

Free bus travel is a good idea; so why does it stop at 15?

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Dear Editor,

This August, children aged five to 15 can travel free on local buses across England. I think that's genuinely good. It makes days out cheaper, helps children get to summer activities, and might persuade a few families to leave the car at home.

But I can't quite work out why it stops at 15. And where I live, age isn't really what decides the price of a bus seat anyway.

I'm 16. I live in Epsom and travel to school in Wallington, which is in the London Borough of Sutton. I have a 16+ Zip Oyster photocard. Going to school in London, it turns out, makes no difference at all; the rule follows where you sleep, not where you study.

So here is what the same card is worth to different people. If you're 16 and live in a London borough, it gives you free bus travel. If you're 16 and live outside London, as I do, it gives you half the adult fare – about 88p a journey. And if you're 16 and have never applied for one, you tap a contactless card and pay the full £1.75.

Three 16-year-olds. Same bus, same stop. One pays nothing, one pays 88p, one pays £1.75.

Nothing in that reflects need, or distance, or what anyone's family earns. It reflects which side of the Greater London boundary you sleep on, and whether somebody remembered to tell you the card exists.

That second part bothers me most, because it's the easiest thing to fix. Some students will inevitably miss out simply because nobody has explained the system clearly enough. A benefit that depends on knowing it exists ends up helping the organised rather than the people who need it.

And the cost starts to matter more at 16 than it did at 15. At 15, most journeys are still with your family. At 16 you're travelling on your own to sixth form, a Saturday job, or a work experience placement you were told to arrange yourself. Nobody tells you that you can't apply for those things. On paper they're open to everyone. But one student can afford the journey every week and another quietly decides they can't, and from the outside that never looks like unfairness at all.

I should admit I'm arguing against my own convenience here. I have the card, and half fare is not a hardship. I'd still rather Epsom's 16-year-olds got what Sutton's get. The Greater London boundary was drawn to decide who administers what; it was never meant to decide which teenager can afford to get to an interview in Croydon. TfL buses cross it every twenty minutes.

Surrey does have its own scheme, the LINK card, which halves fares for under-20s. It's useful, it's badly advertised, and it doesn't work on TfL services – which are the buses that actually serve this town.

Of course the government has to draw a line somewhere, and August's offer was aimed at families with younger children. That's fair. Public money isn't unlimited. But 15 isn't an obvious place to stop, and a postcode isn't a principle at all.

Two things would help. Extend the August offer to everyone under 18; we're legally required to be in education or training, and most of us earn very little. And make sure every pupil in Epsom and Ewell hears about both the 16+ Zip and the LINK card before their sixteenth birthday, with a plain list of what each one covers.

Free buses this August are a good idea. I just don't think a birthday, a boundary and a form should decide who keeps them.

Yours faithfully,

Emad Rehman

Aged 16, Epsom, student at Wilson's School, Wallington