

Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee
Wednesday 19 March 2025
5th Meeting, 2025 (Session 6)

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

Introduction

Petitioner Pinar Aksu on behalf of Maryhill Integration Network and Doaa Abuamer on behalf of the Voices Network

Petition summary Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to extend the current Concessionary Travel Scheme to include all people seeking asylum in Scotland regardless of age.

Webpage <https://petitions.parliament.scot/petitions/PE2028>

1. [The Committee last considered this petition at its meeting on 15 May 2024.](#) At that meeting, the Committee agreed to write to Transport Scotland.
2. The petition summary is included in **Annexe A** and the Official Report of the Committee's last consideration of this petition is at **Annexe B**.
3. The Committee has received new written submissions from Transport Scotland, and the Petitioners, which are set out in **Annexe C**.
4. [Written submissions received prior to the Committee's last consideration can be found on the petition's webpage.](#)
5. [Further background information about this petition can be found in the SPICe briefing](#) for this petition.
6. [The Scottish Government gave its initial position on this petition on 27 June 2023.](#)
7. Every petition collects signatures while it remains under consideration. At the time of writing, 2,591 signatures have been received on this petition.
8. Members may wish to note that the 2025-26 Scottish Budget included funding to provide free bus travel for people seeking asylum, who are not already eligible under existing National Concessionary Travel Schemes.
9. The Committee may also wish to note [the Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity's response to a written parliamentary question lodged by Paul Sweeney MSP](#), in which the Minister indicated that a Working Group would be reconvened to consider delivery options for providing free bus travel for people seeking asylum.

Action

10. The Committee is invited to consider what action it wishes to take.

Clerks to the Committee
March 2025

Annexe A: Summary of petition

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

Petitioner

Pinar Aksu on behalf of Maryhill Integration Network and Doaa Abuamer on behalf of the Voices Network

Date Lodged

5 June 2023

Petition summary

Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to extend the current Concessionary Travel Scheme to include all people seeking asylum in Scotland regardless of age.

Previous action

We have raised the issue with [Paul Sweeney MSP, who submitted a motion in the Scottish Parliament](#), which achieved cross-party support.

We also met with the then Minister for Transport, Jenny Gilruth, to highlight the need for free bus travel to people seeking asylum in Scotland.

Background information

Asylum seekers are some of the most vulnerable people in the UK. They are prevented from working, housed in hotels or private rental accommodation, often in isolated areas, and given less than £50 per week to survive.

Those in hotel accommodation are forced to live on as little as £9 a week, just over £1 a day.

Access to concessionary bus travel is viewed by us as a key social justice policy. We believe it will be positively life-changing and mentally transformative for those otherwise stuck in a dreadfully inadequate and slow asylum system. Most of all, we believe it will enable asylum seekers as a group to become much more integrated in our communities.

Our campaign started in December 2021 with members from the Voices Network, followed by support from the Maryhill Integration Network Voices group.

Annexe B: Extract from Official Report of last consideration of PE2028 on 15 May 2024

The Convener: Petition PE2028, which was lodged by Pinar Aksu, on behalf of Maryhill Integration Network, and Doaa Abuamer, on behalf of the VOICES Network, calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to extend the current concessionary travel scheme to include all people who are seeking asylum in Scotland, regardless of age.

We are joined by our MSP colleague, Paul Sweeney, who is redeeming one of his return tickets. Paul continues to have an interest in the petition, and he led a members' business debate on the issues that it raised in October 2023. Good morning, Paul.

We previously considered the petition on 20 September 2023, when we agreed to write to the Scottish Government, the Scottish Refugee Council and the Refugee Survival Trust. Members will recall that, shortly after that meeting, I took the opportunity to highlight the petition at the Conveners Group meeting with the then First Minister, Humza Yousaf, who confirmed that the Scottish Government was giving active consideration to the issue.

We have received responses from the Refugee Sanctuary Scotland, which was formerly known as the Refugee Survival Trust, Transport Scotland and the Scottish Refugee Council, which are included in the papers for today's meeting. The responses provide further detail on the pilot schemes that have taken place in Glasgow, Aberdeen and Falkirk. The findings of the Refugee Sanctuary Scotland emphasise the positive feedback that it received from participants in the pilot project, which enabled people to travel more frequently and over longer distances.

Following the pilots, the Refugee Sanctuary Scotland has recommended that future provision for people who are seeking asylum be implemented through the provision of a long-term digital ticket or through extension of the national concessionary travel scheme. Extending provision of the national scheme is viewed as increasingly important in the light of the Home Office's dispersal policy of locating asylum seekers across Scotland, while most of the support systems are based in Glasgow. However, I understand that the Scottish Government is keen to ensure that any action that it takes does not have a consequential impact on asylum seekers arising from other Home Office regulations that might thereafter be triggered.

Since our most recent consideration of the petition and my raising the issue with the First Minister, the Scottish Government has announced funding of £2 million to support further exploration of extending free bus travel to people who are seeking asylum, and the commitment was noted as an immediate short-term action in the recently published fair fares review.

Before we consider the issues, I ask Paul Sweeney whether there is anything that he would like to say to the committee.

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): Thank you, convener. I would like to take the opportunity to commend the petitioners, Pinar Aksu of Maryhill Integration Network

and Doaa Abuamer of the VOICES Network, who, for several years, have worked tirelessly, alongside people with lived experience of the asylum system, on the campaign to extend access to free bus travel, which has been running for at least two years.

I welcomed the Scottish Government's announcement in October that £2 million would be allocated in the budget for the financial year 2024-25 to enable the roll-out of free bus travel for people who are seeking asylum in Scotland. However, I speak to the committee today in order to urge caution and to encourage members to keep the petition open for the time being. Although the funding that has been announced is welcome and, indeed, overdue, the detail of how it will be utilised and what it will actually mean for people who are seeking asylum remains to be seen.

The original ask of the petition was that the concessionary bus travel scheme be extended, but, in its announcement, the Scottish Government gave no indication that that is what the funds will be used for. There has been no sign of a draft statutory instrument, no indication of the logistics and no details on the design of the scheme.

There is a risk that the funds will simply be used for more information gathering and research or for a temporary scheme, rather than to make free bus travel a permanent reality for people who are seeking asylum in Scotland. Frankly, we do not need more data. We have had a pilot in Glasgow and another one in Aberdeen. We know that there is a need, and we know how to meet it at a relatively marginal extra cost to the public purse.

I urge the committee to write to the Scottish Government to seek written confirmation of the detail of the plans for the roll-out of the £2 million scheme. I also ask the committee to assess whether that funding will be used to deliver on the petition's ask, which is that the national concessionary travel scheme be extended to people who are seeking asylum, before it considers closing the petition.

The Convener: Thank you, Mr Sweeney. Do colleagues have any comments?

I think that it would be perfectly in order for us to write to the Scottish Government or Transport Scotland.

Foyso Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab): From listening to Mr Sweeney, I think that we should write to Transport Scotland to seek an update on the work that is being undertaken to explore options for extending the concessionary travel scheme and to ask, in particular, how the £2 million budget that has been allocated is being used.

Fergus Ewing: I am a bit puzzled—maybe I have misunderstood something—but, in his previous evidence to the committee, Mr Sweeney said:

“rough and ready cost estimates suggest that it would cost around £500,000 per annum”.—[Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee, 20 September 2023; c 18.]

Given that £2 million is enough to fund the whole caboodle for four years, what is happening to that money? What is the point of saying, “Here's £2 million,” if it would cost only £500,000 a year? Why does the Government not just do it? I do not quite

understand. If that money has been set aside, it cannot be used for anything else. It has been allocated from the budget, and it seems that it would be sufficient to run the thing for four years. What is going on?

The Convener: The First Minister and the then cabinet secretary said that, first, there are issues in identifying who an asylum seeker is, because it is not like being a pensioner or being under 21, as those groups are self-defined. How do we define an asylum seeker?

The second issue is that the Government is concerned about the fact that the scheme would have to operate in such a way that it did not contravene the Home Office guidelines on what constitutes earnings or benefits. I do not think that asylum seekers are entitled to receive benefits, so being in receipt of free travel could potentially alter their status. My understanding was that there was some detail to be worked out in relation to how what was proposed would come about.

However, after six months, it is perfectly in order for us to try to establish—as Mr Sweeney suggests—what on earth is going on, because we are well into the financial year and the scheme is not helping anyone to travel anywhere. As Mr Sweeney says, there is then the contingent risk that the money will end up being used to finance the carrying out of a whole lot of research rather than to put people on buses, which is what the intention is.

Fergus Ewing: It could be frittered away in consultants' reports, which would be farcical and rather grotesque.

The Convener: The petition has achieved nominal success, but we want that to be followed by substantive success.

Do members agree to keep the petition open and to make the inquiries that Mr Choudhury suggested?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Annexe C: Written submissions

Transport Scotland written submission, 11 June 2024

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

Thank you for the letter dated 20 May 2024 from Jackson Carlaw MSP on behalf of the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee about Petition PE2028. I have been asked to reply as Team Leader of the Concessionary Travel Policy Unit.

In particular, the Committee is seeking:

- an update on the work being undertaken to explore options for extending concessionary travel to people seeking asylum in Scotland.
- The Committee would particularly welcome clarification on how the £2million budget allocation is being utilised, specifically how much of this funding will be directly used to fund a concessionary travel scheme or whether Transport Scotland are planning to use some of this funding for additional research and evaluation work.

Update on work being undertaken to explore options for extending concessionary travel to people seeking asylum in Scotland

You will be aware that on 28 October 2023 the Scottish Government announced that £2 million would be made available in the budget for 2024-5 to progress free bus travel for people seeking asylum in Scotland. Since that time work has been ongoing to establish the most appropriate way to deliver this support, with eligibility for those not already covered by the existing concessionary travel schemes, building on the learning from local and regional pilots delivered by third sector organisations over recent years.

Around a third of people seeking asylum in Scotland are thought to already be eligible for free bus travel for the existing National Concessionary Travel Schemes through age or disability criteria. If a person is aged under 22, aged 60 or over or meet the disabled eligibility criteria, I would encourage them to apply for a National Entitlement Card.

How the £2million budget allocation is being utilised

Following the announcement in October 2023, Transport Scotland have been developing a national pilot scheme for delivery of this funding during this financial year with eligibility for those not already covered by the existing schemes, building on the learning from local and regional pilots delivered by third sector organisations over recent years.

Third Sector organisations and representatives with lived experience of the asylum system are contributing to the design of the pilot through a Working Group with Transport Scotland officials. This pilot will provide valuable evidence on nationwide delivery, costs and demand and will inform future progression of policy.

Work has been progressing to establish what is affordable and practical for delivery during 2024-25 within the budgetary envelope. As the funding has been allocated for a single year only, we will not be extending the statutory National Concessionary Travel Schemes to include people seeking asylum as an eligible group. Rather, it is anticipated that through the pilot a certain number of journeys or weekly tickets will be available per eligible person over a set period of time to provide support with travel. The date of launch and duration of the pilot are being considered as part of work to develop the pilot.

We are intending to use as much of the funding allocated as possible to provide free bus travel to people seeking asylum but will be ensuring the results of the scheme are evaluated to inform future policy decisions. Further information will be provided via the Scottish Government's website and these Third Sector organisations as preparations are made for the pilot to be opened.

I hope that the information provided is helpful for the Committee.

Petitioner written submission, 12 March 2025

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

We would like to thank the Petitions Committee for considering our petition and providing us with the update.

We have the following comments to make regarding recent developments:

- We welcome the £2 million that the Scottish Government allocated for a free bus travel for people seeking asylum in Scotland. While we appreciate this support from the Scottish Government, this remains a temporary/short term national scheme with further details to follow regarding the process and time limitation. This has also been the second announcement of the scheme restarting.
- We kindly request the petition be kept open to collect more signatures as we continue with our initial ask, which is for concessionary bus travel for people seeking asylum in Scotland.
- We encourage the Committee to seek a further update from Transport Scotland and Scottish Government until we have a clearer idea about next steps and the timeframe on when the Scottish Government is planning to start the scheme.