

Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee
Wednesday 15 May 2024
9th Meeting, 2024 (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/PP3904>

1. [The Committee last considered this petition at its meeting on 20 September 2023](#). At that meeting, the Committee agreed to write to the Scottish Government, the Scottish Refugee Council, and the Refugee Survival Trust.
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 Refugee Sancturay Scotland (previously know as the Refugee Survival Trust), Transport Scotland, and the Scottish Refugee Council, which are set out in **Annexe C**.
4. [The Committee received two written submissions prior to its last consideration of the petition](#).
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, 2,555 signatures have been received on this petition.
8. Members will also be aware that the Convener took the opportunity to highlight this petition during [the Conveners Group meeting with the then First Minister on 27 September 2023](#).
9. Members may also be aware that Paul Sweeney led a [Members Business debate on Free Bus Travel for People Seeking Asylum on 26 October 2023](#).

10. The Committee may also wish to note that [Fair Fares Review includes an immediate to short-term action for Transport Scotland to continue developing policy to consider the best way to provide free bus travel to people seeking asylum](#), including delivery of the one year £2million funding commitment for 2024-25.

Action

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

Clerks to the Committee
May 2024

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 20 September 2023

The Convener: Our first new petition this morning, PE2028, has been lodged by Pinar Aksu on behalf of Maryhill Integration Network and Doaa Abuamer on behalf of the Voices Network. It 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 their age.

We are joined in our consideration of PE2028 by our MSP colleagues Paul Sweeney and Mark Ruskell. Mr Sweeney is a veteran of our proceedings, of course, and I believe that Mr Ruskell has also been with us to consider petitions previously. I wish a very warm welcome to you both.

The petitioners highlight the challenging financial circumstances that asylum seekers face, and suggest that extending the concessionary bus travel scheme would support asylum seekers, as a group, becoming much more integrated in our communities.

As the SPICe briefing notes, people who seek asylum in the UK are usually ineligible for most welfare benefits. They have, to use the term that many of us are familiar with, “no recourse to public funds”. However, the Scottish national concessionary travel schemes are not listed by the UK Government as benefits that rely on public funds, which means that some asylum seekers can already benefit from free bus and coach travel.

Scottish Government officials estimate that around one third of people who are seeking asylum in Scotland are already eligible for concessionary bus travel under the existing schemes—that is, people who are under 22, are over 60 or are disabled. The Scottish Government response has also provided information about a pilot to provide travel support to asylum seekers in Glasgow, which ran from January to July this year.

We have also received a submission from the petitioners drawing our attention to pilots that have taken place in Aberdeen and Falkirk, and encouraging the Scottish Government and Transport Scotland to continue to engage constructively on the matter.

Before I ask colleagues how we might proceed in relation to PE2028, I invite both of our visiting colleagues to speak. Mr Ruskell, would you like to offer a contribution?

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): Thanks very much for giving me the opportunity to speak to PE2028. It is on an issue that I have been aware of for a number of years. Having talked to people who are in the asylum system about the daily pressures that they face, the poverty that they have to endure, the lack of opportunity and the constriction of their everyday lives, I feel that such provision is the minimum that we can do to support them.

The committee will be aware that the amount of money that asylum seekers have to live on is very low—I think that it is around £5 a day, and if they are living in hotel accommodation it is around £1 a day. I cannot imagine how hard it would be to live on that amount of money. It feels to me as though it is an absolute impossibility.

The other side of the matter is that I have seen just how transformative the under-22s concessionary travel has been for young people—how it has opened up opportunities, how it has helped people to build relationships, to save money, to access jobs and employment, and just to go about their everyday lives and to have that kind of freedom.

I know that people who are in the asylum system do not have a lot of those freedoms as a right, but they are basic freedoms—just to get about and to participate in society, to see their friends, colleagues and others and to engage in the community. Their situation is hugely restricted, so just having free bus travel would make a massive difference.

The evaluations that the convener mentioned of the very limited pilots in Aberdeen and Wales—we are still waiting to hear about the pilot in Glasgow—will show the value of the policy. It feels to me that it would be a natural extension to the Government's existing concessionary travel schemes—for over-60s, under-22s and people with a disability—to include this category of people.

I have to say that I am really at a loss as to why the provision has not already been introduced. The information that the committee has received in the SPICe briefing is quite clear that such schemes are not included in the category of benefits for which people with no recourse to public funds are ineligible, so that really begs the question whether there is another reason. Is there another legal interpretation that the Government has heard that is making it cautious? Are there complexities with extending the existing card-based concessionary travel scheme to people who are in the asylum system? Are there other issues about identification or other issues around budget? I genuinely do not know. I do not think we have had a clear answer from recent transport ministers. We have had four transport ministers in the past two years, so there is a question there, as well.

I am concerned that the issue is falling between different ministerial responsibilities. I am concerned that we do not have from the Government a clear view on the reason why the provision cannot be introduced, but I think that the case for it remains. It would be a great service for the committee to get under the bonnet of the issue to understand why it has not been introduced. On the face of it, such provision would be in line with the environment that the Scottish Government is trying to create, which is a welcoming environment for people in the asylum system as their claims are being processed. I do not understand why the scheme has not been extended.

At the end of the day we are talking about small numbers of people—fewer than 6,000—so, again, I do not understand, if there is not a budget reason, why the support has not been extended already.

The Convener: Thank you very much. I know that you are not here to give evidence, but I was going to ask a question about the number of people who might be involved, and you have answered it. I think that you have quantified that at around 6,000.

I suppose that the other potential reason, which you did not volunteer, is that this request has been blended in with other requests for extension to the scheme and, therefore, rather than moving on any, the Government moves on none, in case it is then used as the basis for an argument in another area of extension. I am not arguing that that would be the right thing to do, but I wonder whether that is also in the minds of people who have not taken this issue forward.

Mark Ruskell: That is an excellent point. The way in which the concessionary travel scheme has been established is that there is an evidence test for extensions of the scheme, with certain conditions that have to be met and certain qualities of evidence that need to be submitted. That would get into the guts of the reasons why the scheme has not been extended up to now.

The Government is currently engaged in a fair fares review that is looking at concessionary travel and fares across all public transport. I understand from the transport minister, who gave evidence to the Net Zero, Environment and Transport Committee this week, that that will be concluding next year.

Clearly, there are demands for the extension of concessionary travel—for example from people in island communities and from people who need companions to join them if they have a sight issue—but it would be useful to understand the context of how Government is looking at the extension of concessionary travel. In particular, zeroing in on why it has taken so long for the Government to come to a considered view and how this fits with a fair fares review would be a good place to go in terms of questioning and scrutiny.

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): It is a pleasure to be back in the committee and I am just here to commend and echo what my colleague Mr Ruskell said in this petition to you.

The genesis of the petition came from discussions with people seeking asylum in Glasgow over a number of years about some of the practical challenges that they face living in the city, particularly in the wake of the pandemic. There was a particularly harrowing anecdote that one of the gentlemen related about having an abscess in his gum. He had to get emergency dental treatment, but he could not afford the bus fare into town, so he had to walk 10 miles in the pouring rain in severe pain to go to get emergency dental treatment, because of his financial position as an asylum seeker. That struck me as a quite shocking scenario in a country such as ours. That moved me to ask them what would practically help make a difference and that is where the idea of extending the concessionary travel scheme came from, which subsequently led to a launch of our campaign in December 2021, in conjunction with the VOICES network and the Maryhill Integration Network.

The campaign has since attracted widespread support from across the asylum sector and continues to be championed by third sector colleagues, including those from Maryhill Integration Network, the Scottish Refugee Council, Friends of Scottish Settlers, JustRight Scotland and Grampian Regional Equality Council. People seeking asylum do not have the right to work—that is the critical issue—and they instead rely on a financial allowance from the Home Office to cover the basic costs of living. That allowance is not inflation proofed and amounts to around £6 per day, and for those living in hotel accommodation, which is an increasing number, it can be

as little as £1.36 a day, so they have very limited freedom to move and undertake any real life.

In Glasgow, the cost of an all-day bus ticket is £5. In effect, that means that not just recreational activity or social activity but travel to essential medical, social, legal or Home Office appointments, which often come at short notice, is simply not an option for many people seeking asylum in Glasgow and elsewhere in Scotland, unless they forgo food or other essentials, which has severe impacts. I have had testimony from mothers caring for young children, for example, who have gone without food to make sure that their child got basic nutrition because they had to attend a Home Office appointment under threat of deportation. There are severe psychological implications there as well.

Due to the cost pressures, asylum accommodation is often situated in isolated, peripheral parts of the city and an unaffordable public transport system, which does not function, is ultimately compounding that isolation for many people seeking asylum in Scotland today.

Free bus travel is one relatively small practical intervention that we could make that would allow people to integrate, explore their new surroundings, their new communities and their new country, and I have been proud to amplify this proposal in partnership with constituents and colleagues in the third sector.

I have mentioned previously some of the organisations working with people seeking asylum that have spearheaded this campaign since its launch in 2021, but it is important also to reference that this policy has support from across civil society. Indeed, all faith leaders in the Scottish religious leaders forum have signed an open letter in support of the proposal, and it has also been recommended by the Mental Health Foundation Scotland and the Poverty Alliance.

From a parliamentary perspective, it has been fantastic to work with cross-party colleagues such as Mr Ruskell and Mr Doris, the MSP for Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn, to engage with the Scottish Government on this ask, both in writing and in meetings with successive transport ministers and Transport Scotland.

I have also met Shona Robison MSP in her previous role as Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, Housing and Local Government and Neil Gray MSP in his previous role as Minister for Culture, Europe and International Development with special responsibility for refugees, both of whom saw merit in the proposals and undertook to explore them further. To that end, in the programme for government 2022-23 the Government committed to work with third sector partners and councils across Scotland to consider how best to provide free bus travel for people seeking asylum. Since then, a pilot has been run in Glasgow, but there has not really been any further update or any mention of further work or extrapolation of that pilot in this year's programme for government. That is extremely disappointing to those of us who have worked on this project for almost two years.

To that end, I encourage colleagues on the committee to keep the petition open and to invite witnesses who are affected by this—those personally seeking asylum—to speak to the impact that this policy would have on their lives and their current situations. That could inform future correspondence from the committee to the

Government regarding this proposal and perhaps create greater impetus to move forward with it. Thank you very much.

The Convener: Thank you very much, Mr Sweeney. Did you recognise the 6,000 figure? Did that seem familiar to you?

Paul Sweeney: The number of people seeking asylum in the country at any one time varies, but it is broadly around 6,000. We have done some rough cost estimates and there is a very marginal cost to the public, given the wider benefits that this proposal would realise for people's wellbeing, social interaction and so on. It is a very small percentage of the cost of the existing concessionary travel scheme. It is quite a marginal increase in the overall provision. I think that the Government mentioned in its correspondence that around a third of people seeking asylum currently would qualify under the existing schemes for young people, disabled people and over-60s, so we are really just filling in that gap of people of working age.

The Convener: I think that this is an important petition that has quite a specific and deliverable ask. Do colleagues have any thoughts, having heard from Mr Ruskell and Mr Sweeney?

Foyso Choudhury: I would say that we should get third sector organisations involved as well, because a lot of people do not have direct access to the Scottish Refugee Council. We should get the third sector and other communities involved.

The Convener: Who specifically might we contact?

Foyso Choudhury: The smaller organisations. In Edinburgh, you have the Council of Ethnic Minority Voluntary Sector Organisations—Scotland.

Maurice Golden: The starting point might be to write to the Scottish Government in order to understand its assessment of this proposal, the associated costs and the numbers involved—that is probably important, although we have heard estimates today. We should ask for an update on the options that it is exploring on this issue. Thereafter, it might be worth considering whether further evidence is required in writing or in person.

The Convener: We might also ask specifically the Scottish Government where the pilots have managed to get to and what the outcome was.

Are there any other organisations that we could write to in relation to all of this, or do we want to hear from the Government in the first instance? I think that there is merit in hearing from the Scottish Refugee Council and the Refugee Survival Trust.

I am minded that the Scottish Parliament's Conveners Group will be putting questions to the First Minister directly next week, and I wonder whether this might not be an issue on which I, on behalf of the petitioner, could put questions directly to the First Minister. That is something that we might consider, because the question session with the First Minister next week is on the programme for government. From everything that I have heard, I think that this fits in quite nicely with that, and it might be an opportunity to highlight the work of Mr Sweeney and Mr Ruskell as well.

The nice thing about the Conveners Group when you are convener of the petitions committee is that you are not raising something on behalf of any political party but are raising it on behalf of the petitioner. It would be an opportunity for the petition concerned to be put directly to the First Minister. It seems like something that might give the petition a little bit of impetus.

We will keep the petition open. We may take evidence subsequently, but let us see what progress we can make in the first instance. There seems to have been a measure of good will towards the proposal, but it seems from what Mr Ruskell said that, having got so far, it has then got into a basket of things where nothing then makes further progress.

Paul Sweeney: What we are looking for is an extension under a statutory instrument to the existing concessionary travel scheme. That would be the simplest and neatest solution. Certainly, rough and ready cost estimates suggest that it would cost around £500,000 per annum, so we are not talking about a substantial sum of money in the grand scheme of the Scottish Government's fiscal position. There is plenty of headroom to deliver this policy, but it has perhaps been confused with some of the pilots being done through third sector partners. Maybe the cleanest and neatest solution is to simply go with the statutory instrument.

The Convener: Thank you very much. I think that we are content.

Members *indicated agreement.*

Annexe C: Written submissions

Refugee Sanctuary Scotland submission of 15 October 2023

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

Refugee Sanctuary Scotland formally known as the Refugee Survival Trust

Thank you for allowing us the opportunity to comment on the above and provide information on our very successful 'Travel Choices' pilot scheme that we completed from January to July 2023. The Travel Choices project is funded by the Smarter Choices Smarter Places Open Fund which is Paths for All's programme to increase active and sustainable travel throughout Scotland. The programme is grant-funded by Transport Scotland. The fund aims to encourage people to change their behaviours; to drive less and to walk, wheel or cycle as part of their everyday short journeys or to use public transport for longer journeys. In this case, the purpose of the project was to give people who don't currently use bus travel on a regular basis, the opportunity to access bus transport.

The project had a number of aims:

1. To measure changes in the travel habits of the participants. In particular, to measure how frequently people travelled and whether people travelled further with the ticket.
2. To measure the impact having a travel pass had on people's lives.
3. To collect information about using a digital ticket as this is rapidly becoming the preferred ticket option for bus travel providers, with paper tickets gradually being withdrawn.
4. To collect information about the "customer experience" of being a regular bus user.

From the baseline survey we learned that 46% of the participants travelled by bus more than once per week, with 35% travelling once per day. 9% of people reported that they travelled monthly and just over 1% reported that they never used the buses.

The reasons for travel were varied, with 24% of people identifying appointments as the main reason for their journey. Shopping was also high on the list with 21% of people reporting this and 20% of people reported asylum case related matters as the reason for their journey. Other reasons included social appointments, taking part in volunteering or education, gym or sports, and for religious reasons.

When asked what stopped people travelling by bus more frequently, just under 77% of people said the cost of tickets was their major barrier.

The findings from the 12-week feedback form show a shift in travel habits.

At the end of the trial, 72% of people reported that they travelled more than once per day, with 17% travelling between 1 and 3 times per week. A further 11% reported they were travelling every day. No one reported that they had travelled less than this. The feedback shows that people were travelling more frequently with the travel pass.

Another change in travel habits was recorded. When asked if they were travelling more frequently, 92% of people said they were, while 88% of people reported they were also travelling longer distances.

Given that a large proportion of participants were parents, they were asked if they were travelling more as a family. 57% of parents responded yes to this with 43% responding no. Again, this potentially reflects the lack of take up on the Under 22 concession.

People reported that having the bus pass had had an overwhelmingly positive impact on their life.

There were many positive comments reported on the feedback forms reflecting the change impact on everyday life, freeing up funds (mainly to be spent on food) and freedom to travel and explore:

"I was able to attend appointments without problem".

"I could spend more money on food".

"It has a positive impact on my daily life".

"I travel every day, and this helps my mental health".

"Before I used to stay indoors all day. The ticket is a life saver".

"Having the ticket meant I could go to different places with my family and meet friends and it was easier to go to important appointments".

Using a digital ticket

The majority of people using the digital ticket reported no issues. Some people had issues setting up the app and purchasing tickets. This was particularly the case with the 3rd and final ticket as some people had forgotten the process. Only having a 4-week ticket was problematic for some and generated work for supporting partner organisations. Partners also reported difficulties when using the app in Arabic - there was no payment option. Some people reported being locked out of their account and needing to re-register.

Customer experience

Most people reported no issues with using the buses. There were some complaints about buses being late or cancelled and there were some examples of poor treatment on the buses, examples of this came out in the one-to-one interviews.

Please note that extracts from our Travel Report have been used in this document and we have permission from the participants to do so.

It is clear from the findings of the project that providing access to regular bus travel has an overwhelmingly positive of the lives of people who are ordinarily excluded from using public transport because it's unaffordable. The findings show that with the travel pass, people travelled more frequently, took longer journeys and travelled for different reasons. Having access to public transport supports the concept of "integration from day one" and enables people to do not just the things they need to do but opportunities to explore the place they are living.

Recommendations based our Report:

- Provide a longer lasting digital product.
- Extend the existing concession scheme.
- Promote existing concessions to the refugee community.
- Explore further how the voluntary sector can be involved.
- Ensure travel apps are language friendly.
- Improve customer service on buses.

If you would like to look at our report in full, please take a look at our [website](#). Thank you.

Transport Scotland submission of 24 October 2023

PE2028/D: 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.

Scottish Refugee Council submission of 6 February 2024

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

Scottish Refugee Council strongly supports the extension of free bus travel to people in the asylum support accommodation system in Scotland.

Those seeking refugee protection in the UK, who are in Scotland under the jurisdiction of the Home Office's asylum support accommodation arrangements, are in such as they have been assessed as otherwise destitute, triggering the duty on the Home Secretary to prevent that destitution under section 95 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999. It is important however, to comprehend the breadth and depth of restriction placed on those in this support and accommodation system.

Asylum accommodation is provided on a no-choice basis and increasingly commonly that means placement in institutional-type accommodation in the form of ex-hotels, barracks, or camps or even barges. In Glasgow mainly, approximately 5,000 individuals – we estimate one-quarter of which are children under 18 within families - are accommodated in residential-type accommodation within communities. The asylum support financial allowance for those persons is around £7 per day, well under even the Universal Credit Standard Allowance social security floor.

Across the rest of Scotland, approximately 1,400 asylum seekers are placed in one of 16 ex-hotels in use and 1 self-catering site, with one of these ex-hotels also being in Glasgow. These 17 institutional accommodation sites are in 13 towns or cities across 12 local authorities. Across all sites, the vast majority of residents are single people, mainly men. The average length of stay is typically 9 months to 1 year, but can be longer. Around 700 of the 1,400 residents are required to share bedrooms with unrelated adults. This proportion is likely to rise. Residents in these institutional sites get a mere £1.26 per day in the ex-hotels (if full board catered) and, as with those persons in residential-type accommodation, in the one self-catering institutional site receive £7 per day.

To compound this strictly enforced Home Office poverty, those seeking asylum are not permitted to work for at least the first 12 months after lodging their asylum application, after which if they have not yet had an initial decision they can apply for permission to work – which may not be granted but even if it is that is only to apply for positions on the UK Government's shortage occupation list.

All of these restrictions bear upon on people – already carrying significant trauma from fleeing persecution, war and human rights abuse, and loss and separation from loved ones – to drive mental health suffering. These needs are not adequately met in local mental health provision, not least as the UK Government provide no direct funding to local authorities and related key services notably health, in reflection that they have a responsibility to asylum seekers in their areas.

In summary, the current asylum support accommodation system is a place of severe restrictions, grinding poverty, no opportunity to work and have control over one's life and acute and widening mental health suffering for many. Underlying this systemic exclusion and disintegration is the chronic slowness in the asylum decisions system.

It is in that real-world context, that we strongly support the extension of free bus travel for those seeking asylum who are in Scotland, under the Home Office's asylum support accommodation system. It may have a genuinely transformative and positive effect on those enabled by access to free bus travel to become part of their communities rather than be consigned, as too often happens now, to social isolation and wasted potential.

Indeed, this state of affairs in the asylum system reflects why access to free bus travel is a social justice matter. Relatedly, we would like to see the lowest income communities across Scotland – those from Scotland and those new to the country – to have such access in reflection of that social justice imperative. That wider accessibility is a matter for Scottish Ministers, and we would support any move to enable access to the lowest income communities. However, on the matter in hand it is crystal clear from a humanitarian and social justice perspective that people entrapped by the Home Office in asylum support accommodation, both desperately need, and local pilots have demonstrated, the use and social, mental health and integration benefits from free bus access.

Therefore, we were delighted that the Scottish Government through Transport Scotland are actively exploring how to utilise £2million from the 2024/25 budget settlement to extend free bus travel for asylum seekers in Scotland, [as described in this news release](#).

We are part of the Transport Scotland-convened Working Group established to lead this exploration and we urge that the focus is now on what we describe as a **Dual Integrated** approach comprising:

- a) National policy pilot inclusive to all in Scotland aged 22-59 who are in the Home Office asylum support accommodation system. This national pilot should use the existing concessionary travel infrastructure and start as early from April 2024 as is possible in order that people have practicable access and enjoy the benefits of free bus travel; and
- b) That this national pilot is intrinsically connected to and directly informs legislative change to embed those on asylum support accommodation into Scotland's statutory concessionary travel scheme.

As touched on earlier, reflecting that access to free bus travel is a social justice matter we hope Scottish Ministers can also consider how the lowest income groups generally may be added to the statutory concessionary travel scheme. We recognise that lower income groups necessarily have to rely on public transport more than those with incomes sufficient to have their own car for example. Equally, we anticipate that such reliance would develop into greater use of bus travel if the lowest income groups were brought into the statutory concessionary travel scheme, including asylum seekers but not limited to them.

We hope all the bus operators including the larger private ones will regard such extension to asylum seekers and ultimately to other lowest income communities in Scotland as not only the right thing to do in principle, carrying multiple social, health and work and volunteering benefits for those made eligible, but also as a step that will not be damaging to business. Specifically, we anticipate that there is negligible

revenue loss for these bus operators, as asylum seekers especially are not “lost bus fares”. In so far as that is true, we do not envisage a strong argument for the bus companies to seek reimbursement from Scottish Government for any higher volume use from asylum seekers, as they are not common users of buses in the first place, given they get only £7 a day or if in institutional sites a tiny £1.26 per day. As we imply, we think that the worst outcome for the bus operators is negligible loss of revenue and, more likely no loss at all as there is no “lost bus fares” and, conversely receipt of £2million public subsidy. We note some of the private bus operators report significant profits. When contrasted with the restrictions placed on the lives of asylum seekers and the limited monies they receive, we hope swift agreement enabling free bus travel can be reached.

For further analysis of the [asylum support accommodation system](#), please refer to our [oral](#), [written](#) and wider [supplementary written](#) and [final supplementary evidence](#) to [The Human Rights of Asylum Seekers in Scotland inquiry report](#), which we fully associate with.