

# **SATA**

## **Scottish Accessible Transport Alliance**

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Scottish Charity No SC027600

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## **SATA Briefing**

### **Thistle Travel Card Scheme**

In August 2009, ACE (the national Scottish committee of people with learning disabilities which advises ENABLE Scotland) announced that the Thistle Travel Card was no longer operating as it had been unable to secure funding from the Scottish Government to continue the scheme. A statement from the Scottish Government said the decision was based on financial grounds not on policy.

The Thistle Card was launched seven years ago since when nearly 280,000 cards have been distributed to people who lack confidence when using public transport because of age, a learning or physical disability, people with dementia and epilepsy . The sort of things that people most often need help with are knowing what bus or train to get on and where to get off, being able to count out the correct fare, understanding timetables and travel announcements. When shown the card, transport staff should recognise that the holder needs extra help. A plastic wallet on the back of the card can contain additional information such as the intended destination or an emergency contact number. Cards were available from transport booking offices, concessionary travel offices, day centres, housing associations, work places, clubs and offices.

When launching the scheme in September 2002, the then Deputy Transport Minister Lewis Macdonald said it would "make a huge difference to the lives of thousands of people" and it would "offer them independence and freedom which other people might take for granted". It was welcomed by the Mobility and Access Committee for Scotland (MACS) which advises Ministers on the transport needs of disabled people, and supported by the Confederation of Passenger Transport.

Research and preliminary work on the scheme had been undertaken by ACE since 1997 and in 1999 support was obtained from major players in the transport industry. One year pilot schemes were run by First Bus in West Lothian and Stagecoach Western in Ayr and Kilmarnock. As a result, and in consultation with other organisations including Capability Scotland, Carers Scotland, Downs Syndrom Scotland, Alzheimer Scotland, Key Housing Association, People First, National Autistic Society and Fair Deal 1 in 100, it was decided to open the scheme to a wider group of people having difficulty using public transport, not

just those with learning disabilities.

A key element has been the training of transport staff. By 2006 some 8000 staff guidelines had been distributed among 42 transport providers. Funding for the scheme was initially provided by the then Scottish Executive from January 2002 with a grant of £50,000 and a further £21,557 in March 2004 for additional cards and promotional material. Otherwise the cost of the scheme have been borne by ENABLE. The grant request now turned down has been for £150,000 over the next three years, mainly to employ a member of staff to take on the management, administration, promotion of the scheme and to provide training.

It has long been recognised that there are complex issues and questions about the scheme's effectiveness in aiding communication and especially about the training of transport staff to recognise the card. Overcoming these has been regarded as crucial if it is to be improved. Research in 2006 found that changes were needed and greater resources were required if it was to be actively promoted amongst users and operators.

## **Scotland Wide Free Bus Travel Scheme**

The demise of the Thistle Travel Card will seriously impact on the mobility and quality of life of an estimated 120,000 people with learning disabilities and other communication difficulties. At the same time, because they only get the lower rate mobility component of the Disability Living Allowance, many of them under 60 do not qualify as eligible under the Scotland Wide Free Bus Travel Scheme for Older and Disabled Persons established under Scottish legislation in 2006. This is despite the fact that they might previously have qualified under local concessionary schemes. There is also evidence from ENABLE that they are not being given information about other ways they might qualify.

The result of this is, not only do they have to pay the full fare on buses and many are not in employment or only work part-time, but they have to struggle with those very things the Thistle Travel Card was designed to help with - communication with transport staff, fare money, etc. Nor do they qualify to have a companion who also travels free of charge as others can do under the bus pass scheme.

In the recent Scottish Government report following a review of the bus concession scheme it was decided not to change the eligibility criterion relating to the lower rate DLA. This was on cost grounds, it being estimated that a further 50,000 people on the lower rate in Scotland might be eligible which would, with companions travelling as well, add a further £12 million a year to the total. There are currently 1.1 million 'entitlement cards' in circulation and the estimated cost to the Government for 2009/10 is £194-98 million.

Nevertheless, the first declared objective of the free bus travel scheme, as stated

in the report, is 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 so promote social inclusion." Quite clearly this objective is not being met in respect of those with learning disabilities.

## **Conclusion**

Recent Scottish Government decisions on both the Thistle Card Travel Scheme and the Scotland Wide Free Bus Travel Scheme seem to have been taken within the Transport Division on purely financial considerations and highlight the apparent lack of joined-up thinking about policies to meet the all-round needs of people with learning disabilities in Scotland. They remain highly disadvantaged.

## **References**

1. Scottish Government News Release on the Thistle Travel Card Scheme. 3 September 2002
2. ENABLE briefing on the Thistle Travel Card. 19 January 2006
3. ENABLE briefing paper about the National Concessionary Travel Scheme and people with learning disabilities. October 2007
4. Scottish Government report on the Review of the Scotland-wide Free Bus Travel Scheme for Older and Disabled People. March 2009

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