

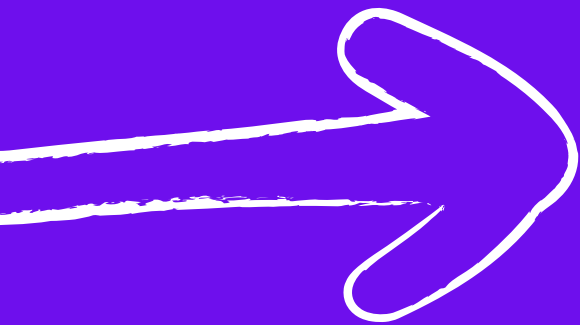
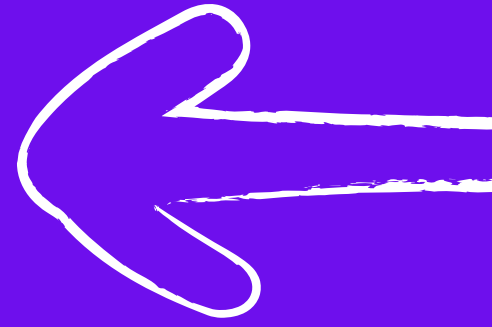
The journey to wellbeing

Refugees, transport, and mental health





**EVERYONE
DESERVES
GOOD
MENTAL
HEALTH**



About us

Mental health is one of the most important foundations for a healthy and long life. We believe no-one living in the UK should be deprived of the opportunity for good mental health because of who they are, the community they come from or where they live.

For more information,
[visit \[mentalhealth.org.uk\]\(http://mentalhealth.org.uk\)](http://mentalhealth.org.uk)

This report was created in partnership with



Introduction

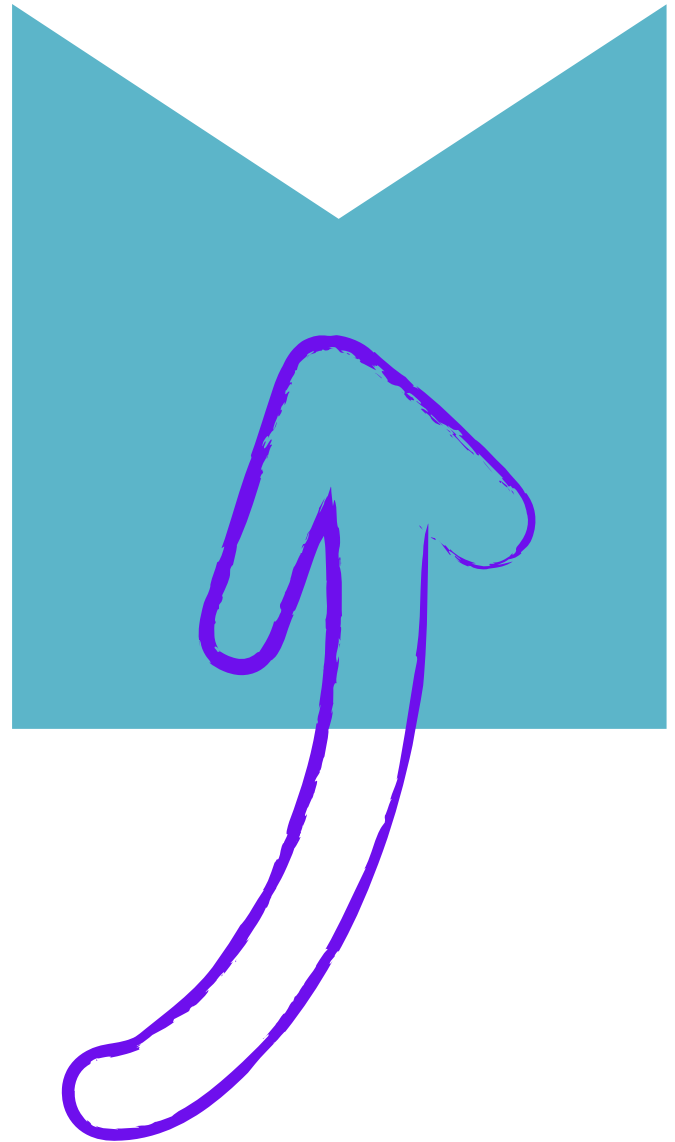
The Mental Health Foundation's Elevate project aims to increase the representation of people from refugee and asylum-seeking backgrounds in decision-making processes within transport, health and social care, education and policing across Scotland.

Our work through the Elevate project opened our eyes to the challenges and barriers faced by refugees and people seeking asylum in accessing and using public transport in Scotland. We also discovered how few forums exist for citizens to share their experiences and opinions with transportation providers.

Motivated by this insight, we undertook research as part of Elevate, with the aim of developing a comprehensive understanding of what refugees and people seeking asylum in Scotland are experiencing regarding public transport.

Findings from this research will be used to inform transport providers and advocate with this marginalised group for positive change for their community and beyond.

In this report, we first outline the research design and participants. We then report on the types of transport people use, reasons for travel and affordability, before reporting on their experience of the quality of services. Finally, we report on participants' recommendations for how to improve public transport in Scotland.



Research design

The study employed a mixed-methods approach, incorporating quantitative and qualitative data collection.

Focus groups

Three in-person focus groups were conducted in Glasgow, Edinburgh, and Perth respectively. These locations were chosen to capture a range of experiences from refugees and people seeking asylum living in urban and semi-urban settings – the settings in which this population is most likely to be accommodated¹.



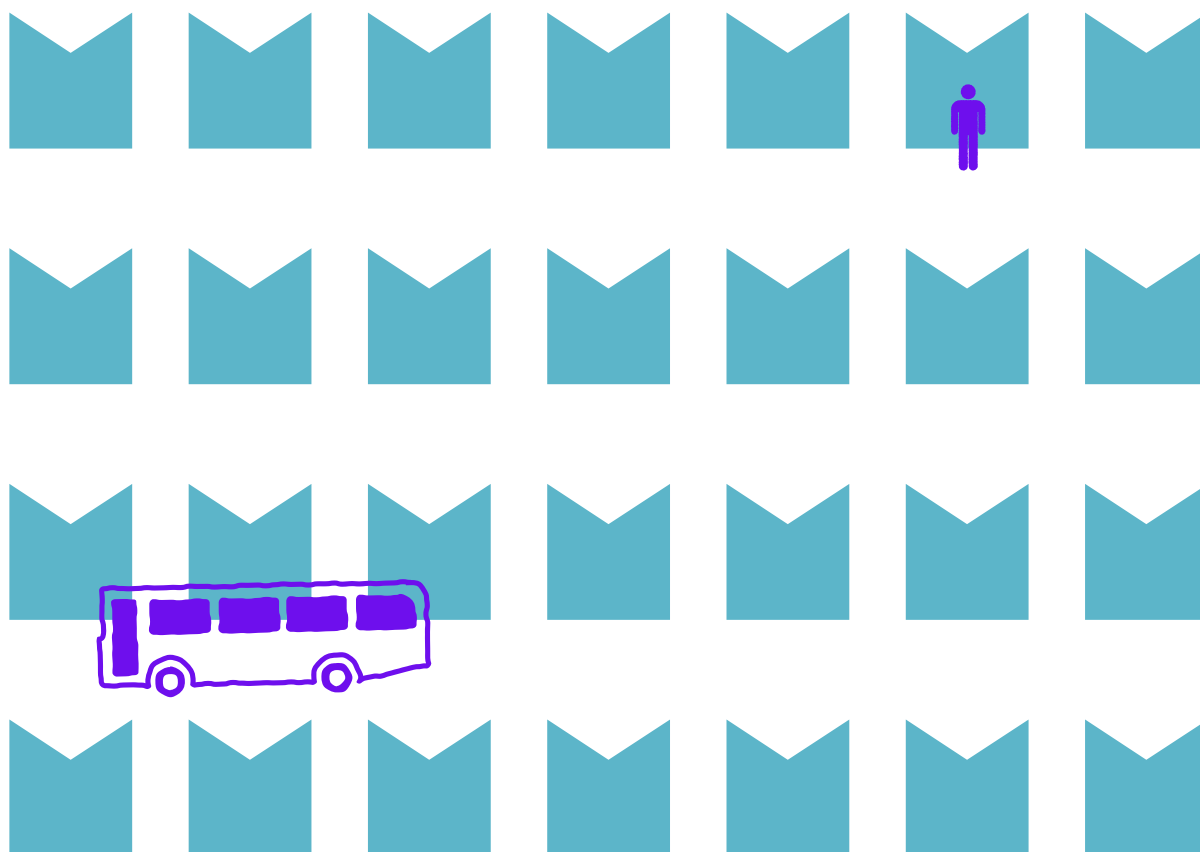
Focus Group	Date	Location	Co-Facilitators	No. of participants
Glasgow	27.4.2023	Mental Health Foundation Glasgow Office	Mental Health Foundation Community Transport Association	12
Perth	7.6.2023	ESOL Perth	Mental Health Foundation Tactran	27
Edinburgh	8.6.2023	St. Mary's Episcopal Cathedral	Mental Health Foundation Tactran	8

For the Glasgow focus group, participants were recruited through existing Mental Health Foundation contacts in refugee and asylum-seeking communities, including learners studying the accredited Health Issues in the Community (hiic.org.uk) course with us.

As the Mental Health Foundation has done less work with the refugee and asylum-seeking communities in other parts of Scotland, we worked with local organisations and individuals in Edinburgh and Perth to recruit participants for those groups. Specifically, we collaborated with ESOL Perth and the Perth Minorities Association to recruit for the Perth focus group. Similarly, we worked with an ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) volunteer based in Edinburgh to recruit participants for the Edinburgh focus group.

Travel expenses were reimbursed, and £20 e-vouchers were sent out to participants after the groups took place, as a thank you for their time and contributions. All participants completed a consent form before participating.

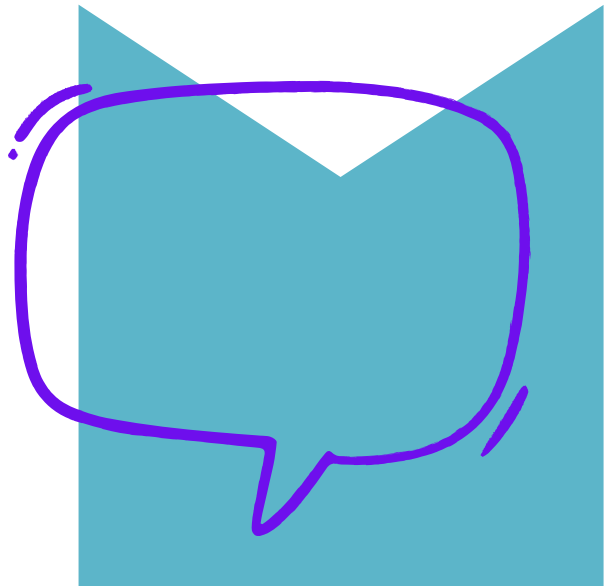
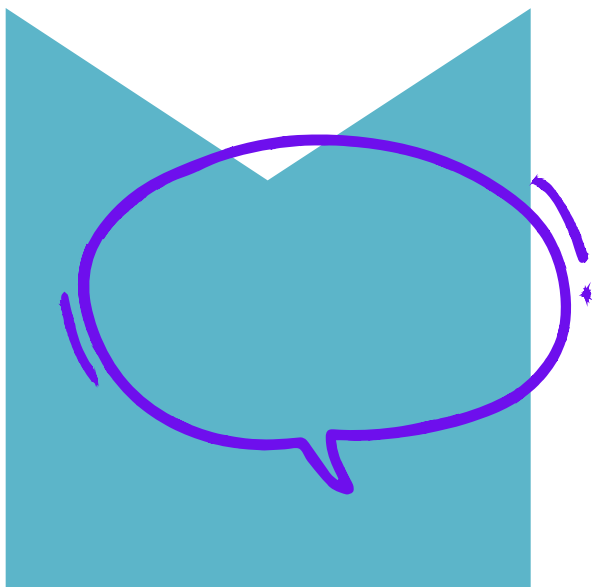
Participants of all groups were asked about the modes of transport they most frequently use; their usual reasons for travel; affordability; the quality of services; and what they would change about public transportation in Scotland. The audio was recorded for the duration of the group discussions and was transcribed. Following transcription, frequently occurring themes were identified, which were used in a thematic analysis which examined broader themes and patterns that emerged across the focus groups.



Interviews

The Mental Health Foundation delivers the accredited Health Issues in the Community Course for learners from refugee and asylum-seeking backgrounds.

As part of this course, 6 learners conducted a community research project between the period October to December 2023 about experiences of public transportation in Scotland for people seeking asylum. Their project involved conducting 31 peer-to-peer interviews with people seeking asylum in Glasgow to gather their experiences of transport and feedback on what they think needs to change. The interviewers took notes of what interviewees shared. Once all interviews had been carried out, this data was thematically analysed along with the focus group data.



Survey

To complement the qualitative data gathered through focus groups and to better understand refugee and asylum seeker experiences of transport across Scotland's urban and rural areas, we ran an online survey using Smart Survey. The survey comprised 17 questions, capturing demographic information, the cost of public transport and the associated impact, experiences with transport staff, feelings of safety while travelling, and the impact that free travel would have on mental health.

The survey was distributed through existing contacts of MHF staff in the refugee and asylum-seeking community and through partner organisations. The survey was live between 10 August and 9 October 2023 and received 222 complete responses during this time. The data from the survey was analysed using Excel.

Demographic data

National demographic data for refugees and people seeking asylum in Scotland is not publicly available, meaning we are not able to compare how representative our sample is.

Demographic data was not collected for focus group participants. However, from observation, the participants appeared to be diverse in gender, age, religion, ethnicity, and country of origin. Some participants had disabilities, mobility needs, and long-term health conditions.



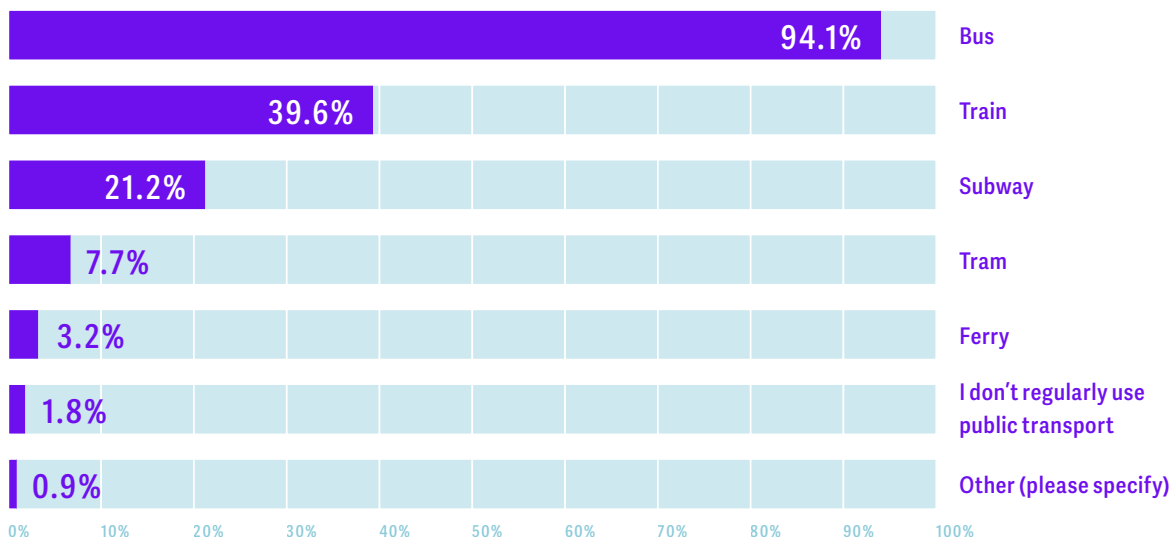
Survey demographics

Of all survey respondents:

- 77% lived within the Glasgow City Council area.
- 54% were female and 44% male.
- 34% were 25 – 34 years old, 38% were 35 – 44 years old, and 17% were between 45 – 54 years old.
- 46% were seeking asylum and 32% had refugee status. The remainder fell into the following other categories: British Citizen from a refugee background (6%), Resettlement Visa (5%), Humanitarian protection (5%).
- 38% were African and 20% were Arab.

Modes of transport and reasons for use

Figure 1.
Types of public transport frequently used



As shown in Figure 1, the mode of public transport most frequently used by survey respondents is the bus. 94% of respondents regularly use the bus, 40% regularly use the train, and 21% regularly use the subway. Focus group participants also told us that they mostly use the bus network to travel around their local area and further afield, due to it generally being more affordable and convenient than alternatives.

There was some positive feedback about the buses:

"I take the bus... I like the adaptability for people with limited mobility."

Focus group participant

"I use the bus because the stop is nearer my home and it's easier for me."

Focus group participant

However, bus provision still failed to meet people's needs in several ways:

"Where I live, there is only one bus an hour. I asked the council and the MSP but nothing happens – still only one bus every hour. In the evening it isn't even every hour, and on holidays there are no buses. In this area there are lots of older people, disabled people, and families with children. I have my children. If we don't get that bus we have to walk 20 or 25 minutes to get to the main street to get to another bus."

Focus group participant

"Buses get cancelled a lot of times and they are not always regular"

Focus group participant

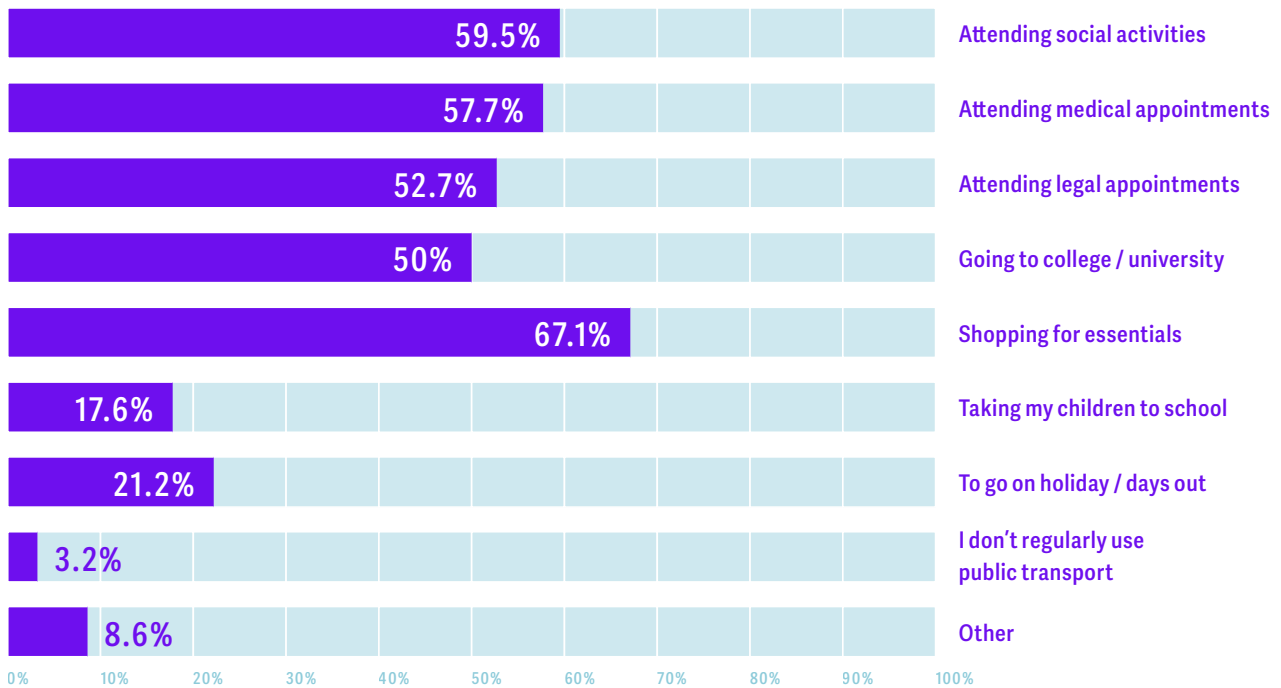
"My son works until 11.30[pm]. By the time he reaches the bus stop, there are no buses."

Focus group participant



Figure 2.

Reasons for using public transport



As in Figure 2, over half of survey respondents reported that they regularly use public transport for going shopping for essentials (67%), attending social activities (60%), attending medical appointments (58%), attending legal appointments (53%), and going to college or university (50%).

Focus group participants reported using transport for similar reasons:

"I'm unable to access a car and can't afford taxis. I use public transport to go to work, shopping, hospitals, and visiting friends and family"

Focus group participant

"The buses help us a lot to live: to go to the pharmacy, to the GP, to the appointments, to go shopping."

Focus group participant

Cost of travel and implications

84% of survey respondents experienced being unable to afford public transport because of the cost. This was a key theme that emerged from all the focus groups, too.

Of those survey respondents who have been unable to use public transport because of the cost, almost half (49%) are unable to use public transport because of the cost all or almost all the time. A fifth (20%) can use public transport more than once a month but prioritise other activities, and 19% can only afford to use public transport in an emergency.

And of those survey respondents who have been unable to use public transport because of the cost, 66% have dealt with this by staying home instead of going out, 65% have walked to where they need to go, and 27% have borrowed money from friends or family.

This resonates with what we learned from focus groups and in the peer-to-peer interviews conducted by Health Issues in the Community learners.

Participants told us that:

“Many times I am struggling. I don’t have enough money for the bus. I have walked many times from my house to the city centre, two and a half hours, many times.”

Focus group participant

“It really supports our mental health to go out, but sometimes it’ll be 1 week, 10 days, 2 weeks I won’t go out of the house because I can’t pay for the bus.”

Focus group participant

“I get stuck at home without going out... which deteriorate my mental health.”

Interview participant

However, it’s important to note that to ensure that they can go out while on an extremely low income, some respondents prioritise transport over other necessities:

“I don’t buy food and don’t eat and pay my money just on transportation”

Survey respondent

Experiences on transport and with staff

Most survey respondents reported their interactions with staff on public transport as being positive (66%). 29% reported that their interactions had been neither positive nor negative and only 5% reported that their interactions had been negative.

Of the 5% of survey respondents who had negative or very negative experiences with staff on public transport, some said that they had experienced racism perpetrated by staff:

“Since I’m a black person, they [transport staff] tend to ignore my questions”

Survey respondent

Focus group participants reported similar experiences, which they also attributed to being from a racialised community:

“When the bus driver says, ‘Where do you want to go?’, he only asks that to me. Why? Because of my hijab?”

Focus group participant

“...But when you go on the bus, the driver looks at your face, and the attitude is as if ‘here comes another one.’”

Focus group participant

Survey respondents also reported feeling as if staff didn’t want them on transport:

“Staff looked at me with hate. He didn’t want me on the bus”

Survey respondent

“They [staff] embarrassed me and that happened many occasions and it demoralising making me feel less as a human”

Survey respondent

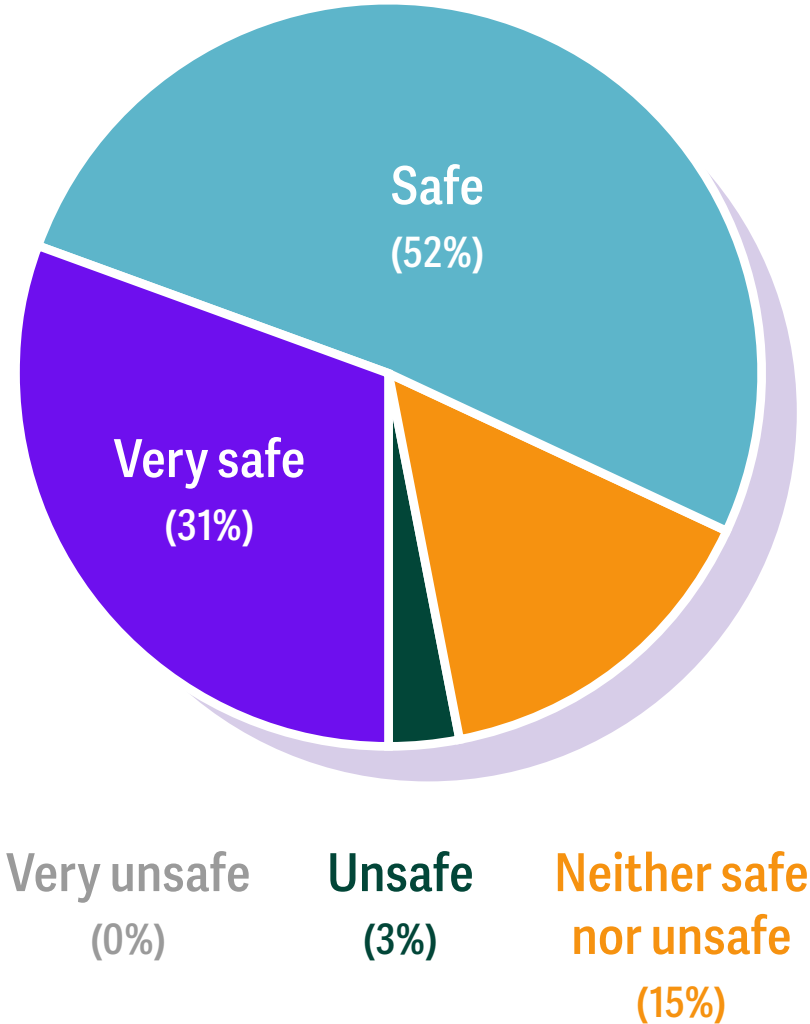
A significant majority of survey respondents (82%) reported feeling safe on public transport, with only 3% reporting feeling unsafe. Therefore, even though some people have highlighted negative experiences on public transport, in most cases,

it doesn't translate to feeling unsafe. However, it is worth noting that of the very small number of survey respondents who reported feeling unsafe on public transport, most feel that way as a result of experiencing racism.

Figure 3.

Safety on public transport

How safe do you feel on public transport?



Free transport and mental health

As this research was carried out prior to the Scottish Government's announcement of plans to introduce free bus travel for asylum seekers, it captured viewpoints about this proposal². When asked about free travel and mental health, survey respondents overwhelmingly (77%) said that having access to free transport would impact their mental health.

Of those who said access to free transport would impact their mental health, four themes were consistently mentioned when they explained their reasons.

Most often, respondents mentioned the activities that would be made possible by having access to free transport:

"[With free transport] I will be able to go out and meet friends, go to participate in different activities to keep my mind busy and that will help me reduce stress and depression."

Survey respondent

This resonated with what was shared during interviews:

"[With free transport I would] interact more with the community and involve myself more with projects that can be helpful with my mental health"

Interview participant

Secondly, many respondents mentioned that their mental health would improve as they would no longer be dealing with the stress and anxiety associated with affording transport on a tight budget:

"It will have a very positive impact on my mental health and overall Wellbeing. As it will free me of the stress, of worrying about transport given the small £45 I get per week. It will enable me go to college effortlessly unlike how I had to drop out of college last term as I ran short of transport..."

Survey respondent

Thirdly, several respondents mentioned that free transport would help alleviate the loneliness and isolation they currently experience:

“[With free public transport, you] have option to visit different public places to release your tension, depression and from feelings of loneliness....”

Survey respondent

Lastly, respondents cited that free transport would reduce stress for parents as they will be better able to provide for their families:

“I have 3 children. I stay at home as I cannot afford to travel on public transport and also provide for my 3 kids. Having to get 3 children ready and out the door everyday is a hassle nevermind having to make them walk everywhere... During the school holidays I stayed at home for all the time the children were off, we only went to local parks we could walk to. My children need more, i need more.”

Survey respondent

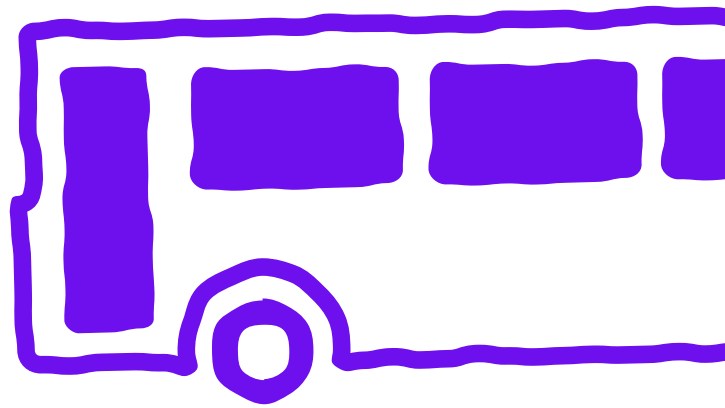
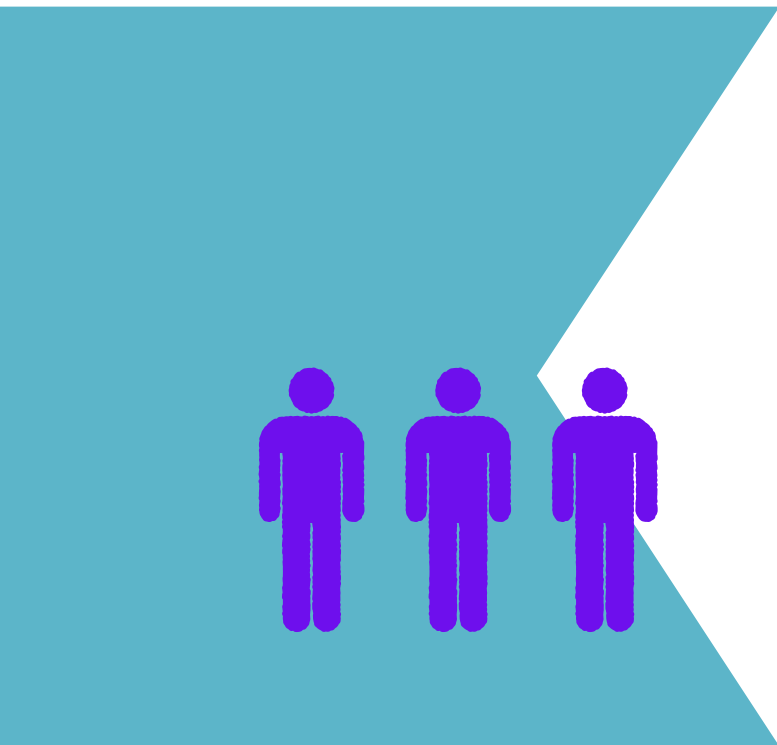
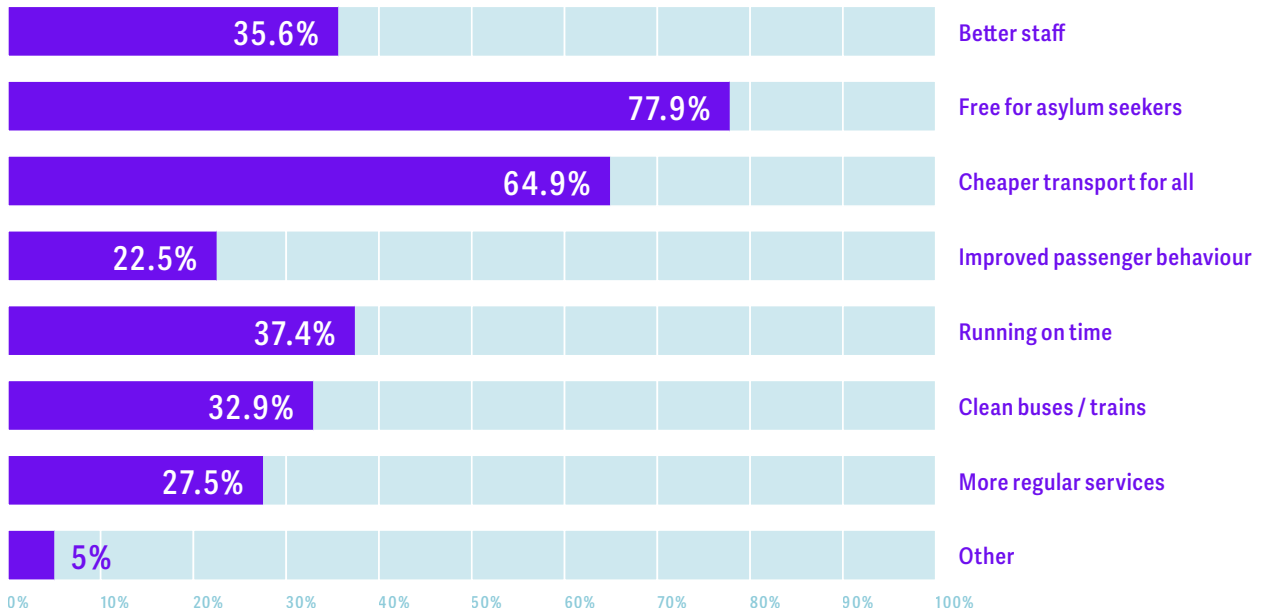
This chimes with evidence from the peer-to-peer interviews conducted by Health Issues in the Community learners. One interviewee shared that:

“Sometimes want to take my kids to city centre or something so that they can have fun but I can't due to expense of bus ticket... this is affecting me physically and mentally.”

Interview participant

When survey respondents were asked what changes they would most like to see in public transport in Scotland, the vast majority (78%) said they'd want free transport for asylum seekers. Cheaper public transport was also a popular option (65%), followed by transport running on time (37%), polite, helpful and well-trained staff (36%), and clean buses and trains (32%).

Figure 4.
Desired changes in public transport in Scotland



Key takeaways

The headline findings from this research were around the cost of transport and the impact this has. Findings from the survey and focus groups both show that cost is the most significant transportation issue for refugees and people seeking asylum in Scotland, with 84% of survey respondents having been unable to afford transport due to the cost. The problem is most acute for people seeking asylum who, unlike those with refugee status who have access to public funds, live off asylum support payments of £49.18 per week and are largely unable to work.

An all-day bus ticket in Glasgow, for example, is £5.60. With £7.03 to live off per day, people seeking asylum are having to choose between travelling and eating. As a focus group participant told us:

“If I spend my money on the bus ticket, I don’t have enough for food.”

Interview participant

Furthermore, our findings show that refugees and people seeking asylum use public transport most frequently to attend medical and legal appointments, to shop for essentials including food and toiletries, and to participate in social activities. Attending medical and legal appointments and shopping for essentials are far from luxuries: these are necessities for health and dignity. Participating in social activities is key to integration and building

and maintaining social relationships. The fact that refugees and people seeking asylum are often having to choose between socialising and eating is concerning as we know that loneliness is a risk factor for poor mental health³.

Therefore, from a wellbeing and human rights perspective, the Scottish Government’s announcement of free bus travel for people seeking asylum is a very positive one. We believe that this decision will have a positive impact on the mental health of people seeking asylum in Scotland, through creating opportunity to participate in social activities, reducing feelings of loneliness and isolation, and decreasing anxiety for individuals and families. As a focus group participant explained:

“[with free transport I will] be able to go out more often, meet friends, attend social activities, take my child out. These impact positively on my mental health rather than being stuck in the house.”

Focus group participant

Now the budgetary commitment has been made, continued advocacy will be required to achieve effective and inclusive implementation of this new policy as a matter of priority. Beyond this, it is our hope that the Scottish Government’s decision will pave the way for other governments to adopt similar measures.

We were pleased to see that the overwhelming number of survey respondents reported feeling safe while using public transport and having positive interactions with transportation staff. However, it is important to note that the majority of those who felt unsafe or have had negative experience with transportation staff said that this was due to racism. To ensure that public transport is a welcoming, inclusive space where everyone feels like they belong, we recommend compulsory anti-racism training for public transportation staff. This sentiment was echoed by one focus group participant:

“I think it is very important for the bus drivers to get training, especially about racism and how to deal with people from BME or refugee communities.”

Focus group participant



Recommendations

Given the findings discussed in the report, we recommend that transport companies, government departments, and other stakeholders take the following steps.

- The Scottish Government must roll out free bus travel for people seeking asylum as a matter of priority, with guidance from people with lived experience and professionals working with them. This will ensure that the roll out is efficient and inclusive, considering the unique needs of this community.
- Free bus travel for people seeking asylum in Scotland must be completely unrestricted, without any limitations on location or time of travel.
- Free bus travel must be provided to the asylum-seeking community in a manner which upholds their human rights and avoids stigmatisation.
- The Scottish Government must evaluate the impact of providing free bus travel for people seeking asylum, including its mental health impacts.
- Public-facing transportation staff and strategic planners in transport companies must receive compulsory anti-discrimination training including anti-racism training as part of the induction process when starting their role, and every two years going forward.
- Companies and government departments making decisions around transport should have mechanisms (such as citizen panels or public engagement forums) to allow people from all of Scotland's diverse communities, including refugees and people seeking asylum, to have their voices and experiences heard and considered in decision making.

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