



## « FREE PUBLIC TRANSPORT »

Aubagne and Etoile Region, France

*Period of implementation: 2009 (launch) | Study case written in 2010*

Free public transport was introduced in the Aubagne and Etoile region on May 2009. This facility is available to those living and/or working in Aubagne, and to those which in one way or another travel within the territory – consisting of 12 communes in which 101,000 people live. The transport network currently consists of bus lines, but in 2014 the city was planning to open also a free tram and a tram-train running on a restored railway line. In order to implement the free public transport, it was necessary to pass a local law and change the percentage of Transportation Tax (VT) paid by businesses located within the agglomeration. Free public transport has been particularly useful for young people, for the elderly and for people living within the region or neighbourhoods and towns far from the city centre. In total, the number of trips on the local network of scheduled and school services (except for chartered transport services) doubled (+100%) in 2010. In 2011, public transportation accumulated 3.8 million trips over the 1.9 million of 2008 (before free public transport was introduced).



The **Inclusive Cities Observatory** was launched in 2008 by the UCLG Committee on Social Inclusion, Participatory Democracy and Human Rights with the aim of creating a space for analysis and reflection on local social inclusion policies. The initiative was developed with the scientific support of Professor Yves Cabannes (University College of London) and the Centre for Social Studies (CES) from the University of Coimbra. At present, the Observatory contains more than sixty study cases mostly developed between 2008 and 2010. Even though many of these cases refer to policies that have already come to an end, they still have much to offer: from capitalizing on the learning acquired by other local authorities to discovering suggestive and alternative means to address social inclusion challenges from a local perspective.

## Context

### *City context*

The 12 communes in the Aubagne and Etoile Region agglomeration are divided into 13 economic activity zones, containing 7,600 businesses providing employment for 25,700 people in 2009. One in four jobs are in the retail sector. The Aubagne and Etoile Region is heavily dependent on the metropolitan areas of Aix-en-Provence and Marseille. Half of the jobs in those areas are occupied by people living outside them, and 60% of workers live in the agglomeration work outside it. The proportion of home-owning households and incomes in the town are higher than those of neighbouring cities and the unemployment rate is lower.

### *Decentralization context*

At the local authority level, the French political-administrative system is divided into Regions, Departments, Intercommunalities and Communes (equivalent to municipalities), each of which has its own prerogatives and responsibilities when providing guarantees and managing public services. Given that the Communes have relatively limited resources, they create partnerships in Intercommunalities in order to provide the necessary services for their citizens (France has about communes of 36,700 and on January 1, 2011, there were 2,599 EPCIs - *établissements publics de Coopération Intercommunale* - public establishments for intercommunal cooperation).

The agglomerated community (*Communauté d'agglomération*) discussed in this case is an Intercommunality that contains a number of medium-sized municipalities. After it is created, the Intercommunality adopts a President who is elected by delegates of the communes; it shapes a deliberation assembly called the Community Council, which includes delegates from communes through municipal councillors, who meet at least once every three months and every time the President considers it necessary; and it finally puts in place technical administration.

The agglomeration of the Aubagne and Etoile region was created in 2007, and is the culmination of a process initiated in 1992. In 2006, the agglomeration was the focus of a political campaign that succeeded in preventing its integration into the community of Marseille (17 km from Aubagne). The town of Aubagne, with 46,000 inhabitants, is the largest commune in the agglomeration, which consists of 12 communes and has a total of just over 100,000 inhabitants.

### *Social context*

There were 3,000 people living below the poverty line in the town of Aubagne in 2009 (defined as 871 euros for a single person without children; 1,829 euros for a couple with two children under 14 years of age; and 1,568 euros for a single-parent family with two children under 14 years old). As of October 15, 2009, there were 1,076 beneficiary households receiving active income support (*Revenu de solidarité active*). (This benefit amounts to 454 euros for a single person without any children, 681 euros for a single person with one child, 818 euros for a single person with two children, and so on; 681 euros for a childless couple, 818 euros for a couple with one child, 954 euros for a couple with two children, etc.). In January 2009, there were 2,061 unemployed people and just over half the fiscal households (51.3%) were not subject to tax. This figure at the agglomeration level was 46.8% in 2004. In France today, there are 'working poor' who are men and women who have a job and a salary, and who nevertheless do not earn enough income to meet their basic need. In 2006, the proportion of people over 60 years of age was 23.63%, which is roughly the same as for the agglomeration as a whole. The agglomeration had an active population of 46,837 in 2007, of which 5,196 were unemployed.

## Policy development

Free public transport was introduced in the Aubagne and Etoile region on May 15, 2009. This free facility is available to those living and/or working in Aubagne, and to the population which in one way or another travels within the intercommunality, consisting of 12 communes, in which 101,000 people live. The transport network currently consists of bus lines, but in 2014 there will also be a free tram (linking the working-class neighbourhoods with the town centre and the industrial and commercial areas of Aubagne) and, later, a train-tram running on a restored railway line will be added (linking the various municipalities with the city centre and the Aubagne multi-modal transport platform). Since its inception, the free transport policy has been based on the convergence between public participation and local government led projects.

### *Background*

The free public transport project was established in Aubagne during the 2008 municipal election campaign. It was part of the manifesto of the 'Left union list' which included Communists, Greens, Socialists, and figures from civil society. The idea was debated within a process that was linked to about 800 people known as 'city activists', and which involved holding public meetings and distributing documents. During this process, free public transport became a key manifesto commitment by the electoral list mentioned above. The 'Left union list' (which had by then been renamed the 'rainbow' as a result of support from the moDem - *Mouvement Démocrate* - Democratic Movement, the local centrist party) won the elections and the Mayor of Aubagne proposed the idea of free public transport to the other mayors in the agglomeration.

After discussion of the issue at the Community Council, on February 4, 2009, it was put to the vote and a local law was passed that implemented the principle of free public transport throughout the territory of the agglomeration as of May 15 of that year. This decision was accompanied by the vote and approval of a further two strategic options. First, there was an increase from 0.6% to 1.05% in the transport tax (*Versement Transport – VT*), which companies in the agglomeration with more than nine employees are required to pay; and second, projects aimed at improving public transport and reducing car traffic, such as the construction of a tram line, the rehabilitation of an old railway line, a 'public bicycle plan' (bicycle loans to residents and workers as for a nine-month period), the 'let's walk to school' project and inter-company and inter-governmental commuting plans. These projects have easily surpassed their initial targets, and free public transport is therefore today supported by a broad consensus.

### *Policy goals*

To increase the use of public transport and reduce car use in towns and villages; to promote access to the right to mobility and to promote citizens' (re)allocation of public spaces; to substantially increase families' purchasing power; and to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. The initial quantitative objectives of the policy were to increase public transport use by 50% between 2009 and 2011, and to reach an 80% increase by 2017.

### *Chronological development and implementation*

After having been put to the vote and approved by the Community Council, the implementation of free public transport required the renegotiation of the Concession for the Management of Public Services (*Délégations de Service Public – DSP*, in French), which provides the legal framework in which a private operator (VEOLIA) provides the transport services that the agglomeration required. The new contract has yet to be approved by the State supervisory authority, the prefect of the Department (the *préfet du département*), who has argued that the

free public transport policy does not comply with the law regulating the granting of the Public Service Management concessions (*Délégations de Service Public – DSP*).

In a situation in which the wording of the regulatory text is extremely vague, the case of free transport, affected by the agglomeration's Concession of Public Service Management (DSP) has been submitted to judges for their assessment. Despite the fact that other towns such as Manosque have already been able to change their DSP, the case is still pending resolution. However, the free transport services policy began on schedule, i.e. on May 15, 2009. This was possible thanks to the recovery of Transport Taxes paid by companies with more than nine employees, which offset the income previously obtained from sales of transport passes.

The free transport was inaugurated at the festival of the sun, a large festival that takes place every year, which received extensive media coverage. In this context, local authorities raised the profile of the policy by creating an advertisement campaign, as well as providing public information via website and newsletter. Regular monitoring has been necessary since the opening and a year after its launch a balance sheet was presented in public in the form of two studies - a qualitative study of its social impact and a survey to ascertain passengers' opinions.

### *Stakeholders, beneficiaries and participatory methodologies*

The implementation of free public transport has involved both the mayors and local governments within the agglomeration as well as the same agglomeration's community council. Its origins are linked to the political interaction between political parties and activists. The policy has also meant that it has been necessary to carry out a survey of businesses and to maintain close cooperation and coordination links with neighbourhood councils, and with a passengers' committee representing a small group of users. Assessment of the project was carried out by a sociological studies consultancy and an institute that performs opinion polls. In addition, the Development Council, a public body at the agglomeration level which monitors the organisation and development of public services, has viewed the implementation of free public transport in an extremely positive light since the beginning. This council consists of 78 people from the association movement (*mouvement associatif*), public services, trade unions, the business and economic sector, as well as citizens committed to the life of their municipalities.

The free public transport services were aimed at the entire population living, working or travelling to Aubagne and up to 11 cities and towns in the surrounding area. Free public transport has been particularly useful for young people, for the elderly and for people living in neighbourhoods or towns that are a long way from the centre, as well as people coming from neighbouring communities.

The implementation process for free public transport was primarily the result of a participation process that took place while the electoral programme of the list of left-wing movements for the 2008 municipal elections was being prepared. This process included and involved around 800 people known as 'city activists', who met at public assemblies and exchanged their ideas in documents that they circulated or by making comments on those documents. The participation process was also closely linked to discussions with business leaders and the public transport users' committee in the agglomeration. It was complemented by the exchange of information through an online forum hosted on the agglomeration's website, and by means of exchanges within the neighbourhood councils, which meet twice a year to discuss Aubagne's services. For example, one of the groups involved, the business leaders group, has shown a great deal of interest in the free transport policy because this policy is related to two of their major concerns: travel conditions for their employees and the decline in their purchasing power.

To the outside observer, it is surprising that the representative body of civil society appears to have played a rather marginal role in the development and support of the policy. This can be explained by two factors: (1) the presence of free transport as a result of a political process, ultimately implemented by elected politicians, i.e. the representative political system, and (2) the accompaniment of the process in participatory forums such as the users' committee, neighbourhood committees and the web forum, where the needs of transport users are given particular priority. Once the development council represents the majority of organisations in civil society, the data it collects will certainly be an appropriate means of enriching the debate on the transport system. At the same time, there is a willingness to rethink the activity of the transport users' committee in order to benefit from the proximity that has been generated between the transport services and their users. The public services delegate is considering creating a 'privileged users club' and the agglomeration community is planning to decentralise the users' committee in each commune as at present it is centralised at the community level.

### *Institutionalization and financing*

The free public transport policy was formalised by a local law approved by the *Community Council* after being submitted for deliberation on February 4, 2009. In order to implement it, it was necessary to put it to a vote and approve the change in the percentage of Transportation Tax payable by businesses. Finally, this policy's institutionalization process was linked to a draft amendment to the contract granting the Public Service Management Concession (*Délégations de Service Public - DSP*) which regulates the relationship between the regional authority and the services provider (in this case, a services company called VEOLIA). As of early 2011, this stage relating to institutionalization had not yet been completed.

The project has been funded by the Transportation Tax (VT), which is paid by companies located in the agglomeration with more than nine employees. As a result of the increase in tax rates from 0.6% to 1.05%, the amount of revenue increased from around 700,000 euros to 2,000,000 euros. Before the introduction of free public transport, the revenue from transport ticket sales accounted for about 7% of the transport budget. Between 30% and 40% of the total costs are covered by the Transportation Tax (VT), and approximately 60% are covered by the community's budget. The transport budget line is maintained by the Tax on Professional Activities, which was renamed in 2010 and is now known as the Territorial Economic Contribution. There has been an increase in operating costs of around 15% due to the growth in the number of passengers – covered by the corresponding increase in the Transportation Tax (VT).

## **Outcomes and reflections**

### *Key results and achievements*

At the end of 2010, 20 months after the implementation of the free buses, an increase was noted in the number of users, which has been growing and will continue to rise. In total, high levels of growth were recorded in 2010, i.e. the number of trips on the local network of scheduled and school services (except those on chartered transport) doubled (+100%) and over 3.8 million trips took place compared to 1.9 million in 2008, before the free public transport was introduced. In comparison, when the free public transport was launched, the forecasts estimated that the number of users would increase by 58% in two years. The latter figure was easily surpassed during the first year that the policy was implemented: between December 2008 and December 2009, the number of passengers on public transport had already increased by 68% on the scheduled lines (12,800 passengers a day compared to 6,008 passengers per day).

According to studies carried out in early 2010, the free public transport policy has made a major contribution to the expansion of the municipalities (+7% of users live in other communes in the agglomeration, outside the commune of Aubagne); it has facilitated travel for young people, when travelling from one town to another or travelling within Aubagne (+10% of users between 11 and 18 years of age among the new users); it has increased the presence of pedestrians (in the city centre, in the market and in the cinema); and the elderly have gradually changed their habits and have become part of the economically active population (+10% of employed people among new users); and it has also stimulated the growing presence of users residing in Marseille or in other communes outside the agglomeration (19% of non-residents among new users).

The free public transport has been particularly beneficial for the elderly, unemployed mothers and young people, whether in education or otherwise. Now these people are more willing to travel to the town centre and throughout the region, and thus visit their relatives more often. Free public transport therefore fosters social diversity, intergenerational relations, the emergence of informal spaces for information and debate, and brings individuals together.

As a result, it is possible to establish both a direct relationship between free public transport and the creation of dynamics of social inclusion, as well as to show that the equation between the mobility generated by the transport and social mobility leads to a type of economic, social and cultural development. As mentioned in the press release that followed the presentation of the evaluation studies in 2010, this equation can be considered in terms of a direct relationship between the creation of economic value and the enhancement of social relations.

### *Main obstacles faced*

According to those responsible for the implementation of the free public transport policy, the main obstacle in its implementation is not related to the partners in the community, but is instead linked to the vague wording of a law that still has not incorporated the principle of the zero cost. This has left room for deliberation, in which the State administrator has intervened to delay the amendment of the Public Service Management concession contract (DSP) and has referred it to the courts. As in Manosque, a town in which free public transport services were also introduced in 2009, the government's involvement appears to be based on variable grounds and as such it is difficult to ascertain the underlying motives with any certainty.

Another problem raised following the deliberations of the Community Council is the inclusion of free public transport within a transport system at a departmental level, i.e. the transport union. This union ultimately aims to create a single transport card and to establish a fare structure associated with the different areas. In this case, the idea of free transport within the agglomeration would come into conflict with the practices of other areas. However, the current head of public transport believes that this contradiction can not only be resolved on a practical level (e.g. by creating free zones within the zoning system), but would also mainly be due to the diversity of approaches and strategies arising from the autonomy of local authorities.

### *Replicability*

The experience of free public transport in the agglomeration in the Aubagne and Étoile region has shown that free transport and economic feasibility are not contradictory ideas, and that mobility policies have a major impact on social inclusion processes. Moreover, their political conception and practical implementation may be closely linked to various forms of political participation. As it is experiencing a period of representative and participatory democracy, the case of the Aubagne region illustrates how local authorities can overcome simplistic and vacuous

links between representation (which is assumed to be removed from the citizens) and participation (which is assumed to be close to citizens).

The replicability of the Aubagne experience basically depends on two factors. The first is linked to the timing of the implementation, which takes place ideally when the Public Service Management concession contract (DSP) expires. This enables local authorities to negotiate the conditions of providing a transport service freely, for example, under the legal regime of awarding a public contract, without having to worry about amendments. However, it must be said that amendments to a contract within a Public Service Management Concession (DSP) are particularly problematic within a legal regime that does not recognise free transport.

The second factor is related to economic feasibility, for which the determining variables are both demographic and technical. In some cases, where the population density requires considerable investment and the operating costs involved are high, it may be harder to replace the income obtained from ticket sales with other sources of funding. However, if we take the social, economic and ecological effects of free public transport into account, the benefits that can be gained will always be greater than the additional costs that have been generated.

## Further information

This case study was written by Dr. Clemens Zobel at the Centre for Social Studies, University of Coimbra, Portugal, with the invaluable help of Slimane Toudert (office of the Mayor of Aubagne) and Nathalie Castan (director of Public Transport in the agglomeration).

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