A Fairer Scotland for Asylum Seekers and Refugees in a Time of Austerity?

February 2012
Who Are We and What Do We Do?

The Scottish Refugee Policy Forum is an independent, refugee led organisation. We seek to encourage and facilitate the integration of all asylum seekers and refugees living in Scotland by assisting them to identify a common purpose and develop an independent, representative and collective voice. We are a member organisation. We develop our strategic direction and policy positions through regular consultation and dialogue with its membership and other organisations. Our members include Refugee Community Organisations, Framework for Dialogue groups, Independent individuals and Associate members such as the Compass Users Group.

In addition, we work closely with the advocacy group Refugee Women’s Strategy Group (RWSG) to ensure that our work represents the needs of asylum-seeking and refugee women. SRPF also works in partnership with Scottish Refugee Council (SRC), The Scottish Refugee Council’s policy and practice is informed by the views and concerns of refugees and asylum seekers. SRPF benefit from support and guidance on policy, practice and governance issues.

Our Objectives
We seek to ensure that:

a) Refugees and asylum seekers in Scotland are treated with humanity, equality and in accordance with International law.

b) SRPF advocates for policies and legislation in the UK which improve access to international protection.

c) The needs of refugee women and other additionally disadvantaged refugee groups are recognized and accommodated within policy development and service provision.

d) The SRPF plays an active role in promoting initiatives which raise awareness, alleviate poverty, assist integration and improve the quality of life for refugees and asylum seekers.
Our 2012 policy conference aimed to:

- Ensure that refugee and asylum seekers’ voices are heard by policy makers, campaigners and service providers.
- Provide an opportunity for our members to hear from campaigners, policy makers and service providers about services and policies that are affecting them, particularly during a time of economic austerity.
- Ensure our members are directly involved in shaping the SRPF’s policy positions by providing a space for them to share their views.
- Use the issues raised by our members to move forward and promote change.

The Conference

The Themes

The four themes which were the focus of the conference were chosen as a result of feedback from questionnaires circulated to SRPF members by the committee in October 2011. This feedback was analysed and the SRPF committee discussed which were the main issues being raised by its members. Important issues which arose were:

- ‘Fairness’ or lack thereof in accessing services
- The impact of deep cuts in services on the lives of asylum seekers and refugees
- The importance of capturing the wide range of experiences of asylum seekers and refugees, to include people who were still going through the asylum process, people who had been refused asylum and people who had received status

Four main themes were identified and the committee held meetings to prepare how to run workshops focusing on these broad themes. These four themes were:

1. Justice and Legal System
2. Employment and Education
3. Health and Destitution
4. Racism and Integration

The conference was attended by approximately 70 people from SRPF member organisations and individuals from refugee communities, a range of service providers and speakers from the Scottish Parliament, Scottish Refugee Council, Glasgow City Council, the NHS and the refugee community.

As well as speeches from the invited speakers which were followed by question and answer sessions, attendees were given the choice to join workshops that addressed each theme. The morning workshop asked ‘Where we are now’ to identify the main issues arising around each theme whilst the afternoon workshop discussed ‘How to move forward’ to find solutions to current problems.
The Speakers

Christina McKelvie
MSP
Christina is MSP for the Scottish National Party in the Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse constituency.
Christina outlined her commitment to asylum seekers and refugees and recognised them as an integral part of Scottish society. She also spoke of Scottish Government policy which highlights the important of integration on arrival for all asylum seekers and refugees and the government’s ongoing funding commitment. Christina also mentioned the commitment of fellow MSPs to the cause.

Gary Christie
Scottish Refugee Council
Gary is Head of Policy and Communications involves overseeing SRC’s policy work, research, media, website, training and events. A key role of his team is to influence UK and Scottish government policy as well as public attitudes, to ensure refugees and those seeking asylum feel safe and welcome while they remain in Scotland. Gary gave an overview of the key failures in the asylum system such as decision-making and the policy framework which leads to destitution and a lack of protection for people seeking asylum in Scotland. He set out SRC’s key activities to challenge and seek improvements to the treatment of asylum seekers and refugees in Scotland including campaigning on solutions to destitution.

Maria Walker
Glasgow City Council
Maria works for Glasgow City Council as the Head of the English as an Additional Language (EAL) Service.
Maria explained that the EAL Service now consists of 132 teachers working for Glasgow City Council to support children and young people learning English. Within this, the service has a specific remit for the asylum seeker and refugee community.
In an effort to focus on teaching and learning in the classroom costs have been reduced in other areas such as school transport and management.
Maria stated that despite austerity measures Glasgow City Council has maintained teacher numbers and has even managed to increase the number of teachers in some secondary schools. They have also maintained additional services such as the EAL services. They aim to develop projects which promote and value bilingualism and diversity in over 100 schools across the city.
Vuyelwa Mpongoshe  
Refugee Speaker  
Vuyelwa told the audience about her experience as an asylum seeker and refugee. She came to the UK in 2005 from South Africa after being a victim of domestic violence. Vuyelwa talked about her journey to the UK, her experiences with both legal representation and accommodation.

Vuyelwa has volunteered to support asylum seekers and refugees in various roles, including at Unity Centre.

Jac Ross  
NHS Greater Glasgow & Clyde  
Jac is Corporate Inequalities manager for NHS Greater Glasgow & Clyde Health Board. The team focuses on tackling health inequality and addresses discrimination caused by socioeconomic status, gender and sexual orientation, race and faith and disability.

Jac explained that the Corporate Inequalities Team looks at practical access to healthcare e.g transport, staff attitude and communication. They aim to ensure medical professionals consider patients’ needs during their appointment and in follow up care. She said that NHS has its own pool of interpreters.

Jac said that the team also works on a policy level in partnership with local authorities. She emphasised that the team is keen to involve more refugees and asylum seekers in their patient and staff structures to ensure their views and needs are represented.
Summary of Workshop Discussion

Justice and Legal System
Our members have found that the information provided to newly arrived asylum seekers can be confusing and insufficient. Currently asylum seekers, who are likely to feel disorientated and be recovering from a long and difficult journey, find it hard to tell their story to UKBA. Sharing their experience is even more challenging as a result of poor interpreters.
Some members also voiced concerns around the poor quality of legal representation as a result of reduced legal aid. Lawyers sometimes fail to take an appropriate amount of time to explain the asylum system to their clients. Communication from the lawyer is often inadequate and, if someone receives a negative decision, they can be left without any kind of legal support. Also, members expressed frustration with the culture of disbelief within UKBA and with its bureaucracy.

Education and Employment
SRPF members discussed access to education at length. Many people voiced concern about difficulties accessing education at all levels, in particular access to ESOL courses. One specific problem identified by some members is how colleges organise and coordinate ESOL classes and registration. This directly impacts people’s access to education. In terms of employment, our members expressed concern about racism and discrimination from employers who seem to find it hard to acknowledge a person’s skills but do consider their background. There was also a feeling that employment agencies failed to offer sufficient support to find work and volunteer placements. The support which is currently available fails to create an environment in which asylum seekers and refugees feel their specific needs and concerns are listened to.
Health and Destitution

The issues raised by SRPF members regarding health can be divided into those problems regarding access and quality of service. Although the NHS has a duty of care to all asylum seekers and refugees in Scotland, access remains a problem before, during and after the asylum process. Some of our members told us that they struggled to find information relating to healthcare, for example how to register with a GP upon dispersal. Others brought up issues with HC2s which are not automatically renewed and so can leave asylum seekers temporarily without access to health services.

Access to healthcare is also problematic for refused asylum seekers and people without support as they face particular difficulty when trying to register with a GP. Poor access to mental health services was raised as a particular concern.

In terms of quality of healthcare services, our members find that the quality of interpreters is often poor and that they often lack or confuse medical vocabulary. In addition, people stated that information provided by the NHS to patients can be confusing and difficult for those without a good grasp of English to understand. This can lead to people being confused about the care they are receiving and may lead to them missing appointments.

Destitution for newly arrived asylum seekers is exacerbated by the need for them to travel to UKBA offices in Croydon to be screened and registered. Members discussed how destitution among refused asylum seekers is going to increase as a result of the end of YPeople’s UKBA asylum accommodation contract. Members felt strongly that agencies needed a better long-term response to the destitution of asylum seekers. Those on Section 4 struggle to support themselves using the Azure card.

The restrictions placed on the limited amount of money they are given make using the Azure card stigmatising and dehumanising.

Racism and Integration

Our members spoke positively about the role of community groups and networks who made them feel part of the community, particularly where their children were concerned. However, members did highlight safety concerns that were still current, and members gave examples of verbal and physical harassment experienced from locals and children. They also expressed hesitation about involving the police because of their experiences of police in their home countries. Members said refugees and asylum seekers face racism and discrimination in many aspects of Scottish society – from using public transport to potential employers.

The lack of understanding amongst the general public about why asylum seekers and refugees are in Scotland adds to this, and is exacerbated by misleading reports in the media. Members noted that racism could be an issue among young people but integration is often easier when they are directly engaged.
**Key Issues: Justice and Legal System**

**Access to information for newly arrived asylum seekers**

On arrival, asylum seekers are likely to be disorientated, recovering from a long and difficult journey. They may even have suffered violence in their home country or during their journey.

Information provided to newly arrived asylum seekers is often confusing and not always in an appropriate language. It is not always clear who is responsible for providing what meaning that in some cases asylum seekers can miss out on critical information.

This makes it very difficult for them to disclose about themselves and their case as soon as they arrive. In addition, they are likely to be uninformed of the legal aspects of the asylum process in the UK. They may even have been misinformed by agents on how to represent themselves. As a result it may be held against them later if their story is found to be inconsistent during further interviews.

**Issues with interpreters**

Having a poor interpreter can hugely impact the validity of an asylum seeker’s claim. Currently, problems exist with interpreters such as them not being able to accommodate for different dialects, lacking neutrality when dealing with sensitive issues such as political affiliation, and not understanding client- interpreter boundaries.

Despite these problems with interpreting, asylum seekers are forced to sign a paper, which they most likely will not understand, to confirm that the information which has been recorded is accurate. This signature is meaningless if the asylum seeker is unaware of the interpretation has been incorrectly interpreted into English.

All these factors lead to inaccurate information which can in turn result in the omission of vital information, leading to a refusal by UKBA.

Refugees should be aware of their rights when dealing with interpreters. An improved interpreting service would lead to more robust information for UKBA to make decisions on and thus reduce the length of time people spend in the asylum process.

Currently many disputed asylum seeker claims are on-going due to unreliable language tests designed to prove nationality this means that many people do not feel that they have had access to justice.

**Recommendations:**

- Upon arrival, the welfare issues of newly arrived asylum seekers needs to be prioritised by UKBA
- Information on rights and legal services should be made available by UKBA and legal representatives prior to the screening interview

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**Recommendations:**

- UKBA needs a better interpreting monitoring system to ensure they provide interpreters who speak the correct dialect, follow good interpreting practice and are not influenced by bias.
Bureaucracy and culture of disbelief within UKBA

These have both contributed to long waiting times for asylum decisions and support issues.

In order to make a claim, asylum seekers are required to provide evidence. This kind of evidence is extremely difficult to provide for various different reasons. One main reason can be the lack of person-specific evidence of abuse.

UKBA frequently expresses a lack of trust in documents which are provided and disbelief regarding the difficulty in finding evidence. Obtaining proof of persecution can be difficult due to the lack of infrastructure e.g. means of communication, in many countries.

For those who are successful in gaining leave to remain further bureaucratic problems exist. National Insurance Numbers are prepared at the screening stage but there can be delays in the allocation of these once status has been granted. This leaves people being unable to access benefits, particularly Child Tax Credit benefits meaning newly granted refugees become destitute, often for long periods.

Recommendations:

- UKBA should strive to involve community groups and country experts more in forming guidance.
- UKBA must review its processes and improve upon the bureaucratic systems that impact negatively on new refugees.

SRPF ACTIONS

- SRPF to initiate and maintain meetings with UKBA in order to discuss:
  - Welfare and information needs of new arrivals and those going through the asylum process
  - Interpreting
  - Developing country guidance notes
  - Overcoming bureaucratic barriers for new refugees
Key issues: Education and Employment

Education

Access to ESOL and other education (children’s, college, higher)

Access to education at various levels remains a challenge for asylum seekers and refugees. Finding placements for ESOL classes proves to be particularly problematic as waiting lists are very long but attending such classes is a high priority for many people. When asylum seekers and refugees do succeed in finding ESOL places there is not always a range of appropriate levels available. There should be more ESOL classes in the community for both beginners and advanced.

The Scottish Government removed barriers for children of asylum seekers who claimed asylum before 01 December 2006. Some asylum seeker children who claimed asylum after this have low morale as they cannot access the same higher education as their peers. This policy needs revisited.

The lack of childcare provision is a serious barrier to accessing education for all families and single parents. This is a barrier predominantly affecting women.

Many asylum seeker children miss out on pre-school education and therefore struggle disproportionately sometimes with primary school because of a lack of language, confidence, and experience of peer interaction.

Depression and other factors related to a person’s asylum claim can be a barrier to accessing and progressing in education. There should be more community-based/local support before people attend college – such as emotional support and confidence building.

There can be pressure from DWP on refugees when they seek to improve their English language. It is not consistently recognised that this improves employability. There needs to be more person-centred support in helping refugees to find a job.

There should be support to help professionals/tradespeople to continue in their profession e.g. more work placements etc. There should be dedicated support to help asylum seekers and refugees to learn about equivalences (for qualifications).

Recommendations:

- Scottish Government and local authorities should reprioritise ESOL to enable asylum seekers and refugees to access ESOL provision
- College and community ESOL providers should coordinate provision better.

SRPF ACTIONS

- Engage with education service providers and policy makers at a strategic level.
- Establish and maintain links with providers and monitor and influence their service provision.
- Assist SRPF members to access information about education and employment and build stronger links with relevant agencies.
Key Issues: Health and Destitution

Health
Although the NHS has a duty of care to all asylum seekers and refugees in Scotland, access remains a problem before, during and after the asylum process.

Access to information
It is not clear for asylum seekers arriving in Glasgow how they can register with a GP. Following allocation of a GP, the information they receive from the GP’s practice is often unclear for people and this confusion is compounded by language barriers. In addition, as many asylum seekers and refugees may have to change their address frequently after they first arrive in the country, they can have problems receiving further information from healthcare providers. Although calling NHS 24 is free from a landline, the cost of phoning NHS 24 from a mobile is a barrier to many asylum seekers and refugees accessing information.

Recommendation:
- Upon arrival, the welfare needs of newly arrived asylum seekers needs to be addressed by UKBA and other providers. Information on health, rights and accommodation is vital. They should have access to this information prior to the screening interview.

Access to healthcare following refusal
Those receiving Section 4 support face particular difficulty when registering with GPs. This has a serious effect on people who need urgent access to healthcare/medical reports.
The Hunter Street surgery (in Glasgow) is a service open only to those who are ‘street homeless’ which can make it difficult for some asylum seekers and refugees to gain access despite no longer receiving support. For example, those who are staying with friends and therefore have a temporary correspondence address have difficulty registering.

Recommendations:
- NHS, UKBA, accommodation providers, Scottish Refugee Council and other stakeholders to work together
  - To ensure all asylum seekers at all stages in their claim are able to register with their local GP.
  - To monitor experiences of refused asylum seeker users.

Access to mental health provision
It is often difficult for asylum seekers and refugees coming from countries where mental health issues were stigmatised to discuss such concerns with health professionals in this country. Even when people are recognised as needing support they wait a long time to receive it.

Recommendations:
- UKBA, accommodation providers and others should provide information about mental health services to asylum seekers and encourage them to disclose current or past mental health issues.
- Community groups should work with mental health organisations to address the stigma surrounding mental health.
- All agency staff should receive training on culturally sensitive practice in relation to mental health.
Destitution

New arrivals

Newly arrived asylum seekers in Scotland are required to travel to Croydon even if they have reported health or other issues that identify them as vulnerable e.g. sexual violence, torture. Most new arrivals rely on charities such as Scottish Refugee Council, Refugee Survival Trust for assistance.

Recommendation:
- UKBA must re-evaluate their policy and screen all asylum seekers in Scotland to ensure applicants are not destitute and UKBA’s resources are used effectively.

Section 4 Issues

The Azure card creates many problems for asylum seekers who are receiving Section 4 support. Azure cards can only be used in limited outlets which means those on Section 4 support are extremely limited in where they can shop and what they can buy. As such, Azure cards are not culturally appropriate. For example, it is difficult for people to use them to buy halal meat. They can also not be used to pay for travel, therefore limiting people’s movements and isolating them.

In addition, the obligation to use up the money each week prevents people from managing their own finances.

The limitations placed on those receiving Section 4 by the Azure card makes using it both stigmatising and dehumanising.

Recommendation:
- All asylum seekers should be provided with UKBA cash support until they are granted status or leave the country.

Refused asylum seekers

Those who have been refused asylum and are unable to consider voluntary return, cannot access public funds. Community members (who themselves often have little means) also provide food, shelter and emotional support which can threaten their own support entitlement. Scottish Refugee Council, Refugee Survival Trust and others provide vital charitable support.

People provided discretionary accommodation support to refused asylum seekers. The end of this charitable support means that destitution among asylum seekers will increase putting more strain on charities and communities.

SRPF ACTIONS

- SRPF will continue to work with members to gather information about communities’ experiences in accessing NHS and other services.
- SRPF will continue to engage with NHS Inequalities Group and policy makers to raise awareness of issues and monitor progress of recommendations.
- SRPF will work with Scottish Refugee Council, Refugee Survival Trust and others to ensure members’ experiences of destitution are heard and addressed.
Key Issues: Racism and Integration

Issues with services
Asylum seekers and refugees are frequently victims of racism whilst using public transport at the hands of those providing the service. For example, bus drivers often refuse to assist ethnic minority women who have prams, or in some cases refuse to even stop for them. Some bus drivers have also exploited ethnic minority women by not providing the right ticket. Initiatives from local community groups and integration networks have contributed to positive relations between asylum seekers and refugees and receiving communities. However, young people within the asylum process staying in initial asylum support accommodation feel isolated from peers and less involved in extra curricular activities and that create barriers to integration. Refugees and asylum seekers continue to experience racist verbal and physical harassment in their local areas.

People are hesitant about involving the police because of their experiences of police in their home countries. This means that many hate crimes are left unreported and are not investigated.

Recommendations:
- A better complaints procedure is required by transport providers which seriously considers complaints from all groups of society and provides feedback on the action taken as a result of a complaint.
- Transport providers need to take awareness of diversity and sensitivity more seriously when employing drivers. This should be accompanied by diversity training focusing on language and cultural awareness.

SRPF ACTIONS
- SRPF will engage with existing transport providers, regulators and transport groups working to improve public transport.
- SRPF will meet with transport providers to engage with them and explain the situation of asylum seekers and refugees including their needs and the barriers they face.
- SRPF should provide information to its members on what 3rd Party Reporting is and how to access it.
- SRPF should engage with Glasgow Life regarding:
  - Funding issues for networks trying to provide more activities with young people
  - Improving access to projects for young people across Glasgow.
Overview of SRPF Action Points

- Distribute this report widely amongst SRPF members, service providers, policy makers and other interested parties.
- Include the action points in our work plan.
- Link SRPF members with new and existing information which may be useful to them.
- Encourage the distribution and sharing of this information amongst the asylum seeker and refugee community.

Justice and Legal System

- SRPF to initiate and maintain meetings with UKBA in order to discuss:
  - Welfare and information needs of new arrivals and those going through the asylum process
  - Interpreting
  - Developing country guidance notes
  - Overcoming bureaucratic barriers for new refugees

Education and Employment

- Engage with education service providers and policy makers at a strategic level.
- Establish and maintain links with providers and monitor and influence their service provision.
- Assist SRPF members to access information about education and employment and build stronger links with relevant agencies.

Health and Destitution

- SRPF will continue to work with members to gather information about communities’ experiences in accessing NHS and other services.
- SRPF will continue to engage with NHS Greater Glasgow & Clyde Health Board Corporate Inequalities and policy makers to raise awareness of issues and monitor progress of recommendations.
- SRPF will work with Scottish Refugee Council, Refugee Survival Trust and others to ensure members’ experiences of destitution are heard and addressed.

Racism and Integration

- SRPF will engage with existing transport providers, regulators and transport groups working to improve public transport.
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Useful Information

Many of our members raised concerns about access to information. SRPF would like to highlight some places refugees and asylum seekers can find useful information. We hope this will also be useful for Refugee Community Organisations for sharing with their members.

Justice and the Legal System
Legal representatives Go to ‘Multilingual’ section on Scottish Refugee Council website:
Complaints about Immigration Advice: OISC website
Office of the Immigration Services Commissioner
Scottish Legal Complaints Commission offers more advice
www.scottishlegalcomplaints.org.uk/how-to-complain/complaint-form.aspx

Interpreting
How to use interpreting services Go to ‘Multilingual’ section on Scottish Refugee Council website

Healthcare
How to use the NHS: Info in different languages and order a free DVD
http://www.how-to-use-the-nhs.com
Healthcare info at HRIS for asylum seekers and refugees

Destitution
Glasgow Destitution Network http://destitutionaction.wordpress.com/
Finding Free or Cheap Food & Clothing Locations
Go to ‘Multilingual’ section on Scottish Refugee Council website

Education
Skills Development Scotland: ‘My World of Work’ and select ‘Course Choices’
http://www.myworldofwork.co.uk/section/career-options
Education for young people/general: Contact British Red Cross (0141 331 4170) for their ‘Chrysalis’ guide that provides info for young people and general useful information for everyone

Employment
Finding work – a guide for refugees (6.6Mb.PDF)
Go to ‘Multilingual’ section on Scottish Refugee Council website

Racism and Crime
Strathclyde Police info on how to report a ‘Hate Crime’ information on Third Party Reporting Centres
http://www.strathclyde.police.uk/contact_us/report_crime/reporting_hate_crime/

Life in Scotland
Life in Scotland Go to ‘Multilingual’ section on Scottish Refugee Council website
Welcome to Scotland (young people and families)
Go to ‘Multilingual’ section on Scottish Refugee Council website— see the ‘Welcome to Scotland’ booklet
Things to consider after you receive leave to remain
Go to ‘Multilingual’ section on Scottish Refugee Council website
Feedback
All attendees were given a questionnaire at the end of the conference. The feedback showed that our members regarded the conference highly and all those who filled in the questionnaire stated that they would attend the event again if it was repeated next year.

Interested in Getting Involved?
We’re looking for enthusiastic and committed people to get involved with SRPF. For more information on getting involved, contact us (see contact details below).

A Big Thank You
The SRPF would like to thank:
- The SRPF members who participated and contributed during the conference who included:
  - Y People Glasgow Residents’ Association
  - Maryhill Integration Network
  - Guinean Association in Glasgow
  - North Glasgow Integration Network; Compass User’s Group
  - Refugee Women’s Strategy Group
  - Karibu
  - Living Well in Glasgow
  - Framework for Dialogue Groups across Glasgow
  - Eritrean Community Residing in Scotland
  - Sudanese Community; Congolese Community Unit
  - Cameroonian Association of Members and Sympathisers Scotland
- Awards for All
- Scottish Refugee Council
- Christina McKelvie, Gary Christie, Maria Walker, Jac Ross and Vuyelwa Mpongoshe
- Aja Mariama Konjira and Lamees Tayyem who contributed to the write-up of this report
- Kinning Park Complex

Contact us:
SRPF Chair
c/o Scottish Refugee Council
5 Cadogan Square
GlasgowG2 7PH
Or: hudarasi@hotmail.co.uk