

Cross-Party Group on Migration

Date and Time: 04/10/22, 6pm

Minutes

Present

MSPs

- Bob Doris MSP
- Paul Sweeney MSP

- Mark Ruskell MSP

Invited guests:

- Andrea Cleaver, Chief Executive, Welsh Refugee Council
- Simon Suamu, Voices Network, British Red Cross
- Laura Robertson, Senior Research Officer, Poverty Alliance
- Sekou Louis, MIN Voices

Non-MSP Group Members:

- Andrew stevenson - transport scotland
- Erin Slaven, Research and Policy Officer
- Lorna Gredhill, Research and Office Manager
- Pinar Aksu - MIN
- Ishmail Yambasu - MIN
- Sekou Louis - MIN
- Abiola Aijiniran - MIN
- Mohammed Ashraf- MIN
- Abeer Abdalla - MIN
- Mohammed Almohammed- MIN
- Juliet Enoch - MIN
- Atta, MIN
- Doaa Abuamer - Voices Network
- Laura Robertson - Poverty Alliance
- Una lees - Glasgow Royal Infirmary
- Ellen McGeough Glasgow Royal Infirmary
- Jennifer Ang - Just Right Scotland
- Lawon adeniya individual

- Ahlam Souidi- freedom from torture
- Claudia palacios- Voices network
- Ahmad murad- voices network
- Asia Hart-Eason- Voices network
- Deeksha Pagar- Refugees for Justice
- Gilian Wilsion- CIS
- Mhd Hisham Alhindi- CIS
- Sabrina Galella - Just Right Dcotland
- Mursal Moor- Freedom From Torture
- Gladys NGWASANG- Freedom from Torture
- Isatou NDOW- Freedom from Torture
- Andrew stevenson
- Tandy nicole- (GCP)
- Aileen Harding-Asylum and refugee integration
- Jessica paterson-FOSS
- Sarah Steward- FOSS
- Pamela Correa Martinez- foss
- Mary Osei-Oppong
- Harriette campbell
- Ruth Ann McCalla
- Khadijah- MIN
- Bisida- MIN
- Cath McGee- Refugee survival Trust
- Emily Edwards- GCP
- Stella Kyalikunda
- Yvonne Blake- Migrants Organise for Rights & Empowerment
- Becky Macfarlane: Destitution action
- **Sarine chalmers- Church of scotland**
- Isaias Tsegay

Apologies:

- Traci Kirkland- Govan Community Project
- Savan Qadir- RFJ
- Alison Phillips

Welcome and Introduction

- Paul Sweeney MSP

Approval of Minutes of Previous Meeting

- Paul Sweeney MSP
- Seconded by Pinar Aksu

Agenda item 3

Andrea cleaver (Welsh Refugee Council): talked about the pilot project which ran from Jan-March 2022 in Wales, whose purpose was to understand the travel needs of asylum seekers. She highlighted that it is difficult for AS to travel on £40/wk

support provided by the home office and the project was to see how it will benefit them if travel was given. During the course of the three months, 1007 AS took part and was considered a success by everybody.

Things that went well was, increase in people taking part in education, increase in volunteering, integration activities, being able to attend appointments and every other thing that entails travel. This increased people's wellbeing, enabled them to socialise and take up opportunities that they otherwise couldn't. One client said 'having bus travel made them have a life worth living.'

People were able to come to us for tickets, tickets were given out on smartphones and hardcopy tickets for people that don't have access to digital means.

The project was in partnership with two other charities to increase the wage in order to market the tickets that were given for the project. In terms of the resources, there were table project assistants who purchased the ticket on behalf of the client and gave them out.

In terms of the unexpected benefits, because it was during the pandemic, people brought others concerns as well, a link was created to signpost people to other services and the complaint from our staff was that it was emotionally draining because they had clients breakdown in tears explaining things they were going through

The language barrier was a challenge, as a lot of people needed an interpreter. In terms of recommendations:

- Free travel passes should be organised by a centralised Scottish government. We don't recommend using individual agencies because it's not very cost effective..
- [Detail on the new free bus scheme for refugees in Wales, commenced in March 2022, running until March 2023 \(subject to review\)](#)

Simon(Voices Network): living in Scotland as an AS for over 16yrs, I know how difficult the asylum system is. Coming to this country from Congo, I struggled with the language barrier because I speak French, I lived in isolation because I couldn't communicate. I went all over the charities to enrol in ESOL. I have been part of Paul Sweeney's campaign for free bus travel for AS.

My asylum journey was a difficult one. I lived in Govan and had to travel to the city centre by foot because I couldn't pay for the bus. The home office gives us £5/day and imagine you have 3 appointments a week, how are you expected to survive? This has impacted negatively on my mental health. That is why we are campaigning for the Scottish government to do something about it.

Free bus travel will help integration, involve in voluntary work and will save the government money on dealing with mental health.

Laura(Poverty Alliance): speaking about the work we've been doin with AS & refugees, quoting from the research we had with transport scotland one of the people we spoke to said

- 'People in my situation get £5/ day, if you take £5/day and you spend £4.70 on the bus what is left for you? I can go to foodbanks but most food banks you go to that cater for the needs of a child? I think there should be a reduced transport fee or a reduced waver for AS but with £5/day the level of poverty amongst AS is huge and if you want them to integrate and enjoy glasgow and feel welcomed i think the scottish govt should look into that'

Transport is a key cost for people seeking asylum, it impacts on families not being able to access food and other essential items, it causes delays, anxiety. They two women shared their experience about not being able to volunteer, access services or amenities and the impact on both mental health and wellbeing.

Other issues raised were lack of integrated tickets for different bus companies or different forms of travel which leads to increased cost of living for people.

Our current research that was published today at poverty alliance on the impact of living crisis, some parents have shared their experience about increase in the cost of living and we at poverty alliance are deeply concerned about the AS because they got no access to support measure in the cost of living crisis, we highlighted the cost of living crisis and its impact on mental health. Links to the research:

- [Transport and Child Poverty Research, May 2021, Poverty Alliance for Transport Scotland – has a recommendation around concessionary travel](#)
- [Interim findings on women’s experience of the cost-of-living crisis, Poverty Alliance, October 2022](#)

Sekou(MIN Voices): I have been in the asylum system for 11years coming from Cote d'Ivoire. I have to go from Govan to Maryhill to see my solicitor. I was moved from Govan to Springburn, but still had to go to Govan to the reporting centre. I did that for a very long time and it was very difficult. I urge all the charities/organisations to support this campaign because it will make a huge difference. I've got a lot of qualifications, ranging from HND, BSc and MSc but I'm not allowed to work. I tried to enrol in school again to keep myself busy but there were no scholarships available. I had to go college to do courses I didn't want. It is really hard for us in the AS and I want the Scottish government to help us with this issue because people use bus passes to socialise, go for appointments and put the pressure away. We get £5.80p, if we pay for a bus pass £5 we will be only left with 80p which will not even buy a bottle of milk.

Jen (JustRight Scotland): We are preparing a legal briefing on the issues of providing free transport to asylum seekers in Scotland. We are currently looking at concerns that were raised in relation to the scheme. From a legal perspective it is entirely within the power of Scottish ministers to support a scheme like this. The way it will work is, we'll look at the proposal and different theories of how this can be done as Andrea has raised

As Andrea has raised, in terms of providing a fair and dignified approach, a centrally managed scheme can be operated within a legal framework and is probably a longer and more sustainable approach.

Humap(CIS): I have been in the asylum system for 7 months, I am a journalist. I volunteer with the community info source particularly the asylum seekers housing project (ASH) which helps AS with their housing issues. The issue of accessing public travel is as important as the housing issue because even with the best accommodation without travel it will be like a cell.

Sharing my experience, months ago I was given my dispersal accommodation 6 miles away from Glasgow city centre where I lived before for 3 months and formed a lot of friendships. It is difficult for me in my new accommodation because I am not able to travel and socialise with friends.

My problem was reduced after I took two volunteering roles, where my travel was paid for to and fro the office, I get £10/wk. I use these compensations to pay for my travel. But I am a single man, how about people with families?

Finally, I would say bus travel is as essential as food and healthcare.

Sabine (JRS)– Andrea, do you have a report you could share re your findings?

Cath McGee(RST) – what did the Welsh govt want to learn from the 3 month trial? It's great that concession travel is available for refugees but why the hesitancy over asylum seekers who arguably need it more?

Rebecca McFarlane – shocked by entitlement in the new scheme in Wales for refugees but not for asylum seekers – refugees are allowed to work and benefits but asylum seekers are in extreme poverty and those who are refused may be destitute.

Consideration on how travel expenses for asylum seeker health appointments are in place, but the reimbursement model is a challenge and free bus travel would make it more simple.

Andrea(WRC): The pilot project to see what the issues are. We discovered that because we ran it locally and as a group, there were different communities with different transport systems which was really confusing and not cost effective. This is why it needs to be government led and organised centrally, which was a good learning point for us. There is a plan for the AS program by the Welsh government, it hasn't gone away, it's just because there are more pressing issues, it's still in their agenda.

Mursal(CIS): the impacts of not having bus travel lead to poor mental health of AS, missing appointments, isolation, lack of integration, not being able to go to shops that provide food based on their religious needs. Integration is part of the new scott strategy if AS are not able to afford bus passes, how will they integrate.

Anne(VN): I am a media personality here in Glasgow, I have been in the AS for 5yrs now, i only got a free bus trip 3 months ago because my mental health was astatke and was under a lot of medication and therapy. It took one organisation a whole year of therapy, and it's through the challenge of not being able to get to my counselling sessions on time, that I got the bus pass.

To Jen, is there a way the free bus travel can be both digital and hardcopy because it comes with a stigma from people who don't see you with any disability yet you have a concessional travel pass

Ishmail(MIN Voices): If a free bus pass is given to AS it will improve either mental health and give them a livelihood they'll never forget.

Lawon: bus pass is just one issue of many that people seeking asylum are facing, AS in Aberdeen have free bus pass, why not glasgow.

Mark Ruskell MSP – very powerful testimony. Could we get an update on the Scottish Government's proposed scheme.

Jill McBride SRC - Concessionary travel is also a uniquely straightforward intervention open to the Scottish Govt. Asylum applicants cannot claim the Scottish Child payment or EMA, we've said in consultation responses that the Scottish Govt should explore sensitive equivalents to these that would not place their asylum support payments at risk. But these are complex considerations, concessionary travel is far more straightforward.

Andrew(Transport Scotland): As we all know there is a concession travel for people of a certain age or people with mobility issues. But this is totally up to the ministers to decide for asylum seekers. We spoke to organisations such as SRC, RST and MIN to see what we can do by way of a pilot, there seems to be a misunderstanding that if we do something quickly this can affect the campaign to change the concessional travel scheme, which is really not the case what we are trying to do is based on evidence. At the moment we are speaking to Refugee Survival Trust and we hope there will be a scheme available in the nearby future and it will be in Glasgow because that's where most asylum seekers are based.

Una lees: asylum seekers greatly suffer from poor mental health, for patients who get TB, there is a delay in investigations, diagnosis, treatment for patients who can't go for hospital appointments and there is evidence that this is the case for children, adults and any AS. Most investigations are not in the hospital, it's nearest to the

address, it depends on where the nearest appointment is and it's really a barrier to care if there is no access to free public transport which will make a huge difference to AS healthcare needs if that was provided.

Question : to Andrew can you clarify that it will be an initiative through a charity and for what period of time?

Andrew: we are discussing with RST because they have the expertise and we don't

Jessica (FOSS): let's remember people not in Glasgow who live on £8/week who live in hotels in Falkirk, East Kilbride, Perth who are much more isolated.

Ahmad(Voices Network): What evidence about asylum seekers are you referring to (Andrew)? Let also note that AS loses a lot here, all we are asking for is support.

Yvonne(MORE): Why do you need a pilot? These testimonies should suffice

Emily Edward(GCP): Someone at the beginning made the important link between widening dispersal (both to the outskirts of Glasgow and now more widely around Scotland) and the need for free travel. We hear every day the impact on people's mental health of being accommodated far from services/friends/organisations/education etc. This is only going to get worse with the new dispersal policies.

Claudia(Voices Network): as a single parent with lived experience only, I have two children and only one of them has free bus travel. We tried reaching out but, we were treated as nothing, there was no one to turn to, you only got referred from one site to another because as an asylum seeker you don't matter. We end up getting marginalised from society which is really unfair.

Bob Doris MSP: home should be home not a prison, I think there is really cross party support to make the free bus travel happen. Sometimes the process gets in the way of the outcome, as frustrating as it is, I am optimistic that there will be a good outcome. What the uk govt should be doing is making sure that those in the asylum have dignified and proper support, the fact that it has to be from either the welsh government or the Scottish government not the uk govt shows there's something not right

Mark Ruskell MSP: why will the project take 18months, what are the barriers will be in extending the existing relatively simple card system to another group of people who are vulnerable and desperately in need .

Jen(JRS): what should be considered is people in the AS have no NRPF and in Scotland there is no one prohibited from earning £50/wk aside from people with NRPF and if you want to create a scheme with low income threshold that also include people

on NRPF that is good. One thing that is not understood is how low the level of income is alongside the cost of living crisis. Not extending these schemes do put the government at risk on political grounds.

Yvonne: I cannot see why this is a difficult thing to implement, because the Scottish government has a child poverty target and if children are not able to go to explore how do they tend to achieve that?

Any Other Business and Close

Paul thanked the speakers and everyone for their contributions and announced that the next CPG on migration meeting will be the AGM before the end of the year. Date TBC. He then brought the meeting to a close.

