

**In search of normality:  
Refugee integration in Scotland**

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## Introduction

This briefing provides a summary of Scottish Refugee Council's longitudinal study of refugee integration. The study ran between 2009 and late 2012 and has involved questionnaires, interviews and workshops with refugees in Glasgow and Edinburgh. An advisory group was established who provided comment and guidance throughout that has been greatly valued and has been of huge importance to the research project<sup>1</sup>. There were five stages to the research, beginning with a comprehensive questionnaire (Stage 1) and followed by qualitative interviews (Stage 2). We then conducted workshops within one particular locality in Glasgow (Stage 3) before repeating the questionnaire (Stage 4) and interview stages of the research (Stage 5). We also supported two Masters Students from Queen Margaret University whose research looked at various parts of refugee

integration. Prior to detailing some of the findings it is worth highlighting some of the context in which the research took place.

The integration of migrants into their new countries and communities has been an issue of political importance for some time. Until recently there was some support across all levels of Government, at least in terms of Government rhetoric, that multiculturalism and integration were the dual goals of immigrant policy (what happens once people arrive here) as opposed to immigration policy (the management of entry). That approach has recently been questioned by the UK Government<sup>2</sup>. With regard to refugees, UK policy interventions where they have existed have been aimed solely at those who have had their claims for refugee status approved and have therefore excluded asylum

<sup>1</sup> The advisory group consisted of Prof Alison Phipps (University of Glasgow), Dr Alison Strang (Queen Margaret University), Mhoraig Green (Cosla Strategic Migration Partnership), Rachel Johnson, Judith Ballantyne and Kevin Wilkie (all Scottish Government). At other times meetings were attended by Rami Ousta and Emilia Pietka (Bemis) and Catherine Jamieson (Glasgow City Council)

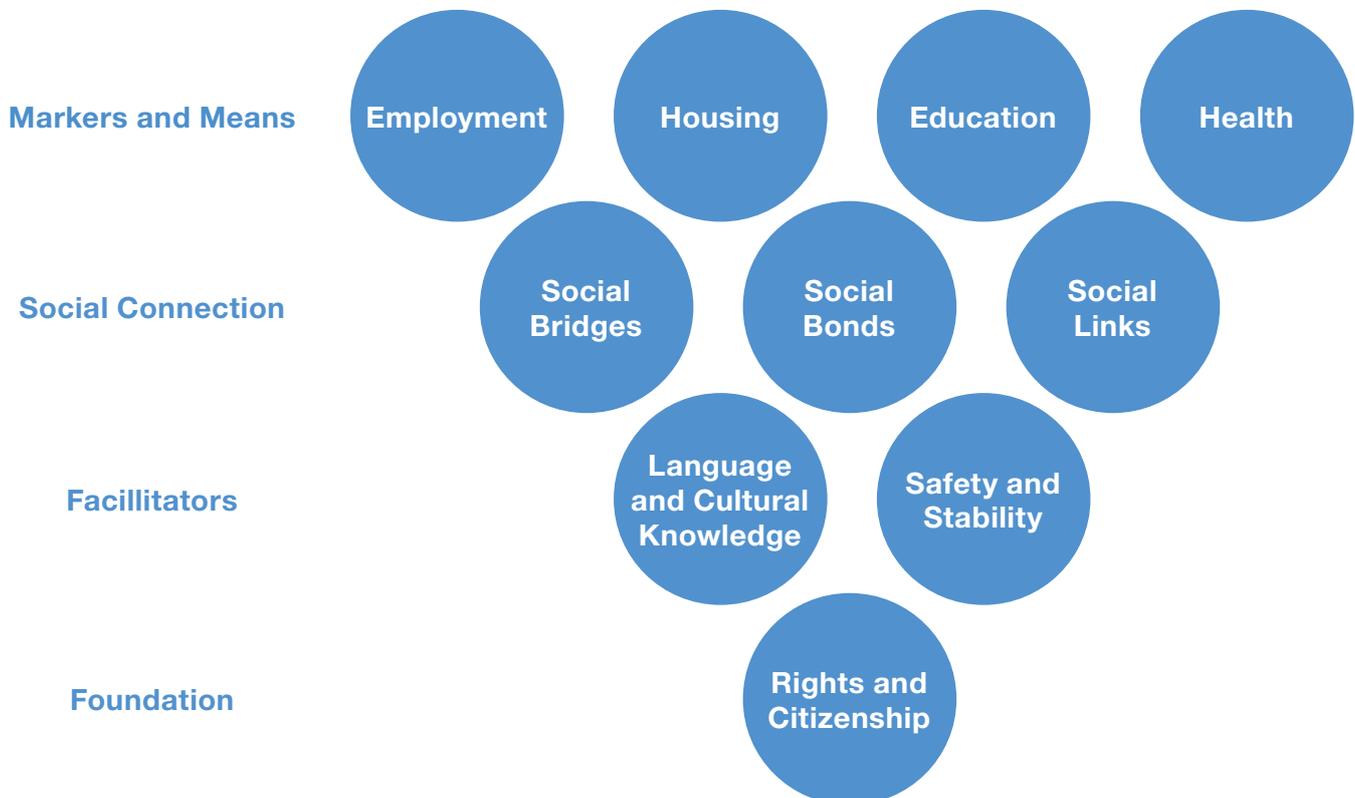
<sup>2</sup> See David Cameron's speech on the failure of multiculturalism [www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-12371994](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-12371994)

seekers. This division has had consequences, however, not the least of which has been to delay integration support for asylum seekers who subsequently go on to be granted refugee status. While up-front and intensive support is highlighted as important by the UK Government's own Survey of New Refugees<sup>3</sup>, this delay can therefore have long-term negative consequences. Nevertheless, the UK Government in recent years has ended all financial and administrative support for integration with the ending of the Refugee Integration and Employment Service in 2011, leaving a vacuum that the voluntary sector and community groups have attempted to fill.

The Scottish Government, in contrast to the approach of the UK Government, has taken the rhetorical position that integration does not

begin on the day on which an asylum seeker is recognised as a refugee, but on their first day of arrival in Scotland. However, there has been somewhat limited research on refugee integration in Scotland. This 3-year research project aims to fill some of that gap and in doing so contribute to any future discussions about refugees in Scotland and beyond. The research adopted Ager and Strang's 'Indicators of Integration' framework as the most comprehensive and holistic basis in which to analyse the series of complex processes that encompass integration. The full report and this summary therefore broadly follow that framework and different aspects of integration are examined both separately and in relation to their intersections.

#### Indicators of Integration Framework<sup>4</sup>



<sup>3</sup> Paper presented by Andreas Cebulla at International Metropolis conference September 2011

<sup>4</sup> Ager and Strang (2004) Indicators of Integration; Final report <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20110218135832/http://rds.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs04/dpr28.pdf>

As asylum seekers are prevented from accessing the labour market figures used in this section about employment were filtered to only show those with the right to work. Nevertheless, employment issues are of importance to asylum seekers despite lacking the right to work. Asylum seekers talk of the effect of not being allowed to work on their financial situation, their health and their ability to find work on getting leave to remain, while refugees who have the right to work confirm many of these long-term effects. There are consequences for the people involved and to society more generally that result from this form of policy induced social exclusion.

Less than 20% of those who are allowed to work had managed to access the labour market in Survey 1, despite a wide range of skills and diverse employment histories, although the percentage of those working had increased by the time of Survey 2. This increase did not affect the numbers identifying as unemployed, but concerned people moving from education and/or voluntary work into employment. Many asylum seekers and refugees attempt to access language training and many more volunteer as a way of getting job ready, but employment is low even for those with transferable skills and with good English language capabilities.

There are therefore significant barriers to employment. The effects of the asylum process are highlighted as one important barrier. Refugees talk of the period of time in which they were not allowed to work being one in which their skills and experiences stagnated. This allied to gaps in employment history and lack of employment record in Britain makes access to work difficult. The age of refugees also adds to these problems. *“For a lot of people when you were in your thirties is the time when you’re starting to build your career, so for you, you weren’t allowed to start a career”* (E752).

The search for employment also throws up a number of challenges for refugees, from learning about the labour market to a lack of knowledge of how to write CVs and what to expect in job interviews. The networks that refugees talk of having relied on in their countries of origin are absent here and so the process can be a daunting one. Another barrier mentioned is that of language, not just speaking English but the perceived way you are viewed by employers if you speak English ‘imperfectly’.

For those able to find employment, they are concentrated in a narrow range of relatively low skilled and low paid sectors of the economy, despite a wide range of experiences. For some looking for work where they felt there was work available was a choice on their part, but for others there is a feeling of being directed down a certain employment route that does not utilise their skills. The subsequent emergence of low paid and zero hours contracts make planning difficult.

All of these issues are leading to refugees giving up on using their skills and specialisms. *“What I am saying is we have to look for jobs where there are jobs available”* (E137). Although this may have some short-term benefits the levels of underemployment are concerning for both the individuals involved and for a society that could utilise those skills more effectively.

For those successful in finding work the benefits are multiple. There are some financial benefits, although the type of work most refugees find means that many still face financial problems due to in-work poverty. However, work is seen as a way of overcoming social isolation and has a relationship with language whereby work helps language development which helps build social networks which in turn helps further language development, and also employment options.

Refugees and asylum seekers are suffering significant financial hardship. Indeed they indicate more financial struggle than even the most deprived 15% of the Scottish population, 23% of whom do not feel they manage well on their present income.

### Feelings about household income

How do you feel about your present household income	%
living comfortably on present income	5.5
coping on present income	26.1
finding it difficult to cope	37.7
finding it very difficult to cope	30.7
Total	100.0

Despite these problems, a large proportion of refugees and asylum seekers feel that their employment and financial situations will improve in the near future.

## Housing and neighbourhoods

The vast majority of asylum seekers and refugees live in UK Government provided accommodation or in social housing. Just 11% of our sample rented privately, 6.5% stayed with friends or family and 9% lived in temporary accommodation at the time of completing Survey 1, many of whom did so for long periods of time. All other respondents either lived in accommodation provided by the UK Border Agency or in more secure social housing.

Housing churn is a serious issue with almost half of all respondents in Survey 1, having lived in their homes for less than a year. Survey 2 shows slightly more settled housing, suggesting that housing stability can come in time, although a third of respondents in Survey 2 had still lived in their homes for under a year.

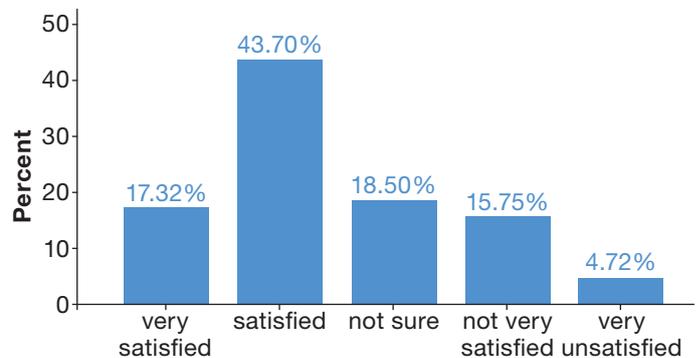
In Survey 1 some 55% of respondents said they wanted to leave their present accommodation, with refugees wanting to move in greater numbers than asylum seekers. By the time of Survey 2, despite 45% of respondents having moved home since completing the first Survey, 60% wanted to move, meaning some of those who had moved in the previous year wanted to do so again.

Although over 50% of respondents are satisfied with their housing (the figures show less women are satisfied and women with children are less satisfied still), there are some issues of concern regarding conditions. Both lack of furnishing and more structural problems such as damp are mentioned as problems to be overcome. *“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”* (E137). In addition the size of houses is also raised as a significant problem by refugees and asylum seekers alike and is linked to issues of overcrowding. For example there were cases in Survey 1 where six people, five under the age of 16 share a three bedroom home, and one where seven people share a two bedroom home.

Housing choice once refugees have traversed the asylum system is an issue and one whereby there is a perception of a Hobson's choice. Although refugees do not have to take the first offer of social housing that they receive a number talk of being concerned that the second offer would be worse than the first and so they accept the first offer despite having concerns about it. Other respondents felt that their knowledge of areas in the city was not developed enough to make fully informed choices. *"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).

Housing was also inextricably linked to neighbourhoods in the views of most respondents. While many are happy with their homes but not the neighbourhood or vice versa, neighbourhoods and communities also have a broader impact upon how people feel about where they live (see the section on communities). Nevertheless, the majority of both refugees and asylum seekers were satisfied with their neighbourhoods in both Surveys. This graph is the larger figure from Survey 1.

**How satisfied are you with the neighbourhood you live in?**



Similar to housing satisfaction, women are less satisfied than men with their neighbourhoods and women with children less satisfied than women without children. Responses are almost identical when asked how safe respondents feel in their community. That is, feelings of being safe are high but there is a gender dimension to responses. There is also a degree of relativism in the way respondents answered this question in that the comparison being made was often to the chaotic and dangerous environments from which they had fled. Nevertheless there are some reports of racial harassment in neighbourhoods and a reluctance to report such incidents to the police.

Refugees and asylum seekers in Scotland are a relatively highly educated group, although levels of education vary from zero years of formal education to 25 years of such education. Nevertheless the figures are comparable to the overall British population.

#### Average years in formal education

	Mean
Mean	12.44
Female	11.30
Refugee	12.06
Asylum seeker	11.92
UK population	12.60 <sup>5</sup>

Knowledge of the Scottish education system is crucial in allowing people to make informed decisions. In Survey 2 respondents indicated a wide range of sources of advice but the primary ones were higher education colleges and Job Centre Plus, with more highly educated respondents whose language skills were well developed doing most of their own research. There is some concern around knowledge coming through word of mouth, risking wrong information being passed on, while the relatively narrow set of options being suggested by some advice providers is also of concern. One respondent told of the advice he had received whereby his advisor, *“was very happy with social care, but photography, or Surveying, or drawing map, she wasn’t happy with that and eventually recommended me I should one year continue English and after that think about what subject, maybe social care, she was very happy with social care”* (E529).

There are a number of barriers in relation to accessing education. Large numbers of respondents talk of waiting considerable periods of time to access ESOL classes, with two-year waits not being unusual. Financial strains also act to dissuade many refugees from accessing educational courses. Indeed over the course of this research a number of respondents had started courses that they subsequently left for a combination of financial and childcare reasons. The latter issue is of particular concern to populations who lack familial support with regard to childcare.

For those successfully accessing educational courses, the majority solely access ESOL courses, (174 of 262 respondents), with relatively few doing other types of courses. Nevertheless, some 85% of refugees and asylum seekers would like to return to education sometime in the future, although there is often a trade-off made between employment and education. That is, respondents feel they can either delay employment by accessing educational courses, or else despite a desire to study they feel the need to try to find work immediately in order to begin to establish a work history here.

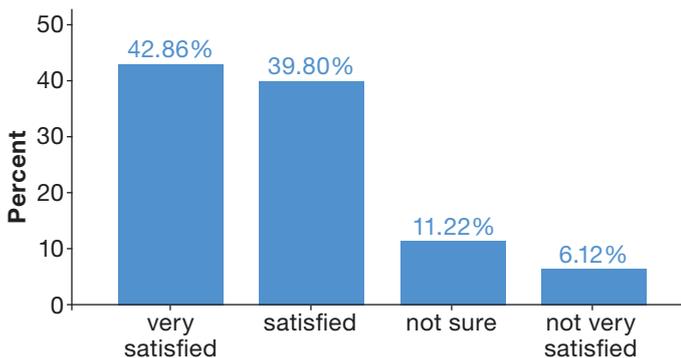
English language learning is seen as key to both education and employment opportunities. Confidence in speaking English is high, with some 69% very confident or fairly confident. Confidence speaking English does not have a linear relationship to time in Scotland as when crossing year of arrival with confidence there is a jagged upward improvement rather than a straight one. There are many respondents, here for long periods of time who report fairly static language development. Nevertheless respondents talk of the need for English language support for general day-to-day communication as well as for labour market and educational access.

The desire to have official recognition of skills and educational levels was a recurring one in this research and was linked to the normalising of refugees’ lives. That is, respondents who feel skilled and educated also feel the need to be seen as skilled or educated. These feelings were not all about practicalities but also reflect a desire to feel self-worth.

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/56/9/37863998.pdf>

Among respondents with children there is relatively high satisfaction with their education.

**How satisfied are you with your childrens education in the UK**



Although many refugees and asylum seekers speak of the style of teaching in Scotland favourably the one area of concern is that many feel their children are not being tested or pushed enough.

## Health

Knowledge of the healthcare system in Scotland is a prerequisite to being able to use that system. Respondents felt that they had a reasonable understanding of the healthcare system, with information being provided on their arrival and during orientation and subsequently through direct experiences. The main gap in terms of knowledge concerned out of hours GP services and the subsequent use of accident and emergency when GP surgeries are closed.

Over 96% of respondents in Survey 1 were registered with a doctor and 77% with a dentist. By Survey 2 the dentist registration percentage had increased to 85%. For those not registered with a dentist in either survey, the main reason was that dental care was not seen as preventative, while non GP registration was mostly related to refused asylum seekers who had either been refused registration from GP surgeries or who were afraid to ask for new HC2 forms that provide support for health treatment costs.

Continuity of care, particularly GPs, was prized by respondents. During the asylum process applicants are often moved around the city and the ability to keep the same GP, one who knew their story, prevented the need to re-tell that story to a new doctor, and was seen as hugely beneficial. The corollary to this was the psychological difficulty experienced when not being able to keep the same GP.

58% of respondents self-rated their health as either excellent or good, although those still in the asylum system report worse health than refugees and women report worse health than men. The asylum system appears to have an independent effect on views of health. Overall a significant minority view their health as deteriorating, some due to having conditions diagnosed but most due to an inability to develop their lives here.

Mental health is a significant issue for asylum seekers and refugees, but particularly for asylum seekers, while there is also a strong gender dimension to mental health. Using the 'Warwick Edinburgh Mental Well Being Scale' (WEMWBS), we find that our female asylum seeker sample show concerning mental health outcomes.

### Warwick/Edinburgh Wellbeing Scale

Scottish Population	50.7
Total study sample	49.7
Refugee sample	50.8
Asylum seeker sample	47.2
Scottish male population	51.3
Study male sample	50.9
Scottish female population	50.3
Study female sample	49
Female asylum seekers	44.2

Despite more respondents accessing employment, being in more secure housing, getting refugee status, and bringing family over to Scotland, the overall WEMWBS score actually drops by the time of Survey 2, to 49.4. For many this appears to be a hangover effect from both the experiences that led to their flight, which they have not dealt with due to prioritising obtaining status here, and due to a hangover effect of the asylum process. What is more, just 22 respondents indicated in Survey 1 that they had a mental health problem, suggesting significant under-reporting.

There are numerous factors that contribute to how people feel about their health. Experiences that led to their flight from their countries of origin are clearly important but so too are experiences here. The asylum process has a major impact with long term consequences, as do adjustment problems and the lack of familial and social networks in Scotland. One respondent talked of the asylum process and its long-term consequences thus, *"the process of the asylum seekers. That was the hardest period in my life. I will never, never forget. So this is maybe I think that's why, because the problem started there, and after that developed."*(E751).

Other factors mentioned include difficulties in accessing the labour market and housing problems. There are also particular issues around many refused asylum seekers who receive no support and are destitute. In some cases destitute asylum seekers were unable to answer questions about their health due to not having seen a medical professional for some years. One major positive impact on health that is mentioned by a large proportion of respondents, however, was social contact, be it with organisations or with neighbours and friends.

Some two thirds of respondents in Survey 1 indicated that they lacked any family in Scotland, although quite a number had managed to get family members here by the time of Survey 2. Considering this lack of familial networks, the importance of contact with friends becomes even more profound. The vast majority of respondents indicate that they have regular contact with friends, with almost half meeting friends more than once a week. However, women appear to be more socially isolated than men, with more than 20% of women meeting with friends less than once a month.

Community was viewed primarily as a small spatial unit and the people in it. In most cases the term community was used interchangeably with neighbourhood. Neighbourhoods were broadly viewed in a positive light but more contact with neighbours was desirable. There was a degree to which passive community cohesion was evident, whereby lack of problems was seen as indicative of a cohesive community, while respondents simultaneously longed for more profound and active cohesion. However, there was little indication of a feeling of being excluded as it was generally felt that the culture here is to have little contact with neighbours. In such cases integration was often seen as mimicking this lack of contact. One respondent told of her initial attempts to form local contacts, and related her changed behaviour to her desire to integrate, *“you have to be integrated, you know? This is what we are talking about, integration. So you have to follow the system of the country. We have to follow, so this is the system so you have to go on”* (E38). If the system is that there is a lack of neighbourhood contact, then integration can mean not having or seeking neighbourhood contact.

For those who have been in Scotland for a longer period of time, there was a widely held view that things had improved in relation to community cohesion. *“It’s becoming more friendly, it’s becoming a place, and they’re holding together hands to be able to support each other”* (E279). Time was therefore seen as having a crucial impact on belonging and belonging was identified more closely with community than with nation state or even city. The opportunity for contacts with other cultures was highlighted as an important factor in creating this sense of belonging. Figures show a mixed experience of community interactions but suggest that community events can have a positive impact upon how people feel about living in particular neighbourhoods.

### Involvement in Local Activities

	Attend local events	Attended community meetings	Volunteer locally
Weekly	40	17	33
Monthly	19	22	11
Once every few months	27	24	15
A couple of times a year	40	36	31
Never	77	94	98

The attitudes of the local population are therefore of huge importance to how people view their lives here. Experiences in this regard were mixed. A large number report no issues in their communities, but others talk of significant experiences of discrimination. For those in the latter group there was a view both that this is simply the way young people behave, while others located problems to the way asylum seekers are presented in the media.

While previous sections of this report detail some of the findings of this research of relevance to specific areas of Ager and Strang’s framework, there are also a number of issues that are crosscutting. The asylum process is one major issue that has ramifications far beyond experiences within that process. The psychological impact of that process has considerable hangover effects. In particular respondents talk of the ‘culture of disbelief’ in UKBA decision-making and the way this psychologically impacts upon asylum seekers. Feeling that state institutions start from the position that you are being untruthful not only has impacts upon health, but also on the degree to which people feel that they can trust and engage with broader state institutions. The lack of right to work also has knock-on effects from the way asylum seekers feel they are perceived (as lazy or ‘benefit scroungers’) to delaying their ability to start to rebuild their lives on getting refugee status. Many respondents are also acutely aware of the way in which the media take up these constructions, and there is therefore an embarrassment about being felt of in this way.

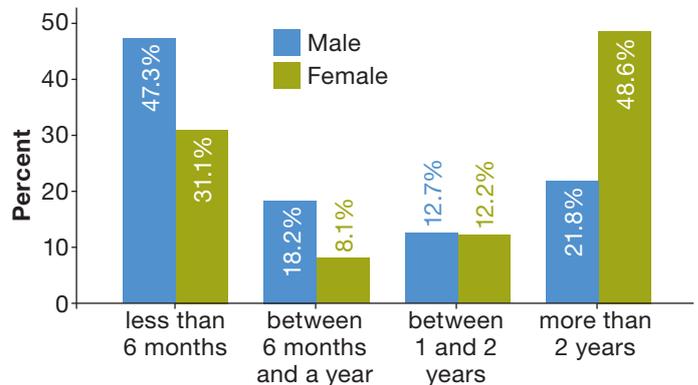
The degree to which people feel they are welcomed into their new society also cuts across all integration issues. State institutions, mostly seen in relation to the British state, were not viewed as being welcoming. This was often contrasted with ‘the Scottish people’, despite some experiences of discrimination. Indeed reports of discrimination are widespread, although in the majority of cases it appears that respondents are not referring to street discrimination. This is borne out by the fact that more asylum seekers feel discriminated against than refugees. That is, it is the fact of being an asylum seeker that is discriminatory.

## Experiences of discrimination

Have you been discriminated against in Britain	Percent
Yes	71.6
No	28.4
Total	100.00

Time is another crosscutting theme. At the beginning of the process time to get status has a broad set of impacts. Many refugees still wait for long periods of time to get status and many eventually get status on appeal after having initially been refused. Wrong initial decision-making has a major impact, particularly on women who wait for longer than men to get refugee status.

### How long did it take you to get your current status?



On getting status temporal issues remain. Time to find employment, time to get onto ESOL classes, time to get qualified, time to access secure accommodation, time to be united with family members; all impact upon integration. What is more, only having 5-year refugee status means that being a refugee is likened to still being in the asylum process as respondents report an inability to truly rebuild their lives with limited leave to remain. This replicates other recent research with refugees in Scotland<sup>6</sup>.

<sup>6</sup> Becoming British citizens? Experiences and opinions of refugees living in Scotland, [http://www.scottishrefugeecouncil.org.uk/policy\\_and\\_research/research\\_reports](http://www.scottishrefugeecouncil.org.uk/policy_and_research/research_reports)

Another important process concerns that of language and language acquisition. Although most respondents felt confident speaking English waiting times for classes were a significant impediment to integration. Language development was seen as having a positive impact upon all other aspects of integration, from social connections to employment, and time lags in accessing language education was viewed as having a significant hangover effect.

For those with children, being a parent was also a crosscutting issue. It was felt that children integrate better and attendance in social spaces such as schools were key to this. Many respondents talked of their children quite quickly developing a sense of belonging and 'being Glaswegian' already. Parenting styles, however, were challenged by bringing children up in a new society. Some parents responded by becoming more 'liberal' in style, but others reacted by restricting the behaviours of their children, an issue that often led to power struggles within families.

## What do refugees integrate into?

Another set of issues that emerged in this research was what refugees integrate into, and also what they feel they integrate into. As already mentioned, the space into which people feel they integrate is of utmost importance. Most respondents felt that the unit into which they were integrating was a small spatial one. Integration was seen to happen in neighbourhoods rather than in a nation state or to a set of assumed values and behaviours as the UK Government appears to believe<sup>7</sup>. The vast majority of respondents subsequently have no plans to leave the city they live in. Indeed some of those who in Survey 1 had contemplated leaving later changed their mind as they developed a sense of belonging to their area. *"I want to stay in Glasgow, because I think that Glasgow, according to me, it's a very good city, and I know their universities, our neighbours, our friends, my friends, our institutes. I know the city very well. It is better than any other cities"* (E34).

Socio-economics are also important across all aspects of integration and one issue that emerges is that of whether refugees and asylum seekers are effectively integrating into poverty. Our sample suggest the refugees and asylum seekers experience more severe financial struggle than even the 15% most deprived people living in Scotland. While support rates for asylum seekers are derisory, employment is difficult to find, and in-work poverty an important issue, there is also the question of the forms of housing and neighbourhoods into which refugees settle. This is not to try and place refugees and asylum seekers above Scots experiencing poverty. It simply suggests that treating all refugees and asylum seekers as a homogenous mass along with the socio-economics mentioned above effectively acts to entrench long term financial struggle into the lives of many.

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2011/apr/14/david-cameron-immigration-speech-full-text>

With regard to what refugees themselves feel they are integrating into, beyond the issue of space, the prime issue that emerges is the desire to integrate into normality. The aspirations respondents express are not unrealistic. Across a range of domains of integration the expressed view is the desire to be and be seen as being normal. While this is particularly the case for those who talk of having lived a good life prior to their flight, it was also expressed by others whose desire for normality was more visceral due to their pre-flight experiences. Living a normal life was described as *“a job, buy a car and nice house and live in it”* (E153).

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#### LOTTERY FUNDED

Scottish Refugee Council is an independent charity dedicated to providing advice and information for people who have fled horrific situations around the world.

We have been advocating and campaigning for the rights of refugees since 1985.

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