

2018.03.06

7 Deputy M. Tadier of the Minister for Infrastructure regarding the number of concessionary disabled bus passes issued since the implementation of the scheme: [OQ.45/2018]

How many concessionary disabled bus passes have been issued since the implementation of the scheme?

Deputy E.J. Noel of St. Lawrence (The Minister for Infrastructure):

Firstly, may I thank Deputy Tadier for asking this question on what is just over the first anniversary of the introduction of this pilot scheme. I can inform Members that, as of 28th February, there have been 346 Avanchi Access disabled person bus passes issued. This number has grown from the initial 152 that were issued in the first month when the scheme was launched, as I said, on 1st March 2017.

3.7.1 Deputy M. Tadier:

It is good to know that hopefully for those 346 people it has made a real difference to their lives and perhaps to their mobility and independence. Can the Minister state how those figures tallied with the expectation, in particular the figure which he provided in terms of cost, had the States been asked to meet the full cost of those bus passes? How much would it cost, for example, for those to be provided by the public purse rather than the individuals? If he does not know, would he perhaps comment on the first part about the take-up?

Deputy E.J. Noel:

The estimated take-up figures were based on similar schemes in England and Scotland. We have had substantially less than that and that is probably down to the quite narrow definition that the Deputy put in his proposition to this Assembly, which was approved by this Assembly. My officers are now bringing forward the review of this scheme, which was due to take place prior to the end of 2019, and will be reviewing the scheme in 2018 to see if we can expand the quite tight definition of those who are eligible for these passes. So hopefully by the end of this year we will have a bigger pool of people being able to access this particular service.

3.7.2 Deputy G.P. Southern:

The Minister says that the estimates of penetration would be based on the U.K. schemes, similar U.K. schemes, and he has failed to meet that estimate; he said we are on the low side, I believe he said. What would he suggest is a reasonable target to now expect the department to meet in order to meet the need for free bus passes for the disabled?

Deputy E.J. Noel:

Deputy Southern is getting a bit confused I feel. The uptake of this service are those people that qualify under the definition that his colleague from Reform brought to this Assembly and this Assembly agreed. We are looking now to expand that definition and for individuals to come forward after we have done that review who may be eligible for this scheme. I would like to take up a point that Deputy Tadier made in his first supplementary. It has made a real difference to those 346 individuals that have the passes and we are still having to make sure that, as our original intention prior to this scheme coming in, to outreach because not all those that have disabilities, a bus service is not necessarily the answer for their mobility issues and we are looking at providing a range of solutions to their mobility issues.

3.7.3 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Could I suggest that the Minister disregards looking at alternatives and concentrates on what he has at the moment? What does he think would be a reasonable target to achieve following his changes, his increase in eligibility, which he proposes, during 2018 for example?

Deputy E.J. Noel:

There is no target, we are there to provide a service to those Islanders that need it. There are currently 346 individuals that have taken up that service. There is no barrier to individuals apart from meeting the criteria for those bus passes to access that service. We are now looking at, and we have been quite flexible and quite liberal in the interpretation of the narrow rules that were brought to this Assembly, by allowing people who do not quite fit into those rules of an Avanchi Access disabled person pass. But that is not the answer for everybody; having access to a bus service, if you are disabled, is not necessarily the answer to your mobility issues and we are expanding our options to the public so we can meet the requirements of those who need additional services.

3.7.4 Deputy G.P. Southern:

The Minister said there is no barrier to seeking to apply for this scheme. Is it not the case that the fee of £15 - I know the Minister might think that incredible - is a barrier to some on top of the cost of taking the photographs as well, is it not possible that this, in order to make it more accessible to those in real need, should be funded directly by the States and not by the individuals concerned?

Deputy E.J. Noel:

No, I do not think the administration charge for processing the application is a barrier. It is exactly the same charge that is levied for those who wish to have a blue badge for their disabled parking.

Deputy G.P. Southern:

If I may ...

The Bailiff:

Thank you, Deputy. I am calling on the Connétable of St. John.

3.7.5 Connétable C.H. Taylor of St. John:

Does the Minister agree with me that, with the uptake we have had, this has been a very great success?

Deputy E.J. Noel:

Yes, it has been a success, but we do have some additional budget, we have not used all the budget that was allocated to this, and so we are looking to expand the scheme to try to help more Islanders with their mobility issues. But we have also used the money, as it was in the proposition, to improve access to the buses. We carried out an audit to make sure that bus stops are improving, we have lowered kerbing in streets where we can, and that is all part of opening up the bus network, not just for those that would qualify for the disabled pass, but for all bus users.

3.7.6 Deputy G.P. Southern:

We are all fully aware that this Reform Jersey scheme is a success, but we would like the Minister to build on that success and improve the numbers of people eligible, especially among the non-car-owning population who have disability because, while they might be able to afford the blue badge pass, another alternative number of people may not be able to afford £15 for the free bus pass.

Deputy E.J. Noel:

For once, I agree with Deputy Southern and prior to this scheme coming into place I invited Deputy Tadier to be part of this scheme and to help us design it. He declined to do so. **[Approbation]**

3.7.7 Deputy M. Tadier:

I am glad to hear that revisionist history from the outgoing Minister for Infrastructure. Clearly the Minister forgets that this would not have been done, because it was a promise that the Minister was at risk of reneging on before the proposition was brought to the Assembly, to get him to fulfil his election promise.

[10:45]

But that is in the past now and we have a scheme, which 346 people are benefiting from. Does the Minister accept that on top of the £15 fee, which can act as a disincentive, and on top of the need to provide photographs and on top of the need potentially to book a G.P.'s (general practitioner) visit in order to get the reference and the signature for that, that it does provide a barrier, especially for those on low income? That it is not a fair comparison to compare it with a free parking disc for somebody who is rich enough potentially to own a car, but for people who do not even have enough money to own a car the bus may be a real lifeline for them, and that for those 346 people the total sum comes to £5,190, which is not a lot of money for the States to pay. The States should and could consider covering the cost of those passes so that they are free so that we can determine what the real need for this service is. Does the Minister agree that we need to increase the numbers, not just in the eligibility criteria, but by reducing the cost to zero to make it a truly free bus pass, we can ascertain what the latent demand out there is?

Deputy E.J. Noel:

I agree that we need to have access to mobility for all those who require it. I would like to refer the Deputy to look at the application forms for applying for an Avanchi Access card, because you do not need to go to your G.P.; we were very, very aware of the fact that we needed to keep the cost down for the individuals. So those people who are eligible for this do not need to get their forms signed off by their G.P., there are other carers and there are other professionals who can certify that they are able to use this scheme.