

Aims of the campaign and desired policy change

The Free Fares campaign has been active since at least 2021, when it formed in Pōneke, Wellington, and is still ongoing today. This campaign advocates for greater equity and reduced fares and become more prominent as they successfully lobbied for the continuation and expansion of half-price and free public transport discounts, including those for young people and Community Service Card holders. The campaign was initiated by the Pōneke Collective and later grew into the broader coalition called the Aotearoa Collective for Public Transport Equity to advocate for free public transport for specific groups.

The aim of this campaign is to provide free public transport for Community Service Card holders, tertiary students, under-25s, and Total Mobility Card holders and their support people. To achieve this aim, they are asking for a policy change from the National-led coalition government to ensure that free public transport for these groups is funded nationally. Granting free public transport to these groups would help them out, as these groups represent a large portion of public transport users who rely on the service the most, but are also the most likely to not be able to afford it. Granting free public transport to these groups would also help encourage more people to use public transport instead of private transport. Doing this would significantly lower New Zealand's carbon emissions, as the more people that rely on public transport instead of private transport means fewer vehicles being used per kilometre, and therefore less carbon emitted per kilometre. Making public transport free for these groups would also help communities as a whole, as it would offer more opportunities for these groups to get places and therefore be more connected to their communities. It may also provide opportunities for students to spend money at places they may not usually access because of public transport costs, for example business districts where students could spend money at places like coffee shops.

The Free Fares campaign has taken a range of actions to promote equitable and affordable public transport across the country. Their actions have included organising petitions, lobbying central and local government, and submitting written proposals calling for transport equity and climate-friendly mobility policies. The campaign has also launched media outreach and public awareness initiatives, gaining widespread attention during debates about half-price and free fare policies in 2022 and 2023. By uniting unions, youth groups, and environmental organisations, the Free Fares campaign has successfully influenced transport policy decisions, helping to achieve and sustain half-price fare schemes for low-income groups and young people.

Different reasons for individual's and groups' involvement

Fares Free NZ is a coalition that involves a range of members and individuals. The PSA and Young Labour are two organisations that are part of this coalition.

The Public Service Association (PSA) supported the Free Fares campaign because it PSA acknowledges that a large number of its members, who work in social services, health, education, and other vital fields, also use public transportation, and that high fares may make it more difficult for them to get to work at a reasonable cost, particularly in urban areas where parking is expensive and limited. Therefore, supporting the Free Fares campaign is an act of solidarity for the welfare of workers, a reduction in the pressures of the cost of living, and an improvement in equity for members with lower incomes. The PSA sees public transportation as a social good that makes it possible for people to have better access to public services. If transportation is too expensive, people might put off or avoid going to the doctor, miss social services appointments, or find it difficult to get to school, which would ultimately put more pressure on the public services that PSA members provide. Climate responsibility is also a key factor in the union's commitment. Free or highly reduced fares would encourage more people to avoid private vehicles, lowering emissions and pollution in keeping with New Zealand's climate responsibilities. The PSA has continuously maintained that the government and public institutions have a duty to take the lead on the environment. This is consistent with the PSA's main goal of a fairer and environmentally friendly society where public services, such as transportation, are

created for people's needs rather than for financial gain. The organisation's support for Free Fares is therefore diverse, involving meeting the everyday needs of its members, ensuring fair access to necessary services, and promoting long-term systemic change for the benefit of the climate and the welfare of the community.

Though its motivations are different from those of other partner groups, Young Labour's participation in the Free Fares campaign reflects its emphasis on social justice, youth empowerment, and climate responsibility. Since young people, students, and those just starting their careers frequently earn the lowest salaries but depend most on reliable transportation to get to school, work, and community life, Young Labour views free or reduced public transportation as primarily an equity problem. They have stated, "The high costs of public transport is a barrier for many. With the costs of living rising, a regular \$3 bus ticket is out of reach for many Community Service Card holders, tertiary students and under-25s." Supporting Free Fares is seen by Young Labour as a means of reducing the burden of transportation costs and ensuring that young people are not left behind, as rising living expenses can make them a barrier to participation. However, the organisation also has a major political interest in creating long-term, systemic changes that support public transportation as an essential service rather than a privilege, in line with Labour's larger goal of social justice. Young Labour members frequently highlight that their generation will be particularly impacted by the growing climate crisis and that switching from a car to sustainable, fare-free public transport is one of the most obvious ways to reduce emissions while changing daily behaviour. They have said, "Free fares will help people to switch to public transport. Public transport produces fewer emissions per kilometre than private cars. As the Government shapes its Emissions Reduction Plan they need bold ideas. Free fares will create the mode shift needed to reduce our carbon emissions. With urgent and widespread implementation, this is one equitable and courageous action on the scale our climate needs." Young Labour's reasoning is centred more on social justice and the need to create a future where cost is not a barrier to opportunity and where young people inherit a planet that is habitable, in contrast to labour groups, which often frame their involvement around worker wellbeing, or organisations like the PSA, which emphasise access to public services. They believe that Free Fares is a policy that combines social justice and climate aims, and that supporting it shows their dedication to protecting youth today while influencing the society they will lead in the coming decades.

Reasons for selecting the actions taken within the campaign

Free Fares NZ utilised several actions to fight for their cause. One of the main social action methods taken have been petitions. They have done three petitions in recent years "Now is the Moment for Free Fares" Petition in 2022, which had 13,000 signatures, the ActionStation petition, which was a direct response to National's plan to cancel the discounts for young people and community services care holders, which gained over 7000 petitions. In 2025, they are doing the petition against fare hikes, which had around 6000 signatures before delivery. Through doing a petition, they have been able to demonstrate the scale of support for their aim with the hope that this will help to directly influence and strengthen the case for the government to adopt their policy suggestions.

To help spread the word about these petitions and to increase public awareness around the goals of the campaign and build understanding and support for why Fare Free is beneficial for New Zealanders, they also operate a very active social media campaign. They frequently post on Instagram, Facebook and X which helps to keep people engaged in what is going on, and this has been one of the main ways in which they have shared their petitions, which have included things like 'count down dates' and encouragement to 'sign and share'. They have also used social media to encourage people to "share their story" about public transport matters, which helps to build engagement with the cause. "They used hashtags like #FreeFaresNZ and #KeepItAffordable to get everyone talking and make the campaign go viral during the big moments.

Finally, they have engaged in more direct means of lobbying. Free Fares NZ has met with MPs "all over the motu" to push for their goals. They have had discussions with MPs like Duncan Webb, Sarah

Pallett, and Poto Williams. They have also had direct contact with MPs by organising petition handovers at Parliament. In December 2023 event where they presented 6,650+ signatures to MPs Julie Anne Genter and Ayesha Verrall, urging the Government to keep discounts and expand free fares. Although these are not National MPs, but engaging with the opposition, this helps to keep pressure on the government within parliament and to challenge them on their thinking. It hopefully also helps to build a base of support, so that if and when Labour get back in, they will be in support of Fare Free's aims. Additionally, Free Fares NZ submitted written evidence to the Petitions Committee and government consultations, opposing fare hikes linked to "private share funding targets." Their submissions argued that these targets would force councils to raise fares by up to 70%, worsening cost-of-living pressures and undermining climate goals. Because these committees are made up of MP's this is another way of having direct influence on the policy makers.

Real consequences of the Free Fares Campaign

The Free Fares coalition successfully campaigned for half-price public transport fares for Community Services Card holders and for Total Mobility users under the previous government. These discounts were retained despite proposals to remove them after the 2023 election, thanks to the work from Free Fares Coalition. The Ministry of Transport's Community Connect programme formalised these discounts and from July 2023 onward, Community Services Card holders and Total Mobility users became eligible for half-price fares nationwide. This had a direct impact on the people who use these cards.

Through the campaign, they were able to rally and draw attention to their cause. While a definitive number isn't available to show exactly how much people supported the campaign, polls indicate significant support for its goals. Seventy-one percent of New Zealand adults supported keeping the existing half-price public transport discounts in a November 2023 poll, and around 80% of adults wanted half-price fares made permanent in December 2022 polls. The Free Fares coalition itself represents about 100 organisations, including unions like the PSA, youth groups like Young Labour, and climate organisations such as Parents for Climate Aotearoa. Working together gave the campaign more power and showed how different groups can unite for a shared goal.

Potential consequences of the Free Fares campaign

One potential consequence that could come as a direct result of the Free Fares campaign is that fares for under-25s, tertiary students, Community Services Card holders, and Total Mobility Card holders and their support people are granted. By building up overwhelming public support and meeting with opposition MPs in Labour and the Greens, it means that if there is a change of government in the 2026 election, it is highly likely this could be adopted as a policy by a left-leaning coalition.

If this were to happen, and their aims are adopted into policy, this would help New Zealand meet its climate targets and promote a sustainable mobility culture. This is because it would encourage more people to switch to public transport. Fare Free states on their website that "21% of New Zealand's greenhouse gas emissions come from transport. 70% of these from cars, SUVs, utes, vans and light trucks. Transport is our fastest growing source of carbon emissions, having doubled since 1990. Free fares, with urgent and widespread implementation, is one equitable and courageous action on the scale our climate needs."

There is also an argument that having Free Fares and increasing use of public transport will have wider benefits for the New Zealand economy. In their research, Free Fares states, "Greater PT use brings three main 'traditional' economic benefits: reduced road traffic congestion, higher productivity, and land value uplift. These benefits strengthen the economic case for public transport fare discounts and support our call for free fares for our target groups and half-price fares for all."

Finally, there is a health benefit that could be gained if Free Fares were successful in their policy goals, in that it would improve air quality through less pollution and also lead to fewer road accidents.

Petrol or diesel private vehicles, the dominant form of road transport in NZ, release air pollution by burning fuel. The Health and Air Pollution in New Zealand (HAPINZ 3.0) report found that, in 2016, exposure to pollution in NZ air led to over 3,000 premature adult deaths, over 13,000 hospital admissions for respiratory and cardiac illnesses, and over 13,000 cases of childhood asthma.

However, when considering these potential consequences, they all hinge on the fact that the Free Fares policy suggestions are adopted if a change of government happens, which is not guaranteed. While some groups are highly committed to the campaign, it is not necessarily on the radar of everyone as it is not frequently in the media. Therefore, it may not be adopted nationally as it is not enough of a priority, particularly if there is a budget shortfall as New Zealand is currently experiencing. There is also a potential consequence that if it were only adopted regionally, as opposed to nationally, there would be uneven implementation. Also, there would need to be some thought as to how well set up public transport infrastructure is in New Zealand. If demand for public transport increased but there was no investment in making it more reliable (which is a common critique of public transport in many of the main cities), it could ruin support for the campaign, and the policy may not be sustained as people may not want to use public transport if it becomes more hassle than taking their own vehicle.

Comprehensively examine and critically evaluate the campaign

The goal of the Free Fares campaign is to advocate for more affordable and equitable public transport by making it free for students, under-25s, and Community Service Card holders, and for reduced fares for everyone, to address rising living costs, decrease carbon emissions, improve public health, and boost economic productivity. The campaign also seeks investment in improving public transport frequency and quality, especially in underserved areas. The Free Fares campaign has had partial successes, despite their setback when the National-led government removed discounts for children and young people, the campaign continues to advocate for greater public transport equity. In November 2023, Free Fares NZ launched a new petition, asking for the current public transport to be kept. The petition was called Keep Public Transport Affordable. In December 2023 Free Fares NZ submitted this petition with more than 6,650 signatures gathered in less than a month.

Some of their achievements include securing half-price public transport for Total Mobility Services Card holders, half-price fares for Community Services Card holders, and increased public awareness and support. The campaign also planned to use their campaign to try to help with people's needs regarding the cost of living, benefit the environment, produce more equity and access to transportation, increase economic productivity, and help improve health of the public. However, the campaign did not achieve all of their goals. They didn't achieve securing free transport for young people. And they also did not achieve their ultimate goal of free public transport for everyone in New Zealand. They are currently still advocating for restoration of discounts previously abolished for young people, and they are still currently working towards their other goals that they could not yet achieve. I believe that they have done a good job of advocating for their cause, but it still hasn't worked. It seems that there is not a lot more that they could have done. I believe they have advocated for free fares to the best of their ability so far. The only thing more they could have done that I can think of is to better advocate and advertise for their cause. The rest of the steps they took were the right way to go about working towards achieving their goal, but they maybe could have spread awareness, and also try to gain even more support with better attention-grabbing advocating techniques. For example, maybe they could have advertised their petitions more on social media. Or, they could have even put up large posters in crowded public areas to better advocate for support for their cause. Maybe they could have focused more of their resources, such as their supporters and supporting groups, on advertising for their campaign and spreading more awareness, as well as promoting and encouraging more support on their campaign, like signing their petitions.

The student used footnoting throughout and provided a full reference list. These were removed for brevity.