

Local Government and Communities Committee

Homelessness

Submission from the Scottish Refugee Council

About Scottish Refugee Council

1. In 2015 Scottish Refugee Council celebrated 30 years of working to ensure that all refugees in Scotland are treated fairly, with dignity and that their human rights are respected. Our vision is for a Scotland in which all people seeking refugee protection are welcome. As an independent charity, we provide essential information and advice to people seeking asylum and refugees in Scotland, campaign for political change, raise awareness about issues that affect refugees, and work closely with local communities and organisations.
2. Our Scottish Refugee Integration Service assists new refugees and their family members reunited in Scotland to access their rights and entitlements, including their rights to housing and homelessness assistance. We provide advice, advocacy and assistance in a range of areas, including housing, social security, health, education, employability, and encourage people to participate in their communities and wider society.
3. Along with the Scottish Government and Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA), we lead on the implementation of Scotland's Refugee Integration Strategy, New Scots: Integrating Refugees in Scotland Communities.¹

Introduction

4. Scottish Refugee Council welcomes the opportunity to respond to this call for evidence. We have not endeavoured to answer all of the questions set out in the consultation document. Instead we focus on the key areas of homelessness which may affect refugees in Scotland.

Background

5. In 2015 (the [latest figures released by Home Office](#)) 39,968 people applied for asylum in the UK, 7,235 of these applications were from "dependants". While the Home Office does not publicly release figures about how many people are dispersed to Scotland, it is estimated that around 10% of people are dispersed to Scotland, amounting to around 4,000 people, approximately 700 of whom are likely to be children. These figures are subject to change according to the Home Office's dispersal priorities and, from meetings with the Home Office, we know that the number of families with children being dispersed to Scotland has increased rapidly in the past year.

6. Although the Home Office releases data on the outcomes of asylum decisions made at a UK level, it does not release data at a Scottish level, nor does it break these down. According to Home Office Figures, approximately 50-60% of initial applications for asylum are granted or overturned at appeal stage.
7. Refugees and people granted Discretionary Leave, Humanitarian Protection or Indefinite Leave to Remain are all entitled public funds and have access to full housing options, including homelessness and social housing.
8. In its strategy, [“New Scots: Integrating Refugees in Scotland's Communities”](#), the Scottish Government recognised the need for action to intervene early to address the housing needs of newly granted refugees, increase housing options for refugees and improve refugees’ access to suitable housing. We will pick up on many of these themes throughout this response.

Aims of this call for evidence

9. After a range of fact-finding visits and oral evidence, the Scottish Parliament’s Local Government and Communities Committee has launched a call for written evidence on homelessness. The committee is interested to find out the reasons why people can find themselves homeless or threatened with homelessness and what can be done to tackle this effectively.

A system where homelessness and destitution is “built in”

10. In the asylum process, refugees are not entitled to access public funds which include homelessness or statutory social security which might allow them to access accommodation of their own (for example Housing Benefit or Universal Credit). Most asylum seekers are also prohibited from working as part of their application for asylum meaning that they are unable to fund accommodation of their own. Under its asylum accommodation contracts, the Home Office provides accommodation to people seeking asylum on a no choice basis in a number of areas across the UK. Glasgow is the local authority receiving the largest number of dispersed asylum seekers in the UK¹. People are also able to apply only for financial support from the Home Office while their applications are being assessed. When refugees gain their status, they become entitled to access local authority housing duties and other forms of social housing. Refugees also gain the right to access social security benefits at this time and gain the right to work in the UK.
11. Once granted refugee status, refugees have 28 days in which to find accommodation and alternative financial support. This is undoubtedly the main driver of homelessness amongst refugees with status in the UK and often means that refugees rely on local authority duties to accommodate them under homelessness legislation.

¹ Home Office Statistics, Quarter 3, 2016

12. From, 1 April 2016 to 31 March 2017, 535 new households granted leave to remain and accessed advice from our Integration advisers. 487 (91%) of these reported a problem accessing settled housing and 455 (85%) reported homelessness². Most of these individuals applied to Glasgow City Council as homeless after receiving their status³. However, accessing temporary accommodation at the point of need presents difficulties and at least 42 of our clients were unable to access temporary accommodation when they became homeless because the Local Authority did not have temporary accommodation available for them. It is partly because of these failures that some 17% of those refugees that we know about moved on from their asylum accommodation to live with friends and family, rather than in their own accommodation.
13. Refugees then face lengthy waits in hostels, supported accommodation units and other forms of temporary accommodation before they are able to find settled accommodation. Our latest statistics show that individuals accessing our service take an average of 32.6 weeks to find permanent accommodation. This is likely to be something of an under-estimation as our service focusses on assisting new refugees. Many refugees who have had their status for several months cease to engage with us and, instead, access mainstream services such as housing support providers.
14. Our [Holistic Integration Service evaluation report](#) provides detailed statistical and qualitative accounts of the impact of the homeless system on refugees in Scotland. It highlights that too many refugees have difficulties finding temporary accommodation because none is available in Glasgow, that the times taken for refugees to access permanent accommodation are too long and that, too often, temporary accommodation is unsuitable and too expensive for to allow refugees to effectively integrate through employment and education. The report makes a number of key recommendations including:
- **Scottish Government must confirm its commitment to refugee integration by renewing the New Scots strategy, 2014 – 2017. The next Refugee Integration Strategy should set the national standards for the integration of refugees in Scotland and set the premise for an innovative Integration Bill and clarify refugees’ rights and entitlements.**
 - **Local Authorities must uphold their homelessness prevention duty by creating dedicated pathways for new refugees to access temporary housing and progress promptly to settled housing without having to access emergency homeless services when their asylum support ends. This could be achieved by adopting similar systems to those implemented as part of the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Programme 2015/6.**

²² Scottish Refugee Council Refugee Integration Service Statistics

³ Homeless applications in Glasgow are dealt with through a specialist team called the Asylum and Refugee Service. This team is one of the busiest in Glasgow.

- **Local Authorities should provide affordable temporary accommodation to avoid creating additional barriers to employment and education by creating a ‘poverty trap’ for refugees and others who are homeless.**
 - **Local Authorities should ensure that all households in temporary accommodation have access to advice on the implications of any change in employment or education circumstances, and full knowledge of options available to enable the pursuance of opportunities.**
 - **Local Authorities should invest in equality sensitive housing support for refugees to ensure all groups are provided with appropriate support, including single men, who are disproportionately affected by homelessness. To be in line with the Scottish Government’s policy that integration starts from day one, the UK and Scottish Government must implement the devolution of asylum support, accommodation and advice as set out in the Smith Commission and ensure availability of integration services**
 - **The UK and Scottish Government should work together to plan the widening of asylum dispersal in Scotland and ensure properly resourced Integration Services are available in all local authorities taking part in the dispersal of asylum seekers. This should be done in respect of asylum seekers rights and by aiming to meet suitable housing and support standards.**
15. We echo these recommendations in this response and emphasise our strongly held belief that the system of provision for asylum seekers and refugees in Scotland need not and should not accept the position where homelessness is “built in”.

A two-tier approach to Scotland’s refugees

16. The [Scottish Parliament's Equality and Human Rights Committee 2017 Report on Destitution](#) and the [UK Government's All Party Parliamentary Group on Refugees 2017 report on Refugee Integration](#) both touched on the above issues and said that a two tier approach is developing between those refugees who have been resettled through schemes such as the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme (for whom Local Authorities have been able to secure settled housing from day one) and those that claim protection through the asylum process who face sustained and severe poverty with a persistent threat of homelessness. And, if refused protection, then they will often fall into what is in UN global poverty terms, the absolute poverty of destitution, suffering mental and physical health deterioration, and amongst other adversities, be at risk of exploitation including from organised crime. The Equality and Human Rights Committee report asked the Scottish Government to take a range of actions to prevent and mitigate the risk and reality of destitution facing those seeking, those granted and, in particular, those refused protection including:
- **The creation of a 'Scottish anti-destitution strategy' to inform a national approach to mitigating destitution.**
 - **The creation of a new Scottish Government advocacy service for destitute people with insecure immigration status.**

- **The creation of a national coordinated practitioners' network, which would include Scottish Government officials, representatives from health boards, local authorities, non-government organisations, third sector organisations, and legal practitioners.**
 - **The Scottish Government should examine the feasibility of extending the Free Bus Travel Scheme to allow destitute people with insecure immigration status to attend appointments.**
 - **Where clinicians consider an individual with insecure immigration status has an infectious disease that requires accommodation, this should be funded by the Scottish Government as a preventative measure.**
 - **The creation of a new 'Destitution Fund' by the Scottish Government for women experiencing domestic abuse unable to access other sources of help.**
 - **Update the COSLA/Local Authority guidance so that local authorities dealing with people with insecure immigration status are clear on help available.**
 - **The guidance should be unambiguous about carrying out human rights assessments.**
 - **Asylum seekers should have the right to do paid and unpaid community work in Scotland – allowing for better integration opportunities, supporting asylum seekers' mental and physical health, and the opportunity for asylum seekers to receive an income.**
17. We broadly support these recommendations and would ask the Committee to consider the issue of asylum seeker and refugee homeless within their findings, highlighting the issues faced by this group of people, regardless of whether they have recourse to current homeless duties.

The need for advocacy services

18. The evidence gathered in the evaluation of our Holistic Integration Service, Equalities and Human Rights Committee and All Party Parliamentary all highlighted the need for effective advocacy services focused on prevention to ensure that asylum seekers and refugees are able to practically access their rights and entitlements, including the right to adequate housing. They point towards the fact that funding for advocacy services is short-term and grant-based, leaving projects unstable and vulnerable to project termination. We back the calls in these documents for the establishment of a statutory funded holistic asylum advocacy service, which is a tangible prevention approach to the destitution of those seeking or granted protection. For those refused protection such an advocacy service is a more humane and therefore more effective way to minimise the scale and the severity of both human suffering as well as financial resources stemming from crisis interventions and wider cost-shunting upon Scottish public authorities, especially in health and social care and homelessness services as well as by NGOs and communities.

Conclusion

19. The above evidence points towards a system which accepts homelessness as a built-in consequence of one's status. We also show that, in Scotland, considerable work has been done to highlight the issue and the momentum for change is clearly there. We ask the committee to ensure that the above evidence is included in its report and that it reflects the recommendations put forward therein.
20. We thank you again for this opportunity to submit our evidence. For background on destitution, please see appended our briefing for the recent Scottish parliament debate on the report by the Equalities and Human Rights Committee's inquiry into destitution, asylum and insecure immigration status. Should you have any questions about this matter, please do not hesitate to contact the undersigned.

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