

Free bus travel for people seeking asylum, the experience in Aberdeen

Purpose

This document provides an overview of the experiences of implementing free bus passes for people seeking asylum in the UK. It includes information about a pilot scheme in Wales, and most importantly, the feedback and opinions of people seeking asylum in Aberdeen, the only locality in Scotland where a scheme for free local bus passes has been implemented for this group.

This paper aims to share more evidence about the use of free bus travel in Scotland in the context of a national campaign that calls for the Scottish Government to extend the Concessionary Travel Scheme to people seeking asylum throughout the country. We anticipate this report being useful for those considering the expansion of the scheme.

Context and evidence in the UK

In Scotland concessionary travel is provided to all people aged under 22, aged 60 and over, and to those eligible on the ground of disability, including people seeking asylum and refugees falling within any of these categories. Since 2021 MSPs and third sector organisations have been leading a campaign calling for free bus passes to be extended to people seeking asylum. The Scottish Government Programme for 2022-2023 outlines that work will be carried out with third sector organisations and local authorities to consider how best to provide free bus travel to people seeking asylum and refugees,ⁱ which would be in line with its New Scots Integration Strategy to enable integration for both refugees and people seeking asylum from day one of arrival.ⁱⁱ

In general terms people seeking asylum do not have the right to work, have No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) and are entitled to very limited financial support (£8 per week for those staying in contingency accommodation/hotels, and £40.85 per week in dispersal accommodation). In the context of the cost-of-living crisis, the campaign in Scotland and related research conducted by Poverty Alliance emphasises that free bus travel would enable access to services and key opportunities for integration, such as attending appointments with immigration services, a solicitor, accessing education and health services, among others. Crucially, it would also enable people to spend this financial entitlement on basic needs (e.g., food costs).ⁱⁱⁱ

Previous cases of free bus travel provision for people seeking asylum are few in the UK. In early 2022 a 3-month pilot scheme offering free bus and train passes for people seeking asylum was launched in Wales with the objective of gathering data and understanding specific travel needs. Wales is currently operating another temporary scheme to provide free bus and train travel to refugees.^{iv} Information shared by the Welsh Refugee Council states that over 1000 individuals took part in the 3-month scheme, and in terms of better enabling integration, the scheme was evaluated positively.^v

Context and evidence in Aberdeen

Since November 2021 Aberdeen, together with other localities in the central belt, has been receiving people seeking asylum who are being accommodated in hotels, which is detrimental to the mental health and community inclusion of vulnerable people. This move came with very little notice and no funding for the public or third sector as, until very recently, Glasgow was the only dispersal area in Scotland receiving people seeking asylum. Therefore, it has been a challenge to try to generate the infrastructure and capacity to address the needs of people seeking asylum in Aberdeen. However, one of the areas where temporary progress was achieved was in the provision of free local bus passes.

In June 2022, and after learning about the specific complexities of the situation of people seeking asylum in Aberdeen, First Bus Aberdeen introduced a weekly free bus pass, making Aberdeen the first local area in Scotland to implement this type of scheme. This offered the opportunity to travel free within the city limits to people seeking asylum. The process to issue the weekly paper pass only required an initial photograph and a weekly update of who required the pass, which was 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 of free local bus passes in Aberdeen, 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. The main findings are presented here.

Use of free local bus travel:

- In the survey, the vast majority of service users stated they had used the pass between 2 and 3 times per week, with 2 participants using it every day.
- Free bus passes were used mainly to attend English lessons, courses, socialising, and to enhance familiarity with the city. 6 participants highlighted that they also use the bus passes to attend medical appointments and that this is the only way to get to their appointments when there is an issue with other means of transportation (e.g., taxis that can be booked through MEARS) or they want to be more independent.

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| <i>"I can explore the city and is convenient in winter or when it's rainy".</i> | <i>"I visit friends, go to the dentist and sometimes the hospital".</i> |
| <i>"I use the pass to go to college, to the university, sometimes to dentist and for medical things, physiotherapy appointment".</i> | <i>"When I feel ill, I use it to go to hospital, far from here (contingency accommodation). The taxi is very good, but sometimes they don't arrive on time or don't come and it's</i> |

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| | <i>very important to use the bus passes, because this is the only option”.</i> |
| <i>“I use it to go to University because I am preparing an English test, and also when I need to fix my bike”.</i> | <i>“I go to Aberdeen University Library, visiting a friend, meeting people for outdoors activity, and volunteering”.</i> |

Evaluation of provision:

- All participants said they had a positive experience using the bus pass. Suggestions for improvement included a monthly renewal instead of every week and having the option of a digital pass instead of only paper to avoid issues with its distribution depending on one point of contact.

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| <i>“I am happy with this experience, especially because we were not able to pay for a ticket alone”.</i> | <i>“I think’s it’s quite easy to use, only (issue was) when (...) it expired, and I didn’t get the chance to pick it up before it expired. But in general, it was quite easy”.</i> |
| <i>“It was very helpful for me and allowed me to easy commute and do activities”.</i> | <i>“It would be good if we can access to the bus pass as an app”.</i> |
| <i>“It would be better if we can have a monthly pass”.</i> | <i>“We can carry out our duties with the bus”.</i> |

- The limits of only accessing local buses were also raised, highlighting the benefits that would come with extending the concession outside of Aberdeen.

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| <i>“I would like to visit my friends that don’t live here (Aberdeen), I would like to visit other places. It would be good if it is an app”.</i> | <i>“There’s nothing I don’t like about the bus, I hope we can use it for all of Scotland”.</i> | <i>“As the bus pass is only for one company, sometimes I can’t go to the places I want because I can’t use it in other buses”.</i> |
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Potential impact of free national bus travel:

- Participants expanded on the idea of how they would utilise a free bus pass to travel in Scotland, which would enable them to use their limited financial resources (currently £8 per week in contingency accommodation) to buy food over and above the food 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.

Participants also mentioned 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.

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| <p><i>“A national pass would help me a lot, unfortunately I don’t have enough money to buy tickets from the station, I only receive £8 per week, so it is necessity to use it, then I can save the £8 for only food and use the bus card for transportation, so it is very important for an asylum seeker”.</i></p> | <p><i>“(A national pass) would help someone that is studying, attending courses or events, short courses, for language or anything else. (...) You know sometimes when you are an asylum seeker everything stops, your life changes, and it’s kind of depressing, so leaving the place you are in for a long time could give you some hope”.</i></p> |
| <p><i>“I would be able to meet new friends, expanding relationships everywhere”.</i></p> | <p><i>“(A national bus pass would help me to) See Scotland, see cities, and my solicitor”.</i></p> |

Recommendations

- Extending the provision of local free bus passes for people seeking asylum in Aberdeen at least until the end of March 2023, when the winter ends. It is during this time of year that people will need the bus pass the most. In addition, people will start moving into dispersal accommodation (flats) at the end of 2022, as indicated by Home Office representatives. Some of these properties will be located far from the city centre and free bus travel will be key for people to become familiar with their new surroundings and adapt their routines.
- If extending the bus pass scheme is possible, GREC is keen to continue collaborating with First Bus Aberdeen to plan and monitor how the bus passes are used and the scheme’s impact, with the aim of providing evidence to the Scottish Government and Transport Scotland to add to their considerations on the extension of concessionary travel.
- Considering the expansion of the Concessionary Travel Scheme for people seeking asylum throughout Scotland, to enable meaningful integration from day one. Utilising the evidence provided by previous schemes will be key. Free bus transport would support addressing issues around accessibility to key services, especially considering the challenges that come with widening dispersal. In this line, any implementation at a national level should be organised in a centralised manner by the Scottish Government to enable an integrated and efficient travel system across the country, preventing further inequalities in access to this and other key services.

ⁱ Scottish Government. A stronger and more resilient Scotland: the Programme for Government 2022 to 2023, 6th September 2022. Available online: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/stronger-more-resilient-scotland-programme-government-2022-23/pages/3/>

ⁱⁱ Scottish Government. New Scots refugee integration strategy 2018-2022. Available online: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/new-scots-refugee-integration-strategy-2018-2022/pages/3/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Poverty Alliance. Transport and Child Poverty, Beyond the Pandemic, May 2021. Available online: <https://www.transport.gov.scot/media/49932/transport-and-child-poverty-beyond-the-pandemic.pdf>

^{iv} Key buses. Free travel for asylum seekers in Wales, January 2022. Available online: <https://www.keybuses.com/article/free-travel-asylum-seekers-wales>

Welsh Government. Free bus and train travel advice for refugees, September 2022. Available online: <https://gov.wales/free-bus-and-train-travel-advice-refugees>

^v Cross Party Group on Migration, Scottish Parliament, Twitter account, 4th October 2022. Available online: <https://twitter.com/CPGMigration/status/1577359113817833488/photo/1>