Briefing to the Incoming Minister of Transport

Aotearoa Collective for Public Transport Equity

March 2025

Dear Minister Bishop,

Congratulations on your appointment as Minister of Transport. We, the Aotearoa Collective for Public Transport Equity, look forward to working with you to create a more equitable, efficient, and environmentally-friendly transport system. We are a coalition of around 100 local authorities, universities, churches, community organisations, student associations, environmental advocacy groups and unions united behind a vision of affordable public transport for all (freefares.nz).

This briefing presents our evidence-informed case for making public transport fares half-price for all New Zealanders nationwide, and free for Community Services Card holders, tertiary students, under-25s, and Total Mobility Card holders and their support people. This briefing outlines the problems with New Zealand's current transport system and how affordable public transport can help to address them. It also analyses the likely impacts of current public transport fare policy settings. You can find further evidence on our website (freefares.nz/frequently-asked-questions/).

Executive Summary

Our current transport system faces four main problems: it is inaccessible for too many vulnerable New Zealanders, releases too much greenhouse gas emissions, is inefficient, and harms public health. Greater public transport use can mitigate these problems.

Affordable fares are important for promoting public transport use. They make transport more accessible, especially for the most vulnerable New Zealanders: young people, those on low incomes, those with disabilities, and those in tertiary education. By enabling people to choose public transport, affordable fares help lower greenhouse gas emissions, relieve traffic congestion, increase productivity, and improve public health. Public transport benefits all of society, not just public transport users. These benefits can be further enhanced if affordable fares are paired with improvements to public transport service delivery, especially in under-served areas.

We, the Aotearoa Collective for Public Transport Equity, recommend that the Government:

- fund fare-free public transport (buses, non-scenic rail, ferries, and Total Mobility taxi services) for Community Services Card holders, Total Mobility Card holders and their support people, tertiary students, and under-25s
- fund half-price public transport fares for those not belonging to those four target groups
- increase investment in public transport service delivery, especially in under-served areas
- end the private share targets set for public transport authorities introduced in November 2024

We also request a meeting to discuss these issues and ideas further.

The Problems with our Current Transport System

Transport is unaffordable for too many, especially the most vulnerable groups

1. Transport is critical for people to work, go to school, receive healthcare, access their daily needs, and connect with their communities. However, many people find transport unaffordable and inaccessible.[1] This is inequitable and costly for society. For disadvantaged people, access to affordable public transport is critical.

2. Four groups would particularly benefit from affordable public transport: Community Services Card holders, Total Mobility Card holders and their support people, tertiary students, and under-25s. For these groups, unaffordable transport imposes significant budgetary pressure, contributes to transport inaccessibility, exacerbates poverty, and reduces their opportunities to live their ideal lives.

    a. **Community Services Card holders**: For low-income people, unaffordable transport is a large budgetary stressor. The lowest-income New Zealanders (bottom 20%) spend nearly 20% of their income on transport, compared to 7.6% of income for the top 20%.[2] In 2013, 22% of households earning below $30,000 per year had no access to a motor vehicle, compared to 1% of households earning $100,000 or more.[3] Unaffordable transport exacerbates financial hardship for low-income people, with 45% of those earning below $30,000 annually having barely adequate or insufficient income to meet daily needs.[4] Unaffordable transport reduces low-income people's social mobility and opportunities to exit poverty.

    b. **Total Mobility Card holders**: For disabled people, unaffordable public transport compounds existing accessibility issues, leading to forgone trips. Disabled people are more likely to have lower incomes than most New Zealanders.[5] Disabled people are especially likely to experience transport-related social exclusion and have fewer opportunities to fully participate in society.[1,6]

    c. **Tertiary students**: For students, unaffordable transport is a significant budgetary stressor, with 43.7% of people in education or training already having barely adequate or insufficient income to meet daily needs.[7] This leads to widespread transport inaccessibility among students, with many limiting their access to education settings to save money.[8] Since having a well-educated population benefits society socially and financially,[9] transport inaccessibility is inefficient and inequitable.

    d. **Under-25s**: Transport is a significant budgetary stressor for young people and their families. Under-25s have lower incomes than other age groups, 15-19 year olds earning on average $242 per week and 20-24 year olds earning $781, compared to the general population earnings of $1090.[10] Many young people are in hardship, with 11.6% of 15-24 year olds and 25.8% of families with children having insufficient income to meet daily needs.[4] Unaffordable transport exacerbates these financial pressures, reduces young people's opportunities to succeed, and imposes costs on society in the long-run.

Our transport system releases too much greenhouse gas emissions

3. Transport is among the largest sources of greenhouse gas emissions in NZ, constituting 17% of overall emissions in 2022 (**Figure 1a**) and 90% of household emissions (**Figure 1b**). This is largely due to fossil fuel-based private vehicles being the dominant mode of transport in NZ.[11]

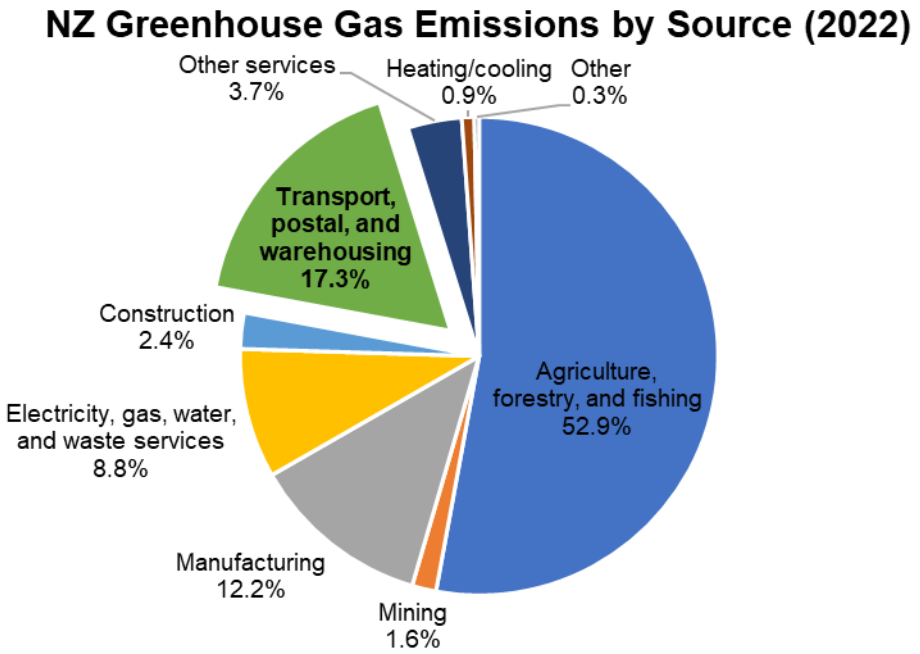

***Figure 1a**. NZ greenhouse gas emissions by source. Transport constituted 17% of national emissions in 2022 (13b kilotonnes CO_2-equivalent).*[12]

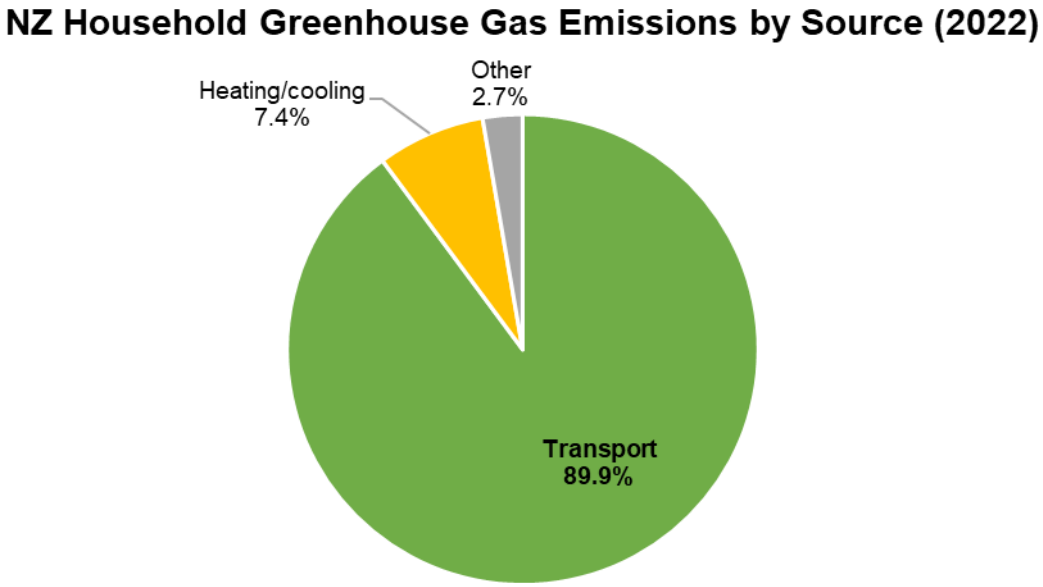

***Figure 1b**. NZ household greenhouse gas emissions by source. Transport constituted 90% of national household emissions in 2022 (7.8b kilotonnes CO_2-equivalent).*[12]

4. Currently, NZ is unlikely to meet international emissions reduction obligations. Under the Paris Agreement, NZ committed to a 50% reduction in net greenhouse gas emissions relative to 2005 gross emissions by 2030.[13] NZ is currently projected to exceed that target by 17,000 kilotonnes CO_2-equivalent in 2030.[13] Decarbonising our transport sector is critical for meeting emissions reduction targets; greater use of public transport is necessary for this transition.

5. Failing to meet international emissions reduction targets not only risks exacerbating climate change, it also risks NZ's trade. A recent Free Trade Agreement between NZ and the European Union commits both parties to "effectively implement" Paris Agreement emissions reductions, with trade sanctions possible in case of material breaches.[14]

Our transport system is inefficient and costly

6. **Traffic congestion**: NZ's car-centric transport system leads to considerable congestion, especially in densely-populated urban centres like Auckland and Wellington. This problem has been worsening: between 2016 and 2017, the driving time from Papakura to Auckland CBD increased by 21 minutes (46%).[15] Congestion imposes a time cost on commuters, raises vehicle operating costs, creates goods delivery delays, and increases greenhouse gas emissions.[15,16] The costs imposed by congestion are significant: it cost Auckland between $0.9-1.3b in 2017,[15] and Wellington between $98-168m in 2016.[16] Traffic congestion also limits economic productivity.[15,17]

7. **Transport-related social exclusion**: While the costs from transport-related social exclusion are difficult to estimate, they are expected to be considerable.[18] Inaccessible transport reduces disadvantaged groups' access to services (e.g. healthcare) and opportunities (e.g. job interviews), limits social connections, causes mental distress, and contributes to poverty.[19] These cost wider society, such as through increased healthcare and welfare provision, or reduced tax revenues.[18]

Our transport system harms public health

8. **Healthcare**: Inaccessible transport prevents many of the most disadvantaged New Zealanders from accessing sufficient healthcare. In 2021-22, 2.7% of adults reported an unmet need for GP services due to lack of transport,[20] with many missing out due to cost.

9. **Pollution**: Our car-centric transport system releases significant air pollution. In 2016, exposure to particulate matter and nitrogen dioxide (mostly generated by vehicles burning petrol and diesel) resulted in over 3000 premature adult deaths, over 13000 hospital admissions for respiratory and cardiac illnesses, and over 13000 cases of childhood asthma in NZ.[21] Pollution from private vehicles costs NZ over $10b annually.[21]

10. **Safety**: Our car-centric transport system is also unsafe. Hundreds of road fatalities occur every year in NZ,[22] generating societal costs worth $5.7b in 2018 (1.8% of GDP)[23] and causing considerable distress to victims and their whānau. Many of these casualties are avoidable through greater usage of safer transport modes.

How Public Transport Fare Discounts can help

What we propose: targeted free and universal half-price fares

11. Our proposal would extend the current Community Connect public transport discounts (free fares for under-13s, and half-price fares for under-25s, Community Services Card holders, and Total Mobility services) to benefit more people — particularly our four target groups. These fare discounts would be funded by central government.

12. We propose fare-free public transport for the following groups ("targeted free fares"):

- **a.** Community Services Card holders
- **b.** Total Mobility Card holders and their support people
- **c.** Tertiary students
- **d.** Young people aged under-25 years

13. We also propose half-price public transport fares for those not belonging to the groups above ("universal half-price fares").

14. While not the primary focus of our campaign, we also call for increased investment in public transport service delivery.

15. These discounts would apply to all times of the day, for all trip lengths, for all types of non-air and non-luxury public transport (i.e. buses, non-scenic rail, ferries, and Total Mobility taxi services).

16. We expect our proposal to cost between $300-400m per year in the short-term. Based on Ministry of Transport modelling, we expect the targeted free fares component of our proposal to cost $250m per year.[24] Based on the cost of half-price fares between 2022-2023, we expect the universal half-price fares component of our proposal to cost up to $145m per year.[24] These costings may grow if this policy generates a larger-than-expected increase in public transport patronage.

17. Fare discounts receive significant public support across the political spectrum. In a recent poll that we commissioned, 71% of New Zealanders were in favour of retaining the fare discounts for under-13s, Community Services Card holders, and Total Mobility services, with majority net support across voters for all political parties currently in Parliament.[25]

Affordable fares make transport and daily needs more accessible for the most vulnerable

18. Our targeted free fares proposal would make a meaningful financial difference to our target groups. Prior to universal half price fares, public transport cost on average $4.82 into Auckland CBD, $3.26 into Wellington CBD, and $2.65 into Christchurch CBD.[26] For a commuter taking 2 trips per weekday, 5 days per week, free fares would save $20-50 per week on average. These savings would be even greater for long-distance commuters, such as those priced out of living in central cities. **Figure 2**

shows estimated cost savings of various on-peak commuters under our targeted free fares proposal (relative to full-price fares).[27–29] These would be significant savings that would enable our target groups to better meet their needs and participate in society.

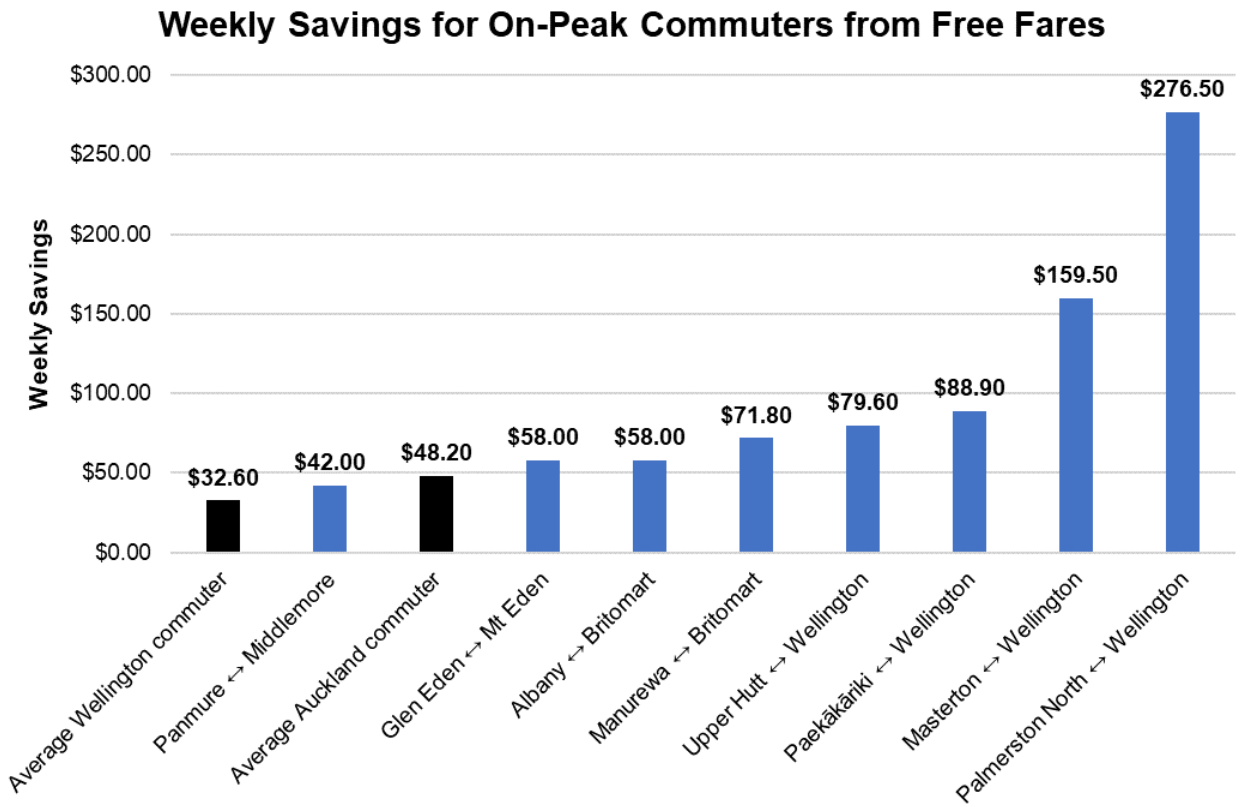

***Figure 2**. Estimated weekly savings for on-peak public transport commuters from free fares relative to full-price.*[27–29]

19. Evidence from the introduction of Community Connect highlight the positive impact that more affordable public transport has made on our target groups — particularly at increasing their number of trips. Expanding Community Connect fare discounts is an important step towards reducing poverty and transport-related social exclusion.

a. **Community Services Card holders**: 9% of Community Services Card holders said that half-price fares enabled them to go to more places, such as medical appointments.[30] 3% said that half-price fares saved them money to use elsewhere.

b. **Total Mobility Card holders**: Under half-price fares, 3% of people with a severe disability reported completely new trips.[26]

c. **Tertiary students**: Limited research is available evaluating the impact of half-price fares on students, although surveys have indicated that free fares would lead to a significant proportion using public transport and going to campus more often.[8]

d. **Under-25s**: 2% of 15-24 year olds reported completely new trips under half-price fares.[26]

Affordable fares increase public transport patronage and promote mode shift from cars

20. **Patronage**: Evidence from the introduction of half-price fares from April 2022 shows that affordable fares led to significantly higher public transport patronage. Between June-October 2022, over 33-35% of public transport users (4-9% of all New Zealanders) reported taking more trips as a result of half-price fares.[26] While public transport patronage remained below 2019 (pre-COVID) levels, the introduction of half-price fares was associated with a sharp increase in patronage that was absent in 2019 and 2021. Overseas evidence also shows that fare discounts result in greater public transport patronage.[31,32]

21. **Mode shift**: The 2022 half-price fares period also shows that affordable fares led to mode shift from cars to public transport. Between June-October 2022, 12-18% of public transport users (3-4% of all New Zealanders) reported switching from cars to public transport due to half-price fares.[26] 49% of those who switched to public transport under half-price fares cited the cost of daily travel as a concern, showing that affordable fares were critical for them to choose public transport. Overseas evidence also shows that fare discounts promote mode shift.[31,33]

22. **Modelling**: Modelling from the Ministry of Transport indicates that each year of free fares for under-25s could generate 7-9 million additional public transport trips and remove 16-21 million vehicle kilometres of private vehicle travel (relative to full price).[34] Since this modelling does not consider our other proposed discounts, the patronage increase and mode shift from our proposal would likely be higher than these estimates.

Mode shift from affordable fares reduces greenhouse gas emissions

23. Public transport is far less emissions intensive than private vehicle travel (**Figure 3**),[35] so mode shift from cars would significantly reduce NZ's greenhouse gas emissions, particularly because fossil fuel-based private vehicle travel accounts for 80-90% of travel in NZ.[11]

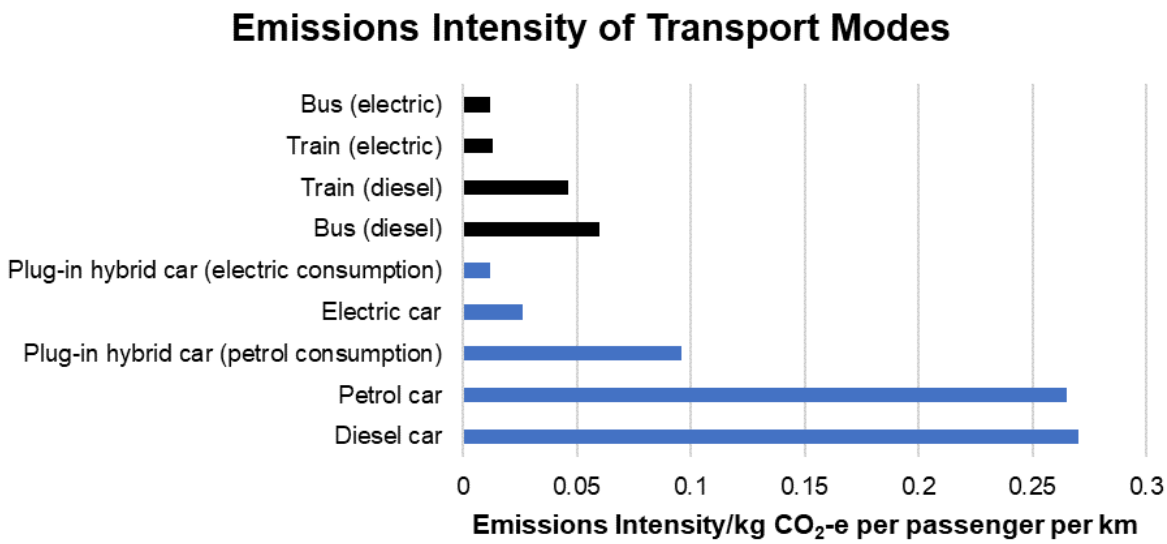

***Figure 3**. Greenhouse gas emissions intensity by transport mode.[35] Cars assumed to have occupancy of 1 passenger, supported by travel surveys.[36] Only direct emissions are considered (from vehicle fuel or electricity consumption).*

24. **Modelling**: Modelling by the Ministry of Transport indicates that free fares for under-25s would save 3-4 kilotonnes CO_2-equivalent per year due to mode shift from private vehicles.[34] Since this modelling does not consider our other proposed discounts, the emissions reduction from our proposal would likely be higher than these estimates.

25. Relying solely on private vehicle fleet electrification would limit potential transport emissions reductions. While electric vehicles may release comparable direct emissions (those from electricity consumption) to electrified public transport (**Figure 3**), electric vehicles release more indirect emissions (those related to production) per kilometre of travel per passenger.[37,38] Modelling for the city of Reykjavík, Iceland, found that, because of electric vehicles' indirect emissions, public transport use was more effective at reducing overall emissions.[39] The limits of private vehicle electrification show that mode shift to public transport is necessary for decarbonising the transport system.

Public transport accessibility brings congestion relief and productivity benefits

26. **Congestion relief**: Overseas evidence shows that mode shift to public transport can reduce traffic congestion. In Los Angeles, United States, a 35-day public transit strike abruptly increased peak-time traffic delays by 47%.[40] In Melbourne, Australia, modelling showed that loss of public transport would increase driving times in the inner city by 78%, despite only carrying 9% of trips.[41] Little NZ-specific congestion modelling has been reported, but based on overseas evidence we nonetheless expect affordable fares to provide significant congestion relief. By comparison, increased roading tends to provide temporary congestion relief because it induces further traffic.[42] Congestion relief from increased public transport use would bring many economic benefits, such as reduced time costs for commuters, fewer goods

delivery delays, and increased productivity. More affordable public transport could also help offset the costs of congestion charging on mode-switching commuters.

27. **Productivity**: Public transport accessibility increases productivity through three mechanisms: by reducing traffic congestion, increasing accessibility and economic activity of central city locations ("agglomeration"),[43] and freeing up parking space for more productive uses.[43] These were seen after improvements to the Auckland Central Corridor bus network. Despite a modest 23% increase in bus patronage from the project (lower than the patronage increase in Auckland in the first month after half-price fares in 2022), it increased CBD employment by 0.8%, raised CBD workers' productivity by 0.1%, and yielded estimated agglomeration benefits worth nearly $2m annually (on top of $8.8m in 'traditional' benefits, like from congestion relief).[43] By making travel into city centres more accessible, our proposed fare discounts will increase productivity and ensure that more people can access higher-paying work.

28. **Land value uplift**: By improving access to desired destinations (e.g. CBDs), public transport increases the value of nearby suburban land. This was seen with the introduction of the Northern Busway in Auckland, which increased the sale value of nearby housing by 3.7% due to buyers willing to pay a premium for increased accessibility.[44] Since affordability is key to making public transport accessible and attractive, our proposed fare reductions could help maximise value uplift from public transport infrastructure. Not only does this benefit property-owners, it also benefits suburban areas at large since higher land values encourage infrastructure investment and housing development.[45,46]

Mode shift from affordable fares reduces air pollution and transport casualties

29. **Air pollution**: Since fossil fuel-based private vehicles are the dominant mode of transport in NZ,[11] mode shift to public transport and reduced private vehicle use can reduce air pollution. In Mexico City, the mode shift caused by the introduction of Bus Rapid Transit led to significant reductions in carbon monoxide, nitrogen oxides, and particulate matter air pollutants.[47] Mode shift can help reduce the $10b in social costs caused by private vehicle air pollution annually.

30. **Transport casualties**: Being an occupant in a private vehicle is more unsafe than being a public transport passenger, with bus passengers 7x less likely to die or be injured than private vehicle occupants in NZ.[48] Mode shift to public transport would significantly reduce transport injuries and fatalities, improving public health.

Addressing Limitations of our Proposal

Other factors influence public transport patronage and mode shift

31. In surveys of public transport journey experience and barriers to access, cost is typically a secondary concern compared to service frequency, availability, speed, and reliability.[26] This means that improvements in service delivery are likely to generate a larger impact on patronage and mode shift than fare discounts alone.

32. However, the impact of fare discounts on patronage and mode shift are still large, with considerable increases in patronage after introduction of half-price fares in 2022 and mode shift by 3-4% of all New Zealanders.[26]

33. The opportunity cost of forgoing fare discounts in favour of improving other aspects is likely to be large because public transport improvements are interdependent and synergistic. In Dortmund, Germany, raising car operating costs, improving public transport service delivery, and halving fares collectively increased public transport patronage by a greater amount than either the individual interventions or their combined individual impacts (**Figure 4**).[49] Focussing on incremental public transport improvements would mean forgoing the economies of scale of multiple improvements working together.

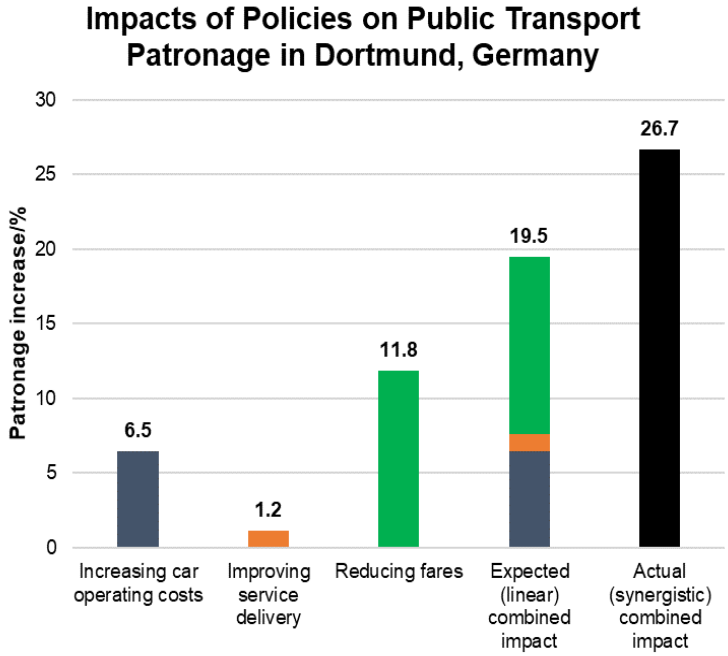

***Figure 4**. Effect of transport policies aimed at increasing public transport patronage in Dortmund, Germany, in isolation and combined.*[49]

Our proposed fare discounts would benefit high-income New Zealanders

34. Under our proposal, half-price fares would be reinstated for all (except our four target groups, who would travel fare-free). Evidence from half-price fares in 2022 shows that many of those who would benefit would be high-income New Zealanders, since they are more likely to use public transport.[26]

35. While this may be distributionally regressive, this is outweighed by the benefits of more widespread public transport use. Greater public transport patronage and mode shift bring significant climate, social, and economic benefits. Public transport use should be encouraged for all people, regardless of their income.

36. The regressiveness of our proposal is reduced by providing larger fare discounts for the most disadvantaged people (those in our four target groups) than for the general population.

Our proposed fare discounts primarily benefit people in urban areas

37. In the short-term, our proposal would mainly benefit people who already live in areas with functioning public transport. During half-price fares in 2022, the vast majority of high-patronage people lived in cities and suburbs (71%), with only 12% living in rural areas.[26]

38. The limited public transport in rural areas highlights the importance of greater public transport investment. Qualitative studies show that car dependency in rural areas is not entrenched, but rather arises due to cars' flexibility and travel time advantages compared to infrequent public transport services.[50] This can be addressed through greater investment in public transport in rural areas by central government.

39. While fare discounts would most directly benefit people living near or in cities, many of the indirect impacts (e.g. reduced greenhouse gas emissions, greater productivity growth) would also benefit people in rural areas. This would partially offset rural people's subsidisation of urban public transport services.

Impacts of Current Policy Settings

40. The Government Policy Statement on Land Transport published in June 2024 set out an expectation for public transport authorities to increase farebox recovery and third-party revenue.[51] In November 2024, NZTA set public transport "private share" targets for each public transport authority – i.e. minimum proportions of public transport operating expenditure funded through fares, fare substitutes (e.g. tertiary fare schemes), third-party revenue (e.g. advertising), and enforcement fees.[52] These policy changes were driven by a desire to reduce the proportion of public transport costs funded by ratepayers and taxpayers, who may not necessarily use public transport services.[51]

41. Several local authorities expect to raise fares in order to meet their private share targets. Greater Wellington Regional Council members claimed that it would need to raise fares by 71% in order to meet the targets,[53] with similar or higher proportional fare increases throughout the country.[54] Environment Canterbury councillors claimed that it would need to quadruple fares in order to meet their private share targets.[55] Many local authorities believe that they will be unable to meet their private share targets through reducing public transport operating costs and raising greater third-party revenue, thus necessitating fare increases.[53,54]

42. Fare increases as a result of efforts to raise private share would significantly burden many New Zealanders. Twenty-nine percent of New Zealand adults reported struggling to pay for transport in February 2025, including 40% of young adults aged 18-34 years.[56] This indicates that transport remains out of reach for many New Zealanders, which would be exacerbated by fare increases. By contrast, fare reductions clearly benefit low-income people. Half-price fares enabled 45% of people in social housing to take trips that they otherwise could not have, and 36% reported being able to spend more money on other things such as food as a result.[57]

43. Fare increases will likely reduce public transport patronage. Based on patronage data, a 1% increase in public transport fares is expected to reduce patronage by 0.2-0.6%.[58] The substantial fare increases projected by local authorities thus has the potential to reduce public transport patronage by upwards of 10% relative to current levels. This would bring negative impacts on traffic congestion, greenhouse gas emissions, air pollution, and equity.

44. Rather than limit subsidisation of public transport and pursue private share targets, we believe that Government should better fund public transport. Public transport brings significant economic, social, equity, and environmental benefits that are not limited to its direct users. Greater funding for public transport services and fare reductions would enable these benefits to be maximised.

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