

READING BOROUGH COUNCIL

STRATEGIC ENVIRONMENT, PLANNING & TRANSPORT COMMITTEE – 20 NOVEMBER 2024

COUNCILLOR QUESTION NO. 1 in accordance with Standing Order No.36

Councillor McElroy to ask the Chair of Strategic Environment, Planning & Transport Committee:

Greens call for a local freeze on the bus fare cap in Reading.

Liverpool City Region Mayor Steve Rotheram has announced that he is extending the region's £2 bus fare cap until September 2025.

The Labour mayor said: *“Affordable and reliable bus services are key to ensuring that everyone, no matter their income or background, can get to work, access education, or simply enjoy all that our region has to offer. [...] this is not just about getting from A to B, it's part of our wider efforts to make clean, sustainable travel more accessible, tackle congestion, and make the Liverpool City Region net zero carbon by 2035”.*

Can't argue with that, but there was nothing in the budget that suggested Labour are remotely serious about climate action, with this and the continued fuel duty freeze.

So it's up to us to address these issues locally, right? Greens call on Reading Borough Council use their influence as the majority shareholder of Reading Buses to see that bus fares retain the same cap in Reading. Will you?

REPLY by the Chair of the Strategic Environment, Planning & Transport Committee:

I invite Councillor Ennis, the Lead Councillor for Climate Strategy and Transport to make the response on my behalf.

REPLY by Councillor Ennis, Lead Councillor for Climate Strategy and Transport:

The Council fully supports the importance of keeping bus fares as affordable as possible, which will help to encourage even more residents and visitors to use the extremely popular bus services in Reading. This is why the Reading All-Bus ticket discount scheme was included as a core element of our ambitious Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP) funding bid to Government, resulting in the successful award of over £26m grant funding to invest in improving bus services in Reading.

The Council worked with local bus operators to launch the Reading All-Bus discount scheme in March 2023, which set a daily cap for unlimited travel in Reading, initially as low as £3.40 for adults and £2.60 for a young person. This was the first time the same ticket could be used on services provided by different operators in Reading, with the all-day ticket valid on Reading Buses, Thames Travel, Arriva and Thames Valley buses. These prices remained valid for 18 months and were revised this September, with the lowest all-day travel prices now £4 for adults and £3 for young people. The ticket continues to offer excellent value for

money and is still cheaper than the equivalent all-day ticket which existed prior to the introduction of the Reading All-Bus scheme.

Overall, the ticket discount has proved to be extremely popular to date, with over 3 million tickets sold up to August 2024, saving passengers in Reading over £4 million in fares as a result. Alongside the Reading All-Bus discount, tap-on tap-off contactless payment has been introduced on all the main operators from 1 November 2023, making it easier for passengers to pay and therefore speeding-up boarding times.

The Council does not have comparable financial resources with an area like the Liverpool City Region, therefore it would not be possible for the Council to continue to subsidise bus travel without further Government funding. However, for most bus users the 'headline' single fare is not the most important factor but the availability of frequent, reliable bus services and affordable prices such as multi-journey tickets and season tickets. That is why, alongside the ticket discount scheme, the Council's BSIP programme is delivering a range of benefits including additional bus services, vital bus priority infrastructure and complementary offers such as the current £1 park & ride ticket initiative.

We will continue to work closely with all operators, including Reading Buses, to ensure fares remain as low as possible once the Reading All Bus scheme ends. However, like all sectors, bus companies are subject to inflationary pressures which need to be factored into ticket pricing. Failing to do so, impacts on the viability and development of improved service offers, with the potential to increase inequalities. It is therefore not possible to artificially cap fares without wider subsidy or growth in patronage.

The final element of our BSIP programme, alongside the infrastructure improvements which make bus travel more attractive, is a comprehensive marketing campaign we are delivering in partnership with operators to support growth in patronage. It is this combination of measures which will support sustainable, long-term growth and ultimately deliver reduced congestion, better air quality and improved health and wellbeing for residents in Reading.

ENDS