



## **Scottish Women's Convention response to:**

# **The Impact on Island Communities of Free Bus Travel for Young People Under 22**

## **The Scottish Government**

**June 2021**

### **Introduction**

The Scottish Government consulted on free bus travel throughout Scotland for under 19s at the end of 2020. A number of responses raised issues around the impacts of the scheme on island communities. The Government has committed to carry out an Island Communities Impact Assessment (ICIA) for the scheme before its introduction. This further consultation seeks views to help gather evidence to inform the ICIA that is now being undertaken.

### **The Scottish Women's Convention (SWC)**

The Scottish Women's Convention (SWC) is funded to engage with women throughout Scotland in order that their views might influence public policy. The SWC uses the views of women to respond to a variety of Parliamentary, Governmental and organisational consultation papers at both a Scottish and UK level.

The Scottish Women's Convention engages with women using numerous communication channels including Roadshow events, Thematic Conferences and regional contact groups. This submission provides the views of women and reflects their opinions and experiences in a number of key areas relevant to women's equality.

The SWC is currently engaging with women through digital roadshows, online surveys, asking women to comment by email and by telephoning those who want to talk. We are also using our wide network to ask women to collate views in their local communities and forward these to us on a regular basis. We are continuing to review innovative ways of engaging with women throughout Scotland using whichever medium is appropriate to them.

## **Do you think that the provision of free bus travel to all young people aged under 22 will have an effect on island communities which is significantly different from the effect on other communities in Scotland?**

Women are on the whole supportive of the introduction of free bus travel for young people, particularly on a universal, non-means-tested basis. This is felt to be a way forward in easing access to a host of opportunities, including employment and education. However, women would note that we should work towards removing any age cut off on the basis that low pay and inequality of opportunity does not stop at a particular age. Meanwhile, since the threshold for the National Living Wage is currently 23, free bus travel provision should at least be offered to all those under 23 to mitigate age bracket pay discrimination.

The onset of the current COVID-19 pandemic has seen an exacerbation in many of the issues faced by young women, including a lack of suitable employment opportunities with decent pay and conditions. Many from island communities have voiced their concerns over these issues with the forced closure of the main sectors where young women worked, including tourism, hospitality and retail.

The disproportionate economic effect of the past year on young women highlights that any incentives, including free bus travel, should be looked upon as a positive tool to promote equality of opportunity where it is implemented correctly and for the benefit of specific communities. The SWC has noted on a number of occasions that, for the majority of women, public transport is seen as something which should be accessible for everyone, regardless of age, taking account of local community needs rather than being run for profit.

Island women have specifically raised with us that there is sometimes a false perception by those who do not live within island communities that they are much safer than the mainland. This is not the reality, and many women in island communities face the same fear on public transport and on the street as women elsewhere. In fact, sometimes island women can feel more vulnerable because there are less likely to be other people around in public spaces. Women's safety needs to be taken into consideration when looking at public transport use, and making public transport free for young women does not necessarily mean they are more likely to use it.

Women have raised concerns about the number of young people moving away from island communities, as well as the higher cost of living on the islands compared to the mainland. While this concessionary scheme may go some way to improving the lives of young people in island communities, women recommend that there need to be more comprehensive strategies for youth retention. For instance, looking at how transport links up with where jobs and education actually are, and doing more to empower young people to gain control over their own lives and opportunities.

The availability of bus travel within many island communities can often be sparse, particularly at night or weekends. This is often a major issue for young women who may work in bars or restaurants where antisocial working hours are the norm. Many of these women have told the SWC that this lack of available public transport means that car ownership is *“an essential, not a luxury”*. Therefore, provision of free bus travel without accounting for these local factors within such communities can be unhelpful to many. Other issues may include:

- Low availability of buses, plus long journey and waiting times for young women staying outwith the main towns in island communities.
- Those living in rural areas with restricted mobility may find bus travel difficult due to the lack of joined up approaches to bus frequency and availability.
- Other transport options such as ferries to the mainland are vital for island women to access employment and education opportunities. These services need to be improved and should also be considered for inclusion in the free transport scheme.

### **If so, are there measures that the Scottish Government might consider to mitigate any adverse effects on island communities in relation to the provision of free bus travel to under 22s specifically?**

Due to the unique geographical makeup of many island communities, taking a one size fits all approach does not address many of the challenges women residents may face. Policy makers should be aware of the issues that impact on women’s inequality by incorporating their views and experience.

Going forward, a combination of environmental concerns and a switch to other working models such as home working will see the way in which many individuals use public transport change. It is key that the Scottish Government promotes public transport and the use of a concessionary scheme in a way that is sustainable, but also adaptable and tailored to the local needs of island communities. It should also be noted that adapting public transport should not just benefit those reliant on this particular scheme, but others who use these local bus services.

One of the major ways these issues could be mitigated is an increased provision of funding and assistance for forms of localised public transport, such as community buses. Not only do many of these run not-for-profit services, providing accessible local transport for communities, they tend to work on unique issues within local regions. Other suggestions may include:

- Further consultation with communities on a case-by-case basis to understand issues in the way of transport availability for many residents.

- Community councils and community-led organisations are very active in the islands. Engaging with these, including groups tasked with assisting young people, to understand the unique needs of different locations across Scotland's islands.
- Linking up bus and ferry travel into one concessionary scheme.
- Continuous undertaking of impact assessments to gauge all effects of any schemes put in place for equality, health and wellbeing outcomes.
- Accounting for the impact on less inhabited island communities rather than just the main towns.
- Ongoing consultation to understand other issues such as barriers faced by disabled in relation to public transport within island communities.

## Conclusion

The SWC is grateful for the opportunity to respond to the Scottish Government's Consultation on the Impact on Island Communities of Free Bus Travel for Young People under 22. As an organisation, we will continue to work with women from across Scotland to gather voices and experiences relating to such legislation and the effect of this on women's equality.

For further information, please contact  
The Scottish Women's Convention  
Email – [info@scottishwomensconvention.org](mailto:info@scottishwomensconvention.org)  
Telephone – 0141 339 4797  
[www.scottishwomensconvention.org](http://www.scottishwomensconvention.org)

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