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The future of free public transport: Dunkirk today, Paris tomorrow?



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Visuel

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Auteur

Maxime Huré (Politiste)

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In collaboration with a group of young researchers in sociology and geography, we wished to carry out a detailed survey on the move towards free public transport in Dunkirk. Dunkirk is a city that had already trialled free public transport at weekends and is therefore preparing to adopt comprehensive free public transport.

So, what are the first lessons drawn from research carried out in Dunkirk relating to weekend travel and therefore concerning leisure travel since this is the main use on non-working days.

Increase in the use of public transport and decrease in vandalism

First conclusion: since the move to free public transport was made, a reduction in the amount of damage and vandalism on buses has been recorded. This is paradoxical if we consider significant increases in the use of bus networks, since buses were used 29% more on Saturdays and 78% more on Sundays. This corresponds to a daily average of approximately 5,000 additional travellers per day on Dunkirk's buses.

New users...

Clearly this increased use is supported by new bus users. Who are these new users, or at least who are those that we have observed within the buses? First, individuals facing significant social, financial issues, who began using the bus network due to it being free are effectively observed. There are also young people aged 16-25 years old who take buses more intensively at the weekend, notably thanks to the increase in freedom that free bus travel offers them, such as the ability to go to the cinema or meet up with friends in the city centre at weekends.

Potentially the most interesting factor revealed as a result of the research in terms of the sociological makeup of new bus users in Dunkirk, is that the elderly were also observed. Elderly, often isolated people take the bus solely to get out of the house, for a breath of fresh air, to rediscover their city as they told us during interviews, and also to re-establish social links, both occasionally on the bus, which is rather surprising, and with their network of friends and family.

Families can also be observed choosing to take the bus rather than the car, which is a very interesting factor. Why? This is because when travelling to the city centre by car, they faced issues parking their cars. Parking needs to be paid for, with limits to the amount of time you can stay, etc. Free bus travel avoids issues concerning time and money. Hence, families start using the bus at the weekend for leisure travel.

Families who choose not to use their cars at the weekend raise the question of a modal shift between cars and public transport. It is important to note that in Dunkirk cars largely dominate since they account for 67% of all travel modes.

It was observed, via a questionnaire carried out among 400 people, that 67% of new bus users decided not to use their cars in order to travel in Dunkirk city centre at the weekend, which is a very significant figure. A total of 33% decided not to walk, or chose public transport or bus travel over walking, and 15% chose to travel by bike as opposed to public transport. Note that the questionnaire was multiple choice, representing the option to use multiple modes of transport.

The first lesson to take away, in terms of weekend trends in any case, is that a relatively significant modal shift was observed from cars to public transport

...and new activities

So, what activities are new users traveling into Dunkirk city centre by bus at the weekend taking part in? It was observed that the number of bus users increased at

the weekends due to people attending events organised by the public authorities in Dunkirk. Notably, events such as Dunkirk's carnival, but also other events such as exhibitions held in the city centre.

Another trend observed concerns feedback from local businesses. A survey was carried out with local businesses, who were very hesitant when free public transport was first introduced, but who are more or less satisfied today as they feel that there has been a slight boost in trade since free public transport was implemented. So, it is very hard to evaluate for the moment, and clearly more time is needed, but we will attempt to see if this trend continues, and if it can be confirmed in a second survey that we will carry out in 2018 and 2019 concerning the implementation of free public transport in Dunkirk, even if this trend clearly depends on the broader context, including, for example, the economic performance of Dunkirk's urban area, and also France's economic performance.

New representations of bus travel and the city

Firstly, what can be reflected upon, and what we have reflected upon, is the fact that free public transport will ultimately have an impact on representations and relationships between users and public services. This is important as today, if we consider the example provided by Dunkirk, buses can be considered as a new public space. A public space within which conviviality sometimes occurs, and within which tension can also occur, tension that can be clearly linked with the over-crowding of certain bus lines, yet we are presented with a new, emerging public space made possible thanks to free travel.

It can also be observed that representations of buses in Dunkirk are set to evolve. Today, they are synonymous with freedom, whilst for some users, buses can represent constraints: time constraints, etc. Today, buses have become a symbol of freedom which was a concept historically linked to cars: the car was defined as a symbol of freedom, at least during the period of the democratisation of the car in the twentieth century in any case, and it is becoming evident that buses will progressively earn this title from users who share their thoughts with us on what buses and free bus travel represent today.

There are also impacts in terms of image, in terms of the image portrayed by cities that opt to implement free public transport. This can be clearly seen in Niort: the Mayor of Niort clearly explained to us that the city's inhabitants are proud to have a

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