

Summary of community views

A number of different consultation methods have been used to understand community views on the current and future options for the public transport fare structure in Wellington. These include

- the formal consultation feedback (reported to the Economic Wellbeing Committee in October 2012)
- a discussion forum for public transport users, advocates and residents groups on the issues around any change to the public transport fare structure
- focus groups around the relative perceived value for money of public transport in the region
- A Fare Structure Review Reference Group comprising representatives from operators, councillors and users.

These are summarised below. A summary of the relevant results from the annual user satisfaction survey is also presented.

Formal consultation - mid 2012

During the formal consultation carried out last year, respondents were asked to comment on a range of alternative options for the fare structure in Wellington.

Overall, respondents were evenly split between retaining existing 14 zones or moving towards coarser 5 or 7 zone option. 70% of those who preferred coarse zones preferred a combined approach of zones for cash and distance based for smart card users with a higher preference for a purely zonal structure from respondents outside Wellington city who would typically be travelling longer distances on public transport.

When asked to consider a distance based fare structure, the majority of respondents supported fare increments to decrease with distance travelled, with a higher percentage of people supporting this in Kapiti and Wairarapa.

Overall two thirds of respondents supported a concession fare for tertiary students which may be a reflection of the high number of under 25 year olds who responded to the survey. Around 40% supported extending the child concession fare to all people under 20 years old and over half of all respondents considered the level of discount offered should be 50%. Three quarters of respondents considered that concession fares should continue to be offered to people with disabilities.

Overall opinion was evenly split for or against an off peak fare, although support for an off peak fare increased with respondent age. Only a quarter of respondents considered that concession fares for beneficiaries or people with disabilities should be replaced with a universal off peak fare.

When asked about preferences for future payment systems, 40% of respondents who use public transport for more than 20 trips per month preferred to pay using a periodical

ticket, whereas 57% of respondents who use public transport less frequently (1 to 4 trips per month) prefer the option of paying on a trip by trip basis with a stored value card. Generally, people who use the train as their main public transport mode preferred periodical tickets, and those who identify the bus as their main public transport mode prefer to pay by stored value card reflecting the current payment systems in place. Just under two thirds of respondents supported payment with a smart card.

Public transport discussion forum

At the forum for public transport users and advocates, views were varied. There appeared to be a general consensus that whichever fare structure is adopted, the Council should be focusing on increasing patronage on public transport.

The group considered that public transport must be affordable, easy to access and use. Integrated ticketing and a single smart card system across the network were needed as this would encourage patronage growth and make the network easier to use.

The group considered that the overarching objective for the fare structure review should be that the fare structure results in fares that are fair, reasonable and equitable. Maximising patronage and ensuring any fare system is simple and easy to use were considered the next most important attributes of a fare structure.

The group considered that concession fares should be offered to those most in need, however who was most in need was debated by participants. Tertiary student representatives argued for concession fares for students, whereas other participants argued other low income users, such as cleaners or other service workers, were equally 'deserving' of a concession fare.

Focus groups on value for money

Six focus groups were held around the region with the objective of exploring public transport user's perception of the value for money of current public transport fares, and their views on any future changes to the fare structure.

Participants generally perceived that under the current fare structure, longer distance public transport travel was better value for money than shorter public transport trips. Rail was considered to offer better value for money than bus travel on a fare per kilometre travelled basis, however participants considered that because bus stops were generally closer to where people want to go and the journey was more 'direct' this added value for money for bus users.

Participants were asked to consider the relative fare for a number of short, medium and long distance trips around the region. Under the current fare structure, short trips in Wellington have a higher fare than an equivalent trip in the Hutt and Kapiti, and Wairarapa travellers tend to pay more for a 50km trip length than Kapiti users. Participants raised multiple reasons for why the relative cost of journeys in the region could be seen as 'fair', with reasons ranging from fares set by distance travelled, duration of journey, level of congestion along route, social good reasons, topography, ability to pay, and willingness to pay. Only a few participants considered the same length of journey should cost the same across the region, mainly as they perceived other factors also influenced the cost of a journey.

A quarter of participants supported retaining the current 14 zone structure, all of these participants (bar one) lived in Kapiti. The remaining participants were evenly split around whether they preferred large zones or distance based fares. Larger zones were seen to discriminate against short trips, whereas distance based fares were seen to discriminate against longer distance travellers.

Participants were evenly split between whether there should be a differential between peak and off peak fares, however, of those who supported a differential were also evenly split between whether off peak fares should be lower or higher than peak fares. The reasons ranged from that at peak times, public transport is more crowded and unpleasant so should cost less, to lower off peak fares are needed to encourage more public transport use.

Public Transport Fare Structure Review Reference Group (FSR Reference Group)

The review criteria were discussed by the FSR Reference Group who considered fairness and equity considerations are unlikely to differentiate between different structures as every fare structure requires some trade-offs between different user groups and types.

The FSR Reference Group considered that the two most important criteria for the review were that any fare structure must be simple and easy to understand and use and encourage patronage growth. All other criteria are balanced in terms of the level of importance, although these criteria may present significant impediments for some options.

The FSR Reference Group also considered that the fare structure should reward the types of behaviours the Council considers important, an issue identified in the original terms of reference for the project. As such, the fare structure should reward:

- frequent users
- users who travel outside the peak period
- users who pay using a smart card system.

In addition, the Reference Group considered that the fare structure should be mode neutral with the same products available on bus, rail, and ferry. Fares for some services could be set at a premium, for example on the ferry, recognising either the nature or additional cost of the service.

Based on the underlying assumption that the fare structure should reward specific types of behaviours rather than users, the Reference Group also considered that concessions for specific users were not supported. The Group considered that there should be a national approach to concessions for people with disabilities, beneficiaries and tertiary students similar to the Super Gold card which provided clarity and consistency to the provision of concession fares.

The Reference Group supported continuing to investigate an off peak fare in preference to a tertiary discount, and a bulk purchase discount for students should also continue to be investigated.

Annual public transport user satisfaction survey

The GWRC annual public transport user survey has shown over the last few years that users have become less satisfied over time with the affordability of both train and bus fares. Over the last 5 years, the level of satisfaction with public transport affordability has declined from around 52% for rail users and 58% for bus users in 2008 to 32% for rail and 34% for bus in 2012. Whilst this decline has to be set against a background of a tough economic environment, the decline of over 20% in satisfaction across the 5 years is significant. Between 2008/09 and 2011/12, overall patronage grew by just 0.4% against a population growth of 5%.

When the current 14 zone structure was introduced in 2006, GWRC public transport fares were increased by around 15%. Between 2008 and 2012, GWRC public transport fares have increased by approximately 20%, in addition to the 2.5% increase in GST introduced in 2010. Over the same period, the general Consumer Price Index has risen around 8.5%. A further fare increase of 2.5% is planned for 2013.