

First Minister
Scottish Government
St Andrew's House
Regent Road
Edinburgh
EH1 3DG

Dear First Minister,

29th August 2024

Withdrawal of free bus travel pilot for people seeking asylum

As refugee, faith based organisations, and public bodies across Scotland that provide advice, support and advocacy to people seeking asylum, we write to you regarding the Scottish Government decision to scrap the commitment to a free bus travel pilot scheme for people seeking asylum.

This news comes as a shock to all of us who have tirelessly provided information and campaigned to make this possible since December 2021 and it will have a significant negative impact on people seeking asylum in Scotland. For some, it was a last ray of hope under such difficult and hostile policies. This decision also represents a lost opportunity to continue leading the way and setting an example of innovation for other home nations.

We feel it is important to highlight that the timing of the announcement, taking place on the day of the launch of the New Scots Strategy and Delivery Plan, gives very mixed messages to those in the asylum system regarding the Scottish Government's commitment to welcoming people seeking safety in Scotland. It is devastating to receive this news when we and our members are joining the celebratory launch of the strategy where transport is a key element.

Transport is foundational to the health of our communities and people in the asylum system are part of those communities from the first day they arrive - as the New Scots Strategy emphasises.

We also share concerns that, given the recent far right movement and threats of violence, withdrawing this crucial support from some of our most marginalised communities will increase social isolation and do nothing to support community cohesion at a time when it is needed more than ever.

Impact

The effects of being denied access to transport do not go away if not addressed and are instead absorbed to intolerable degrees by people trying to rebuild their lives after persecution. The

Home Office continually refuses people in the asylum system the basic tools to integrate into local communities - not just to find support and relief but also to offer it. Especially for the increasing numbers of people being sent on a no-choice basis to accommodation outside of Glasgow, public transport is possibly the single most effective tool we have to ensure all other needs can be met and is one of the most efficient mechanisms for rights restoration and integration that exists.

It keeps people active doing things they love and building networks of support that they draw from and contribute to. It enables access to appropriate food, travel to language-learning opportunities, as well as important appointments with doctors, schools and solicitors. It enables volunteering, and permits guardians to accompany children to school, activities and medical appointments. It enables the third sector to assist more effectively, pooling resources and covering more ground. Members of established local communities across Scotland alongside the third sector (to the varying extent it exists in communities across Scotland) will continue to act in solidarity with community members in the asylum system because the wellbeing of those most vulnerable is the wellbeing of Scotland as a whole.

In this decision, the Scottish Government is abandoning them too because their efforts will not be enough and the longer people are denied what they need to live, the more members of our communities we will lose to despair. These are community members coming from countries like Syria, Eritrea, Sudan, Somalia, and Afghanistan - the vast majority of whom receive positive asylum decisions but not before their mental health is decimated by being rendered immobile for an indefinite period of time (usually many months, sometimes years).

“Treat us as human beings, not like robots.” MIN Voices member

“The cancellation of the bus pass really breaks my heart, and it is a big disappointment for me from the Scottish Government by increasing my mental health”.

Poverty

People in the asylum process cannot work, cannot access public funds and some live on as little as £1.36 per day. Public transport for those in enforced destitution is not a ‘nice-to-have offering for people who are having a hard time’ - it is a vital lifeline for Scotland’s communities. Transport is a key element for communication and integration.

Asylum seeking families and individuals are struggling to afford food, buy appropriate clothing, cover daily essentials, and public transport costs. This abject poverty has an inevitable negative impact and contributes to social isolation, poor mental and physical health, lack of opportunity, lack of integration, vulnerability to trafficking and exploitation and compounds the trauma already experienced. It furthers child poverty as children do not have access to the same services and opportunities as other children in Scotland which can leave them feeling isolated and cut off from services.

Our Ask

After agreeing to a national pilot, the Scottish Government has now said that we are, once again, on our own and that community and affinity groups, neighbours, friends and the third sector will be left to cobble together what we can to stem the tide of despair and it will not be enough. Removing access to mobility makes people vulnerable who otherwise have enormous potential to care for our communities and themselves.

The impact of this decision is incalculable after months and years of hard work to restore this right of movement. If people in the asylum system in Glasgow, with a wide ecosystem of support established over decades, need this desperately then it is clear that the need for transport for those outside the city is dire. The consequences of this situation will only become more severe in the coming months and years as more and more people are held without choice in contingency and dispersal accommodation outside of major cities.

Now that the pilot has been withdrawn, we need a commitment and a comprehensive roadmap to the restoration of public transport access to those who have been denied it.

As signatories, we are seeking answers to the following:

1. Is the Scottish Government still committed to providing free bus travel for people seeking asylum in Scotland and, if so, how does it plan to deliver it?
2. What consultation took place with stakeholders before the decision to cancel the national pilot and what are the concrete reasons which informed this decision?
3. What support is available to third sector organisations and local authorities to provide support with transport costs for people seeking asylum following the cancellation of the pilot?
4. Are there any other actions in the New Scots Refugee Integration Strategy Delivery Plan that will not be able to proceed for this financial year?

Yours sincerely,

Amma Birth Companions

Central Scotland Regional Equality Council

Chris Brawley - Community Links Practitioner

Co-Chair, Ali Hussnain, Scottish Ahlul Bayt Society

Community Infosource

Community Transport Association

Cranhill Development Trust

Dumfries & Galloway Trade Union Council (John Dennis Secretary)

East Kilbride Integration Network

ESOL Scotland

Faith in Community Scotland

forRefugees

FOSS (Friends of Scottish Settlers)

Freedom from Torture

Get Glasgow Moving

Glasgow Asylum Destitution Action Network

Govan Community Project

Grampian Regional Equality Council

Homeless Network Scotland

Imix

Institute of Social Policy, Housing and Equalities Research (I-SPHERE) Heriot-Watt University,
Edinburgh

JustRight Scotland

Maryhill Integration Network

Maslow's Community

Massive Outpouring of Love

Mental Health Foundation

North Glasgow Integration Network

Positive Action in Housing

Radio Buena Vida

RAMFEL

Refugee Sanctuary Scotland

Refugees at Home

Saheliya

Scottish Faiths Action for Refugees

Scottish Muslim Forum

Scottish Refugee Council

Simon Community Scotland

SOHTIS

South East Integration Network

The Methodist Church in Scotland

The VOICES Network

The Well Multi-Cultural Resource Centre

The William Gomes Podcast

United Reformed Church National Synod of Scotland

VoiceOver

Wellington Church INTERNATIONAL WELCOME CLUB

West of Scotland Regional Equality Council

Women's Support Project

Woodlands Community Development Trust

CC: Fiona Hyslop MSP, Cabinet Secretary for Transport, Shirley-Anne Somerville MSP, Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice and Kaukab Stewart MSP, Minister for Equalities.