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# Local Bus Services and Travel Concessions

## Key findings of a survey into the experiences and views of older people

### Report summary

*'Now that local bus travel is free, why aren't buses full of pensioners?'*

In 2006, the Social Exclusion Unit report *A Sure Start to Later Life* highlighted the need for flexible transport services for older people and placed accessibility high on the agenda.

This report seeks to bring to the attention of government – central and local – how public transport and travel concessions are perceived by older people, particularly those with mobility problems and those who rely solely on public transport.

The current review of government policy on buses seeks to reverse the decline in use outside London, and the Government has announced a nationwide system of bus concessions for England in 2008.

#### Previous studies

- A study by the **Brookings Institute** (2003) reveals misunderstandings about older people's needs and urges policies to meet them.
- The **Getting Out and About** survey, by Help the Aged and Portsmouth Pensioners' Association in 2005, showed support for travel concessions and the choice of bus passes or travel tokens.
- **Fair Fares**, which included research carried out in the West Midlands, focused on concessionary passes and differential take-up of benefits across ethnic minority communities.



- The **National Travel Survey** measures travel trends. *Public Transport Statistics Bulletin GB* includes information on bus users, including age. *The National Travel Survey: 2004* contains information on the take-up of concessions and on travel by mode, age and gender. *Focus on Personal Travel: 2005* includes information on travel by older people and on mobility difficulties.
- **Sic Transit** (Eastleigh Southern Parishes Old People's Forum) asked older residents what they used their travel concessions for, why they chose passes or tokens and their views on nationwide bus concessions.

**WE WILL** fight to free disadvantaged older people in the UK and overseas from **poverty, isolation** and **neglect**

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**Aims and methods**

The study summarised here explores the experiences and views of senior citizens, focusing on identifying barriers to greater use of local buses, and on a travel concession system that meets older people’s needs.

Central and local government are grappling with issues surrounding the mobility and social inclusion of older people. They need to make savings and yet respond to greater numbers of older people and their rising expectations. This survey was designed to inform discussions and decisions on both issues.

The survey follows one in 2005 of more than 600 older people in Portsmouth. Issues included the extent of mobility impairment among those eligible for travel concessions; the choice of bus pass or tokens; problems using concessions and hence public transport; the support for choice and flexible provision; the difficulty of using buses; reasons for choosing either bus passes or tokens; and views on universal provision of travel concessions.

The questionnaire was designed by Help the Aged and NOP, with advice from Portsmouth Pensioners’ Association. Portsmouth City Council sent it to 32,000 people who were eligible for travel concessions. A total of 12,418 took part, of whom 97 per cent were 60 or older.

	Male	Female
50 or younger	70 (1%)	81 (1%)
50–60	109 (2%)	106 (1%)
60–70	1736 (36%)	2705 (36%)
70–80	1867 (39%)	2712 (36%)
80+	994 (21%)	1831 (24%)
Not stated	19	45 (1%)
Total	4795	7480

Thirty-nine per cent of the sample were men and 60 per cent were women.

In terms of mobility, 16 per cent reported themselves as registered disabled; 27 per cent as not registered disabled but ‘experiencing

difficulties or discomfort either walking more than 200 metres or getting on/off buses’; and 57 per cent ‘generally able-bodied and mobile’.

	Registered disabled	Not registered disabled but experience difficulties or discomfort	Generally able-bodied and mobile
Total	1972	3214	6769

	Private car	Local buses	Taxis	None of these
Total	3562	6522	1813	270

Fifty-two per cent of respondents chose tokens and 48 per cent bus passes. Of the 31,191 people claiming travel concessions in the city as a whole – as opposed to those who took part in the survey – 56 per cent opted for tokens and 43 per cent for bus passes.

	Tokens	Passes
Male	26690 (41%)	2135 (36%)
Female	3702 (58%)	3778 (63%)
Not stated	67 (1%)	76 (1%)

	Tokens	Passes
50 or younger	1% (78)	1% (74)
50–60	2% (118)	2% (98)
60–70	35% (2234)	37% (2236)
70–80	37% (2382)	37% (2242)
80+	24% (1563)	22% (1306)
Not stated	1% (54)	1% (33)

	Registered disabled	Not registered disabled but experience difficulties or discomfort	Generally able-bodied and mobile
50 or younger	6% (123)	* (9)	* (13)
50–60	8% (165)	1% (24)	* (21)
60–70	24% (483)	21% (688)	47% (3171)
70–80	32% (626)	39% (1248)	38% (2582)
80+	29% (563)	38% (1217)	14% (954)
Not stated	1% (12)	1% (28)	* (28)

**Main forms of transport**

Of the respondents to the survey, 29 per cent relied primarily on a car, 45 per cent on local buses, 15 per cent on taxis.

Women relied more on buses and taxis than men, of whom more used cars. Those without a car rely on others to provide back-up when public transport fails them – a significant finding given that 1,130 women commented on the unreliability of buses, causing difficulties on journeys such as hospital visits.

	Private car	Local buses	Taxis	None of these
Male	52% (1836)	32% (1816)	32% (584)	54% (145)
Female	48% (1703)	67% (3750)	66% (1203)	44% (119)
Not stated	1% (23)	1% (56)	1% (26)	2% (6)

Age groups differed in their reliance on different modes of transport. For example, the 80-plus age group represented 23 per cent of the total car users but 42 per cent of total taxi users.

Sixty-five per cent of the car users were able-bodied but only 18 per cent of taxi users, who comprise 55 per cent of the sample, were. The group with limited mobility (26 per cent) makes up 18 per cent of the total car users but 46 per cent of total taxi users. Thirty per cent of the

\*Number of respondents was too small to estimate percentages.

	Private car	Local buses	Taxis	None of these
50 or younger	1% (22)	2% (86)	1% (23)	5
50–60	1% (47)	2% (99)	2% (40)	4
60–70	46% (1624)	35% (1983)	19% (352)	114
70–80	38% (1365)	38% (2138)	34% (620)	95
80+	14% (493)	23% (1289)	42% (758)	51
	* 11	* 27	1% (20)	1

registered disabled rely on taxis compared to only 5 per cent of the able-bodied. Only 26 per cent of the former rely on buses whereas more than half of able-bodied respondents regularly use buses. The importance of taxis to those with mobility impairment is clear.



	Registered disabled	Not registered disabled but experience difficulties or discomfort	Generally able-bodied and mobile
Private car	28% 547	20% 655	34% 2300
Local buses	27% 528	43% 1381	52% 3487
Taxis	30% 594	26% 829	5% 323
None of these	2% 41	1% 44	3% 178
Not stated	13% 262	9% 305	7% 481

Bus pass claimants predominantly use buses (71 per cent), whereas 41 per cent of token claimants use cars.

	Private car	Local buses	Taxis	None of these	Not stated
Tokens	41% 2646	21% 1355	25% 1586	3% 177	10% 665
Passes	15% 916	71% 4267	4% 227	2% 93	8% 486

**Barriers preventing bus use**

The impaired mobility of potential older bus users, as well as the quality of bus services, is likely to significantly deter more frequent use.

The survey suggested a range of potential barriers to great use of bus services. The main reason cited for people not using buses as often as they wanted was ‘difficulty in carrying shopping on and off the bus’. Many people cited ‘difficulty getting to and waiting at bus stops in bad weather’. Other issues were that ‘buses are too unreliable to use’ and ‘difficulty in getting to/from bus stops to home or destination’, anxiety over anti-social behaviour and difficulty getting to a seat before the bus moves off.

Reasons preventing you from using the bus as often as you would like		
	Main reason	Other reason
Difficulty in carrying shopping on and off the bus	16% 1943	25% 3126
Difficulty getting to and waiting at bus stops in bad weather	8% 949	28% 3453
Difficulty getting to your seat before the bus moves off	4% 523	21% 2635
Anxiety over anti-social behaviour on buses or while waiting for one	4% 504	17% 2101
Buses are too unreliable to use	7% 840	15% 1889
Difficulty in reading or understanding timetables	1% 146	10% 1223
The buses do not go at times when you need to travel	3% 386	20% 2427
The buses do not go to places you need to go	5% 669	17% 2136
Difficulty in getting to/from bus stops to home or destination	7% 840	16% 2024
Other	2% 245	3% 333
Not stated	43% 5373	43% 5359

	A wide choice of travel concessions made available to all senior citizens	A wide choice of travel concessions only available to those with physical mobility problems	Not stated
Total	10143	1101	1174

Almost 1,000 respondents stated that buses ran at inconvenient or infrequent times and some reported that timetables were difficult to read.

Anti-social behaviour is a bigger deterrent for those aged 50 to 60 than for those aged 80-plus. Predictably, the older group was more worried about getting to a seat than those in their 50s. However, nearly all the barriers mentioned in the survey were important to several hundred respondents and therefore are of concern.

There were many comments about routes, bus stops and drivers:

*‘Drivers should show more care and let everyone sit down before moving off.’*

*‘A cheerful driver makes a lot of difference to one’s day.’*

Fellow passengers were often viewed with trepidation:

*‘Was told he would rip my arm off if I asked him to turn his stereo down.’*

Other issues deterred some respondents:

*‘Bus services are not on time.’*

*‘Very slow journeys.’*

*‘Buses have poor suspension, especially the small ones – they are bone-shakers, have uncomfortable seats that are too close. Some are not far off cattle trucks, with limited leg room, and jerky driving doesn’t help.’ (male, 83, registered disabled)*

Participants suggested ways to improve bus services, including flexible use of tickets on any buses going to the same destination; conductors at peak times; more bus stops; all buses to have low platforms; and seat belts for passengers. Many of the comments are likely to apply to urban bus services throughout the UK.

**Who should receive wide travel concessions?**

The survey asked whether all senior citizens or only those with mobility problems should be given a wide choice of concessions. There was resounding support for universal provision: 82 per cent favoured choice for all and only 9 per cent preferred choice to be restricted to those with physical impairments.

The backing for choice and flexibility was across gender, age, main form of transport, mobility status and type of travel concessions received.

**Should more tokens should be given to over-75s?**

A majority (55 per cent) favoured the same amount of tokens for all, regardless of age, while 35 per cent thought there should be more generous provision for the older old.

*‘If extra facilities are available for some people, it should be based on mobility rather than age as some very old people are more able than disabled people.’ (male, 60, able-bodied)*

	Where councils provide free tokens for taxis, people aged 75+ should receive more tokens for taxis than younger senior citizens	Where councils provide free tokens for taxis, the same amount for taxis should be provided to all senior citizens regardless of their age	Not stated
Total	4406	6890	1122

*'All concessions for senior citizens should be the same. Senior citizens start at 60, not 75. There should not be any discrimination.'*

### Views of those with limited mobility

The 2005 survey found that a substantial minority of older people reported mobility impairments. In the 2006 Portsmouth survey, 26 per cent identified themselves as 'not registered disabled, but experiencing difficulties or

discomfort either walking more than 200 metres or getting on/off local buses'. The bulk of those are women (64 per cent); are over 70 (77 per cent); nearly half rely on buses as their main local transport; and more than half chose tokens as their travel concession.

Given that approximately 44 per cent of those with limited mobility rely on buses it is worth examining what deters senior citizens from using the bus.

Mobility and barriers			
	Registered disabled	Not registered disabled but experience difficulties or discomfort	Generally able-bodied and mobile
Difficulty in carrying shopping on and off the bus	54% 1058	60% 1933	28% 1892
Difficulty getting to and waiting at bus stops in bad weather	53% 1054	55% 1775	21% 1423
Difficulty getting to your seat before the bus moves off	40% 790	43% 1366	13% 876
Anxiety over anti-social behaviour on buses or while waiting for one	22% 442	22% 708	20% 1353
Buses are too unreliable to use	22% 435	21% 686	23% 1527
Difficulty in reading or understanding timetables	15% 289	15% 478	8% 525
The buses do not go at times when you need to travel	29% 574	28% 885	19% 1258
The buses do not go to places you need to go	23% 449	23% 725	23% 1543
Difficulty in getting to/from bus stops to home or destination	48% 950	40% 1298	8% 531
Other	8% 157	4% 127	4% 280
Not stated	13% 265	8% 249	32% 2171



The main reasons were similar to findings from the survey as a whole: carrying shopping on the bus, difficulty getting to and from bus stops and waiting in bad weather. This sub-group prioritised 'difficulty getting to your seat before the bus moves off'.

The numbers of those with limited mobility who identified barriers to usage is as important as their ranking; three-quarters completed this section. If substantial numbers identify barriers, this suggests a need for action.

Eighty-one per cent favoured a wide range of concessions being available to all. However, when asked whether or not over-75s should receive preferential treatment, opinion was divided. Forty per cent wanted more generous allocation for the older old, 50 per cent no difference and 10 per cent did not express an opinion. Fifty per cent supported a nationwide scheme, compared to 40 per cent who wanted no difference. Hence, even among this group, which has special and specific needs for transport and travel concession, a narrow majority favours uniform/national provision.

More than 10 per cent more women than men were registered disabled, and 64 per cent of women experience difficulties or discomfort, compared to 35 per cent of men.

Studies have noted how difficulties experienced by mobility-restricted older women have been accentuated by one-person operation on buses and trains.

*'Because of age and infirmity I cannot use buses.'* (female, 94, mobility problems)

*'I feel the bus services are very good – it is just my own personal problems that make it difficult. Once I get my hip replacement I will be able to use my free bus pass.'*

*'The use of taxis by many elderly people is because they need door-to-door transport. Their physical lack of mobility prevents them from using buses, which can be quite an ordeal for them.'*

Approximately 10 per cent expressed views about concessionary provision.

*'The free bus pass is of enormous benefit to those on fixed incomes. It will enable people to go out more frequently, sometimes just for pleasure as opposed to going out of necessity, which is often all they can afford.'* (female, 70, able-bodied)

*'At 90 and having mobility and breathing problems, buses are completely impractical. Tokens for taxis are a lot more useful.'*

*'I would like to keep tokens as they offer freedom of choice and greater flexibility to travel e.g. taxis, trains, ferries.'* (male, 61, mobility problems)

*'I have to spend a minimum of £8 a week for a food shop, £16 if I go twice. So my £37 worth of tokens doesn't last five minutes. Otherwise I'm housebound.'*

*'There should be no time restrictions. The government is saying we should go to work after 65. I have to be at work at 8am and am unable to use my bus pass in the morning.'*

*'I would like to see a nationwide system of free travel for all pensioners throughout the country. It would be great in our retirement to really see England like we never could before.'* (female, 66, able-bodied, reliant on buses)

*'My sister from Lancashire cannot use her bus pass here and I cannot use mine when I visit her in the north'* (female, 62, able-bodied)

*'It's no good having passes if the transport is not available.'*

## Key findings and recommendations

The survey included a large sample; coverage of the related issues of bus services and travel concessions; key questions relating to public transport investment; and a focus on older people who are potentially prevented from getting out and about and therefore potentially socially excluded and isolated.

However, it was an urban study, in a densely populated and accessible city, conducted before the government announced it would fund a nationwide system of local bus travel and before local authorities had decided on their travel concession provision for the coming year. Also, space for detailed comments was limited and respondents' observations could not be pursued in depth.

Therefore **more surveys are needed**: for example, a rural study in an area where bus services are less adequate and geographical isolation more pressing. **There is a strong case for a more systematic approach in terms of location, size and character of local authorities to be studied.**

Monitoring travel concessions provision and take-up, as the Department for Transport does, needs to be augmented by **local surveys** exploring issues such as correlation between generosity/flexibility of provision and take-up; reasons for non-take-up by the older old, ethnic minorities and those in rural areas; and investigation into declining use of buses outside London.

Research should be conducted in consultation with **older people** and organisations that represent them. The partnership between Portsmouth City Council and Portsmouth Pensioners' Association together with Help the Aged and NOP, is a healthy model.

The Department for Transport has a good record of **consulting** the bus industry and local government but a less satisfactory history of seeking the view of agencies such as Help the Aged, the National Pensioners Convention and



Age Concern. Since these organisations and others have both interest and expertise there should be more consultation.

**Portsmouth City Council** is commended for encouraging and facilitating the survey and for consulting pensioners' representatives in formulating its travel concessions policy-making and budgeting in 2005 and 2006.

### Older people with mobility impairment

One of the key findings of the 2005 survey was that 36 per cent of the respondents said they were 'unable to walk to the nearest shops without having to stop or suffering severe discomfort'. This showed a **higher degree of immobility** among older people than expected.

Likewise, the mobility of the larger sample in the 2006 survey confirmed this characteristic among the older population of the city – and possibly of other areas in the UK. A large minority of the sample are not able-bodied; especially among the 80-plus group.

This sizeable proportion of older people with mobility impairments means their **needs should be a central feature in public transport services and travel concession arrangements.**

### Flexibility and choice

Almost universal support was expressed in the 2005 survey for a **choice of bus passes or**

**travel tokens.** Respondents were adamant that tokens should remain, even when free bus passes were introduced. Older disabled people needed them because they were unable to use buses and younger senior car drivers favoured tokens to buy a rail pass/ticket and/or pay for taxis to get to hospital, rail station or airport. The report concluded that there was '**widespread recognition of diversity of need and a great deal of support for choice** in provision of travel concessions' (*Getting Out and About: 12*).

In the consultation and preparatory work for its report, the Social Exclusion Unit considered how travel concessions could be made more responsive to individual need. Individual transport budgets were suggested – perhaps the cash equivalent of bus passes.



Respondents were not asked for their views on this proposal, but were asked which of two statements they agreed with: that a **wide choice of travel concessions should be available for all senior citizens** or that such choice should be **available only to those with physical mobility problems.** The vote was overwhelmingly in favour of the former among those who stated a preference. Opinion in Portsmouth, and in all likelihood elsewhere, favours choice and flexibility.

*'The continuation of tokens in my area is very necessary, especially as there are no bus routes in the immediate area.'* (woman, 67)

*'Please keep the option to receive tokens as it is difficult to walk to the nearest bus stop and boarding it is even more difficult.'* (male, 80, registered disabled)

The policy adopted by most English councils of offering only (free) government-funded local bus passes is not supported by older people. **The 50-plus English local authorities, including Portsmouth, which continue to offer travel tokens in 2006, at considerable extra cost and in the context of having to make municipal savings, are highly commended.**

A policy offering choice of travel concessions is strongly endorsed. There should, of course, be local discretion on the value and type of additional concessions, as well as who should benefit. Portsmouth offers £37 worth of tokens to everyone over 60. Some councils offer more, others less. Some give more tokens to the older old, while others have withdrawn tokens to those aged 60 to 70.

Where possible, there should be a **flat-rate system of tokens for everyone over 60.** If additional funds are available, extra tokens should be allocated to those over 80. Targeting concessionary travel resources on those in greatest need, for example, those with disabilities, received only limited support within this survey.

Finally, the evidence from this survey points to the need for additional funding for alternative forms of travel concession for use on taxis, community transport and dial-a-ride schemes, especially for those who cannot physically use local buses.

### Backing for a nationwide scheme

Respondents in the 2005 survey supported both the existing county-wide bus pass scheme and the call for a nationwide system. Since many councils have not negotiated the use of bus passes beyond their boundaries, or the way these restrictions have curtailed journeys, both Help the Aged and the NPC welcome the government's announcement of a nationwide system in 2008.



A two-to-one majority within the survey stated that if the government released money for senior citizen travel provision it should go into a nationwide scheme. There was more support for investment in local flexible provision from those in their 80s and those with disabilities.

The policy implications must be that, together with the nationwide scheme, funding should be provided to create more flexible local schemes. The imminent review of bus subsidies is an opportunity for action by central government. On the other hand, there is nothing to stop local councils increasing the value and use of non-bus pass travel concessions. **A nationwide scheme, which will primarily benefit younger and more active senior citizens, should not obscure the fact that most older and less mobile people want investment in local provision other than bus passes.**

### Barriers to using bus services and tackling them

There was a clear and consistent pattern in the survey. Overall, the main deterrents were **difficulty in carrying shopping on and off the bus; difficulty getting to and waiting at bus stops in bad weather; and difficulty in getting to/from bus stops to home or destination.** As far as 'other' deterrents were concerned, 2,000–3,000 respondents cited each of them – hence, all are significant.

Some barriers arose as a result of personal health circumstances. However, other barriers could be overcome by **low-cost, easily implemented measures**, such as bus drivers ensuring that passengers have sat down before moving off and shelter at all bus stops.\*

Bringing back bus conductors may not be feasible but perhaps bus staff could supervise selected routes at certain times to help and reassure. Any review of bus routes and timetables should pay close attention to the residential location as well as the problems.

### Best practice

There was strong appreciation of the way Portsmouth City Council has approached travel concessions and its decision to seek older people's opinions.

In York, a survey was conducted into issues of concern to older people. Not all local distribution systems involve annual collection and/or mailouts, but where they do, this opportunity to contact virtually all older people should be used. Officials often complain that they cannot get in touch with those who are **'hard to reach'**, but travel concession databases could easily be used in surveys. If a transport element is involved, there should be no data protection issues.

**Local surveys** can provide valuable information for transport co-ordinating officers and planners.



\*Buses in the Bath area have signs in the drivers' cabs reminding them to give extra consideration to elderly passengers.

The Portsmouth surveys provided information on the number of people likely to switch from tokens to a free bus pass in 2006. It was predicted that 20 per cent of token claimants would opt for free bus passes when they were introduced and the estimate is that 17 per cent did. Officers planning the budget options for 2006 concessions were able to incorporate these likely changes into their costs.

**Consultation** benefits local authority officers and elected members as well as older people. During Portsmouth's 2006 budget discussions, everyone was aware of the massive support for tokens. Because of this evidence, extra costs were incurred by introducing a scheme that was superior to the statutory minimum. Research on accessibility to public transport and take-up of travel concessions, such as the work undertaken in the City of Nottingham, complements the survey reported here.

