



'A Feeling of Freedom'

**The Unmet Transport Needs of
Refugees and People Seeking Asylum
in Scotland**

**Community Transport Association in
partnership with Mental Health Foundation**

October 2023

www.ctauk.org

Summary

Our partnership

We've been working at the [Community Transport Association](#) (CTA) in partnership with the [Mental Health Foundation](#) (MHF) to **better understand and improve the experiences of refugees and people seeking asylum of Scotland's transport system** by engaging with a total of 240 people with lived experience.

In Spring 2023, we convened a **focus group with 12 participants** in Glasgow.

In Summer/Autumn 2023, we conducted an **online survey with 228 respondents** from across Scotland.

Our findings

Most live in Glasgow – and rely on the bus

- 77% live in Glasgow
- 30% have refugee status
- 46% are seeking asylum
- 94% use the bus mostly, while 40% use train

"It's been a while since I used a train. There is a train station near my house, but often the lift isn't working, so I need to get a taxi."

Focus group participant

Access to public transport is an essential part of daily life – and an enabler of integration

- 2 in 3 rely on public transport to get to the shops to buy essentials
- 60% rely on public transport to attend social activities and gatherings
- Over half rely on public transport to attend legal and medical appointments or education

"The buses help us a lot to live: to go to the pharmacy, to the GP, to the appointments, to go shopping."

Focus group participant

Public transport is too expensive for many refugees and people seeking asylum – free bus travel will be transformative

- People seeking asylum have a fixed daily allowance of around £6
- A day ticket for bus operator in Glasgow is £5.40

- 84% of refugees and people seeking asylum in Scotland have been unable to use public transport due to ticket prices
- Nearly half cannot afford to use public transport all or almost all of the time
- 1 in 5 can only afford to use public transport in an emergency
- 2 in 3 stay have to stay at home if they cannot afford public transport
- We therefore welcome the Scottish Government’s announcement that it will invest £2m in free bus travel for people seeking asylum in Scotland

“[When I need to go somewhere] I don't buy food and don't eat and pay my money just on transportation.”

Online survey respondent

Access to public transport improves mental health and wellbeing

- 77% say free bus travel for people seeking asylum would have a positive impact on their mental health

“When I’m able to move by bus it gives me a feeling of freedom... I’m not allowed to work. [Free bus travel would] enable me to meet and talk with people and friends to speak about my problem or to ask for advice.”

Online survey respondent

Safety and trust are concerns

- 5% have had negative interactions with public transport staff
- 3% feel unsafe on public transport
- People of colour are more likely to face discrimination or harassment
- Almost everyone in our focus group had a story to share about being made to feel unwelcome on public transport – by fellow passengers, but also by drivers or conductors

“He [the bus driver] looked at me with hate. He didn't want me on the bus.”

Online survey respondent

Our recommendations

- **Extend free bus travel to people seeking asylum**
- **End discrimination, harassment and racism on public transport**
- **Improve the [New Scots Strategy](#)**
- **Listen to lived experience**
- **[‘One Network, One Ticket’](#)**
- **Improve communication and information**
- **Partner with Community Transport**

Context and Introduction

The [Community Transport Association](#) (CTA) is working in partnership with the [Mental Health Foundation](#) (MHF) to improve Scotland's transport system for people seeking asylum and refugees through research, community engagement and development and advocacy.

This briefing is a summary of:

- Our work to date;
- Our key findings from our engagement, outreach and research with refugees and people seeking asylum; and,
- Next steps and recommendations to meet the transport needs of refugees and people seeking asylum.

Who?

CTA is the voice of the Community Transport sector. We are a UK charity leading the movement for affordable, accessible and sustainable transport for all. We champion, connect and support local charities, community groups and social enterprises to deliver transport solutions to unmet transport needs on a non-profit basis in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. We deliver advice, advocacy, events, information, leadership, research, support and training.

MHF is the UK's leading charity for everyone's mental health. Our vision is for a world with good mental health for all. With prevention at the heart of what we do, we aim to find and address the sources of mental health problems so that people and communities can thrive. We drive change towards a mentally healthy society for all, and support communities, families and individuals to live mentally healthier lives, with a particular focus on those at greatest risk.

Why?

This partnership contributes to MHF's 'Elevate' programme and CTA's 'Introduction to Community Transport' programme.

The 'Elevate' programme amplifies the voices of refugees and people seeking asylum in decision-making processes across Scotland and works to increase the understanding of their lived experience within key public bodies and third-sector organisations. It is funded by the Scottish Government to ensure that one of the most marginalised groups in society is encouraged to contribute to the processes that help improve public services.

The programme aims to increase the representation of people from refugee or asylum seeker backgrounds in decision-making processes within transport, health and social care, education and policing across Scotland.

CTA's ['Mapping Scotland' project](#) identified significant gaps in Scotland's Community Transport network and many unmet needs in Scotland's transport system, including for refugees and people seeking asylum. Many refugees and people seeking asylum live in areas and neighbourhoods with

poor connectivity or a lack of affordable, accessible transport. Community Transport schemes also tend not to be active in, closely connected with or representative of these communities.

CTA is rolling out a new 'Intro to CT' programme to offer in-depth advice, guidance and support to groups, organisations and communities across Scotland through the process of developing and delivering new Community Transport projects and services to improve local transport options.

A priority for CTA and MHF is targeting resources and support at more marginalised and disadvantaged people and communities. As a flexible and grassroots solution, Community Transport can be tailored to meet the needs of refugees and people seeking asylum.

Case Study: Community Transport and Ukrainian Refugees in Edinburgh

Thousands of Ukrainians have arrived in Scotland since Russia's invasion in February 2022. 90% have entered through Edinburgh's Welcome Hub. The Edinburgh Community Transport Operators Group – an informal group of operators at Pilton Equalities Project, South Edinburgh Amenities Group, Handicabs Lothian, Lothian Community Transport Services and The Dove Centre – have been an essential part of this support, providing onward travel from Edinburgh Airport to their accommodation, as well as ongoing support with transport for those staying in the city.

How?

This briefing has been produced using qualitative and quantitative research methods to centre the lived experiences of refugees and people seeking asylum and to gather robust data.

In March 2023, a 3-hour focus group was led by CTA and hosted by MHF in Glasgow, where Scotland's refugee and people seeking asylum population is largely concentrated. There were 12 participants. They were self-selecting and represented a broad range of the local population with a diversity of age, gender and national origin. Some also had a disability, a mobility need or a long-term health condition.

Potential barriers to participation were identified at the outset. For most, the financial cost of travel to attend in-person events would be prohibitive. For some, English may not be their first language. For others, they may lack trust in an unfamiliar process.

The engagement process was designed and resourced jointly by CTA and MHF to remove these barriers to participation. All travel expenses were reimbursed. It was scheduled to avoid clashes with community activities and during school hours to enable parents to attend. Bilingual and multilingual Sessional Workers from MHF were on hand to assist with language where needed. Invites were extended through Sessional Workers, who are all from refugee backgrounds and are trusted members of the community.

Between late Summer and early Autumn 2023, an online survey was created to gather quantitative data and further understand the lived experiences of refugees and people seeking asylum across Scotland. The survey was created, distributed and collated by the Mental Health Foundation.

There was a total of 228 responses. Over three-quarters were from individuals based in Glasgow (see Q2). Most respondents were either people seeking asylum (45.9%) or refugees (29.7%) (see Q5). Their ethnic background was most likely to be African (38.8%) or Arab (15.9%) (see Q6).

The data collected from the survey can be found throughout this briefing, alongside testimonials from respondents as well as focus group participants. Our thanks to the Mental Health Foundation.

Online survey respondents

| Q2 Which council area in Scotland do you live in? | | | |
|--|-------|----------------------------|------|
| <i>Aberdeen City</i> | 0.5% | <i>Midlothian</i> | 0.9% |
| <i>Aberdeenshire</i> | 1.4% | <i>Moray</i> | 0.0% |
| <i>Angus</i> | 0.0% | <i>Na h-Eileanan Siar</i> | 0.0% |
| <i>Argyll and Bute</i> | 2.7% | <i>North Ayrshire</i> | 0.0% |
| <i>Clackmannanshire</i> | 0.9% | <i>North Lanarkshire</i> | 0.5% |
| <i>Dumfries and Galloway</i> | 0.0% | <i>Orkney</i> | 1.8% |
| <i>Dundee City</i> | 0.5% | <i>Perth and Kinross</i> | 0.0% |
| <i>East Ayrshire</i> | 0.0% | <i>Renfrewshire</i> | 0.0% |
| <i>East Dunbartonshire</i> | 0.5% | <i>Scottish Borders</i> | 3.2% |
| <i>East Lothian</i> | 0.5% | <i>Shetland Islands</i> | 0.0% |
| <i>Edinburgh City</i> | 2.3% | <i>South Ayrshire</i> | 0.0% |
| <i>Falkirk</i> | 0.0% | <i>South Lanarkshire</i> | 0.0% |
| <i>Fife</i> | 0.0% | <i>Stirling</i> | 1.8% |
| <i>Glasgow City</i> | 77.3% | <i>West Dunbartonshire</i> | 1.4% |
| <i>Highland</i> | 0.5% | <i>West Lothian</i> | 0.0% |
| <i>Inverclyde</i> | 0.9% | <i>Prefer not to say</i> | 0.0% |

| Q3 What is your gender? | |
|--------------------------------|-------|
| <i>Male</i> | 43.8% |
| <i>Female</i> | 54.3% |
| <i>Prefer not to say</i> | 1.4% |
| <i>Other</i> | 0.5% |

| Q4 What age are you? | | | |
|-----------------------------|-------|------------------------------|------|
| <i>12-17 years old</i> | 0.0% | <i>55-64 years old</i> | 4.1% |
| <i>18-24 years old</i> | 4.5% | <i>65-74 years old</i> | 0.9% |
| <i>25-34 years old</i> | 33.8% | <i>75 years old or older</i> | 0.0% |
| <i>35-44 years old</i> | 38.3% | <i>Prefer not to say</i> | 0.9% |
| <i>45-54 years old</i> | 17.6% | | |

| Q5 What is your immigration status? | | | |
|--|-------|--|------|
| <i>Refugee Status</i> | 29.7% | <i>Humanitarian Protection</i> | 5.4% |
| <i>Seeking asylum</i> | 45.9% | <i>Don't know</i> | 0.5% |
| <i>Resettlement visa</i> | 3.6% | <i>Prefer not to say</i> | 5.0% |
| <i>British Citizen from a refugee background</i> | 5.4% | <i>Other (e.g. Ukraine Sponsorship Scheme)</i> | 4.1% |
| <i>Resettlement (e.g. Afghan/Syrian)</i> | 0.5% | | |

| Q6 What is your ethnic background? | | | |
|---|-------|---|-------|
| White | 0.0% | Black/Black British | 1.4% |
| White Scottish English/Welsh/Northern Irish | 0.9% | African | 38.8% |
| White Irish | 0.0% | Caribbean | 0.0% |
| Gypsy or Irish Traveller | 0.0% | Any other Black/African/Caribbean background | 0.5% |
| Any Other White | 15.4% | Mixed or multiple ethnic group | 0.0% |
| Asian / Asian British | 0.0% | White and Black Caribbean | 0.0% |
| Indian | 1.4% | White and Black African | 0.5% |
| Pakistani | 6.1% | White and Asian | 2.3% |
| Bangladeshi | 0.0% | Any other Mixed or multiple ethnic background | 1.4% |
| Chinese | 0.0% | Arab | 15.9% |
| Any other Asian background | 7.5% | Other | 0.0% |
| Black / Black British, Caribbean or African | 0.0% | Prefer not to say | 7.9% |

Our Findings

The key themes which emerged from our engagement, outreach and research with refugees and people seeking asylum were i) reasons for travel; ii) transport modes; iii) affordability; iv) accessibility; and v) safety and trust.

Reasons for Travel

Refugees and people seeking asylum rely heavily on public transport to get to where they need to be. Few people within the community have access to a private car, because they cannot afford to own or use one or do not have a UK driving licence. Most have no option but to use public transport, especially for longer journeys where walking, wheeling or cycling is not a realistic alternative.

People who claim asylum in the UK are not normally allowed to work whilst their claim is being considered, preventing them from improving their financial situation through employment. The DVLA only issues licences to individuals who are 'lawfully resident' in the UK. This applies to all people who do not have 'leave to remain' (i.e. permission to stay in the UK) or 'leave to enter' (i.e. permission to enter the UK).

Meanwhile, the overall cost of motoring has increased by over 44% over the past decade, [according to the RAC Foundation](#), making private car ownership increasingly unaffordable for those on low incomes who are nonetheless eligible.

People seeking asylum and refugees are [more likely to experience](#) anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder. Many of the people seeking asylum we spoke to told us they experienced a sense of exclusion, isolation and loneliness when trying to settle in a new city and adjust to the culture of a new country. They closely associated public transport with rebuilding or rediscovering their dignity, freedom and self-confidence, because it gave them the opportunity to meet new people, build new support networks and travel independently.

Participants and respondents told us that they most commonly use public transport to:

- Visit local shops and high streets for groceries, prescriptions and other daily essentials;
- Attend important appointments (e.g. hospitals, lawyers, Home Office);
- Engage with local charities and community groups to secure advice and support;
- Get to school, college or university;
- Access vital public services (e.g. Citizens Advice Bureau, GP surgeries, libraries);
- Visit family, friends and other members of their community.

Many of those who could not afford public transport said they felt 'trapped' in their own homes or 'depressed' as a result. Their mental health and wellbeing suffered significantly from the restrictions their situation placed on their movement.

Accessible, affordable public transport is therefore critical to supporting the successful integration of refugees and people seeking asylum into Scottish society, as envisaged by the [New Scots Strategy](#).

| Q8 What do you use public transport for most regularly? (Select one or more) | | | |
|---|-------|---|-------|
| <i>Attending social activities</i> | 59.5% | <i>Taking my children to school</i> | 17.6% |
| <i>Attending medical appointments</i> | 57.7% | <i>To go on holiday / days out</i> | 21.2% |
| <i>Attending appointments with my caseworker / solicitor / lawyer</i> | 52.7% | <i>I don't regularly use public transport</i> | 3.2% |
| <i>Going to college / university</i> | 50.0% | <i>Other (e.g. church, mosque)</i> | 8.6% |
| <i>Going shopping for food, toiletries and other essentials</i> | 67.1% | | |

"I'm unable to access a car and can't afford taxis. I use public transport to go to work, shopping, hospitals, visiting friends and family."

Focus group participant

"Transport is really important for refugees. Especially for those who come to the country as asylum seekers, as they don't have the choice to have a car or take a taxi. We must use the bus, otherwise we have to walk."

Focus group participant

"Going out and meeting other people helps me to forget my trauma a little."

Online survey respondent

"The buses help us a lot to live: to go to the pharmacy, to the GP, to the appointments, to go shopping."

Focus group participant

Transport Modes

In Glasgow, focus group participants told us they largely used the city’s bus network to get around. Most live in neighbourhoods which are poorly connected to the rest of the city and have no train or subway stations nearby (see Q9).

Participants and respondents said that buses were more affordable than the alternative transport modes, but still often failed to meet their needs. Some said they were sometimes left with little choice but to use highly expensive taxis due to buses which are unreliable, infrequent or do not run early/late to make it on time to important appointments with caseworkers, doctors, solicitors and others.

Others said that they could not afford to use taxis in the event of cancelled bus services, which prevented them from accessing advice, information and support. This understandably left them feeling ‘anxious’ and ‘isolated’. The risk of closure of Glasgow’s night buses underlines these problems and the potential impact on more at-risk passengers.

Few participants had any knowledge of local Community Transport operators and the services which they provide across Glasgow. It emerged that some participants may be eligible for support or may live in areas which they serve. It was clear that there needs to be greater focus placed on raising awareness of the sector in the community, as well as for operators and policymakers to consider what greater role it could play in developing tailored services to address the unmet transport needs of people seeking asylum and refugees.

| Q9 What types of public transport do you use most regularly? (Select one or more) | | | | |
|--|-------|--|---|------|
| <i>Bus</i> | 94.1% | | <i>Ferry</i> | 3.2% |
| <i>Train</i> | 39.6% | | <i>I don't regularly use public transport</i> | 1.8% |
| <i>Subway</i> | 21.2% | | <i>Other</i> | 0.9% |
| <i>Tram</i> | 7.7% | | | |

“It’s been a while since I used a train. There is a train station near my house, but often the lift isn’t working, so I need to get a taxi.”

Focus group participant

“I use the bus because the stop is nearer my home and it's easier for me.”

Focus group participant

“[The nearest] bus stop is far from where we live. Yet we need to use these in winter and late at night, which can be horrible.”

Focus group participant

Affordability

The [New Scots Strategy](#) recognises that being able to enjoy full and independent lives will play a crucial part in supporting integration for refugees and people seeking asylum. Having reliable, safe and affordable transport will play a key part in this.

The UK Government provides people seeking asylum with an allowance of around £45 per week which is intended to cover the costs of food, other essential items and travel for the week. As people seeking asylum are prevented from working due to current UK Government asylum legislation, they rely on this fixed income to cover all of their living costs, including travel.

Glasgow’s bus network is operated and run by multiple private operators across the city – and each of these operators require separate types of tickets. Many focus group participants identified this as a barrier to being able to afford to use public transport regularly. Many compared their experience in Glasgow with other places they had lived, and recalled that even if they were short of money in other places, public transport was still affordable enough for them to get out to get to appointments, socialise and carry out other essential journeys. Participants stated that being able to access transport had a positive impact on their physical and mental health, but they felt limited in how often they were able to travel due to costs.

There is currently no concession scheme for people seeking asylum, who cannot work and rely on a fixed daily allowance of £6.40, which makes transport costs unaffordable. The typical day ticket for bus travel in Glasgow, for example, costs £5.40. Nearly 84% of respondents have been unable to use public transport due to cost (see Q9).

Free bus travel for people seeking asylum will remove the barrier of affordability and help to tackle isolation and loneliness in the community, which many focus group participants and online survey respondents cited (see Q16). We therefore welcome the Scottish Government’s announcement that it will invest £2m in free bus travel for people seeking asylum in Scotland.

| Q9 Have you ever been unable to use public transport because of the cost? | |
|--|-------|
| <i>Yes</i> | 83.8% |
| <i>No</i> | 11.7% |
| <i>Don't know</i> | 4.5% |

| Q10 Please tell us which of the following best describe your situation | |
|---|-------|
| <i>I am unable to use public transport because of its cost all or almost all of the time</i> | 49.2% |
| <i>I can only afford to use public transport in an emergency</i> | 19.3% |
| <i>I can only afford to use public transport once or twice a month</i> | 11.2% |
| <i>I can only afford to use public transport every two months or less often than that</i> | 0.5% |
| <i>I am able to use public transport more than once a month but prioritise other activities</i> | 19.8% |

| Q11 How have you dealt with being unable to afford public transport? (Select all that apply) | |
|---|-------|
| <i>Staying at home instead of going out</i> | 66.1% |
| <i>Walking to where I need to go</i> | 64.5% |
| <i>Cycling to where I need to go</i> | 7.5% |
| <i>Asking someone for a lift</i> | 10.2% |
| <i>Borrowing money from a friend or family member</i> | 27.4% |
| <i>Other</i> | 2.2% |

| Q16 Would being able to access free bus travel in Scotland have a positive impact on your mental health? | |
|---|-------|
| <i>Yes</i> | 76.8% |
| <i>No</i> | 10.8% |
| <i>Don't know</i> | 12.6% |

“When I’m able to move by bus it gives me a feeling of freedom... I’m not allowed to work. [Free bus travel would] enable me to meet and talk with people and friends to speak about my problem or to ask for advice.”

Online survey respondent

“[When I need to go somewhere] I don't buy food and don't eat and pay my money just on transportation.”

Online survey respondent

“[Free bus travel] would help me visit friends and go to social events more so I am less isolated. I would feel more confident in this country.”

Online survey respondent

“If I spend my money on the bus ticket, I don’t have enough for food. It’s too difficult to spend the money on the bus... Sometimes, I used to get the bus and sit all the way from my house to the last stop, because I’m lonely.”

Focus group participant

Accessibility

Across Scotland, the quality and frequency of public transport provision varies as much as the geographical landscape. Although Glasgow is Scotland’s most populous city and home to our only subway network, a dense suburban rail network and multiple bus operators, focus group participants living in the city still cited poor access to public transport as a barrier to being able to travel around the city and beyond.

This was raised as a particular concern regarding bus services. Participants told us there were few useful bus stops where they lived, existing bus services can be infrequent and timetable information at bus stops is often outdated or limited. While they are used to travelling using public transport, and understand how to use timetables and mobile apps, participants stated that they are still in areas they are getting to know – and having little access to accurate timetable information makes getting to know the area more difficult (see Q17).

Part of the reason for this, participants stated, is the combination of multiple competing bus operators in Glasgow, and a lack of support offered for people who don’t speak English as their first language. Many participants said that ticket prices, bus routes and timetable information can be difficult to find, and language barriers can make this more difficult.

Community Transport is just one element of Scotland’s complex, fragmented transport system. It is clear that the diversity of different operators, the lack of coordination of services and the lack of integration between transport modes are significant challenges for many passengers. Our research suggests that this is exacerbated for people seeking asylum and refugees.

| Q17 What changes would you like to see in public transport in Scotland? (Select all that apply) | |
|--|-------|
| <i>Polite, helpful and well-trained staff</i> | 35.6% |
| <i>Free bus travel for people seeking asylum</i> | 77.9% |
| <i>Cheaper public transport for everyone</i> | 64.9% |
| <i>Stricter rules for passenger behaviour</i> | 22.5% |
| <i>Transport running on time</i> | 37.4% |
| <i>Clean buses/trains</i> | 32.9% |
| <i>More regular services</i> | 27.5% |
| <i>Other</i> | 5.0% |

“When people arrive, they don’t know the system, where the bus stops are. They don’t speak the language.”
Focus group participant

“When I came to Glasgow I was struggling with the buses because there is a lot of companies... It’s a wee bit confusing.”
Focus group participant

“The bus driver doesn’t answer when you ask questions... Some drivers are very rude.”

Online survey respondent

“[Bus operators should] share clearer information about public transport and how they operate in the city.”

Focus group participant

Safety and Trust

Everyone should feel safe and happy when travelling by public transport. It should be a democratic and welcoming space which is open to all regardless of who they are or where they come from.

On the one hand, refugees and people seeking asylum in Scotland overwhelmingly feel safe on public transport and report positive experiences with staff, such as ticket office workers, bus drivers and conductors on trains or trams.

However, on the other hand, a lack of safety or trust was a recurring topic of conversation in our focus group and appears to be a major concern for a significant minority, especially for people of colour. 5% of online survey respondents have had negative or very negative interactions with public transport staff (see Q12). Meanwhile, 3% feel unsafe on public transport, typically due to anti-social behaviour or being targeted for discrimination, harassment or hate crimes by other passengers (see Q14).

Almost everyone in our focus group had a story to share about being made to feel unwelcome on public transport. Some said it negatively impacted their mental health and made them feel unwelcome not just on the bus or train, but in our country too, their new home.

While it was recognised that many bus drivers are friendly and helpful, they had other recollections of bus drivers who seemed to pre-judge or actively discriminate against them based on their race. Participants shared experiences of impatient, unhelpful drivers who weren't willing to give advice, information or support, even when they were asked for help.

Buses being delayed or cancelled – particularly late at night – was shared as a common occurrence by respondents, and means they have found they cannot trust or rely on buses. While understanding that some issues are unavoidable, the lack of support or awareness in what to do if the last bus doesn't show up highlighted issues around public safety.

Many respondents recalled feeling stranded in poorly lit areas and having to find their own way home through areas they didn't know late at night. This was a particular concern for women, older people and people of colour we spoke to. There are clearly inequalities in the safety of public transport based on age, ethnicity and gender.

| Q12 How have your interactions with staff on public transport been? | |
|--|-------|
| <i>Very positive</i> | 24.3% |
| <i>Positive</i> | 41.9% |
| <i>Not positive or negative</i> | 28.8% |
| <i>Negative</i> | 3.2% |
| <i>Very negative</i> | 1.8% |
| | |

| Q14 When you take public transport, how safe do you feel? | |
|--|-------|
| <i>Very safe</i> | 30.6% |
| <i>Safe</i> | 51.8% |

| | |
|--------------------------------|-------|
| <i>Neither safe nor unsafe</i> | 14.9% |
| <i>Unsafe</i> | 2.7% |
| <i>Very unsafe</i> | 0.0% |
| | |

"I have been exposed to racism more than once."

Online survey respondent

"When the bus driver says, 'Where do you want to go?', he only asks that to me. Why? Because of my hijab?"

Focus group participant

"I think it is very important for the bus drivers to get training, especially about racism and how to deal with people from BME or refugee communities."

Focus group participant

"He [the bus driver] looked at me with hate. He didn't want me on the bus."

Online survey respondent

"... But when you go on the bus, the driver looks at your face, and the attitude is as if 'here comes another one'."

Focus group participant

"While many of our service users find bus drivers helpful, a minority face racial harassment and discrimination – e.g. not stopping at bus stops for them, commenting on [their] clothing."

Local charity worker

Next Steps and Recommendations

1. Extend free bus travel to people seeking asylum

We welcome the Scottish Government's announcement that it will invest £2m to extend the concessionary bus pass – which offers free bus travel to people aged under 22 and over 60, as well as disabled people – to everyone in Scotland who is seeking asylum. Two-thirds of people seeking asylum are not eligible under existing criteria.

People seeking asylum cannot work and are forced to live on very small fixed income of around £6 per day. Our findings demonstrate that this makes public transport unaffordable for most refugees and asylum seekers. Many can rarely afford to go out to go to the shops, attend appointments or visit friends. They can feel lonely or trapped in their own homes. Some even report having to choose between eating and travelling. This is unacceptable in Scotland in 2023.

Free bus travel will be transformative for people seeking asylum. It will improve physical and mental health and wellbeing, facilitate integration and prevent missed appointments in health & social care. We therefore urge the Scottish Government to progress implementation at pace.

2. End discrimination, harassment and racism on public transport

Ending discrimination, harassment and racism on public transport by passengers and staff should be a shared priority for the British Transport Police, Transport Scotland, regional transport partnerships, local authorities, ScotRail and bus operators.

All passengers should feel safe on public transport. All public transport staff have a responsibility to keep passengers safe. Refugees and people seeking asylum should have faith that all public transport staff take this responsibility seriously and are pro-active in standing up for them.

All stakeholders should re-double their efforts to implement the [Hate Crime Charter](#) and commit to being anti-racist organisations. All public transport staff, especially those on the frontline such as bus drivers and ticket inspectors, should receive training on equity, diversity and inclusion. They should be empowered and trained to prevent anti-social behaviour and encouraged to support all passengers equally with empathy and patience.

3. Improve the New Scots Strategy

The Scottish Government's New Scots strategy has been widely recognised for its positive and progressive approach to 'building growing diverse and integrated communities in Scotland'. The next strategy, however, should do more to recognise and address the unmet transport needs of refugees and asylum seekers.

The current [New Scots Strategy \(2018–2022\)](#) does not identify transport as a major theme or priority area of action. Transport has not been a major focus of any of the projects it has funded. However, as our findings demonstrate, transport is an essential enabler of the integration of New Scots into our society, as well as a positive contributor to their physical and mental health and wellbeing.

A new and revised New Scots strategy should identify transport as a priority and commit to investing in projects which widen access to services and support and facilitate integration through accessible, affordable transport.

4. Listen to lived experience

Lived experience should shape transport policies and strategies in Scotland. Consultation exercises should reach beyond 'the usual suspects' and be pro-active in engaging with diverse people and communities. Building on MHF's 'Elevate' programme, there should be platforms for the voices of refugees and people seeking asylum to be heard to ensure their transport needs are met.

Transport Scotland, regional transport partnerships, local authorities, ScotRail and bus operators should work with local and national organisations who can facilitate or support accessible, inclusive and meaningful engagement with these communities.

5. 'One Network, One Ticket'

Our findings demonstrate that Scotland's complex, fragmented transport system is a significant barrier for refugees and people seeking asylum. Moving towards integrated multi-modal ticketing across public, shared and community transport services on the basis of the ['One Network, One Ticket'](#) principle would make travelling simpler and more attractive for everyone – including and especially for refugees and people seeking asylum.

6. Improve communication and information

Transport Scotland, regional transport partnerships, local authorities, ScotRail and bus operators should improve the provision of clear, concise and useful information about public transport services to ensure everyone has the tools they need to navigate our transport network smoothly and confidently. Wherever possible, information should also be made available in commonly spoken languages other than English.

7. Partner with Community Transport

Government, the public sector and the third or voluntary sector should partner with Community Transport operators to meet the transport needs of refugees and people seeking asylum.

Local Community Transport services support [diverse people and communities across Scotland](#) to access essential services through accessible, affordable transport. But there is more our sector can and should do through collaboration. Our findings demonstrate that refugees and asylum seekers have specific, and potentially unique, concerns and experiences.

CTA will work with our members and partners to explore how we can better meet their transport needs, including potentially through new projects and services.

Further information

If you'd like to learn more about this research, or discuss opportunities to partner with us to improve the lives of refugees and people seeking asylum in Scotland, we'd love to hear from you:

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