

Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee

Asylum Seekers in Scotland inquiry

Notes from informal engagement session

Maryhill Integration Network Tuesday 6 June 2023

Theme - transport

Group one

It would have been helpful for free bus transport. Used to be five pounds, which was a substantial amount. It's better for integration. If you can have free bus travel as it would reduce social isolation.

Glasgow transport is okay, but in the south-west of the city, it's difficult. There are different companies which makes things less accessible.

We need to do some research around the inaccessibility of transport. Transport can be a boost for mental health. But lack of financial support is an issue. Some Asylum seekers get £45 a week. £1.40 a day for the bus is a lot.

The asylum seekers say they need to see the city, they want to socialise, they need to visit GPs. There are lots of social events that take place in Glasgow. A member asked whether the Young Scot Card would help, which there were mixed opinions on.

Airdrie is terrible for asylum seekers. There's no charity support and you're in a hotel where you only have £8 a day, so the bus was not feasible at all.

The biggest challenge is that some of the charities, provide transport, but in Falkirk, there's only FOSS. The furthest people could go was the park or the Kelpies. They could not get somewhere like, Glasgow. Stirling is a great city. But most of them felt they could not explore it.

"I felt really isolated in Airdrie. I felt that we were the only asylum seekers in that town. It's difficult to integrate with the locals because of this."

There's no way to afford the train. Transport networks are disconnected – they might need multiple tickets to get around.

They believed there were 99 bus stops to get from Airdrie to Glasgow which didn't really see feasible. Therefore, they would take the bike. When it rained that created other problems.

The key piece of feedback was that they wanted free transport for asylum seekers. This could make a big difference. Karen Adam said, "if you can find a solution to those transport issues, you can build a community".

A witness said, I would love to work but transport, it's a real problem.

Group two

They talked about their allowance. They got around five pounds a day and a bus pass is around 5 pounds per day. This meant they had the choice between eating or travelling. It's tough. "You can't go out or you need to prioritise."

How many appointments do asylum seekers have? They've had to meet with lawyers and doctors. And other different groups. Some of those meetings can be weekly.

One asylum seeker was pregnant. They had to attend three to four appointments a week while they were pregnant.

Migrant Help were called and the person who's pregnant told them she could not survive with the money that she had, but Migrant Help were not able to help them.

Refuweege gave help in terms of free bus passes. Then Amma Birth Companions gave further help with taxis. Selina: "Travel support is available through Migrant Help, but you need an ambassador to fight for you, with endless letters and calls." Also, if you have a mother who stressed and cannot make appointment that that can makes things worse and more difficult.

The third sector must be properly funded. You shouldn't need to choose between eating and travel.

Another witness said that travel was part of how they grew up. Not being able to do that, nearly broke them. If it was not for the Red Cross. She would not have been there today. Someone listened to her. And they sent her an envelope in the post with free bus passes, which saved her life.

She said that she had been camping and hiking. "It gives us so much". She used to be an MC at corporate events, speaking to 10,000 people. So, she's used to being social. She said that doing the activities that she was able to with free travel helped her mental health to improve and helped her to recover her dignity.

She said, I used to be really busy all day long and a lot of work and then I became an asylum seeker. "I couldn't work anymore; I needed a purpose".

The group considered how many people here had access to travel today. How many others do not? "This is a feasible, life-changing thing that we can do" - MSP.

Group three

They talked about the need to see the GP, socialise, taking young ones to activities. "The young people have a free card, but we need to go with them". "£5.40 a day is actually above the minimum amount that we receive from the Home Office".

In terms of getting the free bus passes for younger young people, they needed to fill in the form multiple times, eventually a school helped to get the Young Scot cards. Free bus passes for asylum seekers and refugees would help.

One of the witnesses said that they didn't know how many people didn't realise that they could get free passes from certain places or blue badges. They also went on to say, if you buy food, you have to carry it. This can be a real pain physically. And in terms of time, it's a huge obstacle, particularly when you have to travel a long distance.

They didn't get any information about local travel from Mears. Mears provided general information about the country but nothing useful for asylum seekers. "The pack is thick difficult to understand, like a tourist guide". GP allocation can take a while and it doesn't follow you when you move.

When you end up moving:

A witness told the members that she went from hotel, to flat, to another flat, to another flat. At which point she had her status granted but had no home. So, she was moved back into a hotel. And since then, she's moved hotel every week; transport for this moving is organised by the Asylum Seekers.

Their belongings get moved by a contractor. But they just get a phone call unexpectedly from someone they don't know telling them that they have to move to another hotel. An asylum seeker said, "I don't know why, but I think it's to do with the availability of housing".

Looking beyond the main transport needs, asylum seekers talked about communication and need to see someone and improve their mental health. They said if you all spaced out and can't meet, that creates isolation. They discussed about the possibility of sacrificing food for a one-day travel pass. They also talked about the embarrassment.

"Bus ticket fares in Glasgow seem to be high, compared to the rest of the UK." It's always challenging, and they need to think twice about what they're doing. Free bus passes would improve things. But they did say that the buses and transport in Glasgow seemed safe.

Group four

They said that it was so expensive to get around for getting to appointments with, for example, lawyers, or for babies. They get £9.90 a week when in the hotel. And £45 a week, now that they've been granted status. Prices are going up, though [so money doesn't go as far].

Would free travel make a difference? Yes, a lot.

Bus passes, allow you to meet people. It's just myself in the house and that's a problem. You can meet people. Which can ease the stress of everything.

One month in a hotel. I didn't go outside because I was in Erskine, which was in the middle of nowhere, so far away. Hospital appointments, I would go to those. Now, I'm in a city centre flat.

Another witness said "When I'm stressed, everything about me goes down. So, bus pass would be a big help. I don't know who I can meet, who can help... £45 pounds a week means it's not easy for me... it's really, really hard... I don't know how the system operates."

"Another issue is access to GPs or dentists, who are already overcapacity. People don't explain. When people arrived they didn't get any information. It's a problem. I don't know how to communicate problems either. Mental health issues can appear way down the line".

Group five

"A free bus pass is what asylum seekers need. There are too many places we can't go. Family tickets are expensive. Kids need to get out and go to parks, but they can't. My kids have a free bus pass. But bus timing isn't great, getting into school is mentally and financially draining. And school is quite far away. When the bus hasn't appeared, you have to walk. It's hard."

"It was hard in the beginning and expensive. I was lucky to find a college who gave me a bus pass. This year, though, it sounds like they are cutting(??) that."

"If you're shopping, you have to use the bus. The Bus pass is very useful. The local shop is so expensive, so I have to go out further. The next shop is 15 minutes by bus, or a 30-minute walk. But with heavy bags."

"I take the bus to go to the shop, the GP and to get the kids outside, but it costs a lot of money."

"I'd often find myself in myself, do many things on the same day. My lawyer is in town. So, I need to travel to see them and I need to go to college every single night and football. But without the bus pass I would have given up a lot of this."

"I could do more if you didn't need to pay for transport, snacks for kids. There's not much left at the end of the day."

When a child goes to secondary school that might end up with meaning that you have different buses going in different directions.

"For us, it's mandatory to have free or at least decent concession bus travel." "Or, you could even just bring it back down from £5.40!"