

Agenda Item	18a
Report No	ECI/42/22

HIGHLAND COUNCIL

Committee: Economy and Infrastructure

Date: 10 November 2022

Report Title: Transport assistance for Ukrainian Displaced Persons

Report By: Executive Chief Officer Infrastructure, Environment & Economy

1 Purpose/Executive Summary

- 1.1 This report outlines options and implications for introducing a free travel scheme for Ukrainian displaced persons within Highland, following a motion agreed by the Council on 22 September.

2 Recommendations

- 2.1 Members are asked to **Agree** that a scheme be developed and implemented, should external funding be received as part of the overall support packages available from Scottish or UK Governments.

3 Implications

- 3.1 **Resource** – Funding of £1.504m has been provided to the Council for the support of Ukrainian displaced persons. The report to Council on 22 September 2022 identified an existing in-year budget pressure of £0.041m and that confirmation of further funding be sought from the Scottish Government as ongoing and emerging costs are identified.

The cost of free travel for refugees is difficult to quantify in advance. An indicative figure of £140,000 is estimated, but this is very much subject to the number of eligible people, the number of journeys they make and the reimbursement arrangements agreed with bus operators. In addition, there would be an administrative cost estimated at £14,000. It is likely that these costs would impact on other services being

provided by the Council from this budget. There is no Service budget available to fund the implementation of such a scheme.

- 3.2 **Legal** – There is no specific legislation empowering Councils to operate travel concession schemes for persons likely to be to benefit from the proposed arrangements.
- 3.3 **Community (Equality, Poverty, Rural and Island)** – The proposal would assist Ukrainian displaced persons to settle in Highland. The proposal is restricted to Ukrainians as no other refugees or asylum seekers have arrived in Highland since March 2022, and the position of Ukrainians is less settled than that of refugees from other nations who have relocated to Highland on a permanent basis. Refugees are entitled to the same levels of Universal Credit (and other supports) as others. Families across Highland in similar economic circumstances are not able to access free bus travel unless entitled by age or disability.

There are no specific rural or island implications.

- 3.4 **Climate Change / Carbon Clever** – There are no significant implications.
- 3.5 **Risk** – There are risks that the Scottish Government will not fully fund a free travel scheme for displaced persons from Ukraine.
- 3.6 **Gaelic** – There are no Gaelic implications.

4 Background

- 4.1 On 22 September the Council approved a motion to investigate the feasibility and cost of offering a free one year bus pass to all refugees and asylum seekers who have arrived in Highland Region since March 2022, to be remitted to the next meeting of the Economy and Infrastructure Committee.
- 4.2 Residents of Scotland who are aged under 22 or over 60, or with certain disabilities, are entitled to free bus travel throughout Scotland under the schemes operated and funded by Transport Scotland. This report therefore focusses on provision for persons aged between 22 and 59.
- 4.3 Help to apply for the existing schemes is being given by the Council's welfare team to refugees who would be eligible for them.

5 Feasibility

- 5.1 The most probable way of operating a bus pass would be to use the Saltire Card (National Entitlement Card). East Lothian Council has developed a program which can be uploaded to the Saltire Card for this purpose. This software can be read by all bus ticket machines.
- 5.2 An alternative approach, which has been used by Dundee City and some English Councils, is to enter a partnership with local bus operators for purchase of season tickets, with some sharing of costs. The Dundee scheme was originally limited to a month for each pass holder. In Surrey, the Council has purchased season tickets for two months, with the operator providing a third month free of charge.
- 5.3 For either method, eligibility for the pass would need to be confirmed. The Council's Welfare Support team would be able to support refugees to access a national scheme operated by Transport Scotland or a local scheme. There will be an administrative overhead to administer a local scheme which will need to be resourced and budgeted.
- 5.4 An issue related to eligibility is the degree of permanence of each refugee's accommodation. Those in permanent accommodation are likely to remain in Highland for the year. Those living with host families are generally settled for six months but may move elsewhere after that period. Those living in hotels could potentially move into or out of Highland at any time.
- 5.5 The Saltire Card method developed by East Lothian is restricted to bus routes within East Lothian and to/from Edinburgh. Therefore, unlike the national schemes for young and older people, if adopted here it could be configured for a specific geographical zone, which could be all of Highland or smaller areas within Highland.
- 5.6 With the season ticket purchase method, a cost would be incurred whether or not the pass holder made use of the ticket, and it would restrict the usefulness to a specific bus operator's services.
- 5.7 Although the motion to Council was in the context of solidarity with the struggle of the Ukrainian people, it is expressed as including all refugees arriving in Highland since March 2022. No refugees of other nationalities have arrived in Highland since that date, but if a travel scheme is introduced, Members may wish to consider extending it to other people groups at a later date. There is ongoing discussion with the Scottish Government and the Home Office about future refugee resettlement phases, and arrivals are anticipated in 2023.
- 5.8 The existing concessionary schemes are established by statute. Adoption of a scheme for refugees could only be voluntary, so bus operators could not be compelled to participate.

6 Cost

- 6.1 The current scheme for people aged over 60 or with a disability provides reimbursement at the rate of 55.9% of the single fare for the journey. The scheme for people aged 16 to 21 has a higher reimbursement rate of 81.2%. It is likely that for a new scheme, operators would expect a similar reimbursement rate to that for the young persons' scheme. Stagecoach have indicated a willingness to participate on this basis; at the time of writing, other operators have not been approached.
- 6.2 It is impossible to predict how many journeys would be made under a scheme. In East Lothian, only 26 people currently qualify. The cost to date has been £4200. Over a full year this would amount to approximately £8000 (an average of around £308 per person). In Highland there are currently 460 Ukrainian displaced persons aged over 22, although some of these may be eligible for the existing national scheme due to age or disability. If the cost was similar to that in East Lothian, this would be around £140,000 for a year. It may be possible to reduce this figure by lowering the reimbursement rate to bus operators, but being demand-led, it could increase if more eligible people were to be settled in Highland.
- 6.3 If a scheme is introduced, the time period for which any pass holder would be eligible would have to be decided. The motion agreed by the Council was to investigate a scheme covering a year, but in view of the potential cost, and comparison with other councils, a shorter period is likely to be more appropriate.

Designation: Executive Chief Officer Infrastructure, Environment & Economy

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