



Briefing for Scottish Green Debate: Free Bus Travel for Asylum Seekers

9th October 2024

About the Poverty Alliance

The Poverty Alliance is Scotland's anti-poverty network. Together with our members, we influence policy and practice, support communities to challenge poverty, provide evidence through research and build public support for the solutions to tackle poverty. Our members include grassroots community groups, academics, large national NGOs, voluntary organisations, statutory organisations, trade unions, and faith groups.

Introduction

Accessible and affordable public transport is a public good that should be available to all, offering opportunities to raise household income and, as such, protecting people from being swept into poverty or pulled in deeper. **Reform to our public transport systems is therefore an integral part of tackling poverty.** It is a lever to easing the financial pressures on low-income households by unlocking employment and education opportunities and providing access to other vital services like healthcare. However, we have a public transport system which fails to live up to its potential to be a transformative anti-poverty tool. The impact of the failings in our public transport system is not felt equally.

People seeking asylum are among the most vulnerable groups in Scotland. 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. Yet, they are too often barred from using the public transport they need to access mandatory appointments, far less leisure activities, because of rising costs. That means that people are forced to make impossible spending choices. In a society that believes in justice and compassion, that's simply wrong. That is why we share the deep disappointment felt across the sector around the Scottish Government's decision to scrap its plans to introduce free bus travel for asylum seekers.

This decision represents both a broken promise and a betrayal of trust not only to one of the groups most marginalised in Scotland, but also to the campaigners and organisations who dedicated years of effort and experience into making this scheme a reality.

During Challenge Poverty Week 2023, one of our policy asks related to the extension of concessionary bus travel to asylum seekers and we were delighted when this ask was realised. We are therefore disappointed that during this year's Challenge Poverty Week we are once again having to call for this action. One of our key policy asks relate to the expansion of concessionary travel to under 25s, people in receipt of low-income and disability benefits, unpaid carers, students and modern apprentices, and asylum seekers.

Our Rights in Action Project

As part of our Rights in Action project,¹ we worked with community researchers from the Maryhill Integration Network to expose how the asylum process badly impacts the mental health of people in Glasgow.² Transport was one of the major causes, but could also be a potential means of mitigating some of the worst impacts of poverty including social isolation.

A key finding was that access to public transport is a significant barrier in engaging in activities to promote mental health and wellbeing. Central to this was access - or indeed the lack of access - to public transport. To engage with many activities that support mental health and wellbeing, people have to travel. One participant said that they *“didn't engage in any outdoor activities”* due in part to an inability to access transport.

Without adequate access to public transport, opportunities and activities cannot be enjoyed and this led to increases in loneliness and isolation. Furthermore, an inability to travel around the country - to see the place in which people now live - contributed to feelings of isolation and was a barrier to integration:

“It is very expensive, train ticket is very expensive now, and the buses service is very expensive now.”

Access to leisure and transport facilities represents a preventative social spending. As well as providing an increase in physical and mental wellbeing, it has the potential to reduce the need for access to primary health, and wider mental health services. Active transport was highlighted as being one area where positive impacts could be made, but one in which barriers persist.

¹ More information available here: <https://www.povertyalliance.org/rights-in-action/>

² The Poverty Alliance (2023) *“The life of Glasgow pigeons is more certain”: mental health and wellbeing amongst people navigating the asylum process.* Available at: <https://www.povertyalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Rights-in-Action-Final-Report-Mental-Health.pdf>

People in the asylum system that we work with had welcomed the decision to provide concessionary bus travel, and had hoped that this would function as a platform on which to build further changes which could improve their lives. It is therefore very disappointing that this commitment has been revoked.

Conclusion

This Challenge Poverty Week we are calling on the Scottish Government to take action to make sure everyone can get to where they need to go. We urge MSPs to support the motion to highlight the importance of progressing free bus travel for asylum seekers.

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