Transport for Freedom

Why all care leavers in England aged 18-25 should be given access to free bus travel

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The bus pass made me feel free, it's about getting out there. It gave me hope.
(Care experienced young person involved in the Cornwall pilot)

1. About the transport for freedom campaign

Barnardo's new campaign – *Transport for Freedom* – is calling for free bus travel for all care leavers in England aged 18-25. This is an important measure that could significantly improve the lives of some of the most vulnerable young people in our society, by helping to 'level up' their opportunities.

The recently published Independent Review of Children's Social Care[1] recommends five 'missions' for care experienced young people which we should aim to achieve as a society over the next five years. These include ensuring that no young person leaves care without at least two loving relationships and an aim to double the proportion of care leavers attending university, by 2026.

Care leavers currently have poorer outcomes than their peers. They are less likely to gain good qualifications[2], nearly half of children in care have a mental health disorder[3] and it is estimated that 25% of homeless people have been in care at some point in their lives[4].

From the age of 18 care experienced young people are often expected to be financially independent and are usually responsible for managing their own household bills. Research over many decades has shown care leavers are financially vulnerable and a significant number live at or near the poverty line – often struggling to make ends meet[8].

Now things are getting even harder as a result of the cost-of-living crisis. Annual inflation in the United Kingdom rose to 9% in April 2022[5] and the Bank of England expects it to reach 10% by the end of the year[6]. Across the UK, people are experiencing increases in the cost of everyday essentials – sometimes above inflation – Office of National Statistics

analysis for example, recently revealed that the price of value pasta rose by 50% between April 2021 and April 2022[7]. Such extreme price rises disproportionately affect young people leaving the care system.

For many care experienced young people, travel can feel like a luxury. But it's also essential. Buying and running a car is either very difficult or impossible, so many are heavily reliant on local buses. Yet **at an average cost of £18 a week, a bus pass can be prohibitively expensive,** particularly for care leavers on benefits. **For young people on Universal Credit, the cost represents 30% of their weekly benefit payment[9].**

"If I pay for the bus, I haven't got enough money for food shopping or to put gas and electric on so I can't really afford to get the bus."

Without access to transport, care leavers face a whole host of challenges. These include:

- struggling to meet with friends and family
- difficulties accessing education, employment or training
- limited opportunities to take part in hobbies
- difficulties in going food shopping
- barriers to attending medical appointments.

Lack of access to transport can also contribute to young people feeling cut off and isolated, especially when living alone at such a young age. Evidence shows around **one in five** care leavers[10](19%) say they felt lonely always or often.

There is no national scheme of free bus travel either for care leavers or more generally for young people in England, Wales or Northern Ireland. The Scottish Government has however recently recognized the important role that access to bus travel can play in improving the lives of young people and introduced a national scheme of free bus travel for all young people under the age of 22. At a local level, young people have been calling for free bus travel for some time, and we've been able to gather evidence about the difference it could make to their lives.

In 2019-21 Barnardo's teamed up with a local charity called Carefree, which is based in Cornwall, to pilot free bus travel for care-experienced young people. With support from bus operator First Bus, we provided free bus passes for local care leavers for a year. Meanwhile, young people supported by Barnardo's in Bristol have been working to persuade the council to fund free bus travel in their local area. However, while in both cases young people made a strong case and while representatives in both local authorities were sympathetic to their arguments, shortages in funding has made it very difficult to introduce comprehensive schemes[11]. While conversations are ongoing locally, the introduction of a national scheme backed by Government funding would enable local authorities looking to improve care leavers' access to transport, to take the necessary action.

This short paper draws on findings from these local examples and makes the case for free bus travel for care leavers England-wide.

2. Why do care leavers need free bus travel?

A lack of access to public transport can create a persistent barrier for care experienced young people in their daily lives. It can hinder access to work, childcare, medical appointments, seeing family and friends and more.

As part of the project in Cornwall, care-experienced young people told us about the significant impact lack of access to transport has on their daily lives. Here we highlight some of these stories – all names have been changed to protect the identity of the young people.

Oscar's story – being a young parent

Oscar is a 24-year-old care-experienced young father, who does not live with his son. Oscar works hard to make sure that he does not miss visits with his son, however he finds it very difficult to meet the cost of transport. He lives far away from his son – the journey can take as long as two hours, and costs around £10. As Oscar is self-employed he doesn't always have regular work. This means that he often has to borrow money to make sure he can get to visits and this has proven stressful. He knows that missing visits would impact on his son hugely.

> "In care I couldn't have the relationship that I wanted with my dad and I want to be that network for my son that I didn't have."

Jordan's story – improving physical and mental health

Jordan is a 20-year-old care-experienced young person who has a lifelong health condition. Jordan experienced extreme childhood trauma and experiences issues with personal identity and self-esteem. This means he often struggles with self-care and can find daily activities a challenge. Affordable public transport is essential for Jordan, both to help him access medical appointment – on occasions he has not been able to get to see a GP in a timely manner – and to enable him to do things that help his mental health, such as visiting his family and friends and getting out into nature. This helps give Jordan the motivation and self-esteem to help him better manage his medical condition. Unfortunately, however Jordan cannot always afford the bus without financial help.

Freya's story – accessing employment

Freya is a young person with care-experience who works full time at a large local supermarket earning the minimum wage. However, she does not live in the same town as her job and she estimates that she spends £100-£150 a month just on travel. When Freya has been offered overtime at work she finds that she sometimes isn't in a position to take it as the cost of the bus fare will mean that she will not see very much financial return for the hours that she has put in. Freya explains that after being offered a free bus pass through the pilot project she was able to take as much overtime as was offered which has improved her finances and self-esteem. As Freya explains:

> "[As care leavers] we're independent from a young age and need to be able to get out and about to places."

Where do care leavers tell us they would go?

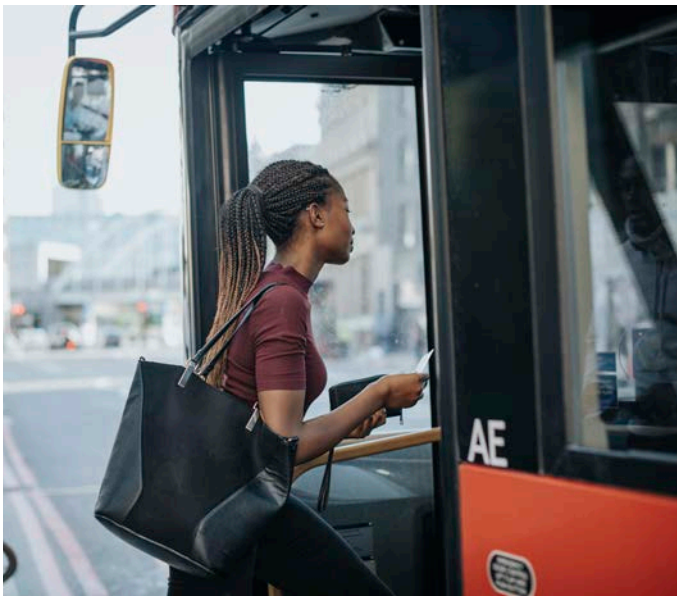
I would us it to go to my LGBT support group
I would go to see family
I would go sightseeing and find new places to explore
I would use it to go to my therapy groups

3. The impact free bus travel has had on other groups entitled to it

While there is currently no national scheme for free bus travel for care leavers there are schemes for other vulnerable groups. The English National Travel Concession Scheme (ENCTS) allows free off-peak bus travel for residents of England of pensionable age and for disabled people. As a minimum this provides guaranteed free travel for people over state pension age and those with an eligible disability on local bus services from 0930 until 2300 on weekdays and all day at weekends and on Bank Holidays. Many local authorities expand this offer[12]:

- In almost 1 in 4 councils older people can travel for free before 0930 Monday-Friday
- In more than 1 in 3 councils disabled people can travel for free before 0930 Monday-Friday
- In almost 4 in 10 councils older people can travel for free after 2300
- In more than 4 in 10 councils disabled people can travel for free after 2300

The ENCTS is cost-neutral for bus operators. Local authorities are responsible for reimbursing bus operators for journeys made by passengers with a bus pass. The Government funds this reimbursement as part of the main Revenue Support Grant for local authorities. In 2018/19 £879 million was reimbursed to local authorities in England by the Government. There are concerns however that the funding is not sufficient with local authorities often left to manage the shortfall. In 2018, the Local Government Association (LGA) estimated that councils were spending at least £200 million a year to subsidise the scheme[13]. Inadequate funding can also cause problems for operators who are already facing a wealth of rising costs including



wage inflation, rising fuel and energy costs, and a sharp increase in supply chain costs. This is particularly challenging in the current environment where passenger levels are below pre-pandemic levels and shows the importance of any new scheme receiving adequate and sustainable funding.

The bus pass is very popular amongst older people - in 2018/19 take-up was at 90% in London and 76% in the rest of England[14], although this has fallen recently due to the Covid pandemic. Bus travel subsidies are particularly beneficial for those from poorer backgrounds with take up more likely for those with a lower income – pass holders with an income of less than £10,000 per annum make twice as many trips than those receiving £20,000 or more[15]. Households are also more likely to use the scheme if they have no access to cars[16].

Evidence also shows that pass holders often make additional journeys to visit friends or relations and participate in social activities, that they would not

otherwise make if they had to pay a fare[17]. Free bus travel has the capacity to improve mental and physical health– since bus journeys often involve some element of walking or the participation in physical activity at the destination. This is strongly reflected in our own conversations with care leavers who mention that free bus travel would mean they could go to the gym or on walks to new places. One young person told us how a free bus pass would enable them to join a sports team and pursue their hobby of netball which they love.

In addition to the national scheme some bus companies themselves have their own schemes of discounted travel targeted at disadvantaged groups. One of the biggest of these is that the national scheme offered by Stagecoach – their *Back on Board* initiative gives jobseekers across the UK a 50% discount on their bus travel to help them attend job interviews and find employment. This scheme has proved very popular and figures show that it can result in as many as 1,000 trips every four weeks[18].

4. What help do local authorities currently offer care leavers with the cost of bus travel?

While there is no national bus concessionary scheme for care leavers in England, local authorities do have a general statutory duty to support care leavers in their area. The support provided differs between areas but must include access to a support worker known as a 'personal adviser' and a 'pathway plan' which outlines the support each care leaver needs to move towards independent living. In addition, all local authorities in England have to publish a 'local offer' which outlines the extra support they provide for care leavers.

Barnardo's wanted to find out the extent to which help for transport costs was included as part of the support package offered by local authorities. To obtain this information we issued a Freedom of Information (FOI) request to all local authorities. In total 116 local authorities were able to provide us with information and the results reveal a very mixed picture. The main approaches taken are summarised below.

Offer to care leavers	Number of local authorities (n=116)	Percentage of those who responded (% of 116)
Free bus travel for all care leavers up to the age of 25	0	0%
Free bus travel for all care leavers up to the age of 21	10 (all within the greater Manchester scheme)	9%
Discounted bus travel	4	3%
Limited or discretionary help with bus travel costs	91	78%
No help with bus travel costs	11	9%

NB: we received no response from 34 local authorities, one could not provide information and one (the Isles of Scilly) had no bus services.

Free bus travel for all care leavers
Only one area – Greater Manchester - offered a universal scheme of free bus travel for care leavers in the area. This scheme covers the 10 local authorities which make up Greater Manchester and gives care leavers free bus travel on most Greater Manchester bus services up to their 21st birthday. The scheme was introduced at the end of 2019 and for the first two years its operation has been significantly impacted by the pandemic. However even considering this impact the initial indications are that this scheme has been beneficial particularly for care leavers living in more urban areas with a good bus system. In addition, Newcastle and South Gloucestershire explained that they had an 'aspiration' to offer free bus travel to all care leavers, with Newcastle reporting that they were working with partners including the Clinical Commissioning Group on a pilot.

Discount schemes
Four authorities said they provided help with the costs of bus travel for care leavers, but this offered a discount rather than free travel – these were sometimes part of general youth travel discount schemes which care leavers qualify for on account of their age. The extent of these discounts differed significantly. One local authority offered care leavers aged 18-25 the opportunity to purchase a reduced bus ticket to travel throughout the whole of the region for £5.90 a week, a substantial discount from the usual cost of £27 while another gave the option to buy a card for £30 which would then give them a 30% discount on travel costs.

Discretionary help
The most common answer to our question – given by 91 local authorities – was that they had 'discretion' to offer care leavers help with the cost of bus travel either in relation to specific listed circumstances or on a 'case by case' basis for example if it was recognised as support that a care leaver needed as part of their pathway plan.

Where local authorities name specific circumstances where care leavers qualify for help with bus fare costs, this was most often to help with the cost of travel to an education or training provider. Some also offered support for care leavers to have their transport paid, when they were attending a job interview, or for the first month of employment, before receiving their first month's salary. The majority of local authorities who fell into this category however did not name specific circumstances where help was available, but said there was a discretionary option available if specific need is identified by the young person and their personal adviser.

Where the approach is to provide only discretionary help with travel, it is likely many care leavers will miss out. This will be for a number of reasons for example:

- Many are not aware of their entitlements
- Not all personal advisers will know free travel may be available
- Not all care leavers engage regularly with their personal advisers and with very high case loads, the support available can be limited
- Pathway plans are not always kept up to date and reviewed regularly

Additionally, discretionary access to free travel is often linked to specific circumstances such as to attend a specific medical appointment, or to visit a specific family members named in their pathway plan. This rigid approach does not recognise the important role that transport can play in helping to connect care leavers with their communities and to opportunities that promote wellbeing.

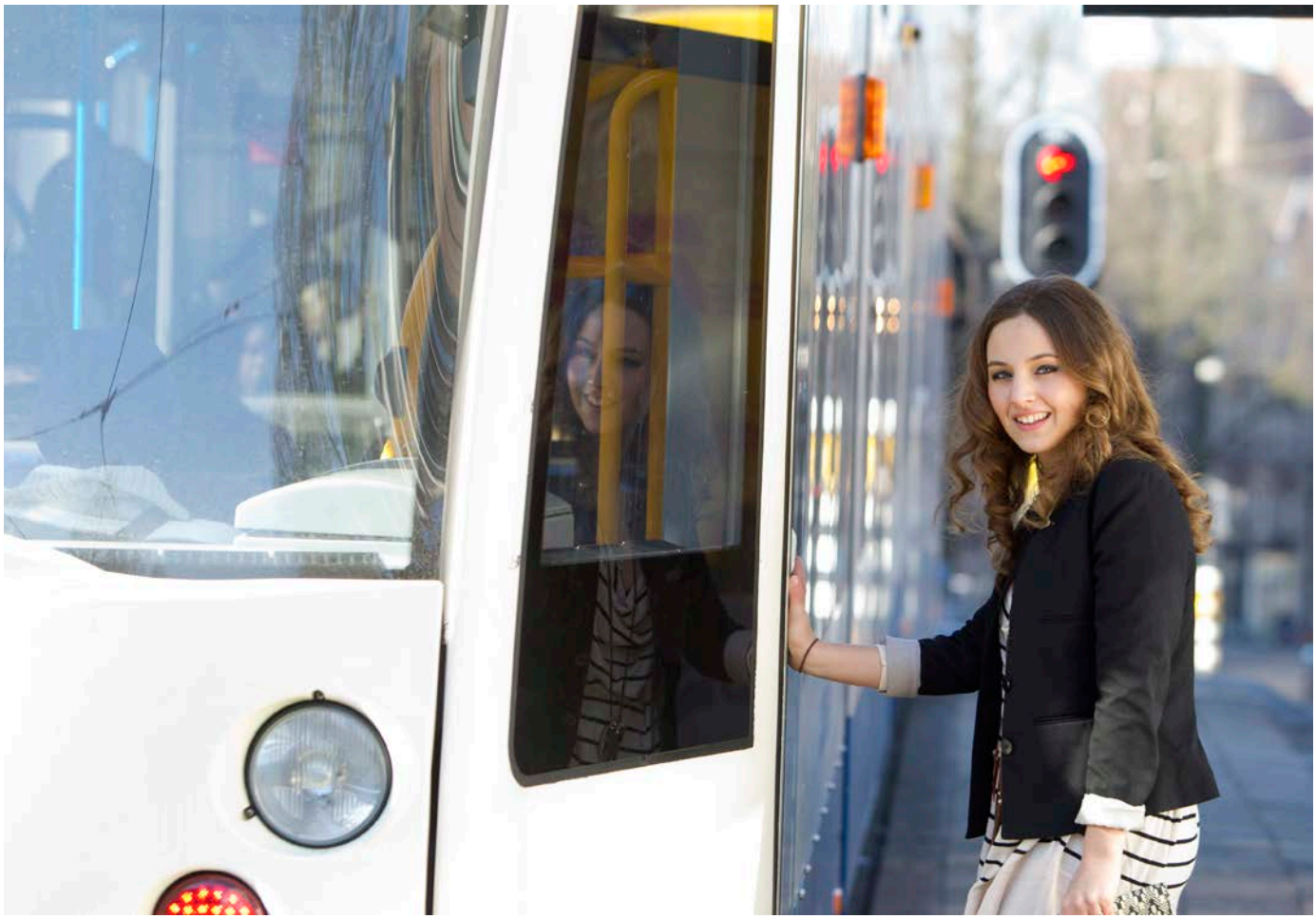
No help offered
9% of respondents (11 local authorities) reported that they offered care leavers no specific help at all with the costs of bus travel.

5. What level of investment is needed to introduce a national free bus scheme and what savings could be realised

Given the clear benefits of free bus travel for care leavers, including improved access to employment, and reducing loneliness and isolation, we believe there is a strong case for investment in a national scheme.

The costs of a national scheme for care leavers will be dependent on a number of factors, however we have made an estimate based on the following:

- We have assumed that care leavers would be provided with the cost of travel which is equal to the average cost of a weekly saver ticket. **Latest data shows that the average cost of a weekly ticket is currently £18.77**[19]**.** To note, we used this figure as the best available data – if we were able to look at the cost based on annual tickets this could reduce the estimated costs of the scheme further.
- We estimate the total number of care leavers aged 18-25 in England is **105,687**[20]. This uses figures from the Department of Education.
- We have assumed a take up rate of 76%[21] which is equivalent to the take-up rate for the existing bus concessions scheme as they operated before the pandemic[22].



Assuming these factors we estimate that the annual cost of a care leavers concessionary bus travel scheme would be around **£77m.**

While this would represent a cost to the Treasury, we believe the scheme could create cost savings in the longer term. The existing English Travel Concessionary Scheme creates some benefits to the state although estimates differ – one study suggests that **for every £1 invested, there was nearly £3 of benefits** although other estimates are more modest[23]. The focus of the existing scheme is also heavily biased towards the elderly population, who are unlikely to be using the bus pass to access work. The economic benefits from increased access to employment from this scheme is therefore small.

We anticipate that the cost benefit of providing a scheme focused on care experienced young people is likely to be significant. This group is much younger and free bus travel would play a role in helping them access employment, increasing tax revenue in the longer term and reducing reliance on benefits. **Research estimates that the costs to the state of supporting care leavers every year total £1961m, including £145m from forgone tax revenues, due to care leavers struggling to access work and £1816m due to other poor outcomes**[24].

Free bus travel would therefore constitute a *win win*: making a small but tangible difference to young people's outcomes and reducing long-term costs to the state.

Our ask

This briefing shows that access to bus travel can be a **lifeline** for care leavers.

Evidence from our pilot in Cornwall shows the power of a **free bus pass** to transform opportunities.

While introducing free bus travel for care leavers will require investment, it can also contribute to longer term savings, due to i**ncreased employment and improved mental health and wellbeing.**

Making this change would make a tangible difference to one of the most vulnerable groups in our society, especially during the cost of living crisis and it contributes to the Government's mission to 'level-up' opportunities across the UK.

That is why Barnardo's is calling on the Government to fund free bus passes for all care leavers aged 18-25 in England.

End notes

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