

NEWS RELEASE

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HISTORIC NEW ERA IN ALL-ISLAND FREE TRAVEL FOR OLDER PEOPLE NORTH AND SOUTH STARTS FROM TODAY

UNRESTRICTED ALL-IRELAND SCHEME OPENS UP NEW TRAVEL OPPORTUNITIES FOR TENS OF THOUSANDS OF SENIOR CITIZENS

An historic new era in All-Ireland Free Travel began from today with the official start of a seamless all-island, North and South, scheme that opens-up unrestricted travel opportunities for tens of thousands of older people in every part of Ireland.

To celebrate the start of the new unrestricted All-Island travel scheme, the Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern TD and Minister for Social Affairs, Séamus Brennan TD, today presented the first group of pensioners to qualify with their new electronic Senior Smartpass cards at Busáras in Dublin.

The new scheme will allow seniors (those aged 66 and over) resident in the Republic of Ireland to travel free of charge on all bus and rail services in Northern Ireland. Likewise, seniors (over 65) in Northern Ireland will travel free on bus, rail, air and ferry services participating in the Free Travel scheme in the Republic of Ireland.

In the Republic, more than 430,000 of the 600,000 customers who are in receipt of free travel are aged 66 or over. Current annual expenditure on the scheme is more than EUR58 million. In the North, some 200,000 senior citizens qualify under the Concessionary Fares Scheme.



Department of Social and Family Affairs

While it is not possible at this early stage in the scheme to predict the exact number of customers who will avail of the new travel scheme, an indication is that under the limited "point to point" arrangement that has existed up to now some 220,000 cross-border journeys were made each year.

The Taoiseach, Mr. Ahern, said the start of the All-Ireland free travel initiative was an historic occasion and was another example of how close North-South co-operation can deliver real practical benefits for people throughout the island of Ireland.

Mr. Ahern said: "This new scheme opens up a seamless travel system that allows older people to travel anywhere on the island and I would encourage senior citizens to make full use of the new concessions to explore as much of the island as they possibly can through leisure breaks, visiting family or friends, or simply taking day trips to the many attractions the island of Ireland has to offer. I am particularly pleased that in beginning this unrestricted all-island scheme we are delivering on the commitment in the Programme for Government to introduce All-Ireland Free Travel for our older people on all parts of the island".

Minister Brennan said the start-up of the All-Ireland scheme was the culmination of years of discussions and negotiations and was a tribute to the dedication and commitment of all involved.

"This scheme heralds the beginning of a new era in All-Ireland travel opportunities for tens of thousands of older people on the island. It is an initiative that will remove all existing restrictions and help to build new understandings and friendships throughout the island. In many ways it is about more than just new unrestricted travel arrangements, it is a facility that will allow the older people of the island to gain a deeper understanding of each other's part of the country. It is also a recognition, and a gesture of gratitude, to all of our older people who have contributed so much over so many years to the building and shaping of the modern, progressive island we have today".

Under the new scheme, travel in the Republic will be facilitated by Northern customers using their current Senior Smartpass as a flash-pass. Customers from the Republic wishing to avail of the free travel concession in the North will require a similar electronic Senior Smartpass and this can be obtained through applying to the Department of Social and Family Affairs (DSFA).



Department of Social and Family Affairs

Minister Brennan said an indication of the interest in all-island travel was that in the six weeks since the April 2nd start-up date was announced more than 7,000 completed applications for the Senior Smartpass have been received. This number is expected to increase significantly over the coming weeks as the result of a countrywide TV, radio and newspaper information and awareness campaign on the scheme which will begin within days.

To apply for the Senior Smartpass customers need to submit an application form and to have their photographs authenticated at their nearest DSFA local office. The documentation is then forwarded direct to the card producing company for the issue of a Smartpass to the customer.

The Free Travel Scheme was first introduced in 1967 and has undergone significant change in the last number of years.

One of the most significant improvements took place in September 2006 with the removal, after almost 40 years, by Minister Brennan of peak travel time access restrictions applied on all Dublin Bus services and Bus Éireann provincial city services in Cork and Limerick.

Press Release Ends