

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.