 10x to 15x increase in passenger numbers. The report noted DDRT services are available in Campbeltown, Berwickshire, Highland, Moray and East Lothian.

The report recommended that DDRT should be a subsidised public service. It stated that:

“It should not be considered as a replacement for any public transport mode, but rather as an emerging mode with strong potential to affect behaviour change by offering a more personalised service and filling gaps in the network which are unsustainable otherwise”.

[...]

“DDRT has so much potential to positively influence society. It can help authorities to meet and government to execute policy goals such as the second National Transport Strategy through improving access to fair and equitable transport and reducing social isolation caused by finance, geography or additional mobility needs.”

The report found that getting people to buy into the concept of DDRT is a challenge – bus operators can view it as a threat, potential users can see it as a specialised service not applicable to them.

The report categorised services into four types:

- Door to door,
- Virtual Bus Stops
- Hybrid DDRT – fixed pick-up and drop-off points, but collecting passengers from other locations.
- Spoke and hub – acting as a ‘feeder’ to another transport hub.

The report described funding as the biggest challenge:

“As funding for public transport shrinks, the competing priorities of services become more distinct and the lack of consistent and adequate funding for DDRT leaves authorities undecided on whether to launch DDRT services. Currently, several different pots are funding DDRT services; however, none of these is guaranteed or consistent.”

In their submission, SCOTS describe how a pilot in Aberdeenshire, ‘Ready2Go’

“came to an end in April 2023, due to the funding challenges to maintain the service, despite achieving key objectives around inclusion and accessibility.”

Members may wish to discuss:

- 11. What is the potential of Digital Demand Responsive Transport (DDRT) services to improve transport to employment - particularly for low earners and parents in very rural areas? How can that potential best be realised?**
- 12. The recent report on DDRT in Scotland stated that the major challenge is funding. What are witnesses views on the scale of funding required if DDRT is to become an integral part of the public transport system?**

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SPICe
31 August 2023