

Transport Scotland submission of 24 October 2023

PE2028/C: Extend the concessionary bus travel scheme to include people seeking asylum in Scotland

The Committee is seeking:

- an update on the options being explored to provide free bus travel to people seeking asylum in Scotland.
- Transport Scotland's assessment of the proposal to extend concessionary bus travel to all people seeking asylum in Scotland, specifically the anticipated annual cost and the number of people expected to be eligible; and
- the outcome of the pilots in Glasgow, Aberdeen and Falkirk that have already taken place.

Taking these in order:

Options to provide free bus travel to people seeking asylum

In line with the 2022 - 2023 Programme for Government commitment, Transport Scotland is considering how best to provide free bus travel to asylum seekers. Existing concessionary bus travel schemes are delivered inclusively. This means that anyone resident in Scotland who meets the eligibility criteria in terms of age or disability can access concessionary travel on the same basis. This includes people seeking asylum, refugees and displaced people from Ukraine.

Transport Scotland estimate that around one-third of people seeking asylum in Scotland are already eligible for concessionary bus travel under current schemes (by virtue of being under 22, aged 60 and over or via disability eligibility). Extending concessionary travel scheme eligibility to all asylum seekers would therefore provide free bus travel to those aged 22 – 59 who do not have a qualifying disability.

Two main paths to delivery have been identified for consideration as potential options for providing free bus travel to asylum seekers.

Option 1: Full Inclusion in the existing Concessionary Bus Travel Scheme: making asylum seekers a specific eligible group for concessionary travel would be a change in the universal approach taken for such schemes to date (which apply to anyone resident in Scotland

who meets an age or disability criterion regardless of financial situation or status in the UK).

Option 2: Local Delivery and Provision of Travelcards: whether free bus travel to asylum seekers could be delivered without the need for changes to the existing statutory scheme at a more local level. A small pilot using this model of delivery, run by Refugee Survival Trust and Third Sector partners, took place between January to July this year. The outcomes of this report are discussed below.

Transport Scotland's assessment of the options to extend concessionary bus travel to all people seeking asylum in Scotland, specifically the anticipated annual cost and the number of people expected to be eligible

Published Home Office statistics show that there are currently around 5,300 people seeking asylum accommodated in Scotland who are in receipt of asylum support and/or accommodation. Home Office forecasts from summer 2022 estimated a UK total supported asylum population of 100,000 by end 2023 and sought an increase of dispersal to Scotland to reach 9% (9,000 people).

In Option 1, any changes to the existing scheme would require secondary legislation and corresponding consultation and impact assessments. Asylum is reserved to the UK Parliament under Schedule 5 of the Scotland Act 1998 as part of immigration and nationality reservation. Any legislation would also require to be within devolved competence.

Cost estimates of both options 1 and 2 are uncertain as detailed statistics on the age distribution and travel behaviours of asylum seekers in Scotland are not available. However, assuming that the upper range of average use of scheme is just under 50 journeys per person per month (as in the Travel Choices Pilot discussed below), Transport Scotland have estimated that the annual cost of including all asylum seekers in the concessionary travel scheme could be between £1.2 million and £3.3 million.

The range of potential costs is wide due to uncertainty around expected take-up of the scheme in this group. In addition, the pilot study only allowed for travel on First Bus in the Glasgow area. If free travel is provided for all services and across a wider geographical area, uptake may increase further and the estimated costs will likely be in the higher

end of the range. In addition, the expected cost of reimbursement would increase if the population of asylum seekers receiving support in Scotland were to grow as detailed above.

It is worth noting the risk of changes to estimates as asylum policy is reserved to the UK Government, including accommodation of people seeking asylum. The Scottish Government does not have control over the number of people dispersed to Scotland or the time they spend waiting for an asylum decision from the Home Office. Further, the number of people forced to seek a place of safety is linked to external factors internationally.

The outcome of the pilots in Glasgow, Aberdeen and Falkirk that have already taken place

Glasgow - Travel Choices Pilot

A short-term pilot led by the Refugee Survival Trust and third sector partners ran for six months between January and July this year. The pilot provided travel support to 150 people seeking asylum living in Glasgow through the provision of a 12-week digital First Bus pass, along with information and digital support to access and use the pass. In addition, the funding secured provided short term bus tickets to those in immediate need.

The Refugee Survival Trust drafted a report on their findings from the Pilot, which is published on their website at <https://www.rst.org.uk/archives/4379>.

The Report concludes that providing access to regular bus travel has an overwhelmingly positive impact on the lives of people who are ordinarily cannot afford to use public transport. The travel pass allowed participants to free up funding for other necessities (most notably food), to travel for necessary appointments and to explore their new environments more easily. 92% of respondents said they were travelling more frequently and 88% reported they were also travelling longer distances.

The Report recommends that for any future provision of free bus travel to people seeking asylum is implemented either through provision of a long term digital ticket or extension of the National Concessionary Travel Scheme (NCTS) to include all people seeking asylum. Extending the NCTS is the Refugee Survival Trust's preferred option as this would

provide coverage of all bus operators and be on a national scale. This is increasingly important in light of the Home Office dispersal policy of locating asylum seekers across Scotland, while most of the infrastructure of support systems are based in Glasgow.

Aberdeen – Free bus passes for asylum seekers

Since November 2021 Aberdeen has been receiving people seeking asylum who are being accommodated in hotels. This move came with very little notice and no funding for the public or third sector as, until then, Glasgow was the only dispersal area in Scotland receiving people seeking asylum.

In June 2022, First Bus Aberdeen introduced a weekly free bus pass, making Aberdeen the first local area in Scotland to implement this type of scheme. This allowed free travel within the city limits to people seeking asylum. The process to issue the weekly paper pass requiring an initial photograph and a weekly update of who required the pass, provided by Grampian Regional Equality Council (GREC). In turn, the passes were sent to the hotel each week to be distributed accordingly by MEARS.

After 6 months of implementation, 80 out of 91 people seeking asylum in Aberdeen accessed this provision. To better understand how it has worked and its impact, GREC circulated a survey and conducted a focus group with service users. 12 participants gave their opinions through the survey and 20 attended a focus group, which was supported by an interpreter.

Participants confirmed that having a free bus pass to travel in Scotland would enable them to use their limited financial resources (currently £8 per week in contingency accommodation) to buy food over and above that supplied at the hotel, access more educational opportunities, and improve their mental health by being able to get to see the country and create new social connections.

They also noted that the national pass would enable them to have in-person appointments with their solicitor, which is particularly relevant taking into consideration that now all of Scotland is preparing to be a dispersal area and welcome people seeking asylum, but immigration advice provision is almost entirely based in Glasgow.

The full report, [Free bus travel for people seeking asylum, the experience in Aberdeen](#) is available on the GREC website.

Falkirk - Transport project for people in the asylum system housed in Falkirk

Friends of Scottish Settlers (FOSS) are a registered Scottish charity working to welcome refugees and all newcomers to Falkirk district. They primarily support resettled families in the Falkirk district. Since the Home Office opened a hotel in Falkirk in October 2021 to house people seeking asylum, they have been seeking to support the men who have been sent there.

As a medium sized town that does not have experience accommodating people that the Home Office prevents from working, Falkirk often lacks the support ecosystem and infrastructure (such as consistent and appropriate ESOL provision and specialist legal advice) that Glasgow has developed over many years in supporting people seeking asylum.

FOSS received £50,000 funding from Paths for All to provide free transport to asylum seekers accommodated in Falkirk. After researching options, this funding was used primarily for train travel as participants needed to get to either Glasgow or Edinburgh and Falkirk sits on the main railway route between the two cities. FOSS also provided options for buses as far as administratively possible.

I hope that the information provided is useful for the Committee in considering this Petition.