

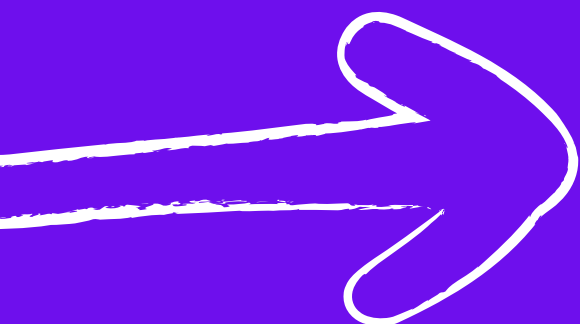
The journey to wellbeing

Refugees, transport, and mental health
in Northern Ireland





**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](https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk)**

Introduction

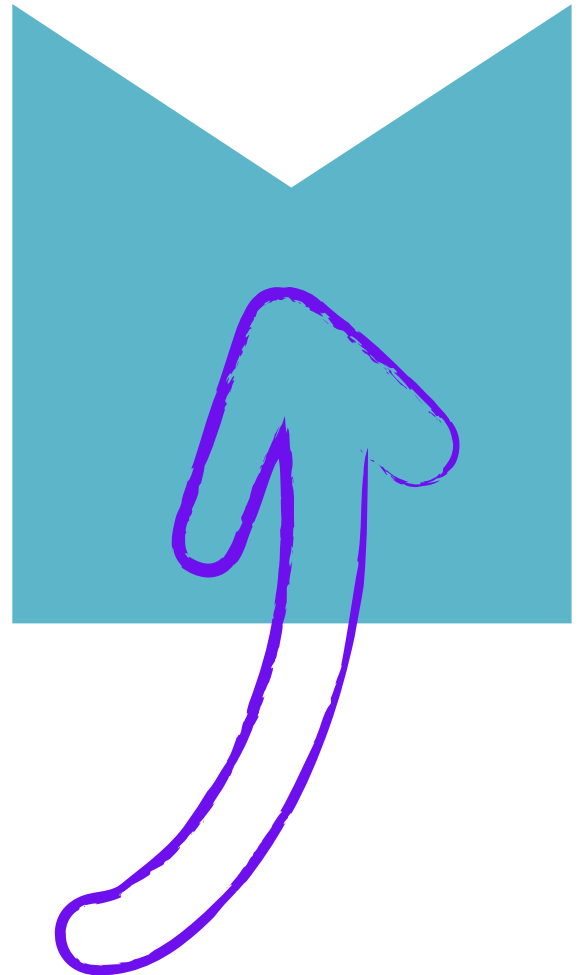
The Mental Health Foundation's Bridges to Belonging Project works to increase mental health awareness with people seeking asylum and refugees, as well as advocating for changes in society to help improve their mental health. Using a community conversation model, we've worked with over 100 people in the past year.

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

Building on the learning from Scotland, we undertook research to understand what refugees and people seeking asylum in Northern Ireland are experiencing when using public transport.

Findings from this research will be used to inform transport providers and policymakers and advocate for positive change for communities and beyond.

In this report, we first outline the research design and participants. We then report on the types of transport people use, their reasons for travel, and the affordability of public transport before reporting on their experience of the quality of services. Finally, we report on recommendations for improving public transport in Northern Ireland for people seeking asylum and refugees.



Research design

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

We used the same survey and focus group design developed by colleagues in Scotland. This allows us to compare data in each Nation.

Focus groups

Four in-person focus groups were conducted in Northern Ireland.

These locations were chosen to be in Belfast city centre for ease of accessibility by public transport, to capture a range of experiences from refugees and people seeking asylum living in urban and semi-urban settings – where this population will most likely be accommodated.

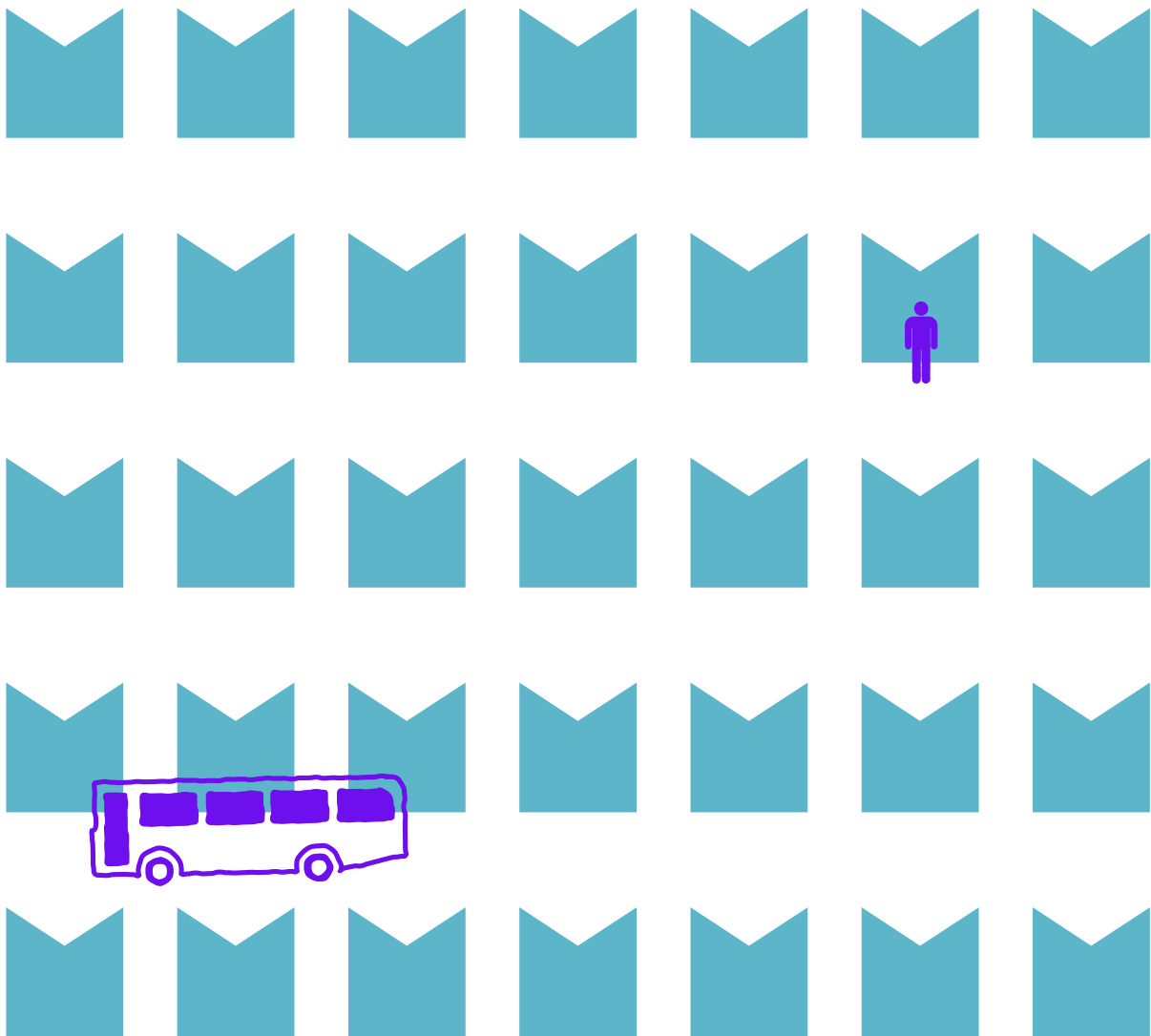


Focus Group	Date	Location	Facilitator	No. of participants
Men Group 1	7.10.2024	Lorag Center	Mental Health Foundation	5
Men Group 2	23.10.2024	Lorag Center	Mental Health Foundation	4
Women Group 1	15.10.2024	Anaka Center	Mental Health Foundation	8
Women Group 2	15.10.2024	Anaka Center	Mental Health Foundation	7

Participants for the focus group were recruited through Mental Health Foundation contacts in refugee and asylum-seeking communities.

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

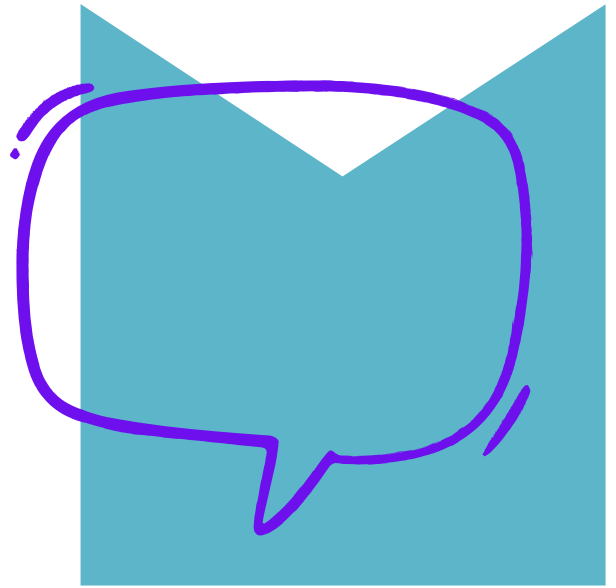
Participants were asked about the modes of transport they most frequently use, their usual reasons for travel, affordability, the quality of services, and what they would change about public transportation in Northern Ireland. The audio was recorded and transcribed for the duration of the group discussions.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



Survey

We ran an online survey using Smart Survey to complement the qualitative data gathered through focus groups and better understand the experiences of people seeking asylum and refugee transport experiences across Northern Ireland's urban and semi-urban areas. 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 networks in the refugee and asylum-seeking community and through partner organisations like community centres. The survey was live between 21 October and 22 November 2024 and received 121 responses, with 84 out of the 121 being complete responses during this time. The data from the survey was analysed using Excel.



Demographic data

The demographic profile of respondents in the report highlights the diverse backgrounds of refugees and asylum seekers in Northern Ireland.

A significant portion of participants identified as Arab (50%) and African (29.76%), reflecting the multicultural composition of these communities. In terms of gender, most respondents were women (83.95%), indicating a gendered perspective on transport challenges. The age distribution was varied, with the largest group being individuals aged 35-44 years (41.67%), followed by those aged 25-34 years (26.19%). Most respondents were either seeking asylum (42.17%) or held refugee status (34.94%). This demographic diversity underscores the importance of tailoring public transport solutions to meet the unique needs of a wide range of cultural, linguistic, and social groups, while also addressing specific challenges faced by women and families.

Survey demographics

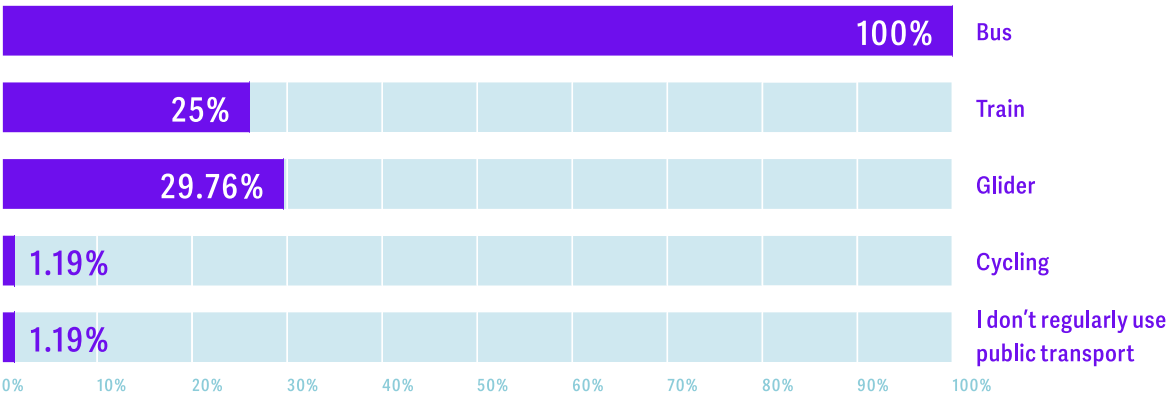
Of all survey respondents:

- 71% lived within the Belfast City Council.
- 84% were female and 16% male.
- 26% were 25 – 34 years old, 42% were 35 – 44 years old, and 23% were between 45 – 54 years old.
- 42% were seeking asylum, and 35% had refugee status. The remainder fell into the following other categories: British Citizen from a refugee background (16%), Resettlement Visa (4%), Humanitarian protection (1%).
- 30% were African and 50% 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. 100% of respondents regularly use the bus, 25% regularly use the train, and 29% regularly use the Glider. Focus group participants also told us that they mostly use the public transport network to travel around their local area and further afield, due to it generally being more convenient than alternatives.

There was some positive feedback about the buses:

"I take the public transport... to everywhere I go."

Focus group participant

"It is mostly the public transport or the glider in Belfast"

Focus group participant

However, the public transport system still failed to meet people's needs in several ways:

"The frequency of public transport, they stop working early and start late in the morning"

Focus group participant

"Public transports are mainly in the city center and scarce for those on the outskirts"

Focus group participant

"The frequency of public transport, they come by one-hour intervals meaning when you miss one your whole journey is disrupted"

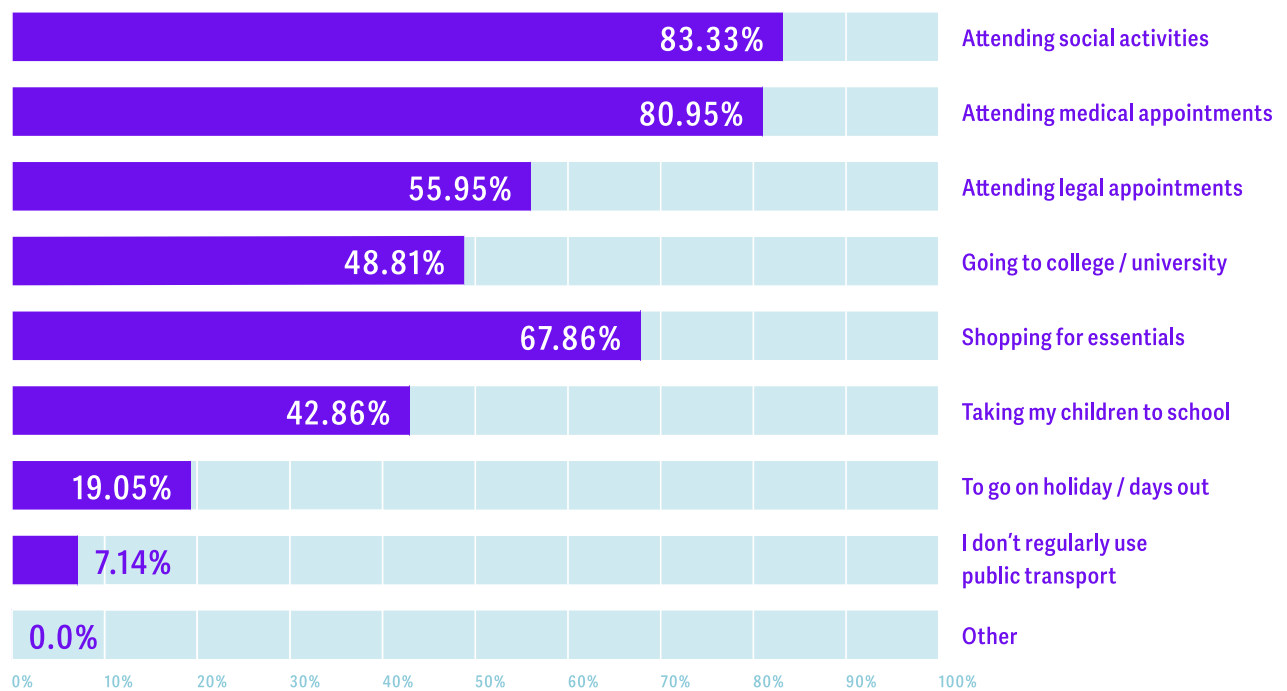
Focus group participant

"Public transport drivers aren't very cooperative; I have four kids, one lost their public transport card, and the driver wouldn't let the kid in"

Focus group participant



Figure 2.
Reasons for using public transport



As in Figure 2, a high percentage of the survey respondents reported that they regularly use public transport attending social activities (83%) and attending medical appointments (80%). This is significantly higher than in Scotland where survey results showed this as lower. Going shopping for essentials (67%), attending legal appointments (55%), and going to College or University (48%), were all similar to Scotland.

Focus group participants reported using transport for similar reasons:

“The public transport helps us a lot to live: to go shopping and attend to other appointments.”

Focus group participant

Cost of travel and implications

97.62% of survey respondents experienced being unable to afford public transport because of the cost, this is higher than in Scotland. This key theme 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 (57.32%) are unable to use public transport because of the cost all or almost all the time. 4% can use public transport more than once a month but prioritise other activities, and 24% can only afford to use public transport in an emergency.

Of the survey respondents who have been unable to use public transport because of the cost, 54% have dealt with this by staying home instead of going out, 69.5% have walked to where they need to go, and 28% have borrowed money from friends or family.

This resonates with what we learned from focus groups and in the surveys.

Participants told us that:

"Many times, I don't have enough money for public transport to take my family out, it cost me £16 per day to take them out, so we just stay home."

Focus group participant

"Used to have the 6 months public transport pass, but it is expiring now, and they don't give that anymore."

Focus group participant

"I'm depressed because I can't go to college because public transport use cost a lot for me."

Survey respondent

"Most of my money goes into transport because of cost and the size of my family I pay more."

Survey respondent

Experiences on transport and with staff

Most survey respondents reported their interactions with public transport staff as very positive (28%) or positive (29%). 27% reported that their interactions had been neither positive nor negative. Only 3% reported that their interactions had been negative, and 1% reported that they had been very negative.

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

"I didn't have a ticket, and he fined me, but let another white guy drop of the next stop without a fine when he said he didn't have a ticket"

Focus group participant

"At a bus stop near my child's school the driver did not want me to ride because I was wearing a Hijab and the stroller was empty."

Survey respondent

Survey respondents also reported positive experiences.

"The bus driver was very helpful when I asked about directions I was struggling with the English language, and he was very patient with me"

Survey respondent

"The public transport driver always waited for me and lowered the bus when I have my daughter on the stroller and greeted me with a big smile."

Survey respondent

A significant majority of survey respondents (47.62%) reported feeling safe on public transport. With no one saying they felt 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 during the focus group with the women some expressed concerns about being unsafe due to racism.

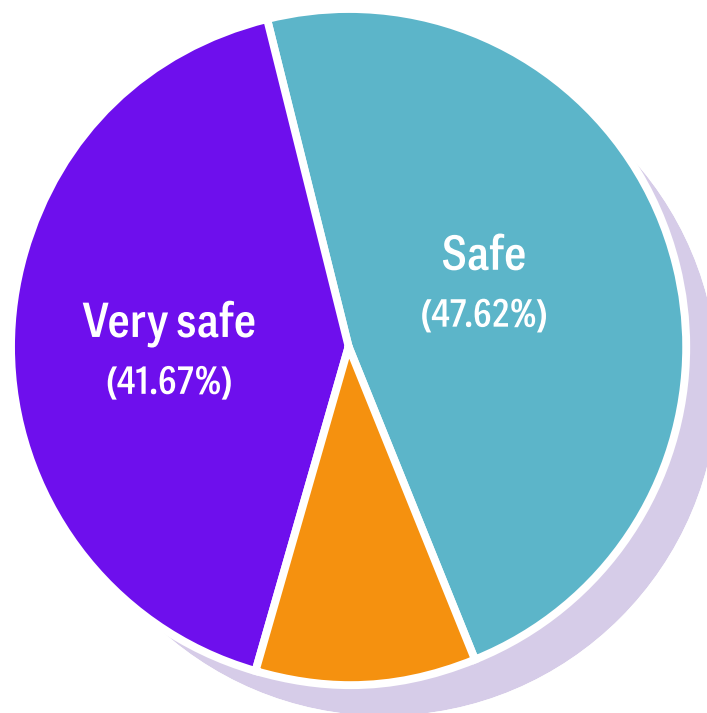
"Once I went on a bus and I wear hijab all the time and there was a man behind me, he pushed me and walked in front of me and sat on the seat I was going to sit on and give me a face, I went and sat on another seat and the bus driver saw all this but did not say anything."

Survey respondent

Figure 3.

Safety on public transport

How safe do you feel on public transport?



Neither safe
nor unsafe
(10.71%)

Free transport and mental health

When asked about free travel and mental health, survey respondents overwhelmingly (80.95%) said that having access to free transport would impact their mental health, this is similar to Scotland (77%).

Of those who said access to free transport would impact their mental health, four themes emerged.

Improved Access and Participation: Free transport enables individuals, especially parents and asylum seekers, to attend appointments, meet family needs, and participate more fully in daily life and society.

Mental Health and Wellbeing: Many respondents highlighted that removing the financial burden of transport would reduce stress and anxiety, contributing positively to their mental health.

Social Inclusion and Reduced Isolation: Free transport was seen as a way to combat loneliness, especially for those in remote areas, by making it easier to engage in social, educational, and community activities.

Support for Families and Children: Respondents emphasized that free transport would allow them to better support their children—getting them to school, taking them to parks or outings, and generally improve family life.

This resonated with what was shared during focus groups interview:

“[With free transport] I can have less worry about my kids going to school and moving around easily reducing stress and worry”

Focus group 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:

“Even with the 6 months card going about our daily routines was less stressful and having to use transport for free especially as an asylum seeker will be helpful to my mental health.”

Focus group participant

“[With free transport] I’ll be able to meet my children’s needs and attend my appointments on time, which will make me very happy.”

Survey respondent

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

"I feel forced into isolation due to living in a remote area with infrequent bus services. I must walk a considerable distance to reach the nearest bus stop, and the high cost fares makes transportation inaccessible. As a result, I feel deprived of opportunities for education, social outing and volunteer experience which make me lonely and sad all the time."

Focus group participant

"Sometimes I want to take my kids to the city center or something so that they can have fun and feel like a part of the society, but she is 8 now and will get charged full price."

Focus group participant

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

"If transport costs weren't a concern, I could take my children to parks during the summer holidays. Instead, we had to stay home for two months because of the expense."

Focus group participant

When survey respondents were asked what changes they would most like to see in public transport in Northern Ireland, the vast majority (77.38%) said they'd want free transport for asylum seekers. Cheaper public transport was also a popular option (67.86%), followed by polite, helpful and well-trained staff (36.90%), More regular services (30.95%) and transport running time (29.76%). These were all similar to the response in Scotland.

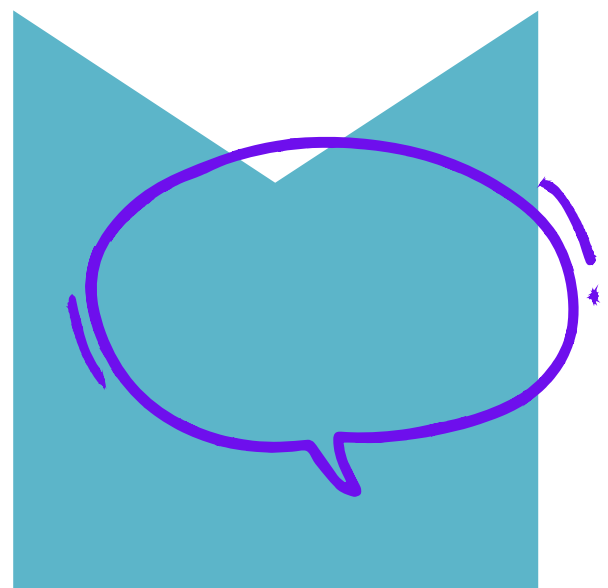
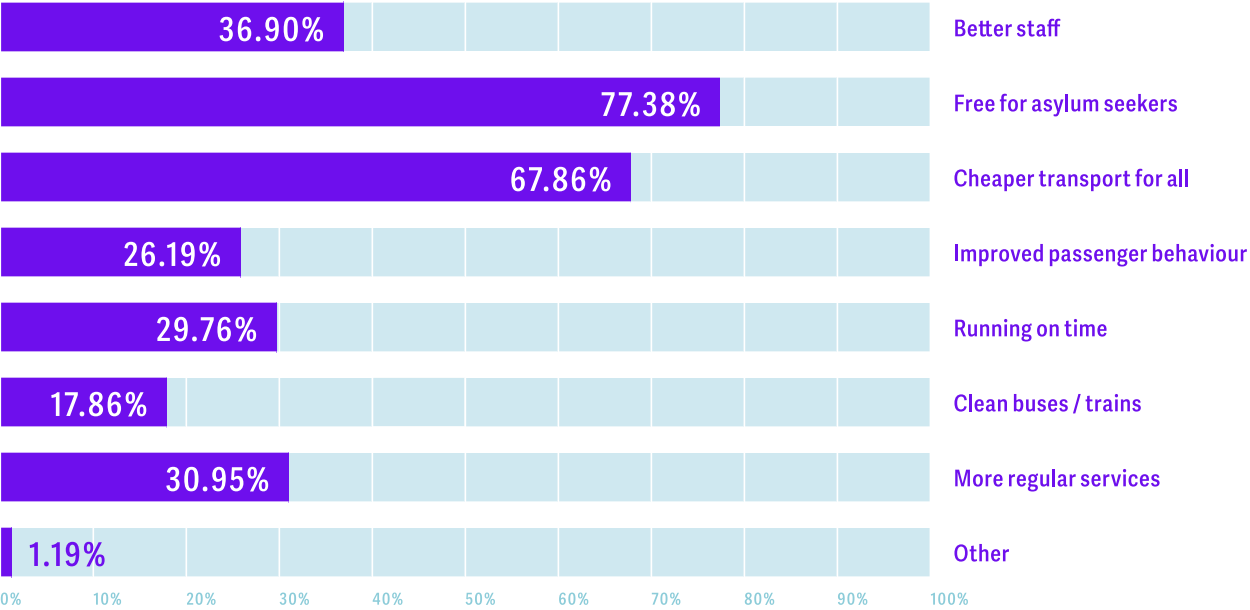


Figure 4.
Desired changes in public transport in Northern Ireland



Key takeaways

The headline findings from this research emphasize the significant impact of transport costs on refugees and people seeking asylum in Northern Ireland. The survey and focus group findings reveal that cost is the most pressing transportation issue, with 97.62% of survey respondents reporting at least one instance where they could not afford transport due to cost. This problem is particularly severe for people seeking asylum who live on asylum support payments of £49.18 per week and are largely unable to work, unlike those with refugee status who have access to public funds.

For example:

"An all-day public transport ticket in Belfast costs £4.60, which is almost two-thirds of the £7.03 asylum seekers must live on per day."

Focus group participant

"If I spend my money on the public transport ticket, I don't have enough for food."

Focus group participant

Furthermore, the research shows that refugees and people seeking asylum rely heavily on public transport for essential activities. These include attending medical and legal appointments, shopping for food and toiletries, and participating in social activities. Attending medical and legal appointments and shopping for essentials are necessities for health and dignity. However, participating in social activities, which is key to integration and building social relationships, is often deprioritised due to the prohibitive transport cost. This trade-off is concerning, as loneliness is a known risk factor for poor mental health. As one focus group participant shared:

"Sometimes, I don't go to community events because I have to save for the week."

Focus group participant

From a well-being and human rights perspective, introducing free or subsidised public transport for people seeking asylum in Northern Ireland would have a transformative impact. Such a policy would enable individuals to participate more fully in social activities, reduce feelings of isolation, and ease anxiety for individuals and families. As one focus group participant expressed:

"With affordable transport, I could take my children out, meet friends, and feel like I'm part of a community."

Focus group participant

This research underscores the urgent need for policy change. Advocacy will be essential to ensure that any new transport initiatives are implemented inclusively and effectively. It is also our hope that Northern Ireland will follow the example set by Scotland in offering free transport for people seeking asylum, thereby supporting integration, reducing mental health risks, and fostering social inclusion.

While 68% of respondents reported positive experiences with public transport drivers, they noted that drivers do not intervene when passengers are rude or display racist behaviour toward them with 37% of respondents asking for more polite helpful and well trained staff.

Therefore, there is more that could be done to ensure that people feel safe using public transport, and that transport providers support an anti-racist approach.



Thank you

Thank you to all the participants who took part in the focus groups or took the time to complete the survey.

Thank you to all our community partners who helped us do the survey and provided the space for the focus groups.

Thank you to our colleagues in Scotland who developed the methodology for the research and supported us in developing this report.

Recommendations

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

- The Department for Infrastructure should extend the current pilot programme until a concessionary fare programme can be implemented. A full evaluation of the pilot should be published, and the recommendations should inform future policy. Following the recent consultation on concessionary fares, the Department indicated that free transport for people seeking asylum and victims of human trafficking would only be made available if there was an adequate budget.
- The Northern Ireland Executive should commit to rolling out free public transport travel for people seeking asylum as a priority, with guidance from people with lived experience and people working with them. This will ensure that the rollout is efficient and inclusive, considering the unique needs of this community.
- The Executive's Office Integration Strategy should commit to providing free public transport for people seeking asylum and refugees, which is a key action supporting integration.
- Free public transport travel for people seeking asylum in Northern Ireland must be completely unrestricted, without any limitations on location or time of travel.
- Free public transport travel must be provided to the asylum-seeking community to uphold their human rights and avoid stigmatisation.
- The Government must evaluate the impact of providing free public transport 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.
- The Department of Infrastructure and Translink should have mechanisms (such as citizen panels or public engagement forums) to allow people from Northern Ireland'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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MENTALHEALTH.ORG.UK

London

Mental Health Foundation,
Studio 2, 197 Long Lane,
London, SE1 4PD

Glasgow

Mental Health Foundation,
2nd Floor, Moncrieff House,
69 West Nile Street, Glasgow, G1 2QB

Cardiff

Mental Health Foundation,
Suite 7, Floor 9, Brunel House,
2 Fitzalan Road, Cardiff, CF24 0EB

Belfast

Mental Health Foundation,
5th Floor, 14 College Square North,
Belfast, BT1 6AS

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