

National School Party Travel Scheme

Detailed Proposal

A ticket to opportunity for every child is within reach. With a targeted pilot, joint DfE–DfT leadership, and a simple booking system, we can open the railways to education and deliver a low-cost, high-impact win for pupils, families, schools and the country.

National School Party Travel Scheme

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1. Summary

Schools across the UK are facing rising transport costs that place educational visits beyond reach, particularly for disadvantaged communities. Pupils are missing out on cultural capital, real-world learning, and the social development that high-quality trips provide.

This proposal sets out a practical, low-cost, high-impact solution: a National School Party Travel Scheme on National Rail, modelled on Transport for London's successful School Party Travel Scheme. Under this national scheme, state school groups would travel free during off-peak times for educational, cultural, and sporting visits.

The scheme would make use of spare rail capacity, reduce road congestion and emissions, and build long-term public transport habits among young people. We recommend piloting with publicly owned rail operators and establishing joint Department for Education (DfE) and Department for Transport (DfT) oversight to design and evaluate the programme.

2. Background & Rationale

Transport for London's (TfL) School Party Travel Scheme, introduced in 2005, has paved the way for a national version based on similar principles. The TfL scheme demonstrates feasibility and strong demand for sustainable, affordable, and well-managed transport options for schools. By utilising underused off-peak capacity, TfL has enabled schools to make the most of what the capital has to offer.

The educational impact of the current scheme cannot be understated. TfL's programme carried over one million pupils per year pre-pandemic,¹ proving demand exists and demonstrating schemes like this can work, even on the UK's busiest transport network. These journeys have provided students with vital off-site learning opportunities — from zoos, theatres, and museums to sporting and cultural venues — allowing them to broaden their horizons and experience learning first-hand.²

This is not a “nice-to-have”; it is high-impact enrichment that many London teachers could not deliver without support. Learning outside the classroom has been consistently linked to improved motivation, wellbeing, attendance, and attainment³ — as summarised by the Council for Learning Outside the Classroom⁴ and corroborated by research showing that enrichment activities help narrow the attainment gap and build social capital.⁵

Nationally, schools are tightening their belts. In 2022, 20% of school leaders reported cutting trips and outings to save money; by 2023, this had risen to 50%, according to the Sutton Trust.⁶ The impact is felt most sharply in disadvantaged areas, where 68% of leaders reported reducing visits.

Over the past two years, schools and families have faced unprecedented financial pressure. Research by Zurich Municipal shows that day trips now cost around £30 per pupil, while residential visits average £430 — placing them beyond the reach of many families.⁷ Coach hire prices have risen by up to 25%,⁸ and rail fares increased by 5.1% in 2025 alone.⁹ With school budgets squeezed by rising energy and staffing costs, many teachers report cancelling or scaling back visits entirely.

These pressures highlight the need for a coordinated, low-cost national travel scheme that enables every child — regardless of background or postcode — to access enriching experiences beyond the classroom.

¹ <https://www.london.gov.uk/who-we-are/what-london-assembly-does/questions-mayor/find-an-answer/tfl-group-travel-1>

² <https://tfl.gov.uk/fares/free-and-discounted-travel/travel-for-schools>

³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/englands-largest-outdoor-learning-project-reveals-children-more-motivated-to-learn-when-outside>

⁴ <https://www.lotc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Summary-of-Evidence-LOtC-in-Natural-Environments-Nov-2022.pdf>

⁵ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/65674b08312f40000de5d5d2/How_trusts_and_schools_narrow_attainment_gaps_between_ethnic_groups_a_preliminary_investigation_.pdf

⁶ <https://www.suttontrust.com/news-opinion/all-news-opinion/sharp-increase-in-school-leaders-reporting-spending-cuts-with-primary-schools-hit-hardest-by-funding-pressure/>

⁷ <https://www.zurich.co.uk/media-centre/school-trips-becoming-too-expensive>

⁸ <https://www.route-one.net/news/school-coach-hire-the-low-cost-days-are-gone-for-good/>

⁹ <https://dataportal.orr.gov.uk/media/d23cpgze/rail-fares-index-2025.pdf>

3. National School Party Travel Scheme: A Proposal

The National School Party Travel Scheme would apply to all state-funded schools, including primary, secondary, and special schools, offering travel on off-peak National Rail services only. By focusing exclusively on off-peak times, the scheme makes efficient use of existing capacity within the rail network, ensuring minimal disruption to commuters and keeping operational costs low.

The scheme's core objectives are to promote equity of access, broaden educational enrichment, support sustainability through a shift from road to rail, and make effective use of underutilised capacity. It seeks to remove one of the final remaining barriers to learning outside the classroom — the rising cost of travel — while aligning with wider government priorities around levelling up and environmental responsibility.

Participating schools would apply at least six weeks in advance via a central online booking portal, ideally a GOV.UK address, which could also incorporate TfL's existing service into it, as well as any future schemes that may be rolled out in addition. Each application would include a preferred route, destination, and time, along with one or more acceptable alternatives. This forward-planning requirement would allow operators to manage capacity efficiently and identify any conflicting journeys well in advance.

Once approved, confirmed itineraries would be issued four weeks prior to travel, ensuring sufficient time for both the school and operator to finalise arrangements. Schools would then receive digital group tickets, which can be printed, if necessary, along with clear travel conditions — including off-peak restrictions, specified train services, and adult-to-pupil supervision ratios.

The scheme would be free, removing cost as a barrier while still encouraging responsible planning and use.

In its initial phase, the programme would run as a pilot with one or more publicly owned rail operators, such as Northern, LNER, or Southeastern, to test and refine operational processes. A joint Department for Education (DfE) and Department for Transport (DfT) working group would oversee design, delivery, and evaluation. This group would include representatives from rail operators, academy trusts, local authorities, and cultural institutions to ensure the scheme works for both the education and transport sectors.

A dedicated online booking portal would be developed to simplify administration. This system would include built-in capacity controls, black-out dates for major events, and automated tools to optimise route allocation and group scheduling.

The scheme would be designed to operate on a low marginal cost basis, drawing primarily on spare off-peak capacity. Funding for coordination, administration, and staffing would be shared between the DfE, DfT and participating publicly owned operators. As the scheme avoids peak travel times and would be phased in gradually, revenue risks are minimal and can be managed within existing budgets. The trial of this scheme would allow for a phased roll out and would enable monitoring in advance of a wider, national roll out.

4. Benefits

Educational Equity

Educational visits play a critical role in building social capital, aspiration, and cultural awareness — yet access to these experiences is far from equal. For many schools, particularly in lower-income areas, the cost of transport has become a decisive barrier that determines whether pupils can take part.

National surveys consistently show the scale of this inequity. Research by The Educator (2025) found that 64% of parents struggle to pay for school trips, and 43% have withdrawn their child from a trip because of cost.¹⁰ Similarly, an NCFE report (2023) found that 45% of families cannot afford day or weekend outings, a figure that rises to 57% among working-class households.¹¹ These findings illustrate how cost — not enthusiasm or educational intent — is excluding children from valuable learning experiences.

The problem is further reinforced by broader evidence on transport inequality. The Department for Transport’s “Transport and Inequality” review (2021)¹² concluded that high transport costs and limited accessibility disproportionately restrict opportunity for low-income households, reducing access to education, employment, and cultural participation. Researchers describe this as “transport poverty” — a condition where families are unable to fully engage in social or educational life because of affordability barriers.¹³

By removing the cost of rail travel, the National School Party Travel Scheme would directly address one of the most persistent drivers of educational inequity. It ensures that every pupil, regardless of background or school budget, can experience learning beyond the classroom, and that schools are no longer forced to cancel or ration opportunities based on who can afford to attend.

Levelling Up

The benefits of the National School Party Travel Scheme would be felt most strongly in the regions where opportunity and access are currently most unequal. Despite national commitments to “levelling up,” significant disparities persist in both educational access and cultural participation between more affluent and disadvantaged parts of the UK.

The Centre for Social Justice “A Level Playing Field” report, which uses YouGov polling, shows that parents from lower socio-economic groups are significantly more likely to report their children do no enrichment activities compared to those from higher socio-economic groups.¹⁴

By enabling low-cost, off-peak travel on the national rail network, the National School Party Travel Scheme directly supports the government’s levelling-up goals. It gives every child, regardless of postcode, the chance to explore the same national institutions — from the British Museum and the National Gallery to regional STEM centres, historical sites, and galleries.

¹⁰ <https://the-educator.org/cost-of-school-trips-forces-over-half-of-british-parents-to-pull-out/>

¹¹ <https://www.ncfe.org.uk/all-articles/cost-of-living-pressure-family-trips/>

¹² https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/60080f728fa8f50d8f210fbe/Transport_and_inequality_report_document.pdf

¹³ <https://www.bsg.ox.ac.uk/blog/transport-poverty-hidden-plain-sight>

¹⁴ https://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/CSJ-A_Level_Playing_Field.pdf

This initiative would also strengthen regional cultural economies. Increased school visits to museums, heritage attractions and performance venues can provide a predictable flow of visitors outside peak tourist seasons, supporting local jobs and helping to sustain smaller institutions that often struggle with visitor numbers.

In essence, the scheme represents levelling up in action: redistributing opportunity through access, not geography — ensuring that a child’s education is not limited by where they live or the size of their school’s transport budget.

Enrichment

Educational visits remain one of the most powerful tools for transforming classroom learning into lived experience. They connect curriculum knowledge to the real world, deepen understanding, and build confidence, curiosity, and aspiration.

Research consistently shows that learning outside the classroom enhances pupil motivation, engagement, and attainment. The Council for Learning Outside the Classroom¹⁵ highlights that students who participate in educational visits demonstrate improved behaviour, higher attendance, and stronger interpersonal skills. Similarly, the Natural England “Natural Connections” project (2016)¹⁶, involving over 40,000 pupils, found measurable gains in both academic progress and wellbeing when learning extended beyond the school grounds.

Access to museums, heritage sites, and cultural institutions also builds cultural capital, a concept now embedded in the National Curriculum and Ofsted’s inspection framework. Exposure to art, history, and science in authentic contexts helps students make sense of their place in the world and encourages lifelong learning.

Environment and Sustainability

A shift from coach and car travel to rail offers substantial environmental benefits. Transport remains the UK’s largest emitting sector, responsible for around 26% of national greenhouse gas emissions.¹⁷ While coaches are often seen as a lower-carbon option compared to cars, rail travel still produces significantly fewer emissions per passenger-kilometre.

According to the Department for Transport and the Rail Delivery Group, rail travel emits around 35–40 g of CO₂e per passenger-km, compared with 105 g for diesel coaches and over 150 g for cars.¹⁸ On electrified routes, emissions can fall below 25 g per passenger-km, and with the continued decarbonisation of the rail network, this figure would decline even further in the coming decade.^{19,20}

Beyond carbon, the environmental gains are local as well as national. Reduced coach traffic in urban centres lowers air pollution, improves road safety around venues, and helps to relieve congestion during school travel hours. Rail travel also reduces the need for parking and idling near museums and attractions, helping host

¹⁵ <https://www.lotc.org.uk/>

¹⁶ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/natural-connections-demonstration-project-final-report>

¹⁷ <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/transport-and-environment-statistics-2023>

¹⁸ <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/government-conversion-factors-for-company-reporting>

¹⁹ <https://www.raildeliverygroup.com/media-centre/press-releases/2023.html>

²⁰ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/transport-decarbonisation-plan>

institutions meet their own sustainability targets, recognised as a measurable local benefit in the London Environment Strategy (2018).²¹

The National School Party Travel Scheme therefore supports wider government objectives on net-zero emissions, air-quality improvement, and modal shift toward sustainable public transport — delivering both educational and environmental dividends at once.

Future Rail Users

Beyond its immediate educational and social benefits, the National School Party Travel Scheme also offers a strategic opportunity to build the next generation of rail users. Introducing young people to rail travel early helps normalise sustainable, public transport habits — shaping future travel choices that support both environmental and economic goals.

Research commissioned by the Rail Delivery Group (RDG) shows that travel habits formed in youth are powerful predictors of adult behaviour.²² Familiarity with trains, stations, and ticketing systems reduces perceived barriers to future use, making rail a “default” mode of travel for education, work, and leisure. Similarly, DfT’s Transport Decarbonisation Plan (2021) highlights the importance of shifting passenger preferences toward low-carbon modes early in life to secure lasting change.²³

By embedding rail into the school experience, the scheme reinforces positive attitudes to sustainable mobility and strengthens the relationship between young citizens and the national rail network. This has long-term benefits for the sector: it helps to cultivate a more loyal customer base, broadens public understanding of rail’s environmental advantages, and ensures that future generations see trains not as a last resort, but as a trusted, everyday part of British life.

In essence, the scheme is not only an investment in education, but also in the future resilience and sustainability of the UK’s rail industry — fostering both climate responsibility and economic vitality for decades to come.

²¹ <https://www.london.gov.uk/programmes-strategies/environment-and-climate-change/environment-strategy>

²² <https://www.raildeliverygroup.com/media-centre/press-releases/2023.html>

²³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/transport-decarbonisation-plan>

5. Considerations & Mitigations

To ensure the National School Party Travel Scheme operates smoothly and does not place undue strain on existing services, a centralised booking system would be implemented. This system would manage applications, allocate routes, and limit party sizes per train. Advance booking — a minimum of six weeks — would be compulsory, allowing operators to plan capacity effectively and coordinate with other scheduled groups.

Because travel would take place strictly during off-peak periods, it is expected that services would have sufficient available capacity. However, in the unlikely event that a particular train has reached its limit for group bookings, the system would automatically offer alternative routes or times to maintain a consistent passenger experience. Where possible, reserved seating should be arranged to ensure that school parties are seated together, minimising disruption to other passengers and simplifying supervision for school staff.

The booking process would operate through a centralised GOV.UK portal, ensuring consistency, accessibility, and clear accountability across all participating regions. During the trial phase, schools may initially submit itinerary requests for manual confirmation, with automation and self-selection functionality to follow as the system scales.

Clear guidance and terms of use would be published for schools. These would be modelled on Transport for London's existing School Party Travel Scheme terms and adapted for national use. Schools that fail to comply with these conditions — for example, travelling without a correct booking or exceeding group limits — may have their access to the scheme suspended.

The scheme would initially run on a trial basis with one or more publicly owned rail operators. This pilot would allow the Department for Transport (DfT) and Department for Education (DfE) to evaluate demand, fine-tune booking limits, and assess the operational impact, ensuring that the scheme expands sustainably while maintaining reliable service for all passengers.

Accessibility would be central to the design of the scheme. The booking portal would provide information on step-free routes, assisted travel options, and alternative arrangements for SEND students, carers, and special schools. Operators and schools would be encouraged to share feedback during the pilot phase to ensure the system is inclusive and practical for all participants.

| Potential Risk | Description | Mitigation / Response |
|--|--|--|
| Capacity pressure on certain routes | Some off-peak services may receive multiple school booking requests, particularly during popular trip periods. | Managed through centralised booking with live capacity limits, advance notice, and automated alternative route suggestions. |
| Administrative complexity | Coordinating national rail operators and thousands of schools could create initial system pressure. | Begin with a limited pilot using publicly owned operators; develop a single GOV.UK booking portal to streamline processes and data collection. |
| Revenue displacement for operators | Discounted or free travel could marginally reduce off-peak revenue. | Scheme restricted to underused off-peak capacity; phased rollout allows monitoring and adjustment before national expansion. |
| Non-compliance by schools | Some schools may fail to adhere to booking procedures, group size limits, or supervision ratios. | Clear guidance and terms of use, with temporary suspension for repeated breaches; emphasis on communication and accountability. |
| Accessibility challenges | Certain routes or stations may not fully meet the needs of SEND pupils or those requiring step-free access. | Accessibility information embedded within the portal; liaison with operators to provide appropriate assistance and alternative routes. |
| Public perception of disruption | Concerns from regular passengers about large groups travelling together. | Off-peak restriction, pre-booked seating, and clear communication with operators and passengers to manage expectations. |
| Funding for implementation | Initial setup and administrative costs would be required to start and maintain the scheme. | Funding to be shared between DfE and publicly owned operators; costs are expected to be minimal and offset by educational, social, and environmental benefits. |
| Last-mile connectivity | Some schools may face first- or last-mile challenges in reaching stations or final destinations. | The scheme reduces long-distance costs and can complement local transport schemes; future partnerships with local authorities can address local connectivity gaps. |
| Industrial action or service disruption | Strikes or service issues could affect planned journeys. | Automated alerts, flexible re-booking options, and clear communication protocols with schools; terms and conditions to specify contingency arrangements (e.g. next available service). |

While these risks warrant careful management, none are insurmountable. Each can be effectively mitigated through phased implementation, clear communication, and close collaboration between the Department for Transport, the Department for Education, and participating operators. With appropriate planning and governance, the scheme can deliver its educational, social, and environmental benefits while maintaining the reliability and efficiency of the national rail network.

6. Suggested Implementation Plan

The National School Party Travel Scheme would be introduced in phased stages, ensuring that lessons from the pilot inform national rollout. This approach allows for effective evaluation, capacity management, and refinement of digital systems before full-scale delivery.

Phase 1 – Development and Planning

- Establish a joint DfE–DfT working group (including rail operators, local authorities, and school representatives.)
- Design and test the centralised booking system.
- Draft scheme terms and conditions based on TfL’s model, adapted for national application.
- Identify pilot operators and routes based on network capacity and demand.

Phase 2 – Pilot Programme

- Launch a trial with one or more publicly owned rail operators (e.g. LNER, Northern, Southeastern, c2c, SWR, and others).
- Collect data on usage, capacity, and user feedback.
- Evaluate administrative processes and accessibility features.
- Refine booking procedures and digital tools based on real-world performance.

Phase 3 – Evaluation and Expansion

- Conduct an independent review of the pilot to assess educational, social, and environmental impact.
- Identify cost efficiencies, user satisfaction, and operational feasibility.
- Prepare ministerial and parliamentary briefings to secure long-term support.

Phase 4 – National Rollout

- Extend the scheme to additional operators and regions, supported by centralised digital infrastructure.
- Develop annual monitoring and reporting systems.
- Embed the scheme as part of DfE’s enrichment and equal access strategy and DfT’s sustainable transport commitments.

7. Conclusion

The National School Party Travel Scheme represents a practical, affordable, and transformative opportunity to reconnect education with the national rail network. By reducing barriers, promoting sustainability, and expanding opportunity, the scheme delivers measurable benefits for pupils, families, and communities — while supporting the long-term health of Britain’s public transport system.