

Another decade for free bus pass?

Featured in edition no 130 of Campaign, the monthly newspaper of the National Pensioners Convention (NPC) were the giant 10th birthday cards delivered to 10 Downing Street on March 28th by NPC bus campaigners to mark a decade of the England, Wales, Scotland and all Ireland free bus pass for older and disabled people. The tenth anniversary was reached on Easter Sunday this year. The concession is currently held by around eight million of the 11 million pensioners in the UK and is widely regarded as an absolute lifeline to many. The most recent research has established that the concessionary travel scheme shows a 3:1 benefit-to-cost to society in general. NPC research of bus usage by older people also found that 45% of journeys were of benefit to the local economy (shopping, banking, eating out), 25% of journeys were used to caring out voluntary work and unpaid caring, and the remaining 30% were used to stay healthy by visiting keep fit classes, local swimming baths and helping to reduce demand and cost of health and care services.

Ron Douglas, NPC president said: "One of the main benefits of the bus pass is that it gives older people the opportunity to get out, stay active and remain independent. The growing problem of loneliness among older people is costing the NHS and other services millions of pounds every year, and without the bus pass this would be much higher."

However, the NPC remains critical that not all areas – particularly rural villages – have access to good bus routes. The campaign also continues to extend the concession so that all passes can be used anywhere within the UK including on routes that cross national boundaries.

There is no guarantee that the freedom pass will continue for another ten years and government has said that the original five year review of the situation is now removed. If your glass is half full you may interpret this as good news in that now we have reached ten years we could have another ten years in similar vein without a review in between. What government would dare to remove such a popular and worthwhile benefit in kind that meanwhile assists the bus service industry as a form of hidden subsidy? On the other hand a review of the facility may now take place more often and the benefit considered "too generous" by government think-tanks looking for further austerity measures – which I think is more likely, so we must continue to use it!

A group of pensioners are using their freedom passes to highlight use of the concession on excursions and holiday visits. Members from our Anglia Region will be travelling by self-drive minibus to the Pensioners Parliament in Blackpool in mid-June when any seniors can participate in learning about and discussing matters of concern to retired folk at the lovely base of the Winter Gardens complex. All should remember to take their bus passes to facilitate their travel in Blackpool for the occasion. Accreditation for this open event is £5 per day or £10 for the duration available from the NPC at their new address – Marchmont Community Centre, 62 Marchmont Street, Bloomsbury, London WC1N 1AB Tel: 020-7837-6622 or you can email: www.npcuk.org for further details.

Christopher J. Brooks,
Chair, Suffolk & Anglia Region
Pensioner Associations (NPC)