

# **Inquiry into the Jobcentre Plus**

Evidence submitted by Scottish Refugee Council

**May 2013**

## **1. Executive summary**

Scottish Refugee Council recommends that:

- a) Job Centres need to adapt their service to be more accessible by all groups. A drop-in system should be implemented to remove some of the barriers created by requirements of initial contact made by phone or online.
- b) Systematic interpreting and translation service is provided over the phone, online and when meeting Job Centre staff.
- c) More efficient cooperation between the Home Office and the DWP is required to ensure timely allocation of national insurance number and process of benefits to avoid administrative destitution.
- d) Reinstate the award winning Move On Response Team which demonstrated great efficiency in processing benefit claims and avoided destitution of newly granted refugees. The need for a specialist team will be greater with the move to the Universal Credit.
- e) Asylum seekers should access mainstream benefits while waiting for the decision on their asylum claim, this would allow continuity of support when people are granted leave to remain and destitution will be avoided.
- f) Job Centre advisers need to receive training in understanding the needs and experience of refugees who seek work.
- g) Job Centre advisers need to adopt an asset based approach, recognising skills and competences to increase efficiency in matching job seekers into suitable jobs.
- h) Job Centres must provide more information about the British Labour Market to refugees.
- i) Sanctions should not be given to job seekers who are studying towards qualification that are necessary for them to secure employment.

**Scottish Refugee Council**

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Registered charity no: SC008639

## **2. Introduction with key area of expertise of respondent**

An independent charity, we offer direct advice services to people seeking asylum and refugees. We conduct detailed policy work which aims to influence policy makers in both Scotland and the UK and bring the issues that matter to those seeking refuge in Scotland to the fore. We support organisations in the community working with, or run by, refugees and asylum seekers, enabling them to have a voice at all levels in Scottish society.

We recently published a 3 year longitudinal study into refugee integration<sup>1</sup> which demonstrated valuable findings in relation to access to employment by refugees. This research is informing the review of Scotland's strategy to support the integration of refugees into Scottish communities led by the Scottish Government. Scottish Refugee Council is a member of the core working group for this review. The new refugee integration strategy is aimed to be published by autumn 2013.

Our Refugee Integration Service works with new refugees to assist them in integrating into Scotland. Advice and advocacy is offered for a one-year period enabling people granted Leave to Remain to learn about and access their rights and entitlements.

Our advisers provide expertise in housing, welfare rights, employability, education and more to encourage people to actively participate in their communities and wider society.

The quantitative and qualitative evidence we present in this paper is based on the experience of refugees who access our services as well as on our integration research.

Scottish Refugee Council welcomes the opportunity to provide evidence to the Committee to examine the role of Jobcentre Plus in the reformed welfare system.

## **3. Factual information and key issues**

### **3.1 Population profile - in working age, mostly fit and available to work**

In 2012/13, 522 households accessed our Refugee Integration service. Out of those people:

- 72% were aged between 18 and 34 years old and 26% were aged between 35 and 59 years old, and only 1.15% were older than 60.
- 64% were male and 35% were female.
- 74% of the households had no children, 97% of whom were single.
- 12% of the households were single parents

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.scottishrefugeecouncil.org.uk/policy\\_and\\_research/research\\_reports/integration\\_research](http://www.scottishrefugeecouncil.org.uk/policy_and_research/research_reports/integration_research)

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- 84 % of our clients were on JSA, 8.8 % on ESA and 5.7 % on IS.

Our research shows that refugees are eager to work and are actively seeking employment. There is a clear indication that refugees are in constant struggle to access the labour market, regardless of either how long they have been in the UK or the skill level that they have.

### 3.2 Barriers to employment

From direct advice service, our recent research<sup>2</sup> and our work with the Refugee Women's Strategy Group<sup>3</sup>, we know that refugees experience specific barriers to access employment:

- Language barriers – newly granted refugees will need to improve their skills and confidence in English in order to successfully access employment. Job Centre advisers should be aware of this and understand that attendance to ESOL classes is a necessary step to be included in the Job Seekers Agreement.
- Limited understanding of the labour market – refugees need support and assistance to improve their knowledge of how to seek work, their rights and obligations.
- Employment gaps due to the lack of right to work during the asylum process but also to the time required to learn English. Besides creating gaps in CVs, it can lead to lack of confidence and skill atrophy.
- Lack of recognition of foreign qualification by Job Centres and employers. This often leads to refugees being underemployed, and so even when their English skills are very good.
- Unreasonable demand from employers who rarely accept Biometric Resident Permit as proof of the right to work and request the provision of Travel Documents. Not all refugees will be able to apply for a Travel Document, if they can it is costly and can take up to 6 months to be produced. Travel Document is the equivalent of a passport for British Nationals, who do not always have a passport and who do not have to respond to similar requests from employers. Employers need to access better information about documents that they can trust to establish if non-UK nationals have the right to work.
- Homelessness – 95% of newly granted refugees who access our Refugee Integration Services have to present as homeless at the end of the 28 day move-on period when the support from the Home Office stops. In Scotland, all refugees in this situation have a right to be provided with temporary accommodation by a Scottish local authority. The latter is very expensive, £250/week on average, and is unaffordable to anyone who is not entitled to housing benefit. Refugees are therefore in a situation where they have to choose between accepting job offers or keeping their accommodation.

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.scottishrefugeecouncil.org.uk/policy\\_and\\_research/research\\_reports/integration\\_research](http://www.scottishrefugeecouncil.org.uk/policy_and_research/research_reports/integration_research)

<sup>3</sup> The Refugee Women Strategy Group published a report, *The Struggle to Contribute*, which highlights barriers women face when seeking employment [http://www.gla.ac.uk/media/media\\_231770\\_en.pdf](http://www.gla.ac.uk/media/media_231770_en.pdf)

### **3.3 Accessibility of the Job Centre - Language needs**

Job Centres are accessible only by appointment which must be arranged by phone. This requirement does not take into account the language needs of refugees and creates additional barriers to access services offered by Job Centres. Due to the pace of the asylum process we regularly see refugees being granted status in less than 2 months<sup>4</sup> which mean they have had little time to acquire English language skills or the cultural knowledge that otherwise may have enabled them to navigate new systems.

In 2012/13, 70% of the households who accessed our Refugee Integration Services required an interpreter when they first accessed the service. This shows that the vast proportion of newly granted refugees will have language barrier when they need to apply for benefits, navigating the system and be able to seek work effectively.

Findings from focus groups we ran with newly granted refugees show that people find extremely difficult to access the Job Centre and see the screening by phone as a real barrier. Refugees have reported that it is almost impossible to communicate on the phone if their English skills are limited, that they presented at the Job Centre for simple queries (e.g. need for more information about the role of the Job Centre or need to correct spelling mistakes on some documents) but were always turned away with a phone number to call. This acts as a deterrent for refugees to engage fully with the Job Centre and achieve employment outcomes.

#### *Recommendation:*

- *Job Centres need to adapt their service to be more accessible by all groups. A drop-in system should be implemented to remove some of the barriers created by requirements of initial contact made by phone or online.*
- *Systematic interpreting and translation service is provided over the phone, online and when meeting Job Centre staff.*

### **3.4 Destitution at the transition from asylum support to mainstream benefits**

While claiming asylum, people are not allowed to work and do not have access to the mainstream welfare system. Asylum seekers can apply to asylum support which is either financial support only or financial support with accommodation provided on a no choice basis. Financial support provided by the Home office is equivalent to 55% of the level of income support for a single

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<sup>4</sup> In April 2013, 72 households were granted leave to remain in Scotland. 30% of them received their decision within a month after applying for asylum, 27% waited between one and two months, and 22% waited more than one year.

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person<sup>5</sup> and will stop 28 days after someone is notified that they have been granted leave to remain. This 28 day period, often called the move-on period, is an overwhelming time for newly granted refugees. In this short period of time they have to apply for benefits and secure alternative accommodation. The latter will in most cases in Scotland be homeless accommodation provided by a Scottish local authority<sup>6</sup>.

The move-on period is often too short to enable all benefits to be processed on time and it is not unusual for newly granted refugees to experience destitution as a result.

When granting leave to remain, it is the Home Office's responsibility to notify the National Insurance Allocation Centre so a National Insurance Number is allocated at the earliest opportunity to enable newly granted refugees to apply for benefits. In many cases, the Home Office fails to complete this notification and this creates delays in processing benefits. Refugees will then have to wait to be given an interview to apply for a National Insurance Number for their benefit claim to be assessed and processed.

Scottish Refugee Council works in partnership<sup>7</sup> with the Refugee Survival Trust<sup>7</sup>, which is charity providing hardship grants to refugees and asylum seekers who are destitute. When the main priority of the charity is to assist asylum seekers who do not have access to public funds, 23.5% of the grants awarded in April 2013 were given to refugees who were destitute while waiting for their mainstream benefits to be processed, 75% of whom experienced delays because of delays in national insurance number allocation.

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<sup>5</sup> "What is the minimum level of support an asylum seeker needs in order to meet their essential living needs and avoid destitution?" , Still Human Still Here, <http://stillhumanstillhere.files.wordpress.com/2009/01/essential-living-needs-jan-2010.doc>

<sup>6</sup> On average, 95% of newly granted refugees who access our RIS service will have to present homeless to Glasgow City Council at the end of the move-on period.

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.rst.org.uk/>

**Case study 1 – representative case of delay in NINO allocation and benefits process**

Mrs J is a 42 year old single woman from Iran. She was granted refugee status on 4 March 2013 and her support from the Home Office stopped on 31 March as a result.

On 14 March 2013, she accessed our Refugee Integration Service for the first time and said that she had not receive a National Insurance Number. Our adviser had to arrange an appointment with Maryhill Job Centre to apply for Job Seekers Allowance as well as an national insurance interview at the Laurieston Job Centre which is where National Insurance Number interviews are held in Glasgow.

On 15/03/2013, Mrs J attended her appointment at the Job Centre to apply for Job Seekers Allowance but was advised that until a national insurance number is allocated to her, her claim will not be processed.

On 31/03/2013, Mrs J's support from the Home Office terminated.

On 02/04/2013, Mrs J attended her appointment for her national insurance number. She had no money to pay for food and our adviser successfully applied for a hardship grant from the Refugee Survival Grant.

On 17/04/2013, Mrs J received her first JSA payment, more than two weeks after her support from the Home Office stopped and two weeks after her national insurance number interview. This was a total of 17 days destitution.

Delays in processing benefits lead to destitution for claimants and have a detrimental impact on people's health and well-being. There are concerns that the move to the Universal Credit will worsen newly granted refugees' circumstances at the transition stage. From meetings with colleagues at DWP, we understand that applications for universal credit will be processed and payment should be made on the 37th day after the application which is longer than the move-on period. This would equal 11 days destitution. As the Universal Credit will be paid in arrears this will have a disproportionate and discriminatory effects on refugees who are likely to have no social support networks.

*Recommendations:*

- *More efficient cooperation between the Home Office and the DWP is required to ensure timely allocation of national insurance number and process of benefits to avoid administrative destitution.*

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- *Reinstate the award winning Move On Response Team<sup>8</sup> which demonstrated great efficiency in processing benefit claims and avoided destitution of newly granted refugees. The need for a specialist team will be greater with the move to the Universal Credit.*
- *Asylum seekers should access mainstream benefits while waiting for the decision on their asylum claim, this would allow continuity of support when people are granted leave to remain and destitution will be avoided.*

### 3.5 Role of the Job Centre as an employment service

#### 3.5.1 Support to gain employment

Newly granted refugees reported in focus groups<sup>9</sup> that their understanding of the Job Centre is to assist them and other unemployed individuals to seek and access employment. Refugees report however that their experience of dealing with Job Centre advisers did not match their understanding and expectation. In most cases, people's experience was that job centre's role was more about completing an administrative process which main goal is to verify if they are still eligible to their benefits. They also feel that Job Centre advisers do not understand some of the barriers to employment that refugees experience and therefore are offered unsuitable support or job offers.

#### **Case study 2 – representative of unsuitable support provided by Job Centres**

One participant to a focus group we ran with our service users explained that he was volunteering with Scottish Refugee Council two days a week with the fundraising team and getting trained on specialist software. At the same time, he successfully applied to Citizen Advice Bureau to become a volunteer adviser and had to attend training prior to start.

Despite being fully involved in meaningful activities that increased his chance to find work, the Job Centre had informed him that he had to start a month placement at the Job Centre as part of the Work Programme. If he refused, he would be sanctioned. He was very distressed as the opportunity offered as part of the work programme would give him less valuable experience as the task he would complete would not enable him to gain more skills.

Our adviser advocated on his behalf and succeeded in convincing the Job Centre that the work programme was not appropriate in his case.

<sup>8</sup> The Move On Response Team was a specialist team of the Job Centre, created in Glasgow to process benefits claim of newly granted refugees. The team succeeded in processing claims efficiently and newly granted refugees accessed benefit payment without experiencing period of destitution. The team was disbanded in 2010 following the spending review.

<sup>9</sup> Our Refugee Integration Services regularly runs focus groups with our service users to gather qualitative evidence about the experience of refugees in accessing services.

### 3.5.2 Assessment of skills and matching job seekers into suitable jobs

Refugees also reported that they feel their skills, qualifications and aspirations are not fully assessed and therefore they do not access appropriate support. Support, including financial support, available to gain qualification is often conditioned to being able to present a job offer.

#### **Case study 3 – representative of unsuitable support provided by Job Centres**

A participant to a focus group that we ran with our service users explained that he speaks four languages and asked the Job Centre for support in getting an interpreting diploma. The training cost £1050 and he could not afford it by himself.

He was advised at the Job Centre that financial support would be available to him if he came back with a job offer.

He felt extremely frustrated as without the qualification it is unrealistic that he will be able to get a job offer.

### 3.5.3 Sanctions

Refugees who access our Refugee Integration Services have experienced unreasonable sanctions motivated by job centre advisers' perception that they were not actively seeking work. In most cases, our advisers were successful in overturning such decision as they ignored the fact that refugees attend part-time courses that are relevant to their Job Seekers Agreement and also continue to seek part-time work. Our advisers have also noticed a lack of consistency in Job Centre advisers' understanding of what should be in the Job Seekers Agreement and it does not always comply with the ethos of the agreement which we understand from our colleagues at the DWP that it should be person centred, flexible and realistic and lead to sustainable employment outcomes.

### 3.5.4 Understanding of the labour market

Refugees report to our advisers but also in focus groups that they would like the Job Centre to help them in understanding the British Labour Market. They perceive the Job Centre as an agency who has a lot of information not only on existing vacancies but also on sectors that currently recruit and on training available. Refugees feel that the job centre could help them in identifying sectors for which their skills would be attractive so their job search could be more efficient. Refugees would also like to receive advice on new skills they would require and how they can gain more skills, e.g. training, volunteering or internship. Refugees reported that their

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experience of employability advice at the Job Centre is to be channelled in specific low paid work rather than having options about career path they could take.

### *Recommendation:*

- *Job Centre advisers need to receive training in understanding the needs and experience of refugees who seek work.*
- *Job Centre advisers need to adopt an asset based approach and recognising skills and competences to increase efficiency in matching job seekers into suitable jobs.*
- *Job Centres must provide more information about the British Labour Market to refugees*
- *Sanctions should not be given to job seekers who are studying towards qualification that are necessary for them to secure employment.*

**For further information please contact:**

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