

Methodology: Mapping young people's bus fare support and transport access to jobs

Methodology note | Paula Castro | October 2026

We mapped youth bus fare support for every age from 16 to 24 in all 153 upper-tier councils in England, applying combined authority and Greater London Authority schemes to their member councils. With AI assistance (Claude), we gathered about 380 official documents: each transport authority's current local transport plan, its latest bus service improvement plan (BSIP) and 2025–26 delivery plan and, where fares were unclear, its enhanced Partnership scheme, BSIP progress reports and council web pages on young people's travel. Each scheme was recorded with its ages, eligibility, offer and status, alongside a verbatim quote from the source; all quotes were checked automatically against the document text. Bus companies' own youth tickets were added from a separate sweep of operator websites.

We then reviewed all 216 schemes by hand, tagging each by who can use it and its exact age range, read literally (“under 19” ends at 18). Only live or committed schemes count. A discount is open to everyone their age if it needs no student, apprentice or jobseeker status, and council-backed if the council or combined authority runs, funds or organises it, including BSIP-funded offers delivered by bus companies. We excluded concessionary passes for older and disabled people, statutory school transport, rail-only discounts, all-age fare caps (such as the national £3 cap and mayoral flat fares), seasonal promotions, national Jobcentre Plus travel help and post-16 transport assistance with distance or income conditions. New Economics Foundation researchers made 70 manual checks of eligibility and current status in October 2026, which override the document-based coding.

To estimate how many young people are affected, we used Census 2021 counts of 16–24-year-olds who were unemployed or economically inactive and not full-time students, by single year of age, as a proxy for Neet status, and gave each the category of their council at their age. For small areas, we combined Census 2021 lower-layer super output area (LSOA) data (RM024) with the Department for Transport's connectivity metric for public transport access to employment, defining poorly connected neighbourhoods as the least-connected 40% of LSOAs in England. A LSOA was classed as coastal or left-behind if at least half its postcodes lie within an Office for National Statistics (ONS) coastal built-up area (2022) or a Local Trust/OCSI left-behind ward (2019). To test the link between connectivity and Neet rates, we ran a weighted regression controlling for region, rural or urban location and deprivation (the income, health, crime and living environment domains of the English Indices of Deprivation 2019). Figures on car access draw on the National Travel Survey 2024.

Overall, while the fare map is a snapshot of schemes in October 2026 and records whether a discount exists rather than how generous it is, the pattern was clear: discounts open to everyone largely end at 18 or 21, and gaps are widest in coastal areas. Schemes covering only part of a council count for the whole council, so the headline is conservative. The census proxy overstates Neet numbers, as part-time students and trainees not in work cannot be separated, and it predates the schemes by five years; it is not the official ONS measure. The connectivity results show association rather than cause.

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