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Evaluation Report of Pilot of Free Bus Travel for People Seeking Asylum in Scotland

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Executive Summary

About the pilot

The Programme for Government 2025-26 included a commitment to deliver a £2 million national pilot for free bus travel for people seeking asylum in Scotland.

The pilot ran from 1 December 2025 to 31 March 2026 on a non-statutory basis. It provided nationwide free bus travel to people seeking asylum living in Scotland, including those accommodated under UK Government asylum dispersal policy. It was delivered using the National Entitlement Card (NEC) which is a smartcard issued by local authorities. Its primary function is as a bus pass for eligible groups.

Communication about the pilot was targeted towards those eligible, predominantly via third sector and community organisations, Mears (who are the Home Office accommodation provider in Scotland) and local authorities. Cards were issued by local authorities following an application process and applicants were required to provide a completed application form along with proof of their asylum status and identity which were subject to a verification process.

There were 3,972 cardholders by the end of the pilot, out of around 6,000 of people seeking asylum resident in Scotland. This is broadly in line with expected take up; an estimated one third of people seeking asylum located in Scotland are already eligible for the National Concessionary Travel Schemes (NCTS) for free bus travel by virtue of age or an eligible disability. Over 341,000 bus journeys were made by those who were issued cards.

Policy and pilot objectives

While asylum policy, including provision of asylum accommodation, is reserved to the UK Parliament and is the responsibility of the Home Office, the Scottish Government has responsibility for devolved services that many people seeking asylum living in Scotland need to access. These services include health, education, community integration, care and support of children, social care and legal support (including legal aid).

The policy objective of providing free bus travel to people seeking asylum in Scotland is to support integration and community cohesion by enabling greater participation in communities, and by improving access to devolved services, advancing the aims of the New Scots refugee integration strategy.

The pilot aimed to assess the extent to which providing free bus travel across Scotland to people seeking asylum supported this, as well as to provide detailed evidence and learning on the deliverability of possible future longer-term provision of free bus travel to people seeking asylum in Scotland.

About the evaluation

This evaluation was designed to assess the extent to which the pilot delivered these objectives. It comprised a survey and series of focus groups with cardholders; a survey and focus groups for organisations involved in the delivery of the pilot, including bus operators and third sector organisations; and analysis of secondary data showing pilot usage. The survey for individuals ran from 10 to 31 March 2026 and for organisations involved in delivering the pilot from 10 March to 14 April 2026.

Overall, 612 cardholders responded to the survey (a sample size of 15.4% of all cardholders), which was hosted online in English as well as the ten languages most frequently used by people seeking asylum in Scotland. Five focus groups were held in-person with cardholders to gather further information. These were hosted at support organisations people were familiar with. Fifty-five responses were received to the survey for organisations involved in pilot delivery and three focus groups were held online for these stakeholders.

The percentages presented in this report are based on the number of respondents that answered the relevant survey questions. The survey findings provide insight into the views and experiences of respondents but cannot be generalised to the full population of cardholders.

Key findings

The pilot provided strong evidence that long term provision of free bus travel to people seeking asylum in Scotland could contribute to meeting the intended policy objective of supporting integration and community cohesion by enabling greater participation in communities and facilitating access to devolved services.

The evaluation results indicate that the pilot positively contributed to integration and community cohesion. Ninety nine percent of respondents agreed that free bus travel helped them feel part of the community; this sentiment was echoed in focus group and stakeholder organisation feedback. Community participation increased significantly during the pilot. Seventy five percent of respondents were more likely to volunteer and 81% more likely to attend community activities or meet local people since getting their NEC. Respondents to the survey and focus group attendees reported significant improvements in their mental health and wellbeing during the

pilot. Ninety four percent of respondents agreed (16%) or strongly agreed (78%) with the statement “having free bus travel helps me feel less alone and isolated”. Ninety seven percent of respondents either agreed (13%) or strongly agreed (84%) with the statement “Having free bus travel has helped my mental health and wellbeing”.

The pilot demonstrated that the delivery of longer-term free bus travel to this group is likely to be operationally feasible. Positive feedback was received on the use of the NEC system and the support provided by local authorities and third sector organisations. Further consideration would need to be given to the resourcing of partner organisations and status verification of applicants in the design of any future provision.

Over the four-month pilot, a significant proportion (an estimated two thirds) of people eligible applied for access to free bus travel. In total there were 3,972 cardholders and 341,677 journeys taken, demonstrating demand for free bus travel among people seeking asylum. Overall satisfaction with the pilot was very high. In response to separate questions, 98% of survey respondents reported that they were satisfied with their experience and 94% stated they were very satisfied. The pilot may also have increased awareness of the statutory schemes but it is not known how many people applied as a result.

The findings also show that the pilot substantially improved access to essential devolved services. 93% of respondents agreed (15%) or strongly agreed (78%) that they were less likely to miss medical appointments and 94% agreed (14%) or strongly agreed (80%) that they were less likely to miss legal appointments due to having access to free bus travel. Access to education and training opportunities were also reported to have improved with 83% of survey respondents reporting they were more likely to attend English language classes or other education and training during the pilot period than prior to it starting.

Feedback highlighted the negative impact on participants mental health of the pilot ending. Some respondents expressed feelings of sadness and anxiety linked to the end of the scheme, with others noting that they felt their mental health would worsen at the end of the pilot as they would spend more time in their accommodation as a result of not being able to afford transport. The importance of clear and sensitive communication about any future arrangements was emphasised. There was strong consensus among respondents to both surveys and at focus groups for participants and stakeholder organisations of their view that longer term provision should be introduced.

About the pilot

Summary of pilot

The Scotland-wide pilot providing free bus travel to people seeking asylum ran from 1 December 2025 until the 31 March 2026.

It was designed based on the existing statutory NCTS which provide nationwide free bus travel to those 60 and over, under 22 or with an eligible disability. People seeking asylum in Scotland were issued with a time limited NEC which provided free travel on registered local and long-distance bus services throughout Scotland, at any time of day and for any number of journeys during the pilot period.

Participation by bus operators was on a voluntary basis with operators reimbursed at an agreed rate for each journey made by a cardholder. 125 bus operators agreed to participate in the pilot, though reimbursement claims indicate around half of this total carried passengers. This is likely to be due to the geographical spread of pilot participants.

To receive a NEC, people were required to provide proof of identity as well as their asylum status. The main form of proof of status was an Application Registration Card (ARC). These are issued by the Home Office to all people seeking asylum in the UK. If an ARC had not yet been received, the BAIL 201 letter was also accepted. This is an official document issued by the UK Home Office to individuals who have been granted immigration bail. People seeking asylum who were eligible for the existing NCTS, based on age or disability, were encouraged to apply for these schemes rather than the pilot but were permitted to apply for the pilot due to the simplified application process if they did not have all the necessary documents required to access the NCTS at the time of the pilot.

To reduce the administrative burden for local authorities, agreements with third sector organisations to act as Trusted Verifiers for applications were put in place where possible. These organisations checked eligibility documents and ensured application forms were filled in correctly before submitting them to the relevant local authority which would issue a NEC via the postal system. In most areas, local authorities also allowed people seeking asylum to apply to them directly and in these cases, the local authorities carried out the eligibility and verification checks. In Glasgow, where around 59% of the eligible population are housed, Trusted Verifiers checked eligibility and application forms for all applicants. Glasgow Life, an arms-length organisation which administers the Young Persons Free Bus Travel Scheme for Glasgow, was responsible only for issuing cards on behalf of Glasgow City

Council. In areas without Trusted Verifiers, local authorities were responsible for both eligibility checks and issuing cards.

Communications about the scheme were targeted towards those eligible, predominantly via third sector and community organisations, Mears (who are the Home Office accommodation provider in Scotland) and local authorities. Information was also available on the Transport Scotland website.

By the end of the pilot, there were 3,972 cardholders who had taken over 341,000 journeys. This resulted in £997,233 of reimbursement paid to bus operators for the four-month period.

This is broadly in line with expected take up; an estimated one third of people seeking asylum are already eligible for the NCTS for free bus travel based on age or disability.

Barriers to travel for people seeking asylum

Asylum policy is reserved to the UK Parliament and managed by the Home Office. The Scottish Government and local authorities are responsible for devolved matters for people seeking asylum who are living in Scotland while they await a decision from the Home Office. This includes health, education, community integration, care and support of children, social care, and legal services (including legal aid).

People seeking asylum do not have the same rights and entitlements as refugees due to restrictions under UK immigration legislation, rules and policy. Section 115 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 and paragraph 6 of the Immigration Rules establish the legal basis for the "no recourse to public funds" (NRPF) rule in the UK. The No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) condition, restricts access to benefits and support classed as public funds, including Universal Credit, the Scottish Welfare Fund and disability payments. People seeking asylum are generally restricted from working, except in limited circumstances if granted permission by the Home Office. Limited financial support from the Home Office is available to people seeking asylum only if they would otherwise be destitute while waiting for a decision on their asylum application. All decisions relating to the accommodation of people seeking asylum are made by the Home Office.

Transport affordability has frequently been identified as a significant challenge for many people seeking asylum, impacting their ability to access services and participate in community life (see [Travel Choices Pilot Evaluation Report](#); [Evaluation of the New Scots Refugee Integration Strategy](#); [Access to primary healthcare for asylum seekers and refugees: an umbrella review of key factors \(European Journal of Public Health\)](#) and [A Feeling of Freedom: The Unmet Transport Needs of](#)

[Refugees and People Seeking Asylum \(Community Transport Association, 2023\)\)](#).

Asylum support rates are calculated by the Home Office to cover essentials, including food (where not provided in accommodation), clothing, toiletries and travel costs and are applied uniformly across the UK, including Scotland. Currently the rates are £49.18 per person per week if living in self-catered accommodation and £9.95 per week if living in accommodation where meals are provided ([Asylum Support: What you'll get - GOV.UK](#)). The average single bus fare in Scotland varies from £2.20 in Edinburgh and Midlothian to £5.10 in Aberdeenshire and Moray. Depending on the location of services and accommodation, people may also be required to take multiple buses.

People seeking asylum in receipt of Home Office support are also usually issued with a HC2 certificate under the NHS Low Income Scheme ([NHS Inform, Healthcare for refugees and asylum seekers](#)). This certificate entitles people seeking asylum to help with eligible NHS health costs, including reimbursement of travel expenses to NHS hospital appointments and support with certain other costs such as dental treatment, sight tests, glasses and contact lenses. However, because travel costs must be paid in advance and claimed back afterwards, this support is not accessible to people who lack the financial resources to meet the initial cost of travel.

For over two decades, Glasgow was the only dispersal area in Scotland, accommodating around 10% of the total UK's dispersed asylum population. In 2022, the UK Government moved to a policy of full asylum dispersal, under which asylum accommodation could be procured in any local authority across the UK. While the majority of the Scotland-based population remains in Glasgow (around 59% as of 31 March 2026), 25 local authorities in Scotland are listed as having people seeking asylum accommodated in their area (excluding those receiving subsistence only) at the end of March 2026 ([Home Office, Local Authority Asylum Support Dataset, March 2026](#)). These areas can lack the specific support services required by people seeking asylum who may need to travel to the Glasgow area for access (see [New Scots Refugee Integration Strategy 2024: Engagement Analysis Report](#)). Outside of Glasgow and other urban areas it is also less likely that essential services will be within walking distance increasing reliance on public transport.

People in the asylum system are often relocated while awaiting a decision on their claim, with some experiencing multiple moves. This means they may need to register repeatedly with different GP surgeries throughout the asylum process or may remain registered with practices located outside their immediate local area. It also means that they may need to travel further to attend classes, activities or volunteering they are already participating in.

Policy and pilot objectives

The policy objective of providing free bus travel to people seeking asylum in Scotland is to support integration and community cohesion by enabling greater participation in communities, and by improving access to devolved services, advancing the aims of the New Scots refugee integration strategy.

The pilot aimed to assess the extent to which providing free bus travel across Scotland to people seeking asylum could support this as well as to provide detailed evidence and learning on the deliverability of possible future longer-term provision of free bus travel to people seeking asylum in Scotland.

Alignment with Scottish Government priorities

- The [New Scots refugee integration strategy](#) aims to support the integration of refugees, people seeking asylum and other forced migrants within Scotland's communities. Outcome 1 of the [Delivery Plan](#) is that New Scots live in safe, welcoming and inclusive communities and are able to build relationships and social connections. Outcome 2 is that New Scots can access services that meet their rights and needs. Accessible and affordable transport is essential to achieving both outcomes.
- The third [Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan](#) (2026-2031) was published in March 2026, setting out how the Scottish Government will drive further progress toward the eradication of child poverty. Providing free bus travel to people seeking asylum supports this objective by reducing transport costs for families and enabling people seeking asylum to use more of their limited income on essentials such as food, clothing and children's needs.
- By removing cost barriers to bus travel for people seeking asylum the provision of free bus travel should contribute to the [National Transport Strategy's](#) aims of promoting equality and delivering an inclusive transport system.
- Providing free bus travel to people seeking asylum could support the aims of [Scotland's Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy](#) by reducing social isolation, improving access to mental and physical health and wellbeing services and activities, and facilitating greater participation in communities.

Feedback from pilot scheme cardholders

Methodology for survey and focus groups of cardholders

An online survey was developed and distributed to participants via local authorities, Trusted Verifiers, Third Sector organisations and Mears. Respondents were advised that any feedback provided would be anonymised.

The survey was open for the final five weeks of the pilot. It was hosted online in English, as well as the ten most used languages among the population of people seeking asylum in Scotland - Amharic, Arabic, Dari, Farsi (Persian), Kurdish Sorani, Pashto, Somali, Tigrinya, Urdu and Vietnamese. The option to download, manually complete and return by email was available but was not taken up.

Alongside the survey, five focus groups were held with individual participants taking part in the pilot, to provide open forums for face-to-face discussion of how the pilot had operated and what effect it had on the lives of participants. Focus groups took place in Central Belt locations (Glasgow, Edinburgh and Falkirk) meaning that more rural areas and areas further North are underrepresented in this strand of feedback. A mix of genders, ages and circumstances were present with multiple languages spoken at each session, with translators in attendance in person or online as required. The focus groups were organised with support from third sector organisations who recruited participants by asking those in their networks who had registered for the pilot if they would be willing to attend. Transport Scotland provided interpreters but otherwise did not provide any support or incentive for participants to attend and did not pay expenses.

Participants sample

Survey results reflect the feedback of those who completed the survey or attended the focus groups and are not representative of the total population of cardholders or people seeking asylum in Scotland. Quotes from participants included in this report are from respondents to qualitative survey questions.

In total 612 responses were received although not every respondent provided an answer to each question. The number of responses to each question is noted within the commentary and tables (e.g. n=438). Multiple choice questions do not sum to the

total number of respondents. Finally, percentages reported throughout represent the valid percentage, i.e. the proportion of those who answered the question and gave a specific answer. Percentages have also been rounded to the nearest whole number so in some cases totals may not sum to 100%.

The number of responses was equivalent to 15% of the total cardholder population.

The geographical distribution of respondents (n=567) didn't match that of cardholders. For example, Edinburgh accounts for 18% of respondents but hosted only 6.4% of cardholders, while Glasgow accounts for 39.2% of respondents but hosted 45.7% of cardholders. A full breakdown is available at Annex A.

As the survey was designed primarily to be completed online, this may have introduced some bias in the results with those who do not/cannot access online sources less likely to participate.

The survey also included optional questions asking people seeking asylum to indicate their age group and how long they had been waiting for a decision on their asylum claim. 95% of respondents to the survey were between the ages of 22 and 59 with 4% under the age of 22. No respondents reported being over the age of 60.

Table 1 Age group of respondents

Age Group	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Under 22	25	4%
22-39	433	75%
40-59	116	20%
Total	574	100%

Table 2 How long have you been waiting for an asylum decision?

Duration	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Less than 3 months	63	13%
3 to 6 months	125	25%
6 to 12 months	121	24%
More than a year	193	38%
Total	502	100%

Overall satisfaction

Reported levels of overall satisfaction with the pilot were very high. 94% of respondents to the online survey reported that they were very satisfied with the overall experience with a further 4% indicating that they were fairly satisfied. Three out of 600 respondents (1%) indicated that they were very dissatisfied with their experience of the pilot.

Table 3 Overall, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with your experience of participating in the free bus travel pilot scheme?

Satisfaction	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Very satisfied	564	94%
Fairly satisfied	26	4%
Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	7	1%
Fairly dissatisfied	0	0%
Very dissatisfied	3	1%
Total (n)	600	100%

This finding was echoed in the qualitative survey feedback and by focus group participants, with the majority of respondents reporting they were satisfied with their experience of the pilot:

“Applying for the National Entitlement Card was a positive experience for me. The process was clear and not too difficult. It has reduced my financial stress and allowed me to be more independent and connected to my community. I believe this scheme is very important for people seeking asylum, and I hope the Scottish Government will continue and expand it in the future.”

[Survey respondent]

The majority of those who attended focus groups noted their desire to see the pilot extended or for a permanent scheme to be put in place. This was also a common response in the qualitative feedback sections of the online survey.

The application process and scheme administration

The simplified application process used for the pilot was well received by participants in the online survey and the focus groups.

65% of respondents reported finding the process of obtaining their NEC very easy or fairly easy, compared to 16% who found the process fairly or very difficult. Over half of respondents chose to answer the follow up qualitative survey question “Is there anything else you would like to tell us about your experience of applying for your National Entitlement Card?”. While two of these responses referenced delays, no others referenced any issue with the application process itself. The vast majority of respondents used the text box to call for an extension to free bus travel.

Table 48 Overall, how easy or difficult did you find the process to get your National Entitlement Card? (n = 600)

Difficulty Level	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Very easy	262	44%
Fairly easy	125	21%
Neither easy nor difficult	120	20%
Fairly difficult	36	6%
Very difficult	57	10%
Total (n)	600	100%

The majority of respondents (59%) found out about the pilot via a refugee support organisation or community group, with around one in ten (13%) hearing about the pilot from Mears, the Home Office accommodation provider, or by word of mouth (11%).

Table 5 How did you find out about the free bus travel pilot? (n = 601)

Organisation	Respondents	Percentage
A refugee support organisation or community group	353	59%
Accommodation provider (Mears)	77	13%
By word of mouth	65	11%
Local Council	40	7%
The Transport Scotland website	37	6%

Organisation	Respondents	Percentage
Other	16	3%
College or university	13	2%
Total (n)	601	100%

The majority of respondents indicated that they had received help with their applications. 60% had received help from support organisations or community groups while 17% had completed the application without any help. Qualitative feedback from focus group discussions indicated that support to complete the process was particularly welcomed by applicants whose main language was not English.

Table 6 Did anyone help you to complete your application, if so who helped? Please select all that apply (n = 596 but totals do not equal this because multiple could be selected)

Source of Support	Respondents	Percentage
A refugee support organisation or community group	358	60%
No one helped me/I completed it myself	101	17%
Local council	83	14%
A friend	33	6%
Accommodation provider	29	5%
College or university	18	3%
Other	8	1%
Total	630	106%

Respondents to the survey were positive about the role played by the Third Sector and local authority members in acting as Trusted Verifiers:

“I would like to thank the volunteers from South Ayrshire because they were the ones who told me about the pilot plan they would be carrying out, as well as the people in charge at the library who showed me how to fill out the form”.

[Survey respondent]

Similar feedback was received in focus group discussion. Feedback from those who attended was that overall, the process was straightforward and that the majority had received support with filling out the forms from volunteers and organisations.

It was reported both in survey feedback and at focus groups that some participants had experienced delays in receiving their NEC once the application form had been submitted. Survey responses indicated that in a few cases this had been several weeks and in two cases delays of months were reported.

Focus group discussion aligned with these findings and in addition, one participant reported that their card was delivered to a previous address. Some focus group participants had moved addresses between applying for and receiving their NEC, though feedback was that this was relatively easily resolved. Participants suggested that clearer guidance was needed about what should be done with the original card if a new card had to be applied for because the original one was not working.

Focus group participants spoke positively about the ease of using the NEC to travel by bus. This was echoed by most respondents to the survey, with 96% saying they found using the NEC to travel by bus either very or fairly easy.

Table 7 How easy or difficult did you find it to use your National Entitlement Card to travel? (n = 599)

Difficulty Level	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Very easy	503	84%
Fairly easy	69	12%
Neither easy nor difficult	18	3%
Fairly difficult	7	1%
Very difficult	2	<1%
Total (n)	599	100%

Experience of travelling by bus

Respondents to the survey were generally positive about their experience of travelling by bus during the pilot. Almost all (99%) of survey respondents said they thought the availability of buses was very good (90%) or fairly good (9%).

Table 8 What did you think of the availability of buses when using your National Entitlement Card? (n = 600)

Overall Rating	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Very good	537	90%
Fairly good	54	9%
Neither good nor poor	5	1%
Fairly poor	3	1%

Overall Rating	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Very poor	1	<1%
Total	600	100%

Survey respondents were overwhelmingly positive about the ease of communication with 95% saying they thought it was easy to understand and communicate with the driver when using their NEC.

Table 9 How easy did you find it to understand and communicate with the driver when using your National Entitlement Card? (n = 597)

Difficulty Level	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Very easy	469	79%
Fairly easy	93	16%
Neither easy nor difficult	34	6%
Fairly difficult	1	<1%
Very difficult	0	0%
Total	597	100%

Almost all (98%) respondents agreed with the statement “I feel safe travelling by bus in Scotland”.

Table 10 Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: I feel safe travelling by bus in Scotland (n = 596)

Level of Agreement	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Strongly agree	508	85%
Agree	77	13%
Neither agree nor disagree	9	2%
Disagree	0	0%
Strongly disagree	1	<1%
Don't know	1	<1%
Total	596	100%

In one focus group, participants noted concerns about safety when walking through their local town centre following regular protests in the area. They explained that access to bus travel had allowed them to travel to larger cities such as Glasgow and Edinburgh which they felt allowed for greater anonymity and meant they felt safer.

Purpose and frequency of travel

Respondents to the survey were asked to indicate the main purposes of their travel using the NEC during the pilot. The results show a wide range of travel purposes with usage particularly associated with travel to health or education services, to access legal advice and for reasons of faith. Medical appointments was the most predominant purpose for using the NEC (95%) with accessing legal advice (81%) and places of worship (81%) the next most prevalent. Under the “other” category, the most common reasons for travel were to take children to recreational activities (three respondents) and to go to work (four respondents).

Table 11 What are the main purposes for using your National Entitlement Card. Please choose all answers that apply (n = 540)

Purpose of Travel	Respondents	Percentage
Medical appointments	512	95%
Appointments with my solicitor or the Home Office	437	81%
Church, mosque or another place of worship	437	81%
English language classes or other education	411	76%
For shopping	393	73%
For social activities	388	72%
For volunteering	329	61%
For sports activities	284	53%
For visiting family and friends	161	30%
For Taking child/children to school or nursery	82	15%
Other	10	2%

When asked about their level of usage of free bus travel during the pilot, over half of survey respondents (53%) had used the NEC on a daily basis with a further 41% using it at least 2-3 times a week.

Table 12 How often do you use the National Entitlement Card to travel by bus? (n = 597)

Frequency of Travel	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Every day	319	53%
2 - 3 times a week	242	41%
Weekly	28	5%

Frequency of Travel	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Monthly	7	1%
Less than once a month	1	<1%
Never	0	0%
Total	597	100%

80% of respondents said that they travelled either more often (31%) or a lot more often (49%) since getting their NEC. These trends were reflected in focus group and qualitative survey feedback.

Table 13 How have your travel patterns changed since getting your National Entitlement Card? (n = 579)

Change in Travel Frequency	Number of Respondents	Percentage
I travel a lot more often	284	49%
I travel more often	178	31%
I travel about the same amount	96	17%
I travel less often	9	2%
I travel a lot less often	12	2%
Total	579	100%

Responses to the survey also confirmed a notable modal shift from walking and wheeling to bus as the main mode of transport for cardholders during the pilot. Respondents were asked about their main mode of travel before the pilot started and since the pilot had commenced. Prior to the pilot, 70% of respondents reported walking or wheeling as their main mode of transport, with 21% saying they mostly travelled by bus. During the pilot, levels of walking and wheeling as the main mode reduced to 9% and bus as the main mode of travel increased to 89%. Bicycle as the main mode reduced from 4% to 1% during the pilot.

Table 14 Main mode of travel before (n = 586) and during pilot (n = 591)

Mode of Travel	Before pilot (n = 586)	During pilot (n=591)
Walking/wheeling	70%	8%
Bus	21%	89%
Bicycle	4%	1%
Other	3%	1%
Train	1%	1%

Mode of Travel	Before pilot (n = 586)	During pilot (n=591)
Taxi	<1%	<1%
Subway	<1%	0%
Tram	<1%	0%
Total	100%	100%

The shift in the main mode of travel from walking/ wheeling to bus is significant in terms of increased access to services for cardholders. 47% of survey respondents said that they lived over 60 minutes' walk or wheel from legal advice and almost a third said that they lived over 30 minutes from the local food shop (29%) and their GP surgery (31%).

Table 15 How long would it normally take you to walk or wheel to the following services?

Duration	Local food shop (n = 573)	Child's school (n = 451)	Doctors Surgery (n = 541)
Less than 5 minutes	6%	2%	3%
5 - 15 minutes	17%	10%	12%
15 - 30 minutes	30%	17%	28%
30 - 60 minutes	29%	11%	31%
More than 60 minutes	13%	7%	13%
Not applicable to me	5%	54%	12%
Total	100%	100%	100%

Focus group feedback was in line with these findings. Two participants highlighted how they had previously cycled to access services, but this had limited how far they could travel and that bus travel allowed them to travel longer distances.

Access to devolved services

Respondents to the online survey were asked how access to free bus travel had impacted their access to key devolved services, with almost all (94%) of respondents agreeing that they were less likely to miss legal appointments during the pilot. Although people seeking asylum are eligible for legal aid, legal advisors with experience in this area of law are based predominantly in the larger cities, particularly Glasgow. This means that those located in other areas are likely to need to travel, in some cases long distances, to see their lawyer. This was reflected in the qualitative survey feedback:

“My lawyer in Glasgow wants me to attend appointments in his office, but I live in Aberdeen. The bus card means that I can go to Glasgow anytime.”

[Survey respondent]

“I am free to travel outside of my area where services are limited especially to see my lawyer in Glasgow.”

[Survey respondent]

Similarly, 93% of respondents agreed that they were less likely to miss medical appointments during the pilot. Focus groups attendees explained that travel costs are typically a significant barrier to being able to access medical appointments, making it very difficult to attend these appointments. This is particularly the case in areas where multiple bus journeys, and therefore multiple fares, are required to get to the appointment.

Table 16 Do you agree or disagree with the following statements? Since having access to free bus travel, I am less likely to miss legal appointments/medical appointments.

Level of Agreement	Legal appointments (n = 593)	Medical appointments (n = 592)
Strongly agree	80%	78%
Agree	14%	15%
Neither agree nor disagree	2%	3%
Disagree	1%	1%
Strongly disagree	0%	0%
Don't know	3%	3%
Total	100%	100%

Participants in all focus groups described how access to free bus travel had significantly improved their access to solicitor and GP appointments. Some participants reported having health issues (including arthritis, cancer, heart issues) that limits their mobility. They described how the pilot made it much easier for them to travel wherever they needed to, particularly for day-to-day travel including to education, healthcare, volunteering opportunities, and shopping.

Some participants explained that they would normally have to pay £5 for a bus ticket to get to GPs appointments and meetings with lawyers, which were located some distance from where they were living. This was stressful as they could not generally afford to travel by public transport.

Around eight in ten survey respondents (81%) indicated that they were more likely during the pilot to seek help and support needed which was outwith walking or wheeling distance, than before.

Table 17 Since getting your National Entitlement Card, are you more or less likely to seek support that you need, but is too far to walk/wheel to (e.g. doctor, lawyer, support organisation)? (n = 567)

Impact on Likelihood	Number of Respondents	Percentage
More likely than before	462	81%
About the same as before	31	5%
Less likely than before	23	4%
Don't know	24	4%
Not applicable	27	5%
Total	567	100%

Access to education, leisure and community opportunities

Analysis of survey responses and focus group feedback indicates that the pilot improved access to leisure and education for people seeking asylum and supported their integration into local communities.

83% of survey respondents said they were more likely to take English classes or other education and training opportunities during the pilot. 75% were more likely to volunteer in the community, with qualitative and focus group feedback indicating that this was often for the first time as a person seeking asylum in Scotland. 81% said they were more likely to meet local people and attend local events during the pilot.

Table 18 Since getting your National Entitlement Card, are you more or less likely to participate in education/training, volunteer, or meet local people/attend events?

Impact on Likelihood	English classes/other training (n=566)	Volunteer (n=557)	Meet Local People/ Attend Events (n=571)
More likely than before	83%	75%	81%
About the same as before	6%	7%	9%
Less likely than before	<1%	1%	1%
Don't know	1%	6%	4%

Impact on Likelihood	English classes/other training (n=566)	Volunteer (n=557)	Meet Local People/ Attend Events (n=571)
Not applicable	9%	11%	4%
Total	100%	100%	100%

The importance of improved access to these opportunities was highlighted in qualitative feedback to the survey:

“Thank you. It has helped me tremendously and I get to save money for my groceries and taking my mum to ESOL and volunteering. Also it helps when I attend university lectures. The bus fare is quite expensive to someone in my circumstances.”

[Survey respondent]

Cardholders also reported that the pilot had a positive effect on their sense of belonging in Scotland. Almost all respondents (99%) agreed that having access to free bus travel had made them feel like they were part of the community.

Table 19 Do you agree or disagree with the following statement? Having free bus travel helps me feel like part of the community

Level of Agreement	Number of Respondent	Percentage
Strongly agree	506	85%
Agree	83	14%
Neither agree nor disagree	5	1%
Disagree	1	<1%
Strongly disagree	0	0%
Don't know	2	<1%
Total	597	100%

This was also noted in qualitative survey feedback:

“I would like to thank you for your help.... [The National Entitlement Card] makes integration with Scottish society more effective, easier and quicker. I need the bus pass to attend the appointments and participate the events for the English classes, GP, lawyer,

conversation, shopping, praying, volunteering, meetings, festivals and maybe in next summer to discover Scotland later, if I could get it again.”

[Survey respondent]

“This card helps me a lot with my studies, participation, and volunteering. It motivates me to take action and achieve so I can integrate into society, get a job, and then become self-reliant.”

[Survey respondent]

Additionally, at each focus group participants said that their English skills had improved as a result of access to free bus travel during the pilot. It was explained that this was not just down to being able to attend English language classes but the increased involvement in volunteering and other social activities which provided further opportunities to practice speaking in English.

Some participants explained that they lived an hour’s bus journey away from their English classes. They noted that free bus travel had helped them to attend the classes regularly and meet others. One focus group participant said that after eight months in a location without travel options, the pilot had enabled them to attend English classes and take part in voluntary work.

Effect on finances

The majority of respondents to the survey indicated that the pilot had had a positive impact on their personal finances. 72% agreed with the statement “I have more money to spend on other items”.

Table 20 How have your personal finances changed since getting your National Entitlement Card?
 (n = 560)

Financial Impact	Respondents	Percentage
I have more money to spend on other items	402	72%
I have about the same money to spend on other items	83	15%
I have less money to spend on other items	75	13%
Total	560	100%

This was also reflected in qualitative feedback to the survey:

“It is a great help to those of us who are in the asylum process and are not allowed to work since the cost of transportation is very expensive.”

“I used to feel unwelcome in Scotland as I couldn’t afford taking my children out. This bus pass has been very very helpful especially in winter.”

[Survey respondent]

During the focus group sessions, participants explained that due to the multiple bus companies operating in and around the Glasgow area, without access to the free travel pilot they needed to purchase multiple day tickets for their journeys, as they would need to use services from different companies if they did not live in a central location. They estimated this could cost £11 or £12 a day.

Qualitative feedback and focus group discussion did not provide a definitive answer to why 28% of respondents to the survey answered that the pilot had not made a difference to their finances or had negatively impacted them. However, a recurring theme in both discussion and written feedback was that many participants felt confined and isolated in their accommodation before the pilot period because they could not afford bus travel and therefore were not spending money on bus travel:

“I found it very useful because I didn’t go out much before, as I didn’t have enough money for a day ticket. I haven’t been anywhere other than Glasgow, but it made it much easier to go to the supermarket and take my children to parks.”

[Survey respondent]

Mental health and wellbeing

Many refugees and people seeking asylum arrive in Scotland with mental health needs associated with the reason they have had to seek asylum. This includes gender-based violence, sexual violence, torture, experience of war and other inhumane treatment. The experience of seeking asylum, incidents of racism or prejudice and the challenge of understanding and exercising rights can also exacerbate or create mental health and wellbeing needs.

Evaluation participants reported improvements in their mental health and wellbeing as a result of the pilot. Almost all (97%) of survey respondents agreed that having free bus travel had helped their mental health and wellbeing.

Table 21 Having free bus travel has helped my mental health and wellbeing (n = 596)

Level of Agreement	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Strongly agree	501	84%
Agree	79	13%
Neither agree nor disagree	7	1%
Disagree	2	<1%
Strongly disagree	1	<1%
Don't know	6	1%
Total	596	100%

94% of respondents agreed that having free bus travel had helped them feel less lonely or isolated.

Table 22 Having free bus travel helps me feel less lonely or isolated (n = 594)

Level of Agreement	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Strongly agree	462	78%
Agree	95	16%
Neither agree nor disagree	8	1%
Disagree	8	1%
Strongly disagree	7	1%
Don't know	14	2%
Total	594	100%

Improved mental health and wellbeing as a result of access to free bus travel was a prevalent theme of the survey qualitative feedback and the focus group discussions:

“It has a significant impact on my mental health wellbeing because it allows me to go out and make new friends and even for sport activities which help reduce my stress in being in the hotel the entire time. It also help me in having access to my legal adviser at any time necessary. It is a lifesaving scheme and would love the government or council to consider reintroduced it again because it helps save life and protect people from mental illness and distress.”

[Survey respondent]

“This support has given me greater independence, reduced stress, and helped my family feel more connected and supported while we

rebuild our lives here. It is a simple policy that makes a powerful difference to health, wellbeing, and dignity.”

[Survey respondent]

Many respondents to the open-ended questions and the majority of focus group participants called for their access to free bus travel to continue, citing the positive improvements it had made to their mental health and wellbeing and their concerns for their future mental health when the pilot came to an end. This point was raised at all focus groups.

Participants across all focus groups described experiencing isolation in their accommodation, which negatively impacted their mental health. They explained that having access to free bus travel has enabled them to attend the gym, participate in religious activities, attend English language classes, and meet friends, reducing their social isolation and improving their mental health. Access to free bus travel was described as helping respondents avoid depression, making them feel cared about and as confidence boosting.

Awareness of National Concessionary Travel Schemes

People seeking asylum in Scotland are eligible for the existing NCTS if they meet the relevant criteria related to age (under 22 or 60 and over) or have an eligible disability. Internal Scottish Government analysis of statistics published by the Home Office show that around a third of people seeking asylum in Scotland may already qualify for concessionary travel due to their age. The survey results indicate that around two thirds of survey respondents (69%) are aware that the NCTS are open to people seeking asylum.

Table 23 Were you aware before completing this survey that people seeking asylum who are aged under 22, aged 60 or over or who have a qualifying disability can get a National Entitlement Card to provide free bus travel? (n = 589)

Response	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Yes	407	69%
No	182	31%
Total	589	100%

Stakeholder organisations results

Methodology

Stakeholder organisations for the pilot included those acting as application administrators, Third Sector organisations acting as Trusted Verifiers or signposting and assisting applicants, accommodation providers, educational establishments and participating bus operators. An online survey was issued by Transport Scotland to gather feedback from stakeholder organisations involved in the pilot. A link was sent to 26 third sector organisations who participated in or publicised the pilot, as well as 32 Local Authorities (and Glasgow Life), COSLA, all participating bus operators (125) and Mears, the Home Office accommodation provider in Scotland. The survey was supplemented with three focus groups, one with bus operators, one with Trusted Verifiers and one with local authorities.

The online survey was open from 10 March to 14 April 2026. Fifty-five responses were received, with 33 identified as local authorities/arm's length organisations, 14 as Third Sector groups, five as bus operators, one as an education provider and two self-defined as "other". Caution should be taken when interpreting percentages from the stakeholder survey due to the corresponding sample size.

The application process and scheme administration

Responses to the closed survey questions suggest that organisations generally had a positive experience of supporting delivery of the pilot. Qualitative feedback and focus group discussion highlights several key areas of learning for any future provision.

Overall, 77% agreed that the administrative process was straightforward and easy to understand, 13% said it was no different to the process for existing NCTS, while 11% disagreed. Of those who found it no different to the process for the NCTS, the majority (67%) were local authorities; in these areas, Trusted Verifiers are likely to have been responsible for the parts of the process that differed from the NCTS. Other than this, responses did not suggest any clear trend in response by organisation type.

Table 24 The administrative process for the Pilot was straightforward and easy to understand (n = 47)

Level of Agreement	Respondents	Percentage
Strongly agree	6	13%
Agree	30	64%
No different to the process for the statutory schemes	6	13%
Disagree	5	11%
Strongly disagree	0	0%
Total	47	100%

The application form was a simplified version of the standard form used for the NCTS. It was available in paper copy only, rather than digitally. Over two thirds (68%) of organisations who responded agreed that applicants had sufficient information and support to apply for the pilot, with 9% disagreeing.

Table 25 Applicants for the pilot scheme have had sufficient information and support to make applications

Level of Agreement	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Strongly agree	5	12%
Agree	24	56%
Neither agree nor disagree	10	23%
Disagree	3	7%
Strongly disagree	1	2%
Total	43	100%

Three-quarters (75%) of respondents agreed that the supporting guidance and advice had been helpful for them as an organisation, with 12% disagreeing.

Table 26 The supporting guidance and advice provided was helpful for organisations in administering the scheme

Level of Agreement	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Strongly agree	10	20%
Agree	27	55%
Neither agree nor disagree	6	12%
Disagree	5	10%
Strongly disagree	1	2%
Total	49	100%

Less than half (41%) of organisations had referred applicants to the translated versions of the guidance produced for the pilot by Transport Scotland.

Table 27 Did you use or refer people to the translated guidance?

Response	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Yes	18	41%
No	26	59%
Total	44	100%

Qualitative survey and focus group feedback was generally positive about how the process had worked. The importance of collaborative working between those acting as verifiers and other key stakeholders was highlighted:

“Generally speaking, applicants had sufficient information and support to apply for their card, this was largely due to the extensive engagement and collaborative work undertaken with partner organisations and verifiers working directly with asylum seekers.”

[Administrator, online survey]

“Overall, the strong partnership working with verifiers helped ensure that applicants were able to access the information and support needed to apply. The significant number of cards issued in a relatively short period attests to the effectiveness of the work/promotion by all parties.”

[Administrator, online survey]

Two survey questions focussed specifically on the Trusted Verifier role within the pilot. The role of the Trusted Verifier organisations in the pilot was to verify and confirm eligibility documents and to support the accurate completion of application forms. This support was particularly important given that English was not the first language of many individuals eligible for the pilot. Organisations acting as Trusted Verifiers included charities and community organisations working with people seeking asylum and local authorities.

In total there were 18 Trusted Verifiers involved in the pilot. Responses received in the survey include some responses from individuals working at the same organisation. Overall, 56% of respondents said that they had found the experience of acting as a Trusted Verifier very easy or fairly easy. 36% said the process was neither easy or difficult and 9% had found it fairly difficult.

Table 28 How easy or difficult has acting as Trusted Verifier been? (n =22)

Level of Difficulty	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Very easy	3	14%
Fairly easy	9	41%
Neither easy nor difficult	8	36%
Fairly difficult	2	9%
Very difficult	0	0%
Total	22	100%

Both the focus group and qualitative survey feedback referenced an element of initial miscommunication around the role of the Trusted Verifiers among other stakeholders, primarily local authorities. In at least one case this led to a delay to the start of applications being processed:

“The process to become a Trusted Verifier was fairly straight forward. However, there was a delay in getting started with submitting our applications because the local authority did not seem to be informed of or up-to-date on the process until a few days in. However, once we knew how to submit applications and what we needed to include, the process was quite straight forward”

[Trusted Verifier, online survey]

A key area of feedback on the process overall related to eligibility, with requests from Trusted Verifiers and local authorities for clearer guidance on eligibility for both stakeholders and participants on eligibility, including how to ensure that those with an ARC are still within the asylum system:

“[We would like] Clear guidance on who is eligible because ARC cards might not be a true reflection of eligibility (e.g. someone might use ARC card as proof, yet have refugee status).”

[Trusted Verifier, online survey]

“[We would like] Better way to explain to people with refugee status that they are not eligible! They have ARC because they didn't send them back so think they can still get it.”

[Trusted Verifier, online survey]

Other suggestions for improvements to the process highlighted in qualitative feedback and focus group discussion included:

- Earlier notification of the pilot starting and circulation of the guidance on processes further in advance of the start date to ensure applications could be processed efficiently straightaway.
- More information on expected processing times for issuing cards.
- Clearer guidance regarding lost, damaged or delayed cards and more efficient responses from Transport Scotland to queries on these issues.
- Wider communication beyond the targeted communications that took place for the pilot to ensure as many people as possible can benefit
- A digital application process, which should also include the capability to accept digital signatures on the application form to speed up the process.
- Guidance and support materials available in additional languages.
- More support for people outwith hotel accommodation to apply.

Impact on organisations

Organisations were asked to provide feedback on how involvement in the pilot had impacted them. Responses were split regarding whether there had been an increase in administration costs for those involved in the pilot, with 37% agreeing costs had increased and 33% disagreeing. Local authorities were more likely to agree that costs had increased with third sector organisations most likely to disagree.

Table 29 There has been an increase in administration costs for organisations as a result of the pilot

Level of Agreement	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Strongly agree	7	16%
Agree	9	21%
Neither agree nor disagree	13	30%
Disagree	9	21%
Strongly disagree	5	12%
Total	43	100%

73% of responding organisations agreed that there had been a reduction in travel costs for organisations as a result of the pilot, with 8% disagreeing.

Table 30 There has been a reduction in travel costs for organisations as a result of the pilot

Level of Agreement	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Strongly agree	13	50%
Agree	6	23%
Neither agree nor disagree	5	19%
Disagree	2	8%
Strongly disagree	0	0%
Total	26	100%

Qualitative feedback indicates that this is because out with the pilot, many organisations pay travel costs to ensure people seeking asylum can access their support and services:

“We were supplying bus tickets to people accessing our football activity on a Saturday which was costing us £100-£150 a week. The people who attend say it's the best thing they do. We were supplying bus tickets for many activities and have been able to expand our support massively as a result of people having these bus passes.”

“The pilot has enabled our organisation to save on the expense of providing travel for asylum seekers.”

[Trusted Verifier, online survey]

Trusted Verifier respondents were asked a specific question on how the role had impacted on their organisations. Around a quarter (27%) reported a major impact on their resources as a result of the pilot compared to 50% reporting a minor impact, with 23% reporting no impact of their organisational resources.

Table 31 If you have been acting as a Trusted Verifier, what level of impact has the resource required for this role had on your organisation?

Level of Impact	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Major impact	6	27%
Minor impact	11	50%
No impact	5	23%
Total	22	100%

Regarding the time required for the role, 45% of Trusted Verifier respondents reporting a minor impact on their organisation, with 32% reporting a major impact.

Table 32 If you have been acting as a Trusted Verifier, what level of impact has the time required for this role had on your organisation?

Level of Impact	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Major impact	7	32%
Minor impact	10	45%
No impact	5	23%
Total	22	100%

In qualitative feedback and focus group discussion, organisations explained that the process was particularly resource intensive in the early stages when high volumes of applications were received. Views were split in qualitative survey feedback and focus group discussion regarding whether the resource burden on organisations would reduce after the main bulk of applications at the start of any future scheme were processed or remain high. However, there was general consensus that, for third sector organisations in particular, acting as a Trusted Verifier required a significant commitment of time and resource:

“This has impacted our capacity a lot as we are a small team. We had never done a service like this before, and we had a lot of people come to our offices for the bus pass, on any day even if we had a drop-in scheduled time.”

“A huge number of staff and volunteer hours went in to providing verification. Therefore, staff cost was significant, plus the opportunity costs of time and resources that would otherwise have been dedicated to other services.

“We had to create a lot of capacity on our own services to process this. It raised stress levels and impacted other areas of our work. We had to choose between staff wellbeing or not offering a resource for the community.”

[Trusted Verifier, online survey]

Many organisations highlighted the critical need for funding for Trusted Verifiers, in particular third sector and community groups, should the pilot be extended or become permanent in the future:

“There should be funding available for whoever becomes a trusted verifier or helps processing applications, so that we don't need to mobilise our own scarce internal resources and impact already overcapacity services. For our organisation, we had to

make a very tough decision internally of not offering such a valuable resource to the community, or putting our staff under more pressure and stress to process this.”

[Trusted Verifier, online survey]

Impact on people seeking asylum

Organisations were asked for their feedback on how the pilot had impacted the people seeking asylum they worked with. Results support the findings from the research conducted with people seeking asylum. A large majority (94%) of organisations who responded agreed that the free travel card had made it easier for people seeking asylum to access essential services. A similar proportion (91%) agreed that the pilot scheme had made a positive impact on community integration.

Table 33 The free travel card has made it easier for people seeking asylum to access essential services, in particular health, education, and legal support

Level of Agreement	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Strongly agree	25	71%
Agree	8	23%
Neither agree nor disagree	2	6%
Disagree	0	0%
Strongly disagree	0	0%
Total	35	100%

Qualitative feedback echoed the findings from people seeking asylum themselves, with an emphasis on how the pilot allowed people seeking asylum to access essential services, including health, legal advice and education:

“Without a free travel pass we had to set up [ESOL] classes that were walkable distance, which cost us as we had to use third party buildings. We also bought travel passes which were £5 per day at the time. In both cases there was a tendency for residents to go to a nearby class rather than a class that was at the correct level for their learning needs. We've been able to go on trips, to refer the residents to sports groups, to encourage them into volunteering and to send them for College interviews. They've been able to attend Home Office interviews, go to the dentist/local hospitals and go to their GP, which in one hotel's case is a 50 minute walk away.”

[Local Authority, online survey]

Table 34 The pilot scheme has made a positive impact on supporting integration of people seeking asylum within local communities

Level of Agreement	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Strongly agree	25	74%
Agree	6	18%
Neither agree nor disagree	2	6%
Disagree	0	0%
Strongly disagree	1	3%
Total	34	100%

Findings were more mixed regarding whether the pilot had resulted in a decrease in people seeking asylum's dropout rates at activities, services, or classes with 44% agreeing that it had, compared to 29% who felt it hadn't.

Table 35 There has been a decrease in asylum seekers' dropout rates at activities, services, or classes during the pilot

Level of Agreement	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Strongly agree	10	31%
Agree	4	13%
Neither agree nor disagree	9	28%
Disagree	4	13%
Strongly disagree	5	16%
Total	32	100%

Improvements in mental health among participants were frequently mentioned in both the focus groups and survey feedback undertaken with organisations. As with participants in the pilot themselves, respondents from organisations expressed worry about the impact of the end of the pilot on people seeking asylum and commonly called for longer term provision:

"I have seen how this pilot changed the dynamic of the asylum seekers in the hotel, traveling to appointments, classes, volunteering and other needs is very costly especially when you are located in a rural area, asylum seekers cannot afford traveling with the very low financial support they have, this pilot came as a saviour for many, it gave them hope, it will really benefit them during the period they are waiting for their decisions in order to start a new life in the UK, I

hope the Scheme will be extended, as this is the question and the wish I hear from asylum seekers every time I meet them.”

[Local Authority, online survey]

“We regularly support people seeking asylum, travelling to health care appointments, solicitors and in general having the freedom to explore was an issue we faced on a daily basis. However, the pass allowed these individuals to feel more empowered and independent. The pass gave them stability and a sense of belonging. We have received positive feedback but now that it has come to an end we are seeing boys feeling deflated and upset.”

[Trusted Verifier, online survey]

Operational data

Data from smartcards

As set out above, the NEC was used to enable individual participants in the pilot to access free bus travel. Participating bus operators were reimbursed at 72.4% of the adult single fare (the same rate as used for the Young Persons Free Bus Travel scheme) using the same mechanism as for the NCTS.

Information on the number of cardholders was supplied by the National Entitlement Card Programme Office to Transport Scotland (NECPO). The table below gives details of the number of cards active by the end of the pilot in in each local authority, not necessarily where journeys were made. No cards were issued in Clackmannanshire, Comhairle nan Eilean Siar, East Renfrewshire, Highland, Moray, Orkney Islands and Shetland Islands Council areas.

Table 36 Number of cardholders per local authority at end of pilot (values less than 20 not shown to ensure data remains anonymous)

Issuing Local Authority	Number of cardholders
Aberdeen City	742
Aberdeenshire	248
Angus Council	< 20
Argyll and Bute	< 20
City of Edinburgh	256
Dumfries and Galloway	42
Dundee City	< 20
East Ayrshire	< 20
East Dunbartonshire	< 20
East Lothian	21
Falkirk	97
Fife	< 20
Glasgow City	1,817
Inverclyde	124
Midlothian	< 20
North Ayrshire	< 20

Issuing Local Authority	Number of cardholders
North Lanarkshire	45
Perth and Kinross	184
Renfrewshire	76
Scottish Borders	< 20
South Ayrshire	< 20
South Lanarkshire	163
Stirling	< 20
West Dunbartonshire	< 20
West Lothian	62
Totals:	3,972

Almost half of cardholders were in Glasgow, where most people seeking asylum have been accommodated in Scotland since dispersal was introduced. The next largest groups of cardholders were in the North-East (Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire). There were also significant numbers in Edinburgh, Perth and Kinross, South Lanarkshire, Falkirk and Inverclyde.

The table below sets out the number of journeys made under the pilot. Journeys are based on the local authority in which the card was issued, however some journeys will have been undertaken out with the local authority area. This data is subject to change due to late data being received and does not include instances where a driver recorded a journey manually due to a technical issue with the smart card.

Table 37 Journey count by local authority (values less than 50 not shown to ensure data remains anonymous)

Local Authority	Journey Count
Aberdeen City	52860
Aberdeenshire	13786
Angus	462
Argyll and Bute	< 50
City of Edinburgh	39229
Dumfries and Galloway	993
Dundee City	560

Local Authority	Journey Count
East Ayrshire	1606
East Dunbartonshire	266
East Lothian	2330
Falkirk	5634
Fife	367
Glasgow City	165507
Inverclyde	9026
Midlothian	1268
North Ayrshire	686
North Lanarkshire	3689
Perth and Kinross	10154
Renfrewshire	7595
Scottish Borders	< 50
South Ayrshire	< 50
South Lanarkshire	19582
Stirling	< 50
West Dunbartonshire	1500
West Lothian	4238
Total	341,677

In addition, as noted above, those cardholders based in areas outwith the central belt (in particular Glasgow), are more likely to have had to make longer journeys to access essential services, both locally as well as those only available in other areas with a larger community of people seeking asylum. Transport Scotland estimates that 3.48% of all smart journeys made under the pilot were via long distance coach operators. By comparison 2.49% of all smart journeys made under the Young Persons Free Bus Travel Scheme during the same period were via coach operators.

Costs

The pilot was demand led, with operators being reimbursed at the agreed rate of 72.4% of the adult single fare for each journey made using the NEC. This meant that the cost of reimbursing operators increased as more cards were issued during the

pilot. The table below sets out reimbursement costs for each month between December 2025 and March 2026.

Table 38 Pilot fares reimbursement costs by financial period

Period	Dates	Journeys	Gross Reimbursement (£)
2026 - 9	10/11/25 – 07/12/25	195	£552.56
2026 - 10	8/12/25 – 04/01/26	21,499	£60,657.17
2026 - 11	05/01/26 – 01/02/26	66,122	£197,225.14
2026 - 12	02/02/26 – 01/03/26	107,736	£310,304.63
2026 - 13	02/03/26 – 31/03/26	146,764	£428,493.13
Totals		342,316	£997,232.63

The total spend for the pilot overall was £1,042,285.53, including the reimbursement costs. This total also includes: a grant to Glasgow Life to meet Glasgow City Council's costs associated with processing applications and administering the pilot in that local authority area in recognition of the higher administrative burden of the pilot given the numbers of people seeking asylum located in Glasgow, administrative costs, including card production and set up costs to NECPO and translation for public facing materials and the evaluation surveys.

Data from the pilot combined with available data from the NCTS and data about people seeking asylum in Scotland has been used to inform an estimate of costs of between £5.4m and £7.2m annually for multi-year longer term provision. There are significant caveats to this estimate, including that estimates are produced assuming the same reimbursement terms as used in the pilot, while for a longer-term scheme a reimbursement approach would need to be agreed with operators. Additionally, the pilot did not run for a full year meaning travel behaviours have not fully emerged and seasonal differences in travel patterns are not fully accounted for. The number of people seeking asylum settled in Scotland may increase or decrease from the current number, depending on Home Office dispersal policy and the overall number of people seeking asylum in the United Kingdom.

Discussion and conclusion

As outlined above, the pilot aimed to assess whether providing free bus travel to people seeking asylum in Scotland would support the intended policy objectives, while also assessing the feasibility of longer-term provision and identifying key learning. The evaluation findings for the key pilot objectives are considered below to assess the extent to which they have been achieved.

Deliverability of possible future longer-term provision

The findings of the evaluation demonstrate that the pilot was successful in delivering nationwide free bus travel to people seeking asylum in Scotland. 3,972 NECs were active by the end of the pilot. This is a significant proportion of the 6,587 people seeking asylum in receipt of Home Office support who were living in Scotland in the quarter to March 2026 (see [Immigration groups by region and devolved administration](#)), particularly given around a third of this group has been estimated to be eligible for the NCTS and may therefore have been less likely to apply for the pilot entitlement.

Travel patterns show the free travel entitlement was used across Scotland. Participants who responded to the evaluation survey and participants at the focus groups had generally a positive experience of bus travel during the pilot as well as of the application process. Overall satisfaction with the pilot was very high with 94% of survey respondents saying they were very satisfied with their experience. This was also reflected in feedback from participants and stakeholders that they wanted the pilot to continue, resume or be made permanent.

Feedback from both pilot participants and stakeholders highlighted the negative impact that the end of the pilot, and the uncertainty surrounding any future provision of free bus travel, had on those who had benefited from the pilot, including in relation to their mental health and wellbeing. Any communication regarding future arrangements should therefore be handled sensitively, providing clear and timely information while avoiding the creation of expectations which may not materialise.

The majority of respondents to the survey had found out about and had support in applying from refugee support organisation or community groups. This is consistent with wider feedback received particularly from the stakeholder survey and focus groups around the reliance of delivery of the pilot on support for the third sector and local authorities. There was a clear consensus among stakeholders who responded to the survey and participated in the focus group that the pilot had a positive impact

on the lives of people seeking asylum. Views were more mixed, however, regarding the extent to which the pilot had affected their own organisations. Feedback indicates that delivery of any longer term provision would not be sustainable unless the organisations supporting it are resourced to do so.

Consideration would also need to be given to how to make the application robust, for example what checks could be carried out to ensure that all those presenting an ARC as evidence of their asylum status have not received a positive decision recognising their refugee status or otherwise how asylum status could be verified. Other areas for improvement that a longer term scheme could look to address were delays in the issuing of cards and improved guidance on lost cards.

Delivery against policy objective

The policy objective of providing free bus travel to people seeking asylum in Scotland is to support integration and community cohesion by enabling greater participation in communities and improving access to devolved services. The pilot was designed to assess the extent to which free bus travel across Scotland could support these outcomes, while also providing detailed evidence and learning on the feasibility and deliverability of any future long-term provision of free bus travel for people seeking asylum in Scotland.

Findings from the evaluation indicate that improved access to participation in community life, enabling people seeking asylum to access education, volunteering opportunities, places of worship, social activities and local events more easily. Survey findings showed that 83% of respondents were more likely to attend English language classes or other education and training, 75% were more likely to volunteer, and 81% were more likely to meet local people or attend community events during the pilot. These findings indicate that the pilot supported increased interaction with local communities and created opportunities to develop social connections.

Although a small minority experienced delays in receiving their NEC, the pilot has also supported the aims of the New Scots Refugee Integration Strategy by helping people seeking asylum participate in community life from the point of arrival in Scotland. Respondents consistently reported that access to free bus travel enabled them to attend activities that would otherwise have been unaffordable or inaccessible, particularly in rural areas. Improved access to English language classes was a recurring theme among both participants and stakeholder organisations. Respondents to the survey explained that free bus travel allowed them to attend courses best suited to their learning needs, continue their studies following relocation, and improve their English through increased engagement in volunteering and social activities.

Perhaps the strongest evidence of the pilot's impact on community cohesion comes from participants' reported feelings of inclusion and connection. Almost all respondents (99%) agreed that free bus travel helped them feel part of the community, while 94% said it helped them feel less lonely or isolated. Qualitative feedback suggested that increased mobility gave participants greater independence, confidence and opportunities to build relationships with people from different backgrounds. Stakeholder organisations similarly reported that the pilot had a positive impact on integration, with 91% agreeing that it had supported the integration of people seeking asylum within local communities. Taken together, the findings suggest that free bus travel was an effective tool for reducing social isolation, increasing participation in community life and supporting community cohesion across Scotland.

Findings also indicate that free bus travel has been very successful in supporting people seeking asylum to access devolved services, including health, legal and other support services.

When asked about the main purposes for using their NEC, 95% of respondents stated it was to access health services or appointments, sometimes at a distance from their place of residence. Prior to the pilot, many had been unable to afford bus travel to health appointments which often included multiple journeys to a GP practice or hospital.

81% of respondents confirmed that they used their NEC to access legal representation or mandatory appointments with Home Office officials. One consequence of Glasgow previously being Scotland's only dispersal area for two decades has been the growth of support networks and legal professionals specialising in immigration law in the city. However, the subsequent dispersal of people seeking asylum across Scotland under the UK Government's full dispersal policy has led to some instances of increased difficulties in accessing their legal representatives because of a lack of specialist legal representatives outside the central belt and in cases where people have been relocated to accommodation at a distance from their legal representative's office. This issue arose in two of the focus groups and in a number of survey responses where individuals had been moved to more remote locations, having initially been accommodated in Glasgow. Given that the NEC provides free travel Scotland-wide, this allows individuals to travel further distances as necessary to attend face to face meetings with their legal representatives and ensures continuity in their application for asylum. Findings also indicated that the pilot resulted in savings for support organisations during the pilot. 20 of the 27 organisations who expressed an opinion in the survey agreed that there had been a reduction in travel costs for organisations as a result of the pilot.

Conclusion

Overall, the evaluation indicates that the pilot was successful in supporting integration and community cohesion in line with the New Scots refugee integration strategy as well as improving access to devolved services for people seeking asylum who participated in the pilot. It has also demonstrated that the deliverability of free bus travel to people seeking asylum is feasible, although there are challenges which would need to be carefully managed for any future provision. This includes challenges of ensuring supporting organisations are adequately compensated for their time and efforts; as well as balancing the need for a streamlined application process for people who may have limited formal documents with the need to manage fraud, error and risks to public funds.

Annex A: Respondent profile

Table 39 Number of cardholders (TS data) and survey respondents (reported by respondents) by area (Areas with less than 20 cardholders or survey respondents reported as other to ensure data remains anonymous)

Issuing Local Authority	Number of cardholders	Percentage of cardholders	Survey Respondents	Percentage of respondents
Glasgow City	1817	45.7%	222	39.2%
Aberdeen City	742	18.7%	133	23.5%
City of Edinburgh	256	6.4%	102	18.0%
Aberdeenshire	248	6.2%	34	6.0%
Other	909	22.9%	76	13.4%
Totals:	3972	100.0%	567	100.0%

Table 40 If English is not your first language, please select the language you use the most?

Language	Count
Albanian	<20
Amharic	45
Arabic	63
Azerbaijan	<20
Bangla	<20
Chinese	<20
Dari	<20
Farsi	<20
Hindi and Punjabi	<20
Igbo	<20
Indian	<20
Kurdish Gormanji	<20
Kurdish Kurmanci and Turkish	<20
Kurdish Sorani	30

Language	Count
Mandarin	<20
Nuer	<20
Oromo	<20
Oshiwambo	<20
Otjiherero	<20
Pashto	<20
Punjabi	<20
Sénégalais	<20
Soomaali	<20
Spanish	33
Swahili	<20
Tamil	<20
Telugu	<20
Tigrinya	<20
Turkish	<20
Turkish and Kurdish	<20
Twi	<20
Urdu	<20
Vietnamese	<20
Wolof	<20
Yoruba	<20
Total	292



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