

The Case for Free Public Transport:

Why Fare-Free Transport Should Be Top of Climate Activists Demands

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For a number of years People Before Profit representatives have championed the idea of fare-free public transport (FFPT) across Ireland as one policy response to the growing climate crisis.

The idea is derided by the usual suspects but also dismissed by some who may surprise, such as Green party representatives and some other environmental activists. The case for fare-free public transport will seem obvious to most of us, but the arguments against it range across a spectrum from basic neoliberal and neoclassical economic arguments about any “free” good to other concerns about “useless” additional public transport trips which don’t reduce actual CO₂ emissions. Both spectrums of opposition are profoundly wrong and misunderstand both the practical concerns and deeper reasons for supporting and campaigning for FFPT. This article will set out both the practical reasons I believe we should champion the call for FFPT, including its wider implications, and what’s currently wrong with the direction of public transport policy in Ireland.

The last decade has seen a growing movement around FFPT globally. By some estimates, there are 100 separate cities, towns and municipalities globally that provide some version of it. It is in place in cities and regions as diverse as Tallinn, Dunkirk and Luxembourg, in municipalities in Poland, Sweden, France and Czechia and in Chengdu in China. In other cities and countries there are partially free services for certain groups. (For more info see: <https://freepublictransport.info/>)

Indeed, Ireland already has one version of FFPT for those over sixty-six. When introduced for those on state pensions and others with disabilities in 1967 by then minister Charlie Haughey, it was widely popular, if frowned upon by economists and some commentators as shameless populism. In fact, its popularity ensured that even when Haughey was subsequently revealed as a corrupt and shameless charlatan decades later, it was not uncommon as a transport worker to hear pensioners stoutly defend

him and describe themselves as “Charlie’s angels” while displaying proudly their free travel pass. For many pensioners the free pass was revolutionary in its day; it meant less isolation, greater connectivity in the wider community, greater ability to remain linked up and the ability to access other services.

Public transport costs have always been comparatively large in Ireland, and those on small fixed incomes in retirement simply didn’t have the financial capacity to travel on buses or trains daily given these costs. The free pass changed that and had a profound impact on many lives, hence the continued defence by some beneficiaries decades later of a clearly corrupt politician.

In many places that have introduced FFPT, the cost of public transport was not the prime motivator, as fares generated a relatively small portion of the overall revenue, with state and other subsidies paying the bulk. Indeed, in some towns, getting rid of fares was an immediately practical measure as the costs associated with actually collecting and monitoring fare revenue was seen as a burden hardly worth the effort.

In contrast, public transport fares in Ireland have always been relatively expensive, with Dublin second only to London in one survey of fifty-five major cities.¹ That cost has increased hugely over the years since the recession as the state cut back its direct subsidies and passenger revenue was left to plug the gap.

Even after the recession, the state did not reverse steep hikes in fares until the recent and temporary cut. PSO (Public Service Obligation) subsidies to Dublin Bus, for example, fell from seventy-five million euro in 2010 to fifty-three million in 2019 (a fall which isn’t sufficiently explained by the transfer of routes to Go Ahead, a UK-based private company who “won” 10 per cent of the Dublin Bus network under a neoliberal tendering competition). In fact, current expenditure across all public transport fell from 343 million euro in 2008 to 304 million in 2020, and capital expenditure has also fallen from 198 million in 2010 to 217 million in 2007.²

What these figures show us is that for all the PR hoopla around new modes of public transport, from Luas lines to promised metro lines and promised BusConnects improvements, the levels of subsidies in the actual network remain low by any comparison with EU networks, and the gap in funding results in high fares for ordinary people. In 2019 the cost of operating the Dublin Bus network was 280 million, but less than 15 per cent of this was subsidised by the state via PSO payments; the rest was paid by the general public in fares. These figures are a near reversal of the levels of subsidies in other cities.

When People Before Profit TDs have raised the issue with government ministers, the usual figures given are that FFPT would cost around 600 million euro across the state. This is simply the current revenue generated from fares paid by the public. There’s good reason to believe that the actual cost of FFPT would be significantly less, as there is a cost to each of the transport

companies involved in collecting fares, arranging ticket sales, etc. If the need for the costly infrastructure associated with revenue collection is gone, these costs are too. The benefits, on the other hand, don't make it into any mainstream economists' reckoning, but would be enormous for society in general.

For regular public transport users, the majority of whom are ordinary workers and students, an FFPT system would be a huge advantage and represent a massive boon in disposable income, a fact recognised by the government's recent 20 per cent cut in fares as a response to rising inflation.

The great social benefit of FFPT, regardless of economic costs, is the increased connectivity it gives people. FFPT is rightly seen as "a great equaliser."³

Studies in Dunkirk, the French city that introduced FFPT in 2018, found this was one of its profound impacts, not just for older people but younger and marginalised sectors of society as well.⁴ One report for news agency France 24 noted:

"It's become a synonym of freedom, attracting those who might not otherwise have used public transport. In this largely working-class city, 'people of limited means say they've rediscovered transport'—a prerequisite to finding a job, maintaining friendships or participating in local arts and culture. But it's not only disadvantaged or working-class people who take the bus. It is also attracting white-collar workers, students and pensioners."⁵

The campaign for FFPT in Boston is largely based on the positive impacts it would have beyond its effect on climate targets. A local representative campaigning said it "has the potential to be a way to solve all of our deepest challenges: climate change, income inequality gaps and addressing racial disparities, intense traffic and congestion problems."⁶

There is a deep need for connectivity in our cities, towns and rural communities. Beyond the functional need to travel to work, school or college or to avail of any service, there is a fundamental human need to be able to move and interact freely in public space. As with everything else, capitalism places obstacles in the way of this basic need and commodifies it. Moving around a city or region is costly and time consuming. Cities and towns are developed with no real planning in terms of how people need to live; an hour-plus commute to work, a three-hour trip to college or a medical appointment; car parking fees, clamping, tolls and regular traffic congestion, etc, are the experiences people actually have, not the ones sold to us in car ads.

The car is seen as the embodiment of individuality and personal freedom. Car ads conjure a vision of open spaces, open roads, rugged mountains or natural beauty spots with a lone car travelling blissfully along. The reality of people's lives is very different.

The case for FFPT stacks up with other obvious benefits that flow from reducing reliance on private forms of transport. If implemented correctly, it should see less traffic congestion and an improvement in air quality, and levels of carbon monoxide, carbon dioxide and nitrogen dioxide should fall. Accidents and injuries from cars should fall, creating a safer environment for cyclists and pedestrians. But the greatest reason to champion FFPT today comes from the climate catastrophe we face and the need to build a mass movement around demands that focus on the causes of the unfolding disaster and on ways to mitigate it. Public transport is one of the best demands the movement has, and FFPT brings class issues into the centre of that movement.

Among the solutions offered to the worsening climate crisis is a massive electrification of the energy and transport sectors. Both are entirely feasible. In the case of transport, this is often concentrated on the replacement of the world's current ICE (internal combustion engine) fleet of private vehicles with new EV (electric vehicles) and hybrid types of private vehicles.

While possible, such a switch will not result in the steep cuts in CO₂ and other greenhouse gases (GHGs) we need in the time we have. In Ireland, the target is for one million EVs to be on the road by 2030. This is insane on many levels, and shows the utter dearth of imagination of many of those who advocate it as a response to climate chaos. Using the electrification of transport to primarily switch from ICE private vehicles to EV private vehicles will mean massive emissions from the manufacture of the numbers of cars needed to replace the existing fleet as well as from the continued building and maintenance of the infrastructure needed to sustain a model based on private vehicle use. However, the electrification of forms of mass transit such as buses, trains and trams, as part of a radical switch to the use of public transport in towns and cities, could deliver the real cuts in emissions we need in the coming years. FFPT would be a key part of that.

In studies of towns and cities that have introduced FFPT, critics often point out that the reduction in car usage was not on a scale needed to justify the costs. This is misleading and misses the point. The most successful cases and highest rate of transfer of commuters from cars to public transport have been in places which didn't just introduce FFPT but which have made other significant changes to public transport at the same time. In Dunkirk and Czechia, the connectivity and capacity of the network was improved as well as departure frequency at both on- and off-peak times. While it is true that the largest jump in usage comes from either existing public transport users or people who had previously cycled or walked, there are significant numbers switching from cars. The key is increasing capacity and connections at the same time as introducing FFPT.

In Ireland's case, this will be particularly crucial. Our cities and towns and rural communities bear the wounds of urban development dictated by the private commercial interests of builders, property developers and financial investors. Homes and

communities are built based on their need for profit, not the needs of people for a rational and planned community.

The much vaunted fifteen-minute city⁷ is a largely upper-middle-class dream that is denied to the majority of ordinary people who must commute to and from wherever they can afford to live to wherever they find work. Ireland's urban sprawl has benefited the nexus of developers and builders that continue to hold such sway over government and state policy. Estates are built privately with little thought or provision for the shops, schools and transport people need.

Urban planning is still today dictated by the needs of investors first and people second. This has left us with a patchwork quilt of development that makes an efficient public transport system difficult to deliver in many places across the country, especially in rural areas.

The car becomes an essential item in order for people to live, work and socialise. In the short term, the only way this can change is with the provision of mostly bus or light-rail systems that can compete with the car in terms of time and costs. It is largely not for reasons of individuality that people remain in their cars; it is a practical response to an impossible situation people find themselves in. Making public transport accessible and free, and extending it so that it is possible, for example, to travel by train directly from Donegal or Sligo to Galway or Cork, would help get many out of the car and result in much more dramatic cuts in CO₂ than the pipedream of one million EVs.

The case for FFPT from a climate perspective would have one other major advantage both as a demand and as a reality. It can shift the entire debate around climate change in the coming years. People are presented with climate change activism as a series of demands for radical change in personal lifestyle or wasteful consumer habits. The solutions offered include increased carbon taxes on the fuels people use for heat and transport. Changes in personal consumer habits and various market mechanisms are proffered as the best and fastest solution to the crisis. The sheer scale of the hypocrisy in this is clear to many ordinary people: switch to a €50,000 electric car or get a €50,000 retrofit for your home or face large hikes in heating and transport costs. The disconnect is allowing a revival of deniers and sceptics even as many in the climate movement believe all debate is over on climate change. The forces behind the fossil fuel and related industries have no intention of winding down peacefully. The need for a mass movement to insist on real climate action remains urgent. This is where the weakness of prevailing mainstream environmental lobbying is crippling. The reliance on market mechanisms such as carbon taxes, and the faith in free market and private firms to deliver a transition, is a risk on two fronts. It will fail to halt emissions at the scale and pace we need: the activity in carbon markets over the last twenty years is a testimony to that. It can also allow a resurgence of climate denial among those who see the hypocrisy of a supposed transition away from fossil fuels when new jobs are largely non-union or minimum wage.

Transport workers in Ireland are among the most heavily unionised groups in the state. They have a militant tradition and reputation, especially in Dublin Bus and Irish Rail. It is one of the reasons the state has attempted to deregulate the industry and bring in private firms to operate subsidised services. Even here, however, in both Luas and Go Ahead, the workers have shown the capacity to be combative and fight for their rights. The result is that, contrary to the hopes of the NTA (National Transport Authority), wages and conditions in these firms remain above those of non-union workers in transport generally. An expansion in public transport in the next few years will mean more unionised jobs with decent pay and conditions. The radical expansion we need in order to have any meaningful impact on CO₂ emissions can be in a sector that is unionised and which has a tradition of decent pay and conditions.

The importance of this is hard to overstate. To the deniers and sceptics fighting to keep fossil-fuel-intensive industries and jobs open, we can point to a sector that needs workers desperately and where those jobs (unlike many in renewables or recycling sectors) have an established workplace standard and a combative workforce. To communities tired of lectures from established politicians on the need to pay more tax or change personal behaviour we can point to a policy (FFPT) that will lead to a dramatic improvement in their quality of life and their disposable income, a policy that will connect communities and people and leave us with a safer, healthier and cleaner environment.

Lastly, among the obstacles to getting FFPT there is one that campaigners should be aware of: the NTA. Transport workers christened the authority “the HSE on wheels.” While pretending to be concerned with the organisation of better public transport, the NTA have actually pursued an ideological agenda that seeks to implement neoliberal policies that will drive workers' wages and conditions down by encouraging private and often non-union companies to provide commercial and non-commercial bus services.

They have managed to successfully promote a privatisation agenda wished for and planned for by both Fianna Fail and Fine Gael. Where past ministers in both parties failed to implement privatisation (because of strikes and workers' protests), the NTA has succeeded by using competitive tendering awards to take routes from existing semi-state companies. They have, to date, avoided a direct confrontation with workers on pay and conditions, preferring to slowly build by bringing in alternative service providers from the private sector before any head-to-head confrontation. They have “awarded” 10 per cent of existing routes to a private, UK-based multinational (Go Ahead), often at greater costs but in the name of competition and efficiency.

The NTA's main contribution to bus service is the BusConnects programme presently being implemented across Dublin. Despite the hype, its chief effect is a rebranding of the network, with letters replacing numbers on bus routes and marginal improvements in some areas but with others losing their services completely. The actual carrying capacity and number of buses on the street is not

envisioned to be dramatically different, with the NTA estimating that the fleet will be two hundred buses larger by the end of the process than it was in 2018. While that might sound like a good start, the reality is that it barely makes up for the numbers of buses lost since the recession in 2008. At that time, Dublin Bus had a fleet of 1200 buses, a figure that we are only now getting back to between both Dublin Bus and Go Ahead. Despite costing millions in design and planning, none of work needed has even commenced on the promised high-quality bus corridors.

The NTA will be an obstacle, not a help, to any serious effort to remodel the country's public transport system, obsessed as it is with neoliberal dogma and policies. What is needed is the precise opposite of failed Thatcherite policies from the 1980s: a coherent, planned and vibrant revolution in the idea of public transport which sees benefits beyond the balance sheet of accountants or of private companies seeking a profit at the expense of service and workers' rights.

However, climate activists should seize the opportunity offered by the new BusConnects routes that are planned, and demand they are introduced as FFPT. The new N4 on Dublin's Northside is a perfect opportunity, as it is planned to traverse some of Dublin's largest working-class communities later this year.

FFPT is a growing demand globally, and we should raise it in Ireland. It's time to get on the bus for real climate action!

¹ "Sky high costs of transport, rent, internet sees Dublin's affordability plunge," available online from <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/ireland/irish-news/sky-high-costs-of-transport-rent-internet-sees-dublin-s-affordability-plunge-1.3901841?mode=sample&auth-failed=1&pw-origin=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.irishtimes.com%2Fnews%2Fireland%2Firish-news%2Fsky-high-costs-of-transport-rent-internet-sees-dublin-s-affordability-plunge-1.3901841>

² "The Utility of Public Transport in Ireland: Post COVID-19 Lockdown and Beyond," available online from: <https://publicpolicy.ie/papers/the-utility-of-public-transport-in-ireland-post-covid-19-lockdown-and-beyond/>

³ "Get on the bus: the case for free public transport," available online from: <https://apolitical.co/solution-articles/en/get-on-the-bus-the-case-for-free-public-transport>

⁴ "Free public transport in Dunkirk, one year later," available online from: <https://www.eltis.org/in-brief/news/free-public-transport-dunkirk-one-year-later>

⁵ "French city of Dunkirk tests out free transport – and it works," available online from: <https://www.france24.com/en/20190831-france-dunkirk-free-transportation-bus-success-climate-cities>

⁶ "Free public transportation is a reality in 100 cities—here's why," available online from: <https://www.cnn.com/2020/03/02/free-public-transportation-is-a-reality-in-100-cities-heres-why.html>

⁷ "Can the '15-minute city' concept of urban living become a reality for Irish cities?" available online from: <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/art-and-design/visual-art/can-the-15-minute-city-concept-of-urban-living-become-a-reality-for-irish-cities-1.4762126?mode=sample&auth-failed=1&pw-origin=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.irishtimes.com%2Fculture%2Fart-and-design%2Fvisual-art%2Fcan-the-15-minute-city-concept-of-urban-living-become-a-reality-for-irish-cities-1.4762126>