

Housing Briefing

Scottish Refugee Council Integration Study – Housing Briefing

Introduction

This briefing is one of five looking at domains of integration in Scottish Refugee Council's longitudinal refugee integration study. These findings are based on some of the data from Stage 1 (Winter 2010/2011) and Stage 2 (Spring/Summer 2011) of the study so combine 262 questionnaire responses and 30 semi-structured interviews. What follows is some of the main findings of interest within the realm of housing. More detail can be found in the full reports on http://www.scottishrefugeecouncil.org.uk/policy_and_research/research_reports

Housing ownership

Most of our respondents live in social housing or Home Office supplied accommodation (69%). There are very low levels of home ownership among refugees and few view the prospect of owning their own home in the future as realistic.

Time in present house

There is quite an even split in terms of longevity in accommodation, with almost 49% having lived in their present homes for under a year and 51% for over a year. Even among those who arrived as long ago as 2005, over 40% had lived in their homes for a year or less, indicating quite high levels of housing churn.

Satisfaction with housing

Satisfaction with housing is relatively high among asylum seekers and refugees, with just over 50% saying they are satisfied or very satisfied. Satisfaction is lower among women than among men, and lower still among women with children. Refugees report lower satisfaction with housing than asylum seekers.

What makes a good home?

'Good homes' are often seen according to their proximity to things rather than due to the house itself. Many people use the concepts of housing and neighbourhoods/communities interchangeably. Thus in many cases respondents were unhappy with their homes but liked the area and therefore responded that they were satisfied with their housing.

What makes a good home – conditions

With regard to actual homes, the furnishing of housing was mentioned by a large number of respondents, in both positive and negative ways. Some felt that the décor in their homes was good and the houses relatively well maintained (E750), while others felt that they had been given

a shell which they, on very little income, had to gradually furnish. One spoke of having moved home 5 times in 8 years and now lived in a nice flat, but one that had nothing in it. He managed to get a community care grant to provide carpets and a bed. Friends gave him plastic chairs and the rest, such as a washing machine and other furniture would have to wait (E752).

For others the conditions of their properties were of huge concern. One man told us “So I can tell you that the house we live in at the moment is hell. It’s in a pitiful state. There’s lots of dampness on the walls. There is water that’s leaking through the roof and there’s dampness in the bedroom.....Damp started appearing last year in 2010. So I’ve been telling them about this dampness problem since May 2010 and also that I need a bigger house because my daughter’s going to arrive” (E137). This led to many people wishing to leave their present accommodation.

Desire to leave accommodation

However, even some people who are satisfied with their homes would like to move. More refugees would like to move home than asylum seekers. The main reason given for wanting to move concerned the physical characteristics and conditions of the house. There are a number of gendered dimensions to these responses. Women cite the condition of properties as the reason they wish to leave their present home more than men. 21% of men who indicated a desire to move home cited the size of a property as having such an impact, compared to 34% of women. Similarly, health reasons are cited by just 4% of men but some 18% of women.

One man also hoped to move house in order to prepare for the arrival of his children. His concern was that he was unable to prepare for that arrival and should his children arrive he worried he would then quickly be uprooted.

Housing size and overcrowding

There were signs of some overcrowding in our research. Overall there are just over 2 people for each bedroom in our sample, although the ratio is slightly better for families. While the overall figures do not suggest severe overcrowding, there are numerous individual cases which highlight chronic problems. There were two cases where seven people are sharing a two bedroom home. Many living in overcrowded conditions would like to move house but not all want to move area, making decision-making even more fraught with difficulties.

Housing aspirations

With regard to housing aspirations, while most of our respondents would love to own their own home, this was seen as impossible for most. One example of this is provided; “I want my own home, but I can’t support them, because if I apply for the mortgage they say you put some 20%, 25% so how can I support it” (E35). This meant that better social housing was the height of housing aspirations among respondents.

Temporary housing

Just under 10% of respondents in this study were living in temporary accommodation at the time they completed the questionnaire. However, the temporariness of such housing varied with some people in such accommodation for over a year. There is an issue of what happens next for those in temporary accommodation for long periods of time. For one woman, having lived in temporary accommodation for two years, she was keen to stay in the same flat but have some security by making it permanent. “I don’t want to keep moving again” (E751). The search for stability pervaded many aspects of respondents’ comments.

There are negative knock on effects that can occur from long term temporariness that equate to a version of the poverty trap. “The house can be a barrier to get jobs because you know temporary accommodation is very expensive, and once I start working that house is too highly rented at £92

every week” (E751). Thus, housing can have serious knock-on effects which can negatively impact upon overall integration.

Housing choice

For those who had become refugees, we were keen to discover how people felt about ‘choice’, whether they feel they had any housing choice and if they did, what they felt about their options? One respondent felt that he had been given some element of choice but was reluctant to have to start his local integration in a new neighbourhood. Although not satisfied with housing, the conditions were seen as worth putting up with in order to remain in the neighbourhood. “We’re well known in the area by now” (E536). The fact that he had three children in a local school also led to reluctance to take them out of that particular school.

Others also referred to having some element of choice. However, for some it was considered something of a Hobson’s choice whereby the better of two bad options was taken (E33, A75). One man relayed, “Well, we didn’t choose it. You’re taken to see what’s available and you’re told that this is the only offer, the first offer, so if you don’t take this then there’s nothing else. Well, in fact you have two offers. They give you the first offer and if you refuse that, they give you a second one. If, after that, you refuse, then they don’t help you anymore. So in effect, you have to accept the second offer..... I wouldn’t have chosen to live there” (E137). With regard to the issue of choice one interviewee alluded to not knowing Glasgow well enough to have made an informed choice at the time he had to make such a choice (E144).

Next steps

In the Spring of 2012 a number of interviews will be conducted on housing. This will add to the existing data about housing and together will provide a more meaningful understanding of housing and refugee integration in Scotland.

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Scottish Refugee Council is an independent charity which provides advice and information to people seeking asylum and refugees living in Scotland. We also campaign for fair treatment of refugees and people seeking asylum and to raise awareness of refugee issues.

This research project runs for two years and will provide better information and understanding of the lives of refugees and people seeking asylum in Scotland. The project uses mixed methods and is supported by an Advisory Group of academics, the voluntary sector and statutory authorities. The work is funded by the Big Lottery Fund.