



Don't Zap the Zip campaign briefing #dontzapthezip

Children in London have been able to travel around the capital for free, or at a discounted rate, since 2006. But that's about to change. As part of its bailout of Transport for London (TfL), the government is insisting on suspending free travel for under 18s, to protect public health and avoid overcrowding on buses. This will be a disaster for families with children who are already struggling. Not only will it increase costs for them, it could also mean that children and young people are more restricted to their local area, less able to travel to school, college, work and healthcare appointments and more likely to miss out on the many opportunities that London has to offer them. Families have suffered enough during the pandemic and children are missing out. It's not right that the government should limit their access to education and healthcare and their ability to maintain relationships with family and friends.

What's the issue?

- As a condition of its funding support deal (worth £1.6bn) for TfL on 15 May 2020, the government required TfL to “suspen[d] free travel for u18s, subject to discussions in the working group about how it is to be operationalised.”
- The deal was the only deal the government offered to the Mayor of London, who accepted it in order to keep the Tubes and buses running.
- Andrew Gilligan, the Prime Minister’s Special Adviser on Transport, first raised this particular condition of funding with the Deputy Mayor for Transport, Heidi Alexander, on 14 May 2020 – on the day the funding discussions concluded. The issue of concessionary fares first appeared in a draft document sent by DfT to TfL late on 11 May – despite discussions about TfL’s finances having been ongoing for 6 weeks.
- The Deputy Mayor expressed serious reservations about any suspension of free travel, and as a result made a point of only agreeing to the condition if the words “subject to discussions in the working group about how it is to be operationalised” were included in the funding agreement, which they were.
- On Friday 31st July, a letter from the Department for Transport (DfT) minister Baroness Vere of Norbiton to TfL’s managing director, Customers, Vernon Everitt, confirmed that the ‘temporary suspension of free travel for 11-17 year olds would be implemented immediately after October Half Term’, i.e. Monday 2nd November, instead of in September 2020. The letter also confirmed that the following children will remain eligible for free travel:

- Children aged 10 and under
- Children aged 11-17 who live more than two miles walking distance from their school/college
- Children aged 11-17 who live less than two miles walking distance from their school/college if they:
 - o have a social worker (NB this includes young people with a child in need plan, a child protection plan, looked after children and care leavers up to 18)
 - o have an Education, Health and Care Plan
 - o are in alternative provision (i.e. educated in a pupil referral unit, or an alternative provision academy/free school)
 - o do not have a safe walking route under two miles walking distance
 - o cannot walk due to a medical condition or lack of mobility
- The eligibility criteria set out above will apply until the end of the academic year in which a child turns 11 or 18.
- The assumption is that if a pupil is eligible to retain free travel for school, that will in practice mean that they retain it at all times, especially if it is a smartcard (oyster) solution. However, this is yet to be confirmed by the government.
- **NEW:** On 1st October, a public statement was made by TfL Commissioner Andy Byford that the suspension of free travel for under 18s in London will not be able to be implemented until the spring 2021, instead of being brought in after the October half term holiday.
- There are still unanswered questions about the proposal: namely that the suspension has been reported as 'temporary', but government has not clarified how long it will last.¹ It has also not made public any details of:
 - the proposed fare structure for different age groups (11-16, 16-18)
 - the proposed means of payment
 - an equality impact assessment (EQIA). The government says that it is completing an EQIA, which will consider whether there are further categories of vulnerable children that should receive free transport.' This is yet to be published.

Why is the government doing this?

i.) To protect public health

The government's stated reasons for suspending free travel for under 18s are to protect public health and reduce the spread of coronavirus by avoiding dangerous levels of overcrowding on buses.

- **However**, the introduction of maximum passenger numbers on buses in London (20 on double decker buses; 10 on single decker buses) is designed to enable appropriate social distancing on buses and the number of children walking to school is already twice as high as those taking the bus.
- Government guidance on social distancing states that if you cannot keep a 2 metre distance, you should maintain a 1 metre distance where possible, and take suitable precautions. This rule also applies to travel by public transport. Children aged 11 or over are required to wear a face covering on public transport.

¹ Grant Shapps told the Commons Transport Committee on 24 June that scrapping free travel for under 18s in London was a "temporary" demand management measure and that the Mayor of London could do things differently "once the finances resolved".

- Transport for London (TfL) figures reveal that in September 2020, the number of bus journeys taken in London was on average only 58% of the number of bus journeys taken during September 2019.
- TfL has been given £6 million by the Department for Education to put on extra school buses to reduce demand until the October Half Term. It is continuing to run additional buses on 174 routes and operating every other bus as a school service on 234 routes in the morning peak.
- TfL is seeing approx. 200,000 Zip cards being used each day, which is about 70 per cent of normal demand. This shows children are already travelling to school using other means even without any change to fares, helping to take pressure off the network
- The Prime Minister’s announcement on 22 September that ‘office workers [should] work from home where possible’, will only reduce demand for bus travel further.

ii.) To prevent young people from making extremely short bus journeys

According to the government, ‘before the pandemic, young people using the free travel concession made up half of all bus users during the morning rush hour... many for extremely short journeys which would not have been made had they not been free (as academic research into the concession makes clear)’.²

- **However**, the research also outlines multiple benefits from free travel, such as “greater social inclusion”, reduced car travel and preventing road injuries to children.

iii.) To ensure that other parts of the UK are not subsidising London

Grant Shapps has said he believes ‘it is unfair to force taxpayers in the rest of the UK to subsidise benefits for Londoners, such as free travel for children, which they do not get themselves.’³ He has also said that TfL’s finances are a disaster due to uncollected revenue, blaming the Mayor of London for the fare freeze and no rise in congestion charge over the last four years. He added that “it’s fair that people in other parts of the country are not unduly subsidising the Mayor who failed to collect the funds”.⁴

- **However**, new figures published by the Office for National Statistics show that the sum of money raised in taxes from London and redistributed elsewhere totalled £34.3 billion in 2017-18, the most recent year for which the stats are available. That’s an increase of nearly £2 billion compared with the previous year and around £9 billion more than the year before that.⁵
- Other parts of the UK have discounted travel schemes for under 19s. Since 2005, the government’s transport strategy has been designed to facilitate modal shift towards ‘active travel’, i.e. public transport, walking and cycling, and away from private vehicles. Other areas such as Liverpool, Manchester and even county councils such as Kent and Cornwall have

² Letter from Grant Shapps to the Mayor of London, 3 June 2020. The academic research is a study called ‘On the buses: a mixed-method evaluation of the impact of free bus travel for young people on the public health’ Green J, Steinbach R, Jones A, et al. Southampton (UK): NIHR Journals Library; 2014 Feb <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK263964/>

³ Ibid.

⁴ Transport Questions in the House of Commons, 2 July 2020

⁵<https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/governmentpublicsectorandtaxes/publicsectorfinance/articles/countryandregionalpublicsectorfinances/financialyearending2019>

instigated discounted travel schemes for under 18s as part of programmes to encourage modal shift, and in the case of Merseyside it was claimed that their scheme was the driver of some significant growth in bus use. The existing Zip card scheme actually points to how children outside of London could also similarly benefit from a concessionary scheme.

Has TfL agreed to the suspension?

TfL is against the changes and has successfully resisted them coming into effect at the start of the new academic year (September 2020). Discussions are ongoing between the government and TfL, as well as the Mayor of London and London Councils, who are all against the suspension.

After undertaking work on how the concession changes might be operationalised, TfL and London Councils have raised a range of serious issues with the proposals with government, including but not limited to:

- Potentially disadvantaging to the poorest, at a time when household finances are stretched more than ever and employment is precarious.
- Potentially disadvantaging to BAME Londoners, because children and young people in London are nearly 60 per cent BAME, a much higher proportion than the population as a whole.
- Very technically complex, due to a range of different statutory requirements to provide free travel for young people in specific circumstances, and due to the huge technical complexity of fares tables and the Oyster system. To illustrate, the introduction of the Night Tube took two years to plan, from a fares perspective.
- Unclear how the new concessions would be administered, as neither TfL nor boroughs have easily accessible information on young's people's home address and place of education, and London boroughs have no experience of administering a system such as this.
- Insufficient time for boroughs to consult with Londoners, and possibility of a legal challenge given that parents will have made school and living choices based on the provision of free transport.

As a result, the Mayor has asked the government to drop this proposal. He has made clear that the onus is on the government to put forward a proposal for how the changes would be operationalised. TfL continues to raise the issues with the current proposals in its daily contact with government on the issue.

Who will the suspension affect and how will it affect them?

i.) Low-income families

Increased costs and stress

- The suspension will hit the poorest Londoners the hardest. There are 2 million under 18s living in London and 37 per cent of all children in the capital (700,000 kids) are living in poverty, after you take housing costs into account.⁶ According to the Mayor, around 30 per cent of children who currently travel to school by bus are eligible statutorily for free travel under the Education Act 1996.⁷

⁶ Households Below Average Income, Statistics on the number and percentage of people living in low income households for financial years 1994/95 to 2018/19, Department for Work and Pensions, 2020

⁷ Letter from the Mayor of London to Grant Shapps, 28 May 2020

- Assuming children are charged a reduced bus fare of £0.75 (half the adult fare), the daily bus trip to school will now cost £30 a month per child, while a parent travelling with two children would see their total bus or tube fare double.⁸
- If a child aged 11-17 lives over two miles away from their school or college, or less than two miles away and have specific needs or vulnerabilities, then they are eligible for free school transport. However, there is no specific provision for low-income families in the new proposal. While the children who live less than two miles away and either have a social worker, an Education, Health and Care Plan, a medical condition or a lack of mobility are in huge need and very likely to be disadvantaged, there is no provision for other children who are disadvantaged by living in relative poverty in London and cannot afford to travel around the capital.
- It is also likely that families' eligibility for free travel will change over time, which will give them additional stress while eligibility is determined.

Missed education and other opportunities

- Not only will families' transport bills increase even further as we move deeper into a recession; those from more disadvantaged backgrounds will be less likely to travel and could end up missing out on school, college, work or training; as well as school trips, healthcare appointments and seeing family and friends.
- The Association of Colleges reports that there are 168,000 students in 16-18 education in London, including almost a quarter on free school meals. They will face severe cost barriers to opportunities and overall quality of life if they do not qualify for free travel.
- One of the factors that makes schooling in London so uniquely successful is that teachers and pupils have cost-free access to world class museums and art galleries, providing many pupils with the only opportunity they will ever have to enjoy such experiences. If schools have to pay for travel, many of these opportunities will be withdrawn.⁹
- Young people could also miss out on accessing training, further education, work or apprenticeship opportunities, as well as sports, leisure and cultural activities.

School choices could be limited

- Thanks to school choice policies, variation in admissions criteria for different schools and the pan-London admissions system, parents can currently express a preference for schools that are beyond walking distance, without being limited by travel expenses. Many families have made school choices (i.e. for this September) already, based on the understanding that their children can travel for free. However, many will have their travel plans disrupted after just half a term. Families also have to make secondary school applications for 2021 places before the end of October, and sixth forms usually start accepting applications in September. So it's possible that students choosing between a secondary school or sixth form that is within two miles of their home and another that is further away will be making that decision in September based on little information about long-term travel costs.

⁸ <https://www.centreforlondon.org/blog/end-free-travel-young-londoners/>

⁹ TfL may still offer off-peak group travel when schools register for its School Party Travel Scheme. However, children cannot travel directly to and from their homes with group travel; they must make the journey to and from school <https://tfl.gov.uk/fares/free-and-discounted-travel/travel-for-schools>

Safety issues

- There is also a safety issue: parents may not want their children walking home from school, particularly in winter months when the days are shorter. Similarly children may feel unsafe walking to and from school, which may result in them missing it.
- Previously, the widespread introduction of Zip card passes helped police and other agencies to trace missing children.

Food access could be limited

- At a time of soaring levels of household food insecurity, the suspension could prevent more families from accessing affordable, nutritious food. For families without local food shops or fruit and vegetable markets, doing the food shop could be even harder. Low-income families will be left with even fewer shopping choices than before.
- Families accessing food aid could struggle as this help is often a bus ride (or more) away.

ii.) Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic (BAME) groups

- The suspension is likely to have a disproportionate impact on BAME groups, which make up nearly 60 per cent of the under 18 population in London – and as much as 80.9 per cent in more deprived boroughs such as Tower Hamlets.
- Children in Pakistani and Bangladeshi households are the most likely to live in low-income households and BAME groups in London are more likely to be low paid, especially people from Bangladeshi or Pakistani origin.
- BAME workers also make up a larger than average proportion of the jobs in sectors vulnerable to the coronavirus pandemic.

iii.) Local authorities

- London authorities have not had to administer or fund free travel for under 18s since 2005 and do not want the burden to fall on them now, as there would not only be a financial implication, but also an administrative burden with regard to identifying and verifying eligibility. Grant Shapps has confirmed to London Councils that the cost of providing free travel 'will not fall on the London boroughs'¹⁰ and that the cost of making travel arrangements for vulnerable children who need to engage with and travel to services will fall on the Mayor of London. However, there is still a resource cost to London councils.
- London Councils believes that the administrative process will be considerable and challenging to establish and complete by the end of October. An application process would need to be established, data would need to be gathered and analysed, decisions made and notified, challenge and appeals processes put in place and oyster cards produced and issued. This would all be extremely challenging at the best of times, but even more so in the current Covid-19 crisis situation.

¹⁰ Letter from Grant Shapps to the Mayor of London, 3 June 2020

- The Department for Education has said that given the pressure on public transport from September onwards, it may have to work with councils to put on additional dedicated school transport services, including areas in which they do not currently operate.

Are there any other implications?

- Many families have reduced the number of car journeys they make as a result of the free transport policy and therefore helped ease congestion in London. Additional car traffic will be generated by the policy change, with consequent impact on road journey times, poorer air quality, reduced road safety for pedestrians and cyclists and longer journey times for bus passengers. Children and young people in some of the most deprived areas in London are also exposed to the highest road danger risk.

What's the solution?

Central government must remove the under 18 travel concession condition from the bail-out deal agreement with TfL as soon as possible.

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