

PEOPLE, COMMUNITIES AND PLACES

The role of local authorities in refugee integration in Scotland

Key findings summary

This is a summary of key findings from a [report on the role of local authorities in refugee integration in Scotland](#). The report was prepared by the **Institute for Public Policy Research Scotland**. The research findings are the views of the researchers and do not necessarily represent the views of the Scottish Government, Scottish Ministers or the project partners.



The research was commissioned by Scottish Government and managed by COSLA in partnership with the Scottish Refugee Council and the UNESCO Chair for Refugee Integration through the Languages and the Arts at the University of Glasgow.



This project is part funded by the EU Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund. Making management of migration flows more efficient across the European Union.

Introduction

Background

Since 2015, **Scotland has welcomed a growing number of refugees and people seeking asylum**, largely as a result of crises including the Afghan evacuation, the civil war in Syria and the Russian war against Ukraine.



Scotland's local authorities (also known as councils) have played a very important role in providing support to refugees and people seeking asylum. They have had to adapt quickly to changing situations and they have learned a lot about what works well as a result.

In February 2022 Scottish Government and COSLA hired IPPR and IPPR Scotland to conduct research to gather some of the learning and understanding that Scottish local authorities have developed through their work with refugees, and record some of the challenges they have faced.



This work was developed as a part of the New Scots Refugee Integration Delivery Project. The results of the research are expected to **help with making decisions about future work supporting refugee integration** locally and nationally.

The research

Aims

The aims of the research were to:

Describe and review the ways Scottish local authorities have been supporting refugees and people seeking asylum.

Identify the opportunities and challenges that local authorities face in their work to support refugee integration.

Understand how Scottish and UK policy impacts on the work being done by Scottish local authorities.

Share clear findings that everyone can use, especially local authorities and decision-makers.

Methods

The research methods used in this study included:



An online survey of 103 people working in local authorities and partner organisations. This research happened between July and October 2022.



In-depth case studies looking at the work of three local authorities

(Aberdeenshire, Dundee and Na h-Eileanan Siar) through focus groups and interviews with: people with high-level responsibility for refugee integration; people with direct experience of working with refugees and people seeking asylum; and with refugees and people seeking asylum themselves. This research happened between June and November 2022.



A **policy workshop with local authority resettlement officers** from across Scotland. This research happened in October 2022.



The results

Education:



Education helps refugees integrate within Scotland by **teaching them skills and helping them find work and connect with others**. Local authorities have a number of responsibilities for the education of refugees, including school places for children and young people.

Councils think that **helping children in school is a top priority. Challenges that councils face include** not having enough school places, or not being able to provide support for children whose first language is not English. Some areas have special programmes, like Dundee's 'homework club' for refugee students, which is a partnership between the English as an Additional Language (EAL) team and the adult ESOL team.

The survey and case study research found that **many councils are coming up with new and creative ways to teach English to adults because of high demand, and in order to make the best use of limited funds**. They often work with local colleges or charities to do this. For example, Aberdeenshire has a system where, in partnership with WEA Scotland (a provider of adult education) and local colleges, the council tests new arrivals' English skills and then direct them to the right classes for them based on their ability.

Overall the research finds that **local authorities are generally delivering high quality education for refugees, despite the challenges they face**.

Employment:



Getting a job helps refugees to more effectively settle into life in Scotland. **Though they have many skills, refugees often face problems such as their qualifications not being recognised in Scotland, or language barriers – that make it difficult to find a good job**. As a result they often need targeted support to find work. Efforts are being made to match refugees' existing skills with jobs, but more can be done in this area.

Councils help refugees get jobs by working with organisations like Jobcentre Plus/Department for Work and Pensions, Skills Development Scotland, Fair Start Scotland as well as further education colleges, and charities. They help with things like making CVs, preparing for interviews, and connecting with employers.

The research highlighted that **local authorities are helping refugees find work**, with many success stories. Some areas, like Na h-Eileanan Siar, have helped refugees to start their own businesses. Dundee's council had a special course to improve language and job skills for refugees and helps them meet employers.

Housing:

Safe and affordable housing is key for refugees to settle comfortably in Scotland. However, **with the significant housing shortage the UK as a whole is currently facing, it's often hard for local authorities to find places for refugees to live.** The research showed that councils work with housing teams, local groups, and charities to find homes.

Some housing plans to support refugees worked well because councils had time to prepare for their arrival. However, due to the pressures associated with the need for rapid support for refugees from Afghanistan and Ukraine, it was very difficult for local authorities to meet their housing needs due to lack of appropriate housing available. As a result many people stayed in temporary places like hotels for a long time. On top of this some families didn't want to move to certain areas, and finding homes for big families was particularly hard. To solve these problems, **councils are trying new things, like buying big houses or helping families live close to each other in more rural areas.**

The research found that **housing is one of the biggest challenges for refugee integration, and there is a clear need for improvement in this area.** While councils are trying their best, the lack of affordable homes is a nationwide problem affecting many people in the UK, and it's a particularly difficult challenge for councils to fix.

Welfare rights:

Welfare benefits help refugees by supporting their household income. **The UK, Scottish and local governments work together to deliver benefits for refugees and people seeking asylum.**

Overall, the research found that **many councils are helping refugees to access and understand the benefits that are available to them.** Some councils even have special officers to give advice on money and help with benefits. For example, in Aberdeenshire, there's an officer who gives money advice to refugees and helps them apply for benefits.

However, **with living costs rising, there is a need to think about how to better help refugees with their money in the near future.**

Health and wellbeing:



Mental and physical health are important for refugees to successfully integrate into life in Scotland. However **many refugees face health problems like stress and depression and can find it hard to get medical help because of language problems.**

The research showed that **local authorities help refugees with things like registering with a doctor, getting eye and dental check-ups, and finding interpreters.** They work with health services, other council teams, and charities to do this.

Refugees and people seeking asylum often need particular support for mental health and the impacts of trauma. Some new programmes are trying to help with this, by providing outdoor activities or community projects to talk about mental health.

The research shows that the **partnership between local authorities and health services to support refugees has been good. However, there is still a need to do more,** especially with regards to mental health. The researchers suggest focusing on better mental health care and early help for refugees in the future.

Communities, culture and social connections:



Making friends and social connections is a key part of successful integration for refugees. This includes connecting with other refugees and with other people from the local community. **Being socially connected can also help to improve refugees' health and assist them with learning English.**

Local authorities support the development of social connections by arranging activities, events, sports, and cultural celebrations. Working with charities and community groups has been vital for this.

In Aberdeenshire the local authority supports a project that helps refugee families with 'employment cafes' and cultural trips. Dundee combines language learning with community development, and in Na h-Eileanan Siar, volunteers help with learning English and making new friends.

The research shows that **community projects in Scotland are doing well in helping refugees make connections, but more resources are needed** for local groups and charities to offer enough activities to meet increasing demand.

Comparing experiences across Scotland:



The study looked at how support for refugees varies in different places. **While city, town, and countryside areas offer similar levels of support, more remote and island areas sometimes lack community groups to support refugees.**

Cities often have more job opportunities for refugees and better public transport networks. **Rural areas tend to have less access to services and job opportunities. However, these areas, where there are fewer refugees and strong community networks already in place, can also be helpful for refugees.** For example, the refugee-led group Al-Amal has been highly successful in building relationships and empowering refugees to settle in Aberdeenshire. In places like Na h-Eileanan Siar, smaller refugee numbers also mean that support can be more personal.

Exploring the impact of policy and legislation:



The work of Scottish local authorities in supporting refugee integration sits within a complex network of Scottish and UK laws. The researchers wanted to explore how different UK and Scottish Government policies and schemes impacted on local authorities' activities.

People who gave their views in the survey felt the UK and Syrian Resettlement Schemes were fairly or very effective. They particularly liked the funding, coordination and advanced planning associated with the Syrian schemes. However, only a third were positive about the Afghan and Ukraine programmes. The Afghan programme was criticised for being very slow and leaving houses offered to Afghan families to remain empty. The Ukraine programme struggled with many new arrivals and didn't consult well with local authorities.

There were also concerns about the National Transfer Scheme for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, such as **arrivals with a short amount of time to prepare, limited funding, housing issues, and strict Home Office rules.**


Most people who took part in the research welcomed the New Scots Refugee Integration Strategy. Some councils reported that it was a very helpful framework and used it directly in their work, though others felt they were already doing good work independent of the strategy and its recommendations.

Looking ahead and future policy recommendations:

In the online survey, people who responded were asked about the greatest challenges facing local authorities in supporting refugee integration. **The top challenges** mentioned were:

 The **cost of living** increasing

 A **lack of housing** availability

 **Not enough staff** to support refugee integration

The research also explored lessons learned that could help with future improvements and changes to refugee integration work. **The key lessons for future work** in this area are that:

- **Partnering and cooperation between** councils and community groups is essential with COSLA helping share best practices.
- **A community-focused approach** works well, with strong connections to local organizations.
- **Importance of language learning and job support** to help overcome qualification and language barriers is essential.
- **Encouragement of teamwork within local authorities**, so that all departments support work with refugees, is necessary.

There were also lessons for the next version of the **New Scots Refugee Integration Strategy**. People who responded felt that the next New Scots Refugee Integration Strategy should:

- **Be more ambitious** with clear targets.
- **Involve local governments** in planning, considering local challenges.
- **Ensure consistent funding, rights and services** for all refugees.
- **Include new funding as part of the strategy**, to support local authorities and others in achieving the strategy goals.



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The Scottish Government
St Andrew's House
Edinburgh
EH1 3DG

ISBN: 978-1-83521-504-3

Published by the Scottish Government, November 2023