

Thistle Assistance Update

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to provide the Board with an update on progress that has been made on the Thistle Assistance scheme.

2. BACKGROUND

- 2.1 [Thistle Assistance](#) is a free app and card for people to use when they need some additional support using public transport. Both can be personalised to show the support required (for example more time getting to a seat) and are shown to the driver or public transport staff member when boarding.
- 2.2 It's a national scheme, which is managed by SEStran on behalf of the seven Regional Transport Partnerships (RTP). It has been running since 2002.
- 2.3 The scheme is clearly referenced in SEStran's Regional Transport Strategy, under the section '*enhancing access to and accessibility of public transport*'. The delivery of the scheme contributes to: '*Deliver improved public transport information in a variety of formats, supported by appropriate wayfinding infrastructure on the transport network*'.
- 2.4 The scheme is a key element of [SEStran's Equalities Outcomes 2025-2029 report](#). Thistle Assistance was identified as a crucial project to achieve the following outcome in the south east region of Scotland: Improve the experience for people and groups who share protected characteristics under the Equality Act 2010 using public transport.
- 2.5 It is also recognised at a national level by Transport Scotland as part of the [Accessible Travel Framework – Delivery Plan 2024-2026](#), and is outlined in the workstream 1 on Passenger experience.

3. 2024-2025 KEY HIGHLIGHTS

- 3.1 In 2024/2025, SEStran dedicated additional capacity to run and manage the scheme; work was taken over by one Project officer supported by the Comms and Marketing officer to focus on more targeted and regular promotional initiatives to increase awareness of the scheme among potential users. This has also led to a number of initiatives aiming at improving the scheme.
- 3.2 A review was undertaken on the comms and marketing materials which led to the following key improvements.

- 3.2.1
 - The leaflet and the card have been updated to improve readability / accessibility (and references to Covid 19 were removed)
 - The Thistle Assistance website has been updated to improve access to the 'request a card' and 'download the app' pages
 - New social media graphics have been created, and formats have been adjusted for social media use
 - Tracking URLs have been used to better understand how people arrive on the Thistle Assistance's website
 - A communications pack has been created and distributed to transport operators, to help them understand the initiative and to support them to share Thistle Assistance messaging through their channels. This includes standard newsletter, website and social media copy, social media assets, a customer facing poster and an updated poster and leaflet for transport staff
- 3.3 A user survey was designed in collaboration with Transport Scotland and Disability Equality Scotland early 2025 with the aim of gathering information on level of awareness as well as use of the scheme. The survey was out for two weeks in February 2025 and received over 100 responses across Scotland.
- 3.4 Although the survey could not be directed to existing users, it showed some important points:
 - 3.4.1
 - The awareness of the scheme remained limited compared to other support schemes such as the Blue Badge or the National Entitlement Card
 - Anecdotal evidence suggested that there was a gap in knowledge and awareness coming from transport operator staff when a user shows the Thistle Assistance card/app, impacting negatively on the overall user experience
 - The survey results suggested that there was an opportunity to significantly improve the scheme by working more closely with the transport operators, in particular bus operators to increase awareness of the scheme
- 3.5 During 2024/25, the take up of the card and app had been low. Historically, the approach had focused on various print and broadcast options, however, given the popularity of digital media, a campaign based on a full digital marketing approach was initiated. This had the added benefit of making it easier to measure the campaign's impact and success.
- 3.6 The Scotland-wide campaign ran from 21 March to 30 April 2025 and focused on improving awareness and take-up of cards and apps of Thistle Assistance.
 - 3.6.1 Here's a summary of the approach for this campaign:
 - Meta (Facebook and Instagram): these were targeted by audience interests and were video and static image ads

- Newspaper websites, targeted by audience interests: these were video ads
- Apple app store
- Google search results (based on key words and search query phrases)

3.6.2 Key results of the campaign: 21 March to 30 April 2025 compared to preceding period (9 February to 20 March 2025):

- Card requests: 3,376 vs 131 (2,477% increase)
- App downloads: 1,784 vs 34 (5,147% increase)

3.7 The results of this marketing activity have been very encouraging, and have informed the plans of 2025/2026, during which we are aiming to deliver another Scotland-wide digital marketing campaign.

3.8 A 'lessons learnt' document was created to identify key areas of improvement, both on the management of the scheme and on the promotional side of things. This is available on request.

4. 2025-2026 PROJECT PLANS

4.1 The learning collected from the past few months, and the data collected have led to the development of a project plan for 25/26.

4.2 The key deliverables are:

- The implementation of small-scale amendments to improve the scheme's management efficiency (i.e. card request form)
- The development and running of a digital marketing campaign followed by a report outlining successes and lessons learnt
- The distribution of a user survey, with a focus on existing users to capture real life experiences and potential impact of the scheme on attitudes and perceptions towards public transport
- The distribution of a survey to transport operators and any other engagement initiatives to better understand current awareness, engagement and promotion of the scheme by operators
- The appointment of a card printer / distributor on a multi-year contract
- The development of a plan for 26/27 reflecting key priorities for future initiatives

4.3 This financial year will see an increased focus on stakeholder engagement to ensure and maintain a good buy-in across the board. A priority will also be on the collection of data (both quantitative and qualitative) to ensure a good understanding of the scheme's efficiency and impact as well as to identify areas of improvement to inform future plans.

4.4 2025/2026 already saw some valuable success with the scheme; the last digital marketing campaign has been nominated in the category 'Campaign of the year' at the National Transport Award 2025. Winners will be announced on the 2nd of October during the award ceremony.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 The Board is asked to:

- Note the content of this report.
- Provide, where appropriate, commentary on the above report.

Sandra Lavergne

Project Officer

26 September 2025

Policy Implications	Thistle Assistance aligns with the objectives of the RTS as well as SEStran's Equalities Outcomes 2025-29 and therefore will help deliver on SEStran's policy objectives.
Financial Implications	None
Equalities Implications	Thistle Assistance is part of SEStran's Equalities Outcomes 2025-29 and should have a positive impact on equalities.
Climate Change Implications	None