

Under 22 free tram travel could continue despite council axing funds

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Edinburgh Trams, the council-owned company which operates the capital's light rail, is in discussions with the authority about footing the bill, estimated at just over £300,000 a year.

The annual city budget set by councillors in February agreed to end tram concessions for under 22s, which were introduced at the beginning of 2022 at the same time the Scottish Government rolled-out free bus travel for youngsters.

However, Edinburgh Trams are continuing the scheme on an interim basis whilst discussions about its future are ongoing.

Scott Arthur, Transport Convener on Edinburgh City Council, said the new line to Newhaven, due to open in the coming months, would extend the network to "quite a lot of young people living in quite deprived areas," adding that it "makes sense for them to have access to the tram on the same basis as

they do buses”.

Lib Dem group leader Councillor Kevin Lang welcomed the news but said the Scottish Government “should be funding this in the same way it funds under 22 travel on buses”.

A report which went before the transport committee on Thursday (April 20) said: “The council budget...made no provision for on-going financial support from the council for free travel by tram for under 22s.

“Council officers are currently discussing this position with the board of Edinburgh Trams with the intention of reporting to Committee on 18 May 2023.”

The council already funds free tram travel for people in Edinburgh who are over 60 or disabled.

Proposals tabled by SNP and Green councillors in February included £3m to continue funding concessions for under 22 year-olds, however these were defeated against the Lib Dem budget which did not support the move.

Paul Lawrence, executive director of place, told councillors conversations about the “true cost” of the scheme were taking place to look at whether the tram company is in a position to meet funding requirements.

He said: “As it happens the cost itself is really not that much, it’s not as if in carrying under 22s for free there are lots of additional staff, lots of additional trams – so the cost is actually not that high.

“There is a matter of principle which is should a public transport carry people for free when it’s not funded? That’s a matter for members to consider rather than officers.”

Mr Lawrence added if young people started being charged there would be displacement from tram to bus and “potential for lost income to the transport public pound in the city”.

Cllr Arthur said: "The tram and the bus company have been exchanging views on this and they have been working together on it – and I think that bodes well for what we want to do around integrating those two companies.

"It's not something that we're going into quickly or without really thinking through the details of it."

The transport convener said he wrote to the Scottish Government's new transport minister Kevin Stewart this week "about how the tram line extension to Leith is going to open up the tram service to quite a lot of young people living in quite deprived areas".

He added: "It kind of makes sense for them to have access to the tram on the same basis as they do buses."

Cllr Lang said: "It is great news that Edinburgh Trams looks set to keep free tram travel for under 22s. Let's be clear, the Scottish Government should be funding this in the same way it funds under 22 travel on buses. However, in the absence of this, Edinburgh Trams deserves praise for looking at how it can keep cost-free travel for our younger people.

"This news also blows a hole in the financial plans put forward by SNP councillors just two months ago. Had the SNP had its way, the Council would have wasted £3 million of public money for a scheme which is now set to be delivered anyway.."

by Donald Turvill Local Democracy Reporter

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