
THE GREY ESCAPE- UNDERSTANDING THE WIDE RANGING IMPLICATIONS OF PROVIDING FREE BUS TRAVEL FOR OLDER PEOPLE IN ENGLAND

This briefing sheet describes a three-year PhD study co-funded by the Great Western Research Initiative (GWR), Stagecoach Southwest and hosted by the University of the West of England (UWE). The study seeks to deepen existing understanding of how and why concessionary bus pass holders have altered their travel behaviour since the provision of England-wide free bus travel, and the implications of these changes for the individual and the future of the bus network more generally.



Background

England's Concessionary Fares policy has recently received considerable media attention, relating both to the practical effects of a significant increase in bus patronage, as well as reported inefficiencies in the administrative processes that ensure bus operators are adequately reimbursed. Whilst a number of studies have sought to record the changes in bus travel since the policy change, they have tended to focus on overall trends, using aggregate statistics and average trip rates as their principal unit of investigation.

This has resulted in a dearth of studies explicitly exploring behavioural changes at the individual, context laden trip level, which is surprising given the burgeoning wealth of literature that highlights the increasingly heterogeneous nature of the over 60s population.

In addition, given that the policy's core objective is to promote social inclusion – a highly individually specific condition- there is an urgent need for a deeper understanding of how the pass is used in the context of its daily users and the benefits that are derived from its use. This information is of particular importance, at a time when bus operators endeavour to manage the practical effects of an increased demand, whilst simultaneously planning for a future in which a significant proportion of bus passengers will be over the age of sixty.

Objectives

The research is guided by four core questions.

- 1) In what ways have behaviours of pass holders changed since they obtained a free bus pass?
- 2) How has the provision of unlimited free nationwide travel impacted on the nature and type of trip/activity taking place?
- 3) What contribution does/can the policy make to the social inclusion agenda?
- 4) What do pass holders see as the most appropriate response to the rising cost of the policy?

Methodology

The research is taking place in three stages.

Phase one involved securing funding for an on-board bus survey of 1000 bus users in the Exeter area (completed December 2009) to gain an insight into the behavioural changes that have occurred since the provision of free bus travel was extended. Comparison of the data was possible with a similar survey conducted on the network prior to this policy extension.

Phase two entails conducting focus groups with a view to exploring changes at the individual level, such as the hypothesis that many pass holders are now spreading out their trips, or their trips are becoming less purposeful. These trip-level changes have as yet received relatively little research attention, despite having significant implications for the number of trips being made under the scheme. In addition, the focus groups will explore the interaction between the pass and its users in a daily life context, with a view to assessing its contribution to the social inclusion agenda.

During **Phase three**, interviews will take place with a series of relevant stakeholders at the local, regional and national level. Particular emphasis will be placed upon the future direction of the policy and its effectiveness in achieving its stated goals.

Initial Findings

To date the research has found that the provision of free unlimited bus travel to pensioners has - perhaps unsurprisingly - significantly changed the demand for bus travel, both in terms of trip frequency, but also the nature of the demand and activities undertaken. Both the survey and the pilot focus groups appear to indicate a widening variety of different uses of the bus pass, and accompanying this, a wider range of benefits derived from the pass. Generated trips were found a rather poor indicator of improvements in quality of life, with the exception of a small

but important group who claimed to be specifically prevented by the cost of bus travel previously and now can make trips they could not physically have afforded before.

For other pass holders the benefit appears more indirect, for example the removal of cost resulting in a more leisurely attitude towards bus travel and allowing trips that are highly beneficial but may not have been taken before when the cost transaction was involved. This suggests that whilst the pass has arguably brought some people out of social exclusion it has been more successful at maintaining and enriching the quality of life of people who did not feel necessarily excluded previously.

The following round of focus groups and subsequent stakeholder interviews will provide additional evidence of these changes and discuss their implications on the future direction and sustainability of England's Concessionary Fares policy.

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