



“Travel Choices” Travel Project

Introduction

This report provides data and testimony of the experiences of 150 participants who took part in the Travel Choices 12-week free bus pass trial in Glasgow between January and July 2023. The trial was inspired by similar initiatives that have taken place in Aberdeen (1) and Wales (2), which provided an opportunity for people seeking asylum in those areas to access bus services for an extended period.

Through this report, we aim to add further evidence about the use of free bus travel and support the campaign that calls for the Scottish Government to extend the Concessionary Travel Scheme to people seeking asylum throughout the country. We hope the information contained in this report will be useful in deciding how best to proceed.

Until recently, Glasgow was Scotland’s only asylum dispersal city and still has the largest population in Scotland of people seeking asylum. Accommodation is dispersed throughout the city which creates a need for access to public transport as people need to travel to attend appointments and access services. There is a large network of support organisations including charities and faith-based groups delivering a range of services and support in Glasgow. Some of these organisations provide support with travel but for the most part, this has been in the form of day tickets and single journey tokens as there aren’t resources to provide longer term support. The aim of the project is to measure the benefits of providing more sustained support.

Public transport is prohibitively expensive for people seeking asylum as the majority are living solely off Home Office support which currently stands at £45 per week with those in contingency accommodation on much less. Additionally, people who are ARE-appeal rights exhausted have no income whatsoever. With a current day ticket in Glasgow costing £5.40, it’s clear to see how people seeking asylum struggle to access public transport on a regular basis.

“Travel Choices” Project

The Travel Choices project is funded by the Smarter Choices Smarter Places Open Fund which is Paths for All’s programme to increase active and sustainable travel throughout Scotland.

The programme is grant-funded by Transport Scotland. The fund aims to encourage people to change their behaviours; to drive less and to walk, wheel or cycle as part of their everyday short journeys or to use public transport for longer journeys. In this case, the purpose of the project was to give people who don't currently use bus travel on a regular basis, the opportunity to access bus transport.

The project had a number of aims:

1. To measure changes in the travel habits of the participants. In particular, to measure how frequently people travelled and whether people travelled further with the ticket.
2. To measure the impact having a travel pass had on people's lives.
3. To collect information about using a digital ticket as this is rapidly becoming the preferred ticket option for bus travel providers, with paper tickets gradually being withdrawn.
4. To collect information about the "customer experience" of being a regular bus user.

Details of project and methodology

The project recruited 150 participants from across Glasgow and provided each person with 12 weeks of continuous access to First Bus travel. First Bus was selected as the travel provider because it has the widest coverage over the city. First offered a generous discount on the digital tickets which enabled the project to work with 150 participants.

Participants were recruited via a number of partner organisations, including Central and West Integration Network, Govan Community Project, North Glasgow Integration Network, Cranhill Development Trust and the Asylum Seeker Housing Project. Referrals were also made by Safe in Scotland and Refugee Survival Trust. Working with community-based partners ensured a geographical spread of participants and enabled information about the trial to be communicated quickly.

After registration, participants were sent a questionnaire about their current travel habits. They were then issued with 2 x 4-week ticket codes to purchase their tickets. Information on how to download the First Bus app and how to purchase a ticket was made available in English, Urdu, Farsi, Swahili, Kurdish Sorani, French and Arabic. At the 6-week point, another questionnaire was sent out, after which the third and final 4-week ticket was issued. At the end of the trial, a final survey was completed along with one-to-one interviews with 20 participants. Partner organisations were also invited to give feedback.

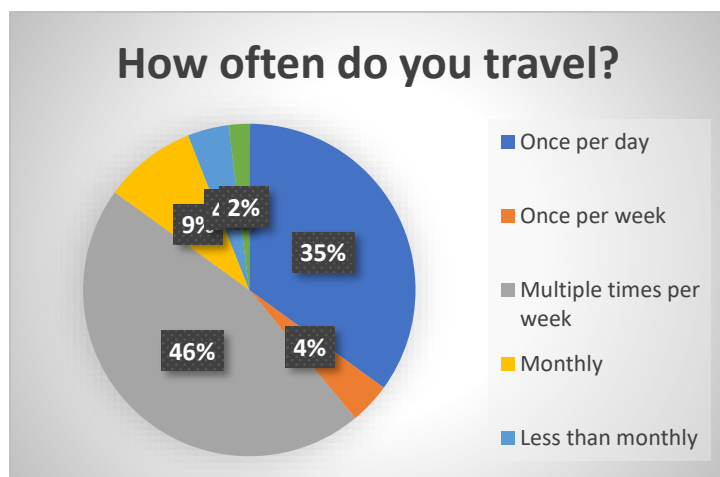
Participants

Of the 150 participants in the project, 54% were male and 46% female. The majority of participants fell into the 31-40 age bracket and 56% had children. The length of time people had been resident in the UK varied greatly from 3 months up to 20 years. Most people fell into the 1–2-year category. Income wise, the majority of participants, just under 68%, were in receipt of Home Office support which current stands at around £45 per person per week.

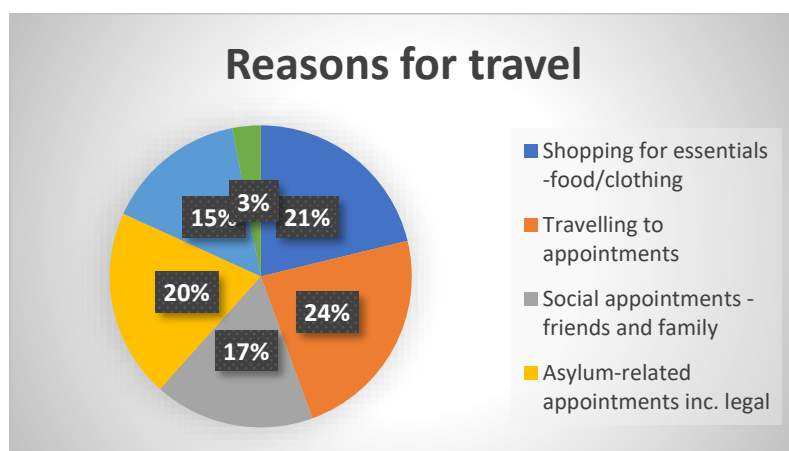
Baseline Survey

The week 1 or baseline survey asked questions about people's current travel habits, the reasons for people's journeys and what prevented them from using the bus service more frequently.

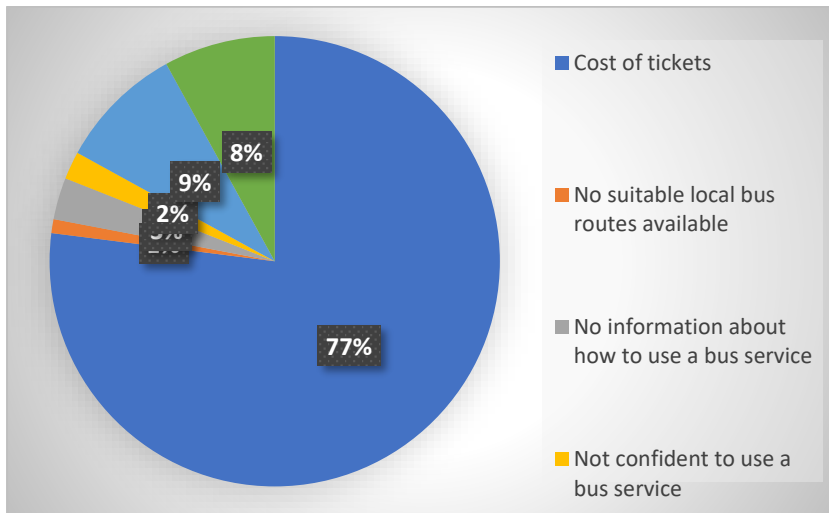
From the baseline survey we learned that 46% of the participants travelled by bus more than once per week with 35% travelling once per day. 9% of people reported that they travelled monthly and just over 1% reported that they never used the buses.



The reasons for travel were varied, with 24% of people identifying appointments as the main reason for their journey. Shopping was also high on the list with 21% of people reporting this and 20% of people reported asylum case related matters as the reason for their journey. Other reasons included social appointments, taking part in volunteering or education, gym or sports and for religious reasons.



When asked what stopped people travelling by bus more frequently, just under 77% of people said the cost of tickets was their major barrier.



Further comments on the baseline form included:

“Half my money goes on bus travel”.

“I want to use every day but can’t because too expensive.”

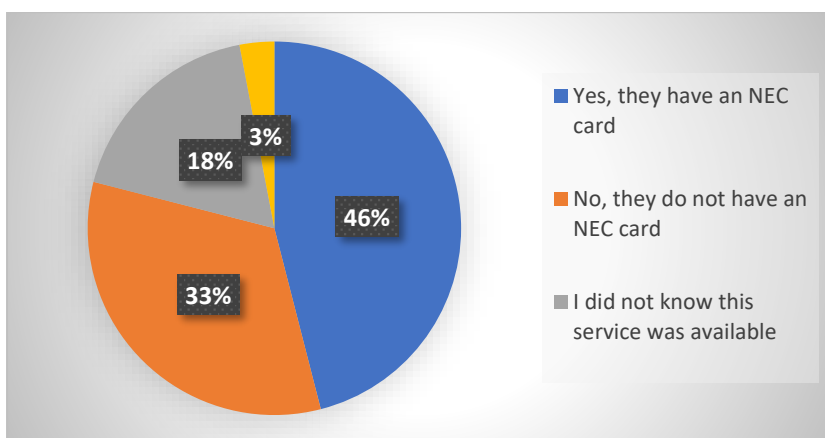
“I can walk but it takes more than one hour to get to my destination and back-it’s very tiring at times”.

“I don’t like to be staying at home because of depression”.

“The cost of tickets is a barrier”.

“As asylum seeker, it is not easy buying ticket for my trip. I am not allowed to work and we only depend on the support from home office. The support is not enough to cover our personal needs.”

Parents were also asked if their children had access to the Under 22 concession.



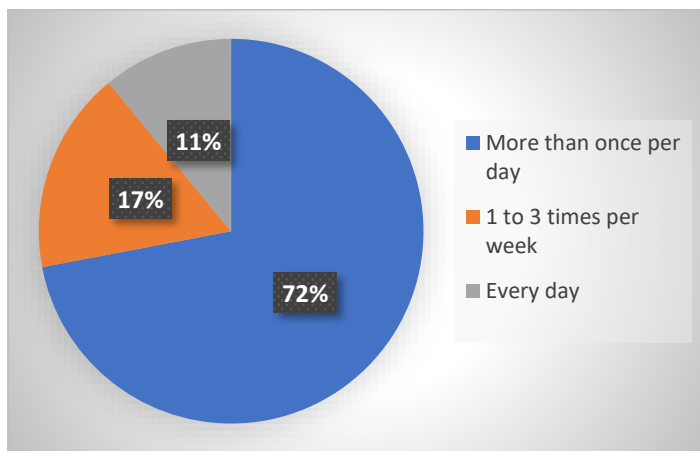
While 46% of respondents said they have the National Entitlement Card (NEC card) for their children, a large percentage reported that they didn't, with 18% reporting that they did not know about the scheme. A small percentage reported having problems accessing the card. From the findings it seems that there has been a lack of take up on this concession.

All the participants felt that the 12-week ticket would have a positive impact on their lives.

The first tranche of travel tickets was issued to participants from January 2023 and this continued on a gradual basis until all tickets had been distributed. At the end of the 12-week period, participants filled out a feedback survey to record their experiences.

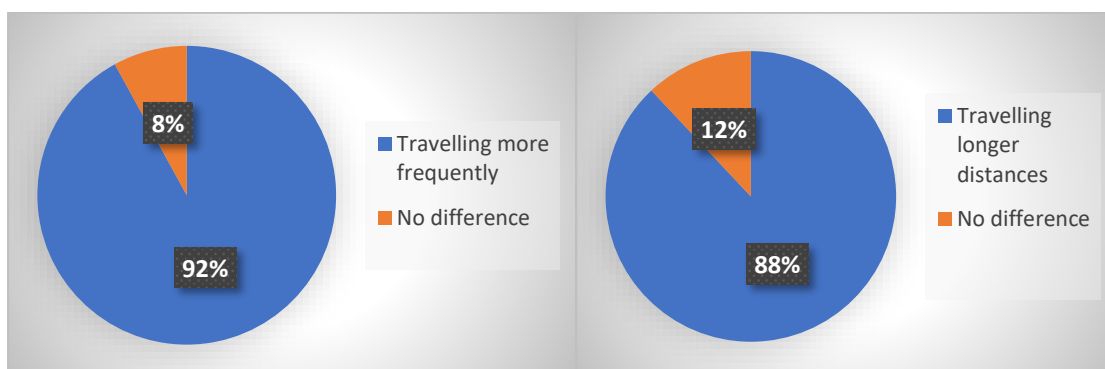
12-week feedback

The findings from the 12-week feedback form show a shift in travel habits.



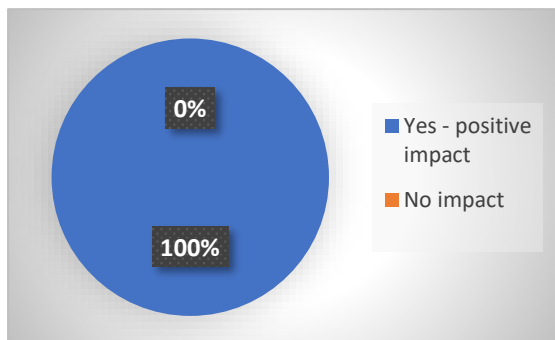
At the end of the trial, 72% of people reported that they travelled more than once per day, with 17% travelling between 1 and 3 times per week. A further 11% reported they were travelling every day. No one reported that they had travelled less than this. The feedback shows that people were travelling more frequently with the travel pass.

Another change in travel habits was recorded. When asked if they were travelling more frequently, 92% of people said they were while 8% of people reported they were also travelling longer distances.



Given that a large proportion of participants were parents, they were asked if they were travelling more as a family. 57% of parents responded yes to this with 43% responding no. Again, this potentially reflects the lack of take up on the Under 22 concession.

People reported that having the bus pass had had an overwhelmingly positive impact on their life.



There were many positive comments reported on the feedback forms reflecting the change impact on everyday life, freeing up funds (mainly to be spent on food) and freedom to travel and explore:

"I was able to attend appointments without problem".

"I could spend more money on food".

"It has a positive impact on my daily life".

"I travel every day, and this helps my mental health".

"Before I used to stay indoors all day. The ticket is a life saver".

"Having the ticket meant I could go to different places with my family and meet friends and it was easier to go to important appointments".

"I have suffered from depression in the past and two years ago was on medication for the condition. As a result I am aware of the signs that my mental health is in decline. The symptoms showed up when I had the Travel Pass and I single-handedly credit its availability for setting me back on the right path. I was able to travel to places like Hogganfield Loch for a walk and fresh air and to gather my thoughts. I used the pass on five consecutive days over that period, visiting friends, discovering new places in Greater Glasgow and within a week I felt fine. Solitude is different from loneliness. Although I was often alone on my travels, I wasn't lonely, thanks to the Travel Pass".

"The M-tickets made life easier for me. I don't have to worry when I need to travel to shops, socials and schooling."

"The ticket made my life easier moving around to many food banks and taking my son for after school clubs as the asylum support is little and could not enable me to get already and how I wish we could get another tickets please?"

"The ticket made me more Activate, for example I can visit a museum and a different area in the city and do exercise."

"I have cancer and I need to eat fresh food fruit and vegetables, I can't use food banks, so it survived me and I could pay my money to buy food not to buy tickets. Before that I had to pay money for transportation and I couldn't eat well."

"The ticket has helped me greatly before I used to stay indoors all day as I cannot afford travelling around it has reduced my boredom, feeling better as am currently on high blood pressure treatment the ticket is like a life saver ."

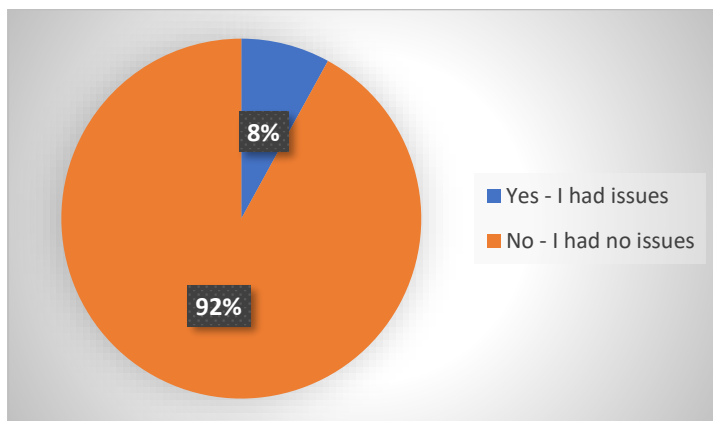
"While I was using free mticket it was easier to make plans with children. Otherwise I need to think look at the budget and mostly just got cancel activities. There was a mental relaxation that I can travel anytime within the city."

"I was able to socialise more and meet my friends. I was also able to just step out and discover the city, and most importantly i was much less worried about the implications of having to buy a bus ticket and it's effect on my finances."

"Ability to move around freely made me feel normal and less restricted. Also, meeting new people and learning about their cultures and taking part in social activities improved my mental health a great deal."

Using a digital ticket

The majority of people using the digital ticket reported no issues. Some people had issues setting up the app and purchasing tickets. This was particularly the case with the 3rd and final ticket as some people had forgotten the process. Only having a 4-week ticket was problematic for some and generated work for supporting partner organisations. Partners also reported difficulties when using the app in Arabic- there was no payment option. Some people reported being locked out of their account and needing to re-register.



Customer experience- most people reported no issues with using the buses. There were some complaints about buses being late or cancelled and there were some examples of poor treatment on the buses-examples of this came out in the one-to-one interviews.

One- to- one interviews feedback

At the end of the trial, 15 people were interviewed in depth about their experience using the 12-week ticket. Much of their feedback reiterated and extended the information that had come out from the feedback forms. Some had problems with the technical aspects but most participants found the app easy to use. A number of participants highlighted a few issues when interacting with the drivers:

“Some are not very nice – drivers. Another passenger paid for my ticket because the driver would not help.”

“No -they are not helpful. Saw lots of people with same issue. Not friendly. They need some training.”

“Bad experience with the bus driver previously but getting better. Makes a difference when the drivers smiles or welcomes you. You feel valued.”

Others highlighted that having the ticket mean that they had more food in the house.

“Saving lots of money -used the money for food for family. Big help.

“this trial made life easier for me – didn’t have to worry about money for transport and less stress. More money for food. Now I wake up in the morning and don’t know how I’ll get to my destination.”

“I would like free transport to make life easy. To afford to eat and travel.”

The positive impact on mental health was also emphasized:

Travelled everyday. I was very sociable in my country. Important for mental health.”

“Two things changed– mental health improved and I saved money. More available for activities with my son to watch him play football and able to use foodbanks. I am waiting for another trial as my mental health is already declining.”

One person mentioned that in Spain, free bus passes are available:

“Free for asylum seekers? If this can be done, the people in need would help. In Spain they get the free bus pass.”

And another that even half price travel would help

““Very good if they make concession for us, not free but half price. Price is too expensive. People would be very happy”.

Partner feedback

The partner organisations in the 12-week trial played a crucial role in promoting the project to people, registering them on the scheme and supporting them with downloading the app and purchasing tickets. Partners found that it was easy to recruit for the project and some were oversubscribed. People needed support to fill in the registration and feedback forms and others with downloading the app despite the information sheets. In some cases, participants needed to come to the partners office for one-to-one assistance which was time consuming and had some impact on partners' capacity to provide the ongoing support needed. As the tickets only lasted 4 weeks, partners reported that support had to be repeated as new tickets were uploaded each time. One partner pointed out that the First Bus ticket did not serve their area well (Govan) and that people couldn't use the ticket to reach their services. Other issues identified by partners was how the app did not work well with in Arabic. As one partner reported:

"The First Bus app has a bug; if a phone's interface is in another language (especially Arabic), the app does not show the "Enter your code here" field. That is easily fixed by changing the phone's interface back to English, but I had to guide users around this issue."

Overall, partners felt that it was worthwhile being part of the project due to the benefits it was bringing to people. People were "excited" to be part of the trial and feedback to partners what a positive difference having the ticket was having on their lives. As one partner reported:

"Positive experiences since they had a choice of going out at a time when they could instead of when they had a pass and do more than one activity which meant that they were rushed in going to buy food stuff at different locations of their choice and carry more heavy things. They were a bit of some financial alleviation and this meant that they could buy more food in the house than usual".

Another noted "People were getting to see areas of Glasgow they had not been to, visiting more services and travelling for additional community based ESOL classes. "

Some partners had reservations about whether they would have the capacity to support the project if it were on a larger scale given the rapid turnover of the tickets. For this reason, partner organisations thought that a concessionary pass would work better and would be more convenient for all. Comments feedback was:

"Yes definitely (to the concession), less complex for those who have low digital skills and language barriers. Digital tickets require devices to be charged, signal some devices may have low battery life need charged more often.

"Although the users might gain digital literacy with the current process, a concession card would be safer to use and carry around. "

Another partner reported:

"We are completely behind the idea an extension to the concessionary travel scheme and we think it is a better option than a digital ticket.

From an organisation perspective the time that we spend helping people access digital tickets is significant and this isn't work that sets people up for sustainable travel, we might

have to help the same people repeatedly do the same task. I imagine this is repeated across most organisations in Glasgow. Whereas applications for the Young Scot card do take some time, we know that that is a one-time piece of work setting people up and then it won't be repeated. "

Conclusion

It is clear from the findings of the project that providing access to regular bus travel has an overwhelmingly positive impact on the lives of people who are ordinarily excluded from using public transport because it's unaffordable. The findings show that with the travel pass, people travelled more frequently, took longer journeys and travelled for different reasons. Having access to public transport supports the concept of "integration from day one" and enables people to do not just the things they need to do opportunities to explore the place they are living.

It's not clear at this stage what the next steps will be regarding free public transport so we have made the following recommendations with this in mind.

Recommendations

1. **Provide a longer lasting digital product.** The digital ticket used in the Travel Choices project worked well for most people but had a number of limitations. Although most people did not have issues using the digital ticket, some people needed support with downloading the app and using the ticket codes to purchase the ticket. As the ticket only lasted 4 weeks, some people needed ongoing support to load the next ticket and the one after that. Ideally, a digital ticket that lasted longer and did not need to be renewed so frequently would work better. Project partners reported that the 4-week ticket generated additional work for their staff. If a digital ticket was used on a larger scale, it may create capacity issues for supporting organisations. It is also limited in its scope and would exclude anyone who did not have access to a smart phone. The tickets used in the Travel Choices project were limited to one bus company. While this suited most people, others in certain parts of Glasgow did not find the ticket so useful because their main bus service was provided by another company. If a digital ticket was rolled out nationwide, it would be difficult to ensure that this covered both urban and rural areas and enabled people to travel between the two.
2. **Extend the existing concession scheme.** Given the limitations of a ticket-based scheme, extending the concession may be the way forward. The advantage of extending the concessionary fares scheme is that it would have national coverage and would cover all travel companies and zones. It would not require the holder to have a smart phone or have to deal with digital technology. Another advantage to the concession is that there is one registration process. With asylum dispersal widening over the whole of Scotland, a concession card would enable people wherever they are living to travel as it would cover both urban and rural areas. The concession ticket would also allow people to travel further distances out with their local area, enabling people to visit their lawyer, attend further away appointments and explore Scotland.

There was a clear preference for an extension to the current concessionary scheme among project partners. The extension to the current concessionary scheme with all the advantages it brings would no doubt be in line with its New Scots Integration Strategy to enable integration for both refugees and people seeking asylum from day one of arrival. (3)

3. **Promote existing concessions to the refugee community.** The trial reflected a lack of take up of the U22 concession among refugee families as some parents were not aware of the scheme or had problems with the registration process. It's likely that some parents may not have been in the UK when the scheme was launched and may not know about it. This scheme and other existing concessions need to be promoted to refugee families and individuals. Also, if the travel concession is extended, it will be important to ensure that refugees are made aware of the scheme via widespread publicity and that support is put in place to assist with registration.
4. **Explore further how the voluntary sector can be involved.** Community based voluntary sector organisations played a key role in this trial. They raised awareness of the project, registered participants and supported individuals with issues they experienced. There were some capacity issues among partners but also a great deal of willingness to support the trial. There is potential for voluntary sector organisations to be involved in promoting a concessionary scheme and assisting with registration, but this would need to be resourced.
5. **Ensure travel apps are language friendly.** The project highlighted some issues with the travel app, particularly in relation to it being used in different languages. Digital travel apps should be reviewed to ensure they work successfully in different languages. It may be useful to run a focus group with app users in different languages to review how well the apps operate. Until such times as a ticket concession becomes available, digital apps should ensure they are language friendly and accessible to all.
6. **Improve customer service on buses.** Although most people had a positive experience using the buses, there were some examples of unacceptable behaviour. All people travelling on buses need to feel comfortable and safe. There is a need to ensure that people are welcomed on buses and assisted professionally when problems occur.

References

1. GREC Policy briefing: "Free bus travel for people seeking asylum, the experience in Aberdeen." December 2022
2. Welsh Government. Free bus and train travel advice for refugees, September 2022. Available online <https://gov.wales/free-bus-and-train-travel-advice-refugees>
3. <https://www.gov.scot/publications/new-scots-refugee-integration-strategy-2018-2022/pages/3/>