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[Free public transport in Dunkirk, one year later](#)

Submitted by [Michiel Modijefsky](#) on 10 Oct 2019

Picture:



“In Dunkirk, the percentage of people using the bus had fallen below 5%, one of the lowest rates in France. It was necessary to create a psychological shock at the height of the challenge to successfully change the uses.” - Patrice Vergriete, Mayor Dunkerque.

Country:

France

Topic:

Collective passenger transport

Body:

Following the introduction of free public transport and improved services in September 2018, passenger numbers have increased dramatically in the French Urban Community of Dunkirk. Moreover, it has made a significant contribution to reducing private car use, a recent study concludes.

In September 2018, the Urban Community of Dunkirk launched a new transport network which had been completely redesigned and improved with the added benefit of being free for both residents

and visitors. A [new study](#) on the experience finds that bus use has increased by 65% during the week and by 125% during the weekend eight months after introduction. The study considered data from automatic counting systems installed in public buses and from a survey conducted among 2,000 public transport users in central areas of the Urban Community.

The passenger increase stems from more frequent use of public transport by people that were already using public transport, either regularly or occasionally, as well as from new users. Overall, half of the users surveyed indicated that their public transport use has increased since it became free of charge. Those that have not changed their mobility are mainly residents that were already subscribers and regular users of the network.

Modal shift

From the users that indicated they increased their use of public transport, almost 50% stated that they used it for journeys previously travelled by car. Furthermore, 10% no longer have a passenger car or have decided not to buy a new or a second car. It mainly concerns people who live in the heart of the community which is well-served by the bus network and where many trips can also be made on foot and bicycle.

The study also shows an increase in walking since free public transport was introduced and the public transport network upgraded. However, the increase in walking results from opposite impacts: a 20% increase in practice for people who shifted from private car to using the bus, and a 13% decrease in walking from people that had limited access to bus services, for reasons of affordability and, to a lesser extent, due to lack of physical access.

In contrast, the introduction of free and upgraded public transport service had little impact on cycling. Cycling is mainly considered a summertime leisure activity and is little developed as a transport mode within the Dunkerque area. According to a travel survey conducted in 2015, only two percent of trips were made on a bicycle and even for short distances trips the share of cycling remains low.

It is expected that major improvements to the cycling network and facilities that are being implemented this year, will have a more significant and positive impact on cycling in the Dunkerque area.

Role of free public transport

Freeing the public transport of any charge for residents and visitors alike is the key reason for the increase in public transport use. In particular, respondents with lower incomes indicated free transport allowed them to use public transport more often. However, the abolishment of transport fares is also the main reason for using public transport more often for people who have a car and sufficient income to afford a public transport subscription or tickets. For this group, the price of a single ticket was still considered a barrier for public transport use, especially for occasional use. While free transport is the key reason for increased public transport use, improved public transport also plays an important role. Almost 40% of respondents mentioned the increased efficiency and reliability of the network as the reason for using public transport more often. **In addition to restructuring the public transport network, new vehicles have also been introduced and traveling has become frictionless: people don't have to worry about travel cards, cash or identification. The fact that public transport has become free and more efficient provides for the required multiplier effect necessary to promote multimodal practices, in an urban area strongly dominated by the individual car.**

Policy background

Improving public transport and making it free from charge was an important election promise of the 2014 municipal election campaign of Patrice Vergriete, the current mayor of Dunkerque. To deliver on that promise, an ambitious project “[DK'Plus de mobilité](#)” was launched. It aims to modernise the public transport network and redevelop the agglomeration, providing simplified travel, better shared public spaces and more comfort and green spaces in the city.

Amongst others, the bus network was reconfigured, connecting Dunkirk to a cluster of neighbouring towns, with five express lines running every ten minutes throughout the day, and a dozen other lines serving less dense areas. Some €65 million has been invested into the redevelopment of seven larger areas and corridors and more than a hundred small interventions in the agglomeration. The extra cost of introducing free public transport is around €13.5 million per year. Before the network was revamped, buses were often almost empty meaning that ticket sales contributed only a small amount - about 10% - of the system's funding. The remaining costs were already being publicly subsidised. Although, making public transport free came down to a “political choice”, so far the impact on the budget has been limited.

Future

Albeit impressive growth in public transport use in the first years is too early to make a definitive judgment about the merits of free public transport in Dunkirk. People want to experience the new offer. After the novelty wears off it remains to be seen if travel habits change permanently and modal shift and other benefits associated with free public transport will occur in the longer term. At the same time, Dunkirk's public transport system is far from saturated yet and can continue to accommodate growth. The pressure on the budget from a need to make massive new investments to keep up with the growth is thus limited, at least for the time being. For now, the initial impact on mobility is positive and further developments in Dunkirk interesting to follow.

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