

---

## **BLIND PERSONS/COMPANION RAIL CONCESSION**

**Report by Service Director Regulatory Services**

---

### **EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE**

**27 February 2018**

---

#### **1 PURPOSE AND SUMMARY**

- 1.1 This report advises Members of a proposal to trial a scheme where the companions of registered blind travellers are offered a concession on the Borders railway. The report also includes the estimated costs of implementing a trial scheme and suggests where budget may be sourced.**
- 1.2 At present companions who accompany registered blind persons on bus services may travel for free. This "+1" scheme has been in place since 1999. Section 3.1 below provides further details of that scheme. Rail services are not currently included in the +1 scheme.
- 1.3 The Council has discretionary powers to introduce a concessionary scheme which would enable a companion accompanying a registered blind person to travel for a reduced fare. It is for the Council to determine whether it wishes to introduce such a scheme and if so what level of concession it wishes to apply.

#### **2 RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 2.1 I recommend that the Executive Committee agrees to introduce a one year trial scheme for +1 blind persons companions rail concessions and considers one of the following two options for how the trial will operate:**
  - (a) That a 50% discount scheme is adopted by the Council, which would effectively give a blind persons companion half-price rail travel on the Borders Railway (preferred option).**
  - (b) A nominal 10p flat fare scheme is adopted by the Council which would effectively give a blind persons companion very close to free travel on the Borders Railway (alternative option).**

### 3 BACKGROUND

- 3.1 The Scottish Blind Rail Travel Scheme (SBRTS) was initiated in 1999 in recognition that some people with visual impairments, who were not able to take advantage of Council managed concessionary fares schemes offering discounted or free bus travel, might be able to take advantage of travel by rail if the fares barrier was removed.
- 3.2 The key features of the scheme introduced in 1999 have not changed since then:
- 1 Scottish holders of National Entitlement Cards (NECs) issued by virtue of Visual Impairment (identified by the incorporation of an 'eye' symbol) may travel by rail without payment of fare anywhere in Scotland and Berwick-on-Tweed and Carlisle. No tickets are issued.
  - 2 All train operators providing rail passenger services in Scotland (except for heritage railways) participate in the scheme, including the operators of the Glasgow Subway and the Edinburgh Tram.
  - 3 NECs issued to holders who are Registered Blind display a '+1' symbol which allows a companion to travel also without payment on *buses*, but there is no entitlement in Scotland for a companion to travel without payment on rail services under the terms of SBRTS.
  - 4 SBRTS also includes a right for island residents to make two return ferry trips to the mainland each year.
  - 5 SBRTS is funded by the individual Councils (with Strathclyde Partnership for Transport acting on behalf of its constituent authorities in the Greater Glasgow area).
  - 6 Payments are made on the basis of a standard annual cost for each visually impaired NEC holder in each Council area. The annual cost in 1999 was agreed with ScotRail at £5.40 for each such cardholder, on the basis of a calculation designed to provide a fair return for the rail operators on assumptions about likely take-up. It has risen broadly in line with inflation since then. The figure for 2017 is £8.75, and the last increase in the rate was in 2015 when 25p was added.
  - 7 ScotRail acts as a single point of contact with SPT and individual Councils in the rest of Scotland. ScotRail sends out the bills, receives the payments, and passes on appropriate proportions to the other rail operators and to ferry operators, with whom they have their own agreements.
- 3.3 In order to obtain an NEC by virtue of visual impairment it is necessary that the applicant be registered with a recognised blind society or their local authority. The Royal National Institute for the Blind estimates that there are many more people with such impairments than choose to register.
- 3.4 There are currently 287 blind and partially sighted persons who apply for a concessionary travel pass in the Scottish Borders. Of that figure 193 take up the +1 option for free bus travel for their companions.
- 3.5 The annual cost for Scottish Borders Council for blind persons bus travel concessions in 2017 was £2511.25. This figure is based on the number of registered blind persons living wholly within the Scottish Borders Council area multiplied by £8.75 as described in 3.2.6 above.

3.6 Concessionary pass holders in other Scottish Council areas with direct access to the Borders Railway are:

- Edinburgh – 1062 of which 773 also take up the +1 option
- Midlothian - 191 of which 156 also take up the +1 option

Blind persons and their companions outside the Scottish Borders would not be included in this proposal.

3.7 Feedback from colleagues in the Sensory Services team have highlighted three particular points relating to concessionary travel:

- There is already a good scheme in place via the National Entitlement Card (NEC) this is mainly for older adults and is based around equity and social inclusion (improved access to services, facilities and social networks) as well as the freedom to continue to use public transport.
- This scheme offers access to facilities both within and outside the Scottish Borders area.
- This scheme encourages modal transfer from car to train, reducing traffic congestion, improving the environment and reducing the number of possible transport related accidents.

3.8 Additional information including background to the SBRTS and NEC schemes, details of traveller numbers across Scotland and any other locally offered rail concessions can be seen in appendix 2.

3.9 The blind persons +1 scheme was raised as an agenda item at a meeting with The Transport Minister and Officials from Transport Scotland on 16 January 2018. The Minister acknowledged the issue but said there were no plans to make changes to the current +1 scheme nationally.

#### **4 OPTIONS AND POTENTIAL BENEFITS**

4.1 A yearlong trial of a +1 blind person's companion scheme on Borders railway would allow Officers to gather travel data; users, travel patterns and costs. This would allow for a more detailed paper to be presented to the Council in the future.

4.2 The calculations used to estimate travel costs for Council concessions are shown in Appendix 1. A half fare proposal effectively giving companions a 50% discount on fares would cost the Council circa £9428pa.

4.3 Scotrail have advised that currently there is no facility to provide free travel for companions however it would be possible to apply a nominal fare of 10p single/20p return, which offers the companion very close to free travel. The annual cost to the Council in implementing this would be circa £18,850.

4.4 The National Rail website refers to a number of locally arranged blind person's concessions schemes; the closest of these to The Borders are those operated by West Lothian and East Lothian Councils. However on closer inspection these are actually not specific to blind persons or companions. For example the scheme in West Lothian advertises a 50% reduced fare but only relates to persons holding an NEC card. If the +1 companion does not hold an NEC card the concession will not be applied and the full fare will still be expected.

4.5 It is also possible that people who currently use the National (Scotland) Concessionary Travel for Blind Persons card may instead use the Borders railway knowing their guide/companion can travel for a reduced fare.

4.6 Feedback from the Sensory Awareness Team has suggested that Initiatives such as concessionary scheme for +1's that encourage the use

of public transport, increase levels of physical activity which in turn improve physical health. Social interaction, before, during and after the journey, as a result of concessionary travel also has positive impacts on general 'wellbeing' associated with more active lifestyles. This improves quality of life and provides a cost effective way to pursue public health objectives.

## **5 IMPLICATIONS**

### **5.1 Financial**

The half fare proposal would cost the Council circa. **£9,426 pa**. The nominal 10p fare proposal is estimated to cost the Council circa **£18,850 pa**. which would be preferred option.

Passenger Transport would undertake to finance the 1 year trial from within their existing budgets up to a maximum cost of £20k. If the trial is viewed as successful a growth bid would be put into the 2019/20 financial plan to provide permanent funding for the scheme to continue.

### **5.2 Risk and Mitigations**

There may be risk of other groups coming forward and asking why the companion rail concession only applies to people with visual impairment. These groups may also ask for the same concession and this may be difficult to refuse as precedent has been set. Any challenge may result in complaints, reputational damage and increased cost to the council. There is also a risk that a trial of this concession would be difficult to withdraw once implemented, again resulting in complaints, reputational damage and increased costs.

Figures quoted in section 4 are estimates and may change if the predicted number of journeys changes. If the availability of this concession results in a significant increase in journeys, or if the uptake of this scheme is otherwise higher than anticipated, this could significantly increase the cost to the Council.

### **5.3 Equalities**

The proposals in recommendations 2.1 (a) and (b) have a potentially positive impact on equalities by facilitating easier and more frequent travel by registered blind persons improving access to services and facilities improving health and quality of life. The proposal in recommendation 2.1 (c) has no impact on the current situation and experiences of registered blind people.

### **5.4 Acting Sustainably**

The proposals in recommendations 2.1 (a) and (b) have the potential to encourage some modal shift to a more sustainable form of transport.

### **5.5 Carbon Management**

Train use is a low carbon alternative to individual cars/taxis and bus travel.

### **5.6 Rural Proofing**

The proposals do not have any rural proofing implications.

### **5.7 Changes to Scheme of Administration or Scheme of Delegation**

No changes to either the Scheme of Administration or the Scheme of Delegation are required as a result of the recommendations in this report.

## **6 CONSULTATION**

6.1 The Chief Financial Officer, the Monitoring Officer, the Chief Legal Officer,

the Chief Officer Audit and Risk, the Chief Officer HR, and the Clerk to the Council are being consulted and their comments will be incorporated into this report.

**Approved by**

**Brian Frater**

**Service Director Regulatory Services**

**Signature .....**

**Author(s)**

Name	Designation and Contact Number
Timothy Stephenson	Strategic Transport Services Manager - 01835 825182
Alan Bonfield	Rehabilitation Worker Low Vision Services - 01896 826272

**Background Papers:                      None**

**Previous Minute Reference:    None**

**Note** – You can get this document on tape, in Braille, large print and various computer formats by contacting the address below. Jacqueline Whitelaw can also give information on other language translations as well as providing additional copies.

Contact us at Jacqueline Whitelaw, Place, Scottish Borders Council, Council Headquarters, Newtown St Boswells, Melrose, TD6 0SA, Tel 01835 824000 Ext. 5431, Fax 01835 825071, email [eitranslationrequest@scotborders.gov.uk](mailto:eitranslationrequest@scotborders.gov.uk)