

By email: London MPs

1 June 2020

Dear London MP

Withdrawal of child fare discounts on Transport for London services

As you will be aware London TravelWatch is the statutory watchdog, representing the interests of transport users in and around London, including all Transport for London (TfL) services.

We are concerned about the implications of a proposal as part of the agreement between TfL and central government to deal with the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic to abolish the availability of free travel to children aged 18 and under on London's bus network.

As we understand it, this would be a permanent, as opposed to a temporary change, and is designed to encourage children to walk and cycle more, as well as provide sufficient social distancing capacity during the pandemic period. This is laudable aim, but as a long term policy, there are significant implications for families, schools, and users of the transport network.

London TravelWatch believes that implementing this change at such short notice is too complex, costly and unjustified on account of the impact on passengers, parents and on other road users.

In London about 37% of children live in households that are classified as being in poverty. Removing this concession will mean increased costs for these families, particularly if children live some distance from their school, or need to travel for other reasons e.g. split childcare arrangements. Many families have reduced the number of car journeys they make and therefore congestion as a result of its' introduction.

The concession was introduced in 2005, as part of a wider policy to increase use of public transport, introducing the Congestion Charge, and reforming fares and ticketing arrangements. However, it has also enabled parents and guardians to take advantage of government policy to broaden the range of educational choices available to them, by removing the cost of travel as determining factor in where a child may be educated. The design of the transport network is influenced heavily by the needs of children travelling to school, and withdrawal or reduction of children using it will likely make ongoing provision of parts of it financially unsustainable for other travellers.

By removing the concession, it is assumed that local councils would continue to provide transport for those entitled to free home to school transport. However, since 2005 the London boroughs have not provided or paid for this function. Indeed, central government guidance states that local authorities are exempt from the need to provide this if TfL provides the service.

Reinstating the criteria for assessing free home to school transport by local authorities is a complex and administratively difficult operation. There are significant costs in dealing with those entitled to free travel and those who subsequently do not meet the legal criteria based on distance between home and school, safety of the route between home and school, religious adherence, eligibility for free school meals and whether the school is defined as the 'catchment' school, and availability of school places. TfL have told us that it would be difficult for them to use their existing database of users as this does not include the required information that local councils would need and transfer of data would require consent under the GDPR.


The TfL Zipcard scheme in contrast has a simple application process without any qualifications relating to distance travelled, place of residence, religious adherence or means testing of income.

The Government's letter to TfL states that this is 'subject to discussions in the working group about how it is to be operationalised'.

Additional car traffic will be generated as a result of parents taking their children on journeys by car instead of public transport, with consequent impact on road journey times, poorer air quality, reduced road safety for pedestrians and cyclists and longer journey times for bus passengers.

I would therefore urge you to address the issues we raise with the Secretary of State for Transport, and we would be grateful if you could let us see any response that you might receive.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Emma Gibson', written in a cursive style.

Emma Gibson
Director, London TravelWatch