Item 3

17th November 2026

Glasgow City Council

Economy, Housing, Transport & Regeneration Committee

Report by George Gillespie Executive Director of Neighbourhoods, Regeneration and Sustainability

Contact: Chris Paterson

FREE PUBLIC TRANSPORT PILOT

Purpose of Report:

To update committee on the Free Public Transport Pilot undertaken in Glasgow in 2026.

Recommendations:

It is recommended that Committee:

i) Notes the contents of the report; and
ii) Notes that the City Convener for Climate, Transport and City Centre Recovery will now write to the Scottish Government to share this report and request that they consider this as part of a national evidence base for future policy-making.

Ward No(s): Citywide: ✓

Local member(s) advised: Yes ☐ No ☐ consulted: Yes ☐ No ☐

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1 Introduction

1.1 The purpose of this report is to provide Economy, Housing, Transport and Regeneration (EHTR) Committee Members with a report on the Free Public Transport Pilot, undertaken in Glasgow in early 2026.

1.2 As reported to EHTR in April 2024, Glasgow City Council procured support to provide a fully developed proposal for a free Public Transport pilot. This responds to the Glasgow Transport Strategy: Policy Framework Action 41.C: *"The Council will work with partners to explore the feasibility of a targeted free public transport scheme, and subject to this, monitor and evaluate any pilot to inform thinking on the benefits and costs of free public transport. This should build on Transport Scotland's free bus travel scheme for under 22s."* This work also responds to previous correspondence with the Scottish Government in 2022 on free public transport and the inability to consider funding until a proposal was developed.

1.3 The scoping study was commissioned to explore the feasibility of a free public transport pilot and covered the following topic areas:

- Similar schemes in operation both in Scotland and wider afield;
- Lessons learned from these schemes which could assist in the development of a pilot within Glasgow;
- The need for free public transport in Glasgow;
- Options for the delivery of a pilot – including ticketing solutions, pilot population and duration; and
- The development of a monitoring and evaluation framework to assess the emerging findings from a pilot.

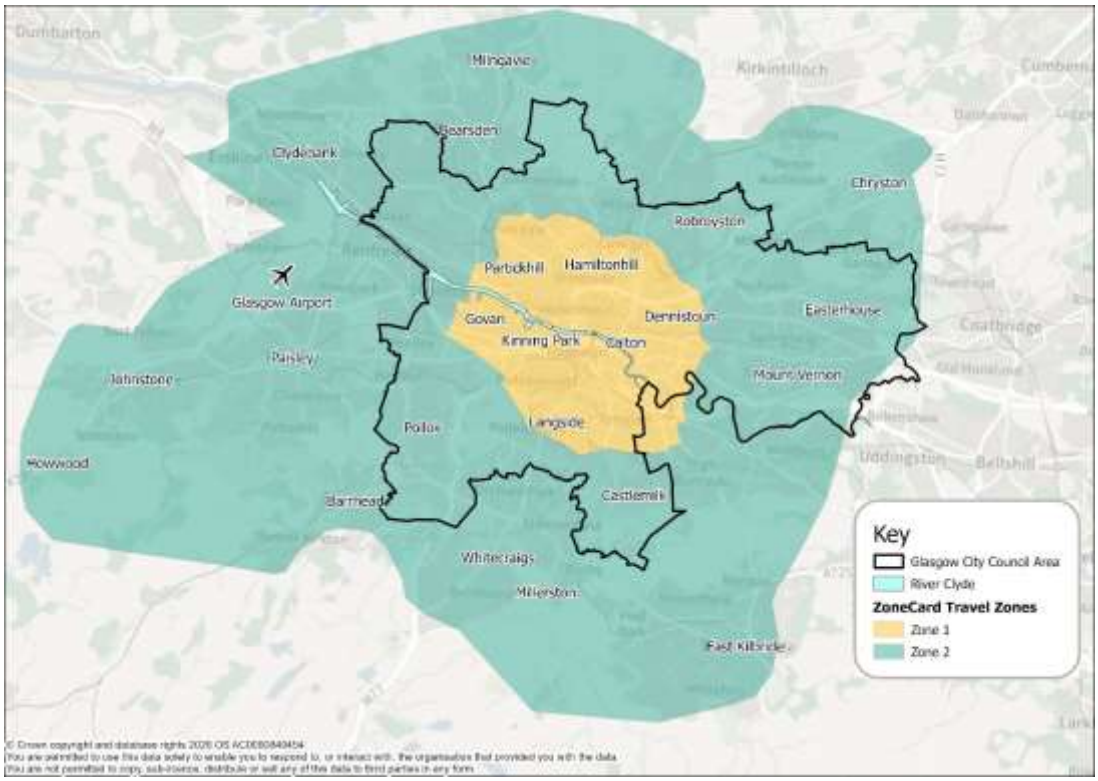
1.4 As part of the study, a pilot proposal was developed which would provide 1,000 residents of the City of Glasgow, aged between 22 and 59 years, access to free public transport for a nine-week duration. Approximately 500 of these participants would be recruited from the public and a further 500 would be from a range of Pathfinder projects operated by GCC.

1.5 In the 2025/2027 Budget Settlement, GCC Elected Members allocated £225,000 to allow the pilot to be undertaken.

1.6 This report summarises the work undertaken and reviews the impact of the Free Public Transport Pilot, which the EHTR committee is asked to note.

2 Approach

2.1 The Pilot began on 9 February 2026 and provided almost 1,000 Glasgow residents with six weeks of unlimited travel by bus, ScotRail services and Subway using the established SPT ZoneCard across Zones 1 and 2. It is noted that Zone 2 stretches into neighbouring authorities, allowing participants the potential to travel beyond the Glasgow City Council boundary, see map below for extent of Zone boundaries allowing free travel.



2.2 Participants who completed the required evaluation activity received a further week of travel as both an incentive and a thank you.

2.3 Pilot eligibility focused on Glasgow residents aged 22–59, who are not covered by the existing national concessionary schemes for younger and older people. Asylum seekers were similarly ineligible for the pilot as the Scottish Government were concurrently running a pilot scheme providing free bus travel. Participants were recruited in two different ways to ensure the Pilot reached residents from all backgrounds, and priority was assigned to engaging residents who face socioeconomic inequalities and those who have a reliance on car travel. This formed two main participant cohorts of equal size, as follows:

2.4 **Representative Sample** - This cohort comprised around half of all participants (almost 500) who were broadly representative of the wider Glasgow City population. All participants for this cohort were recruited through a local research & marketing agency, with recruitment targets set to broadly mirror the

age, gender and income characteristics of the city population. This group has been referred to in reporting as the 'General Public' cohort.

2.5 **Pathfinder/NHS** - This cohort comprised participants who were more likely to experience barriers to travel and face considerable social and economic challenges. Pathfinders were engaged by Council Officers within Glasgow's Child Poverty Pathfinder team. Almost 350 people were recruited in this way, through liaison with a range of community partner organisations, as noted below:

- Calton Heritage and Learning Centre
- Bridgeton Community Learning Campus
- The Venue Housing Association
- Baltic Street Adventure Playground
- West of Scotland Housing Association
- Glasgow Helps / Macmillan ICJ (Improving the Cancer Journey) Service and the Macmillan LTC (Long Term Conditions) team
- Glasgow Life – specifically the Code Learning Programme
- GCC Education – specifically employability support.
- GECCO & GEMS in Southside Central – employability support.
- 3D Families
- Glasgow Life – specifically Family Finance key workers
- Health Improvement Primary Care Leads
- Glasgow Life – specifically PC Passport students

2.6 A further ~150 people accessing NHS healthcare were recruited through the NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde (NHSGGC), a key member of the Glasgow Community Planning Partnership (GCPP). Similar to the Council's outreach to Pathfinders, NHS participants were recruited from specific groups as follows:

- Glasgow's Royal Hospital for Children - Targeting families attending outpatients clinics*, burns/fracture, Trauma clinics, Neonatal/ Community clinics: Foetal anomalies.
- Maternity Hospitals within Glasgow City targeting pregnant women with pre-booked frequent appointments within 7-week pilot period.
- Adult outpatients, orthopaedic/fracture clinics across Glasgow City Hospitals.

2.7 The evaluation of the pilot draws primarily on three participant surveys: a baseline survey of usual travel behaviour and circumstances, a mid-pilot survey of implementation and emerging outcomes, and a final survey of overall effects. Survey data was complemented by ZoneCard usage information, travel diaries, and qualitative research which investigated more than 4,000 open-text survey responses and in-depth interviews leading to the establishment of case studies.

2.8 The three travel surveys were required to be completed by all participants at key milestones during the Pilot. The survey questions were developed through an iterative process with regular internal and external peer reviews. The timings of the surveys were as follows:

- Upon registration for the Pilot, prior to the start date
- After three weeks of travel
- After six weeks of travel

2.9 The general public cohort were additionally asked to complete a weekly online travel diary to detail their individual day-to-day journeys. The diary was available from two weeks prior to the Pilot start date (aiming to gather pre-pilot 'usual' travel patterns) until the end of week six of the Pilot.

2.10 Survey 1 helped to establish the baseline for participants and included a detailed *"About You"* section with questions to establish basic demographics of the participants including their employment (or other status), household structure and income, number of dependents, usual travel mode and travel patterns and access to a car/van or cycle.

2.11 Questions within surveys 2 and 3 focused more on changes in travel behaviours and other impacts felt by individuals arising from their access to free public transport.

2.12 As an incentive to complete the final survey participants were granted an additional seventh week of travel. For any participant failing to complete either survey, SPT were asked to put a block on further travel for the relevant ZoneCards. This ensured that participants were not given free travel without providing information to contribute to the evaluation of the pilot.

2.13 The data gathered through these surveys has been central to the post-pilot analysis and therefore provides much of the evidence base for this evaluation report. Further qualitative research was also carried out, through participant interviews, to gain a more detailed understanding of lived experiences of the Pilot and is presented as 'Case Studies' throughout the report.

2.14 A series of key resources were developed by officers to fulfil the conditions of the pilot. These included:

- Baseline Survey
- Mid-point Survey
- Final Survey
- Travel Diaries
- Easy read document – providing information on the pilot and how to use the ZoneCard
- Guidance document for Pathfinder/NHS staff
- Guidance document for Research staff

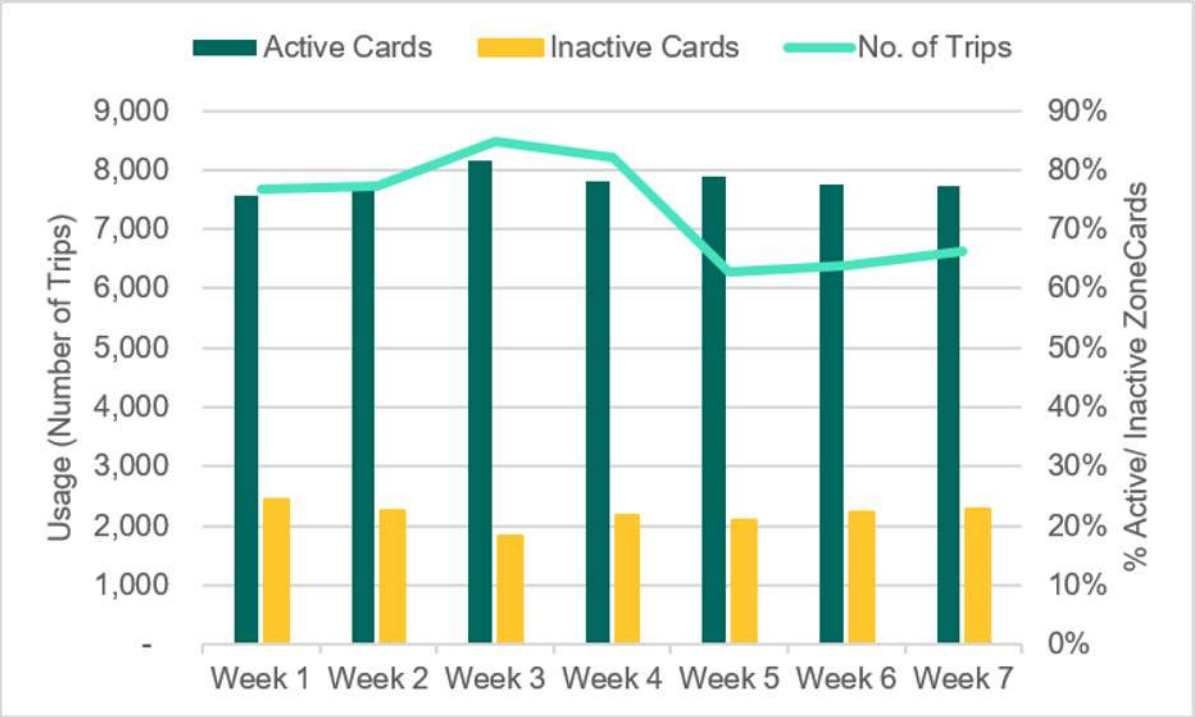
- FAQ document for participants

3 Participation

3.1 Overall, there were **51,416** free public transport trips made across the free travel period. The total uptake rate for the Pilot was 94.8%, with 948 participants remaining eligible after surveys and checks to begin the Pilot.

3.2 Across the pilot and bonus week there were an average of **7,345** trips made per week. Bus was the most frequently used mode, accounting for over 25,000 journeys, followed by rail (20,280 trips) and subway (5,935 trips).

3.3 There was a peak of 8,492 trips in week 3 and a low of 6,293 in week 5. In the following weeks, the number of ZoneCards in use remained high but the number of trips did not return to the levels seen in weeks 1 to 3. It is noted that the Union Street fire occurred during the fourth week of the Pilot and caused significant travel disruption across all modes of transport in the city, meaning a significant proportion of people choose not to travel or chose to travel by different modes. Other factors including the withdrawal of ZoneCard access for those who did not complete survey 2, and the potential for any 'novelty effects' to have worn off, can also be considered for the drop in the number of active ZoneCards and trips made by participants.



3.4 In weeks 5 to 7, participants were seen to continue to use their ZoneCards but to make less trips than before which may evidence the residual effects from the fire where some travel disruption continued until July.

4 Evaluation

4.1 The pilot was designed around a number of outcomes. Following review these were updates as follows:

- Increased journeys by public transport
- Modal shift from private cars to public transport
- Removal of barriers to mobility
- Improved access to services and opportunities
- Improved health and wellbeing
- Reconnecting with the City

4.2 The results of the pilot have been evaluated based on the outcomes above.

4.3 Both quantitative and qualitative methods were employed to evaluate the effect of fare-free public transport on participants and to measure the effect on the following outcomes. Outcomes can be summarised as follows:

Outcome 1: Increased public transport journeys

4.4 The pilot generated a clear increase in participants' ability and willingness to use public transport. Across the fare-free travel period, participants made 51,416 journeys on bus, ScotRail and Subway services. Survey evidence indicates that public transport use was sustained throughout the Pilot, indicating continued engagement beyond any initial novelty effect.

4.5 Participants used the ZoneCard for both routine and additional journeys, including travel for work, appointments, shopping, caring responsibilities, education, leisure and social contact. The findings show that fare-free travel can encourage public transport use by making existing journeys more affordable and by enabling trips that would otherwise have been delayed, avoided or undertaken less frequently.

Outcome 2: Modal shift from private cars to public transport

4.6 The Pilot provided evidence of short-term modal shift, with some regular car drivers using public transport as a substitute for journeys they would normally have driven. Indeed, the representative population cohort showed that of those whose main mode of travel is normally private car, almost 45% reported a modal shift to public transport during the pilot. Though baseline car/van use

was less common amongst Pathfinder/NHS participants, 19% of this cohort reported a modal shift from private car to public transport.

4.7 This finding indicates that price can influence mode choice when people have access to an integrated public transport offering. Indeed, the majority of participants across both cohorts (90% of General Public and 87% of Pathfinder/NHS participants) indicated that they would intend to continue using public transport more if it were free, with some indicating that it would drive them to use it “almost exclusively” or “all the time” as a replacement for other modes of transport.

4.8 The results support Glasgow’s wider objectives to reduce car vehicle kilometres, lower transport emissions and encourage more sustainable travel and demonstrate that free public transport can achieve this. Glasgow has set an ambitious target of 30% car vehicle km reduction, the pilot – although limited in scale has demonstrated the ability to achieve and surpass these targets. It is also important to consider the associated benefits of what reducing reliance on private cars will lead to, essentially reducing the strain on the city’s road network as people choose public transport. This in itself relieves traffic congestion which provides the conditions for more efficient public transport movements.

4.9 While the evaluation does not establish the scale or durability of this change beyond the Pilot period, it does provide an insight into what can be achieved with appropriate investment. Free travel is a major incentive for modal shift and should be considered in any long-term strategy.

4.10 While cost is clearly a major factor, longer-term modal shift will also depend on service frequency, reliability, journey time, network coverage, accessibility and individual circumstances. Provision of free/ affordable transport is established as a critical factor in public transport use, but it is most likely to produce sustained change when combined with an integrated, resilient and high-quality public transport network.

Outcome 3: Removal of barriers to travel

4.11 Cost savings were among the most immediate and consistently reported benefits by pilot participants. The cost of public transport was highlighted as the principal barrier to travel in the baseline survey, with 76% of General Public participants and 85% of Pathfinder/NHS participants noting public transport is too expensive.

4.12 Removing the need to pay for individual tickets or passes across the different transport modes and operators in Glasgow released household income for food, energy and other essentials. This mattered across both cohorts, but

particularly for participants on lower incomes or managing insecure finances. For some, free travel removed the need to choose between making a journey and meeting another basic cost.

4.13 The Pilot also reduced practical and psychological barriers associated with a complex, fragmented and costly transport system. Provision of a multi-modal smartcard, the ZoneCard, gave participants greater freedom to select or combine bus, rail and Subway services without considering the price of each trip. Barriers linked to service availability, reliability, coverage and accessibility remained, showing that fare-free travel improves access to the existing network but does not resolve all barriers to travel.

4.14 By the end of the Pilot, 65% of General Public participants and 87% of Pathfinder/NHS participants said that some or all of their barriers to travel had reduced.

Outcome 4: Improved access to services and opportunities

4.15 Participants reported improved access to healthcare, employment, education and training, shops, public services and caring responsibilities. By removing the direct cost of travel, the Pilot widened the range of destinations and opportunities that people could realistically consider and enabled them to respond more flexibly to appointments, work requirements and changing household needs.

4.16 Responses show that employment and employability outcomes were supported, with participants reporting the pilot allowed them to attend interviews, travel to work, take on additional shifts and access training or courses. Of those who indicated benefits from improved access to employment as a result of the pilot, 44 no. participants said they had started or were scheduled to begin employment.

4.17 A further 70 no. participants said the pilot had resulted in them taking steps towards work, education, training, including having completed applications, interviews, volunteering and gained confidence. The qualitative findings emphasised the importance of the pilot in supporting access to education, with students highlighting ease of attending classes due to reduced financial burden, starting new classes and also travelling to campuses on non-class days.

Outcome 5: Improved health and wellbeing

4.18 Participants reported that fare-free travel supported their health and wellbeing by making it easier to attend healthcare appointments, undertake everyday activities and spend time outside the home. Greater freedom to travel also

enabled more social contact, leisure activity and participation in community life, helping to reduce social isolation and broaden the range of experiences available during the Pilot.

4.19 The wellbeing benefits were often especially important for participants whose travel had previously been restricted by cost, ill health or difficult personal circumstances. Improved mobility gave people greater independence, choice and control over daily life. While the evaluation cannot quantify longer-term health effects, the findings show that affordable transport can support the social connections, access to services and personal agency that contribute to better physical and mental wellbeing.

Outcome 6: Reconnecting with the city

4.20 The Pilot enabled participants to reconnect with Glasgow by visiting neighbourhoods, city-centre destinations, cultural venues, parks, shops and other places that had previously felt out of reach or too expensive to travel to. Unlimited multimodal travel encouraged exploration of the city and helped participants rediscover familiar parts of the city as well as access new places and activities without the cost of each journey influencing their decisions.

4.21 Reconnecting with the city also had an important social dimension. Participants were better able to visit family and friends, take part in community and cultural life, and feel included in the opportunities the city offers. These experiences demonstrate that free/ affordable transport can strengthen a sense of belonging and connection to place, particularly for people whose financial or personal circumstances restrict their use of public transport.

5 Wider Impacts and Delivery Lessons

5.1 The Pilot supports the proposition that affordable public transport can contribute to both environmental and social policy goals. An increase in public transport use was evidenced across both cohorts; 63% of General Public participants and 70% of Pathfinder/NHS participants were using public transport four or more times per week mid-pilot (at survey 2) in comparison to 56% and 59% at baseline. Participants identifying public transport as their main mode also increased over the pilot period, from 57% to 73% of the General Public cohort and 75% to 86% of the Pathfinder/NHS cohort. These observed increases in public transport use and substitution of some car journeys align with Glasgow's net-zero and car-kilometre reduction commitments. The stronger benefits experienced by participants facing poverty, ill health or restricted mobility also show how transport policy can help reduce inequalities by widening access to the opportunities and relationships that support a healthy life.

5.2 These objectives are mutually reinforcing. A fare-free offer can make sustainable travel more attractive, while an integrated public transport network can improve access for residents who do not own a car or cannot drive.

5.3 Use of the established ZoneCard provided a practical route to multimodal delivery and avoided creating an entirely new ticketing product for the pilot. Partnership working between Glasgow City Council, SPT, transport operators, community organisations and NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde was essential to recruitment, administration and participant support. Community-based recruitment was particularly valuable in reaching residents who might not respond to a general campaign and in providing trusted assistance.

5.4 Fare-free travel made the existing network more accessible but did not alter routes, timetables or capacity, nor improve the integration of services. Participants continued to report problems with service availability, integration, reliability, accessibility and the ease of making some journeys. These issues limit the extent to which residents can use public transport, especially for cross-city journeys and shift work, where travel may be at less well-served times. Participants highlighted benefits of access to multi-modal smart ticketing and this adds to calls for wider access to affordable smart and integrated ticketing in Glasgow, which should be advanced alongside improvements to the network.

5.5 The Pilot identified that the benefits of any further cost-of-travel interventions would be significantly enhanced by wider public transport network improvements and affordable integrated ticketing, and together this could bring impactful change, particularly for vulnerable user groups. It is noted that the Scottish Government and SPT are progressing work in these areas, most notably the £2 bus fare cap and the development of a bus franchising model for local services across the Strathclyde region in terms of bus, and the Scottish Government have removed peak rail fares. In addition, SPT are leading on the development of the Clyde Metro programme. These planned interventions make a demonstrable difference to public transport provision in the area, all of which would be further enhanced by better integration and ticketing.

5.6 To date, interventions tend to be evaluated in mode specific silos. Each of these interventions whether they relate to rail, bus, active travel or even a change in governance or fares policy need to be recognised that they contribute to an overarching outcome and as such need to be considered and evaluated together as levers for successful modal shift.

5.7 The results should be interpreted in the context of several research limitations and caveats. The Pilot was short and the evaluation cannot isolate the effect of free fares from every external influence or estimate precisely what would happen under a city-wide, permanent scheme. Participants knew that free

travel was temporary, and their behaviour may differ from that under a long-term policy. Disruption to the transport network also affected some journeys. The findings therefore provide evidence of direction and experience, rather than a forecast of the exact scale of future impacts.

5.8 Within these limits, the evidence is consistent and compelling. The Pilot was highly successful from the perspective of participants and generated benefits across both cohorts. It demonstrated that removing fares can increase public transport use, reduce the financial burden of travel, widen access to services and opportunities, and give people greater choice over when and where they travel. It also provided qualified confidence that similar benefits could arise across a wider Glasgow population, with potentially greater relative gains for more vulnerable user groups.

6 Conclusions of the Pilot

6.1 Overall, Glasgow's Free Public Transport Pilot was considered highly successful and beneficial for participants and their families.

6.2 Positive benefits of the Pilot were felt widely across the participant cohorts, and some benefits were felt more significantly amongst by the Pathfinder/ NHS cohort, who were more likely to experience barriers to accessing and using public transport in everyday life. The main benefits included cost savings with 76% of the representative cohort and 85% of the Pathfinder cohort believing public transport was too expensive and a barrier to travel. The pilot also noted benefits of improved access to a wide range of services and opportunities, and increased agency and choice over travel, in terms of how and when and where. At the policy level, the Pilot was also seen to advance the Council's objectives of net-zero carbon emissions, by encouraging short-term modal shift to public transport modes, with those whose main mode of travel previously having been by car, 45% of those from the representative sample reported a shift to public transport while 19% of Pathfinder/NHS participants made the same switch.

6.3 While the pilot was only delivered over a short time scale, it did however provide qualified confidence that introduction of a fare-free public transport scheme could result in the observed benefits across a wider population. The potential for modal shift is clearly high and if observed pilot performance was replicated across the city population, the contribution to the cities target of car vehicle km reduction cannot be ignored. This would be further enforced by the enhancements which Glasgow and partners are investing into the transport network at present. Overall, a wider roll out of the pilot would make significant contributions to the objectives of achieving Net Zero carbon emissions by 2030 and reducing persistent socio-economic inequalities in Glasgow.

6.4 Other benefits included reducing socio-economic inequalities prevalent within Glasgow by increasing equal access to transport, and therefore opportunities of life.

6.5 The main negative issues were largely related to the provision, integration and availability of public transport services which were described by participants at baseline and, while provision of the multimodal ZoneCard alleviated some issues of integration, these issues persisted and remain to be resolved by network improvements and wider access to affordable smart and integrated ticketing. While a temporary impact, the Pilot was also impacted by disruption to the city's transport network caused by a significant fire adjacent to Glasgow Central Station, on Union Street, and some participation and travel activity were affected by this, highlighting a lack of resilience in the public transport network.

6.6 The Pilot did however identify that wider public transport network improvements and efforts to develop a more integrated public transport offering, including integrated ticketing, are required in the city and would significantly enhance the benefits of any further cost-of-travel interventions, particularly for vulnerable user groups.

6.7 While the pilot has been successful, this has been designed around a limited number of participants over a short time scale. A wider Free Public Transport scheme would be outwith the ability of the Council to fund. Evidence collected from the pilot will however be of use to decision makers at a national level as deliberations around the benefits and affordability of public transport evolve.

6.8 Further analysis of the fare-free intervention is planned, including analysis of travel diaries completed by the General Public cohort. This will include information on trip origins and destinations, travel times, travel methods, and journey purposes, and will inform further transport policies and interventions for the city. This dataset will be useful for the development of general transport policies outwith the lens of free public transport.

7 Policy and Resource Implications

Resource Implications:

Financial:	The pilot utilised funding as agreed within the 2025/26 budget settlement. This was supplemented by capital funds. The pilot is complete, no further funding is required
Legal:	The pilot is complete, there are no legal issues to consider

Personnel:	GCC Officers managed the pilot with assistance from third parties. The pilot is complete, no further resources required.
Procurement:	The pilot required the procurement of up to 1000 ZoneCards from SPT in addition to a small contract to recruit the representative sample.

Council Strategic Plan: Grand Challenge 1: Mission 1 and 2
Grand Challenge 2: Mission 1.
Grand Challenge 3: Mission 1

Equality and Socio-Economic Impacts:

Does the proposal support the Council's Equality Outcomes 2025-29? Please specify.	The Free Public Transport Pilot provides the Council the ability to monitor the positive impacts which free public transport can bring to residents, particularly those from SIMD areas who have no access to a private vehicle, or who cannot afford to travel. The pilot may allow improved accessibility to employment and services, such as education, training, healthcare, retail and leisure facilities
What are the potential equality impacts as a result of this report?	Positive Impact - Equality Impact Assessments (EQIAs) has been developed as part of this workstream. Evidence collected for this EQIA suggests that some groups are experiencing barriers to travelling by public transport and which may contribute towards a range of socio-economic and health inequities experienced across the city. The provision of free public transport may help to reduce some of these inequities and open opportunities for employment or for easier access to key services and lower cost food, etc.
Please highlight if the policy/proposal will help address socio-economic disadvantage.	The pilot will help address socio-economic disadvantage for those who were selected to participate. Benefits will however only be felt for the duration of the pilot.

Climate Impacts:

Does the proposal support any Climate Plan actions? Please specify:	Yes, **Transport Objective 3, Action 1** - *Investigate opportunity for free public transport in Glasgow.*

	GCC has committed to a goal of achieving net zero carbon emissions in Glasgow by 2030 in its collaborative Climate Plan. Free Public transport may encourage a modal shift from the private car to more sustainable modes of transport.
What are the potential climate impacts as a result of this proposal?	As the pilot only ran for 6 weeks there are limited climate impacts however were this to be introduced as a longer term scheme, Free Public Transport has the potential to provide a positive impact on the climate through enabling and encouraging alternative and more sustainable modes of within the city, as well as reduce emissions.
Will the proposal contribute to Glasgow's net zero carbon target?	As above, the limited time period of the pilot limits its contribution to the net zero target however it is hoped that participants may enjoy using public transport and choose to switch long term.
Privacy and Data Protection Impacts:	
Are there any potential data protection impacts as a result of this report Y/N	No. A full DPIA screening was undertaken. The pilot was designed to minimise GCC exposure.
If Yes, please confirm that a Data Protection Impact Assessment (DPIA) has been carried out	

8. Recommendations:

It is recommended that Committee:

i) Notes the contents of the report; and
ii) Notes that the City Convener for Climate, Transport and City Centre Recovery will now write to the Scottish Government to share this report and request that they consider this as part of a national evidence base for future policy-making.