

Bus boss backs confiscating free passes from troublesome youngsters

The boss of Lothian Buses has backed confiscating youths' bus passes if they are caught abusing drivers.

Sarah Boyd said there must be "penalties" for those who abuse the concessionary scheme for under 22-year-olds.

A survey of 1,800 drivers across the UK by Unite found 82 per cent suffered mistreatment from passengers last year, and the union says the number of incidents has increased in Scotland since the introduction of unlimited free journeys for youngsters.

In 2022 after being appointed as the new managing director for the publicly-owned bus company, Boyd called for more respect toward her staff, citing a rise in reports of drivers being sworn and spat at and antagonised.

However problems have persisted – and the city's transport chief said some bus operators are now going to work scared.

Conservative councillor for Morningside Marie-Claire Munro, who has previously said some young people from outside Edinburgh are using their passes to come into the city to cause trouble, raised the issue as bosses of the council's arms-length transport companies took questions from elected members on Thursday, August 15.

"Bus drivers are having verbal abuse and it's the minority spoiling it for the majority who use the under 22 bus passes," Cllr Munro said. "The Scottish Government has put this in but there needs to be more done where if you are being abusive or anti-social behaviour your pass could be suspended.

"Would you think that would be a comfort to residents and drivers who are facing that type of abuse from a minority of individuals who are spoiling it for the majority?"

In response Ms Boyd said: "I think absolutely. There's a few things I've been lobbying for, most recently a behavioural code of conduct is the starting point so when you sign up for your pass, either as a parent as I've done for my own children recently, saying you will take responsibility for their behaviour at a certain age and then yourself when you're older applying for your pass, I think that as a minimum.

"It's a minority of people, but actually that doesn't matter if you're a driver because that one incident is enough for it to be a huge issue for you.

"And so it's something we're working really hard to try and have that, I guess with any good scheme, as it is an incredible scheme, there has to be the penalty if you abuse it."

Ms Boyd said Lothian Buses has a "zero tolerance approach to anti-social behaviour".

She added: "What that means is our control room on any given day, time, if there is an issue, have the ability to take buses out from an area if need be.

"Clearly that is the last thing we want to do, that's a huge inconvenience to customers.

"However the priority of safety to our own people and obviously our customers has to be the priority in that

situation.”

Councillor Scott Arthur, Labour transport convener, said a Lothian bus driver’s wife had been in touch with him this month raising fears over her partner’s safety.

“She’s concerned about her husband because I think twice he’s had his windscreen broken,” he said. “Of all the jobs where people are worried about their partner going to work you wouldn’t necessarily think a bus driver would be one of them.”

Unite’s general secretary Sharon Graham said thousands of bus drivers across Scotland “are increasingly anxious and nervous about going to work”.

In response to the threat to drivers the union is calling for increased presence of police officers or community wardens on buses, better CCTV coverage on buses and at bus stations, panic buttons and other enhanced safety features installed in vehicles including internal locking systems.

“Unite’s road map towards greater safety for bus workers is one which can be adopted right away. We need support from industry and government to work with us in delivering this plan in the interests of thousands of bus workers and passengers,” the trade union’s Scottish secretary Derek Thomson added in a statement released in April.

“The road map however will only take us so far down the road in addressing the wave of anti-social behaviour and violence towards bus workers. We also need legislation which provides stronger statutory protection for transport workers, which is enforced.”

By Donald Turvill Local Democracy Reporter