

National Concessionary Travel for Older and Disabled People

Comments on Audit Scotland's project to evaluate the development, introduction and management of the National Concessionary Travel scheme for older and disabled people and to assess the costs, benefits and future risks of the scheme.

1. Introduction

The Scottish Accessible Transport Alliance (SATA) is an independent, non-political voluntary group and registered as a charity in Scotland. SATA was launched in June 1995 to bring the users, planners and providers of transport together to improve the accessibility of vehicles, vessels and rolling stock, and provide a range of affordable services, good communication and information with appropriate support and assistance for disabled people and people with reduced mobility.

SATA's object is to work for the provision of accessible transport as a basic right for all people and increase the mobility of disabled people as far as possible so that they can enjoy the benefits of travel and have equal opportunities in education and training, health and social services, leisure and recreation and other amenities.

SATA has over 70 individual and corporate members drawn from the voluntary, public and private sectors across Scotland. Financially it relies on the annual subscriptions of its members and receives no public funding

2. Development and introduction of the scheme

SATA welcomed the establishment of the scheme in April 2006 as a centrally-funded Scotland-wide scheme to substitute for local schemes and provide consistency, with opportunities for Scotland-wide travel free of charge for older and disabled people.

Initial consultation with stakeholders took place between October and December 2005 and the scheme was established by agreement between the Scottish Government and bus operators represented by the Confederation of Passenger Transport (CPT). They decided to operate the scheme for 7 years and review it after 3 years.

The objects of the scheme which SATA welcomed were:

- to allow older and disabled people (especially those on low incomes) improved access to services, facilities and social networks by 'free' scheduled bus services (and a limited number of ferry services) and so promote social inclusion
- to improve health by promoting a more active lifestyle for older and disabled people
- to remove restrictions of the previous off-peak concessionary fare scheme which produced differences in access to facilities in different areas of Scotland.
- to promote modal shift from private car to public transport

The target groups for the scheme were:

- anyone aged 60 and over
- 'eligible disabled people'

When the setting up of the scheme was being discussed, one of the task groups was on eligibility. The Scottish Government's Mobility & Access Committee for Scotland, which advises Scottish Ministers on transport matters as they affect disabled people, argued for the widest possible definition of eligibility and a system of self-assessment on which it had commissioned research in March 2006. Such a system would reduce administrative costs - it found that 20%-40% of applications were currently requiring further assessment by GPs. SATA considers that this approach was fully justified but it was rejected.

3. Management and monitoring of the scheme

The management and monitoring of the scheme is the responsibility of Transport Scotland as the Scottish Government's transport agency. To our knowledge, Transport Scotland does not have a focus group with user representation for this purpose, as it does for road and rail matters.

In line with its commitment to a three year review, the Government commissioned research by the Halcrow Group Ltd to evaluate the scheme and the results were published in a Final Report in February 2009. This was followed swiftly in March by the publication of the Scottish Government's review findings. The views of user organisations were sought during the review process but SATA regrets that these organisations were not directly represented on the Scottish Government and Confederation of Passenger Transport (CPT) review body or invited to comment on its decisions. This runs counter to the Government's equality duty and declared intention to involve disabled people in policy making.

4. Costs and benefits

The costs and benefits of the scheme were fully examined and set out by the Halcrow research and to our knowledge there has been no extensive follow up since.

The research showed that the scheme had proved very popular amongst its beneficiaries. There was also evidence that it had sustained and increased bus usage especially amongst lower income groups. Over 950,000 cards had been issued in the 60 and over age group (80% of that age group) and 160,000 under the disability criteria.

We would just make the following observations:

- A high percentage of people over 60 also have disabilities and/or restricted mobility
- A large number of disabled people of all ages are still excluded because they have difficulties using bus services, eg lack of services; varied low floor bus provision; competing users; connections to other services (especially longer distances), and for them there is a need for alternative/complimentary services including DRT/CT, taxis and integrated transport provision. The Scottish Government promised that improving transport for disabled people would be addressed in taking forward its commitment to improving transport accessibility. But increased funding for DRT/CT has stalled and many local authorities are in fact cutting back on budgets for taxicard fare concession schemes and door-to-door services.
- The total number of low-floor, DDA compliant buses increases year on year as new vehicles are ordered. But the situation throughout Scotland is patchy especially in rural areas and the end date for total provision is 2020 - still 10 years off.
- The entitlement card was to be developed as a smart card which over time would allow use of an increasing number of public services. This was a benefit to be derived from the capital investment. The programme for rolling out the card recognition technology across bus services has been slower than expected.

5. Impact against objectives

Again, the impact of the scheme against objectives was fully examined and set out in the Halcrow research. But we have the following comments on eligibility which relate to the declared objective of achieving social equity.

There are an estimated 120,000 people with learning disabilities and other communication difficulties in Scotland. Most are recognised as 'disabled people' under the DDA definition. Scottish Government estimated that some 50,000 on the lower rate of DLA were excluded by the eligibility criteria. Many were previously included in local schemes including the one in Strathclyde which was the largest scheme embracing 12 local authorities and included half of all concessionary travel card holders in Scotland.

The annual cost of including this group of disabled people was estimated by the Government in its review as £12 million, including some journeys with companions. We think this is affordable especially when some 50% can be seen as a saving on previous local expenditure.

These people are also now being affected by the demise of the Thistle Travel Card for which funding has dried up (£50,000 a year is needed to administer and promote it). The scheme was originally backed by the Scottish Executive and the CPT when it was launched in 2002 and was being used by some 120,000 people with communication difficulties.

6. Future risks

The Halcrow report identified a number of future trends such as demographic changes that would produce an increase in patronage amongst the elderly. They looked at sustainability and highlighted a rise in the retirement age for women to 65 by 2020 to equal that of men suggesting that the concessionary scheme could follow suit. Some other changes were hinted at, such as restrictions on peak time travel and entitlement by Blue Badge holders. SATA thinks the former would discriminate against disabled people in employment (often lowly paid) and the latter against giving people travel options and so reducing modal shift.

In any event, SATA is of the view that there must be further research and extensive consultation with all users and stakeholders well before 2012 - the end of the 7 year Scottish Government/CPT agreement period.

SATA
20 Seaforth Drive
Edinburgh EH4 2BZ

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