



Department for

**Infrastructure**

An Roinn

**Bonneagair**

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**From the office of the Minister for Infrastructure  
Nichola Mallon MLA**

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7<sup>th</sup> February 2022

Dear Ms Steele

### **Free Public Transport for Young People**

Thank you for your email to Minister Mallon received on 26 January 2022 advising of the Belfast City Council motion calling for a trial to provide free travel for young people on public transport services within Belfast. The Minister has read your letter and asked me to respond.

The Minister welcomes the motion and notes the interest shown by councillors to explore ways to address the impacts of climate change and the role that sustainable transport may play. Concessionary travel, which is available to a range of vulnerable groups including children aged 5-16, connects people and opportunities through the public transport network. Improving access to public transport helps to protect the environment by encouraging people to travel more sustainably.

Minister Mallon has recently announced her intention to extend free travel across Northern Ireland for people with disabilities who currently pay half fare and to widen the range of services facilitating concessionary travel by extending the Scheme to new operators (including some in Belfast) who have already indicated or expressed an interest in joining. This is in the context of the current budget consultation and the proposal for the associated ring funding of such a move.

As you will be aware, the current public transport network faces financial challenges each year. Given that Translink operate one of the widest public transport networks within these islands, there is a significant cost to running these important services as fare revenue is not sufficient to cover them.

In that regard, the Department for Infrastructure provides a subsidy to Translink to offset the remaining cost of the network with a contractual obligation to maintain the organisation's going concern status. However, as the Department has faced significant budgetary constraints since 2014/15, this has meant that opening baselines for the public transport network are below what is required to operate it. This has meant that in

many years Translink has delivered the public transport network at significant losses. This challenge remains as we look forward to future years.

Minister Mallon would be very keen to offer young people free travel however it would require a significant increase in funding from the Executive to the Department. Please be assured that the Minister continues to make the case around the Executive table for increased funding for our public transport services, not only to maintain existing services but to expand it given the economic, social justice and environmental benefits it delivers.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'K MCFERRAN', with a stylized, flowing script.

**KATHRYN MCFERRAN**  
**Private Secretary to the Minister**