

Pensioner forced off bus in pass wrangle

A northern newspaper has described how Frances Robertson, a former teacher from Manchester, had her bus journey rudely interrupted when she crossed a county boundary on her way to her daughter's home in Burnley. Frances was forced to get off the bus, wait for another one and pay the fare. Such a story is reflective of the restrictive nature of free local bus travel for those over 60 in England – and this situation will remain until 2008 when a nationwide system is introduced.

This change requires legislation, so Help the Aged will be lobbying to ensure that rather than benefiting bus operators, this new system meets the travel needs of older people, including the several million older people who either do not have a decent bus service available or are unable to use public transport because of illness or disability.

All the evidence points to the need for flexibility in provision to enable older people to get to hospitals and other essential services – not to mention visiting friends and family, as Mrs Robertson was trying to do in Lancashire.

But there is another issue which can be dealt with now, particularly in areas where local councils have negotiated wider use of bus passes. Countywide schemes are not uncommon and bus passes can also be used in some areas further afield. However, it would seem that not all bus pass holders know about these free travel opportunities. Indeed, according to a survey conducted by Help the Aged, which is to be published shortly, many older people were unaware of this. Of the 12,000 respondents, many stated that one of the barriers to using buses more often was a lack of clear timetable information and route maps. In another survey conducted for the Department for Transport, 20 per cent of participants said they did not know if their local scheme offered discounted travel outside their local authority area.

There is a strong message here: local councils and local pensioner groups/senior forums can and should inform those they represent about where, when and how they can travel freely.