

## Consultation on changes to the NI Concessionary Fares Scheme

### Key point briefing

The Department for Infrastructure (DfI) is consulting on a number of changes to the existing Concessionary Fares Scheme to ensure it is financially sustainable in the longer term and available for those who are most vulnerable, or liable, to social exclusion. We would like to consult with you to understand the impacts that any changes could have on current and future users of the Scheme. The consultation sets out two types of change:

#### **PART A: Options to reduce the cost of the Scheme**

The options set out in this part of the consultation document include proposals to reduce the costs of the Scheme. When identifying options to reduce costs, we also considered the policy aim of the Scheme which is to reduce social exclusion for members of the community who are most vulnerable, or liable, to social exclusion.

#### **Option 1 – Raising age eligibility**

The Department has put forward 3 options:

- Option A – make **no change** to the Scheme, leaving the eligibility rules as they are now; or
- Option B – **remove the concession** from the 60-64 age group. This would mean that the age of eligibility for the SmartPass would **increase to 65** (the age of eligibility for the existing Senior 65+ SmartPass). The change would apply to existing users as well as new applicants.
- Option C – **remove the concession** from the 60-64 age group **and raise the age of eligibility to State Pension Age**. The State Pension Age for men and women is currently 66 and will increase to 67 between 2026 and 2028. This would apply to existing users as well as new applicants. However, for practical purposes those with a 65+ SmartPass would continue to be able to use it.

### **Option 2 – Limiting SmartPass use to off-peak travel**

This change would mean that a SmartPass would no longer permit people to travel before 09:30 on weekdays (Mondays to Fridays). A SmartPass user would have to pay a full fare if they wished to use public transport before this time. They will continue to be able to travel for free at other times, including at any time on Saturdays, Sundays and Bank Holidays.

### **Option 3 – Limiting SmartPass use to bus travel only**

This change would mean that a SmartPass would no longer permit people to travel by rail. It would allow SmartPass users to travel on bus only.

### **Option 4 – Application, renewal and replacement fees**

This change would mean that SmartPass users would pay a fee for applications, renewals, and replacement cards. An application fee would be paid when a person applies for a SmartPass for the first time. A renewal fee would be paid when the SmartPass holder applies to renew their SmartPass. A replacement fee would be paid when a person applies to have a new card issued if their card has been lost or stolen.

## **PART B: Options to promote social inclusion**

The options in this part are aimed at making the Scheme more targeted at those groups of people facing social exclusion. In some cases, these changes increase the costs of delivering the Scheme. The Department recognises that it is not currently in a position to implement these changes in light of the significant financial challenges being faced. However, we are consulting on these options now to inform decisions on future changes to the Scheme should the Department's budgetary position change.

### **Option 5 - Free travel for those currently receiving a half fare concession due to a qualifying disability**

This change would mean that everyone who is currently eligible for a half fare concession would receive free travel. Free travel would be available on all services. This means that free travel (which is currently available on Glider) would apply to Metro, Ulsterbus, Goldline and NI railways.

### **Option 6 - Companion passes for disabled people unable to travel alone**

This change would mean that, if a person is disabled **and** they are unable to travel alone, they may be entitled to a Companion SmartPass which would allow someone to accompany them on their journey. For the avoidance of doubt, companions are not themselves issued with a SmartPass, nor are they able to travel for free unless accompanying a Companion SmartPass holder.

### **Option 7 - Extend the qualifying criteria for a Half Fare SmartPass in line with other jurisdictions**

This change would widen the qualifying criteria for a SmartPass on the grounds of disability to align it more closely with other UK jurisdictions.

### **Option 8 – Free transport for destitute asylum seekers and victims of human trafficking**

This change would extend the Scheme to provide free transport to asylum seekers receiving asylum support and to victims of human trafficking. Under this new arrangement, all asylum seekers (including those aged between 5-18<sup>1</sup>) receiving such support would be eligible for a SmartPass.

### **Option 9 - Changes to the residence test**

This change would remove the need for applicants to be permanently resident in Northern Ireland for a period of three months and replace it with the 'primary residence' test. Applicants would be asked to sign a declaration that Northern Ireland is their primary residence.

### **Option 10 - Proving residency**

This change would extend the list of documentation that can be used to prove residency. The list would be reviewed to ensure that it is open to everyone on an equal basis.

**To tell us your views please complete the Citizenspace survey on the DfI website. For more information, you can also e-mail us at: [niconcessionaryfaresconsultation@infrastructure-ni.gov.uk](mailto:niconcessionaryfaresconsultation@infrastructure-ni.gov.uk)**

---

<sup>1</sup> There is a disparity between who is considered a child in Immigration Rules and Translink policy. Those between the ages of 16-18, including those who have arrived with their families and therefore 'dependants' and unaccompanied children, are classed as children until the age of 18 for the purposes of asylum law.