

Grampian Regional Equality Council (GREC)

New Scots resettlement in Grampian and Scotland, Position Paper

Why GREC is taking a position on this issue?

1. GREC is a registered charity based in Aberdeen and established in 1984 to improve community relations and advance equality across North East Scotland. We work to tackle prejudice and discrimination, celebrate diversity, build positive community relations, and provide evidence to change policy and practice. To deliver these aims we have a wide array of services which include support and advice for individuals and communities experiencing discrimination, counselling for adults and young people; language cafes and English classes, information campaigns, research, and celebrating the work of young people to promote equality in their schools and communities. We provide interpreting and translation services, as well as training and consultancy for organisations across all sectors. We are strongly committed to partnership working, and play a key role in a range of network and forums, at a local and regional level.
2. In terms of **refugee resettlement**, in 2016-2017 the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme brought Syrian refugees to all areas in Scotland, including Grampian. In 2021, a specific relocation and resettlement scheme was put in place for Afghan refugees, whilst various schemes were introduced in 2022 to support Ukrainian nationals. A 2022 evaluation report of the New Scots Integration Strategy states that the introduction of different schemes “has altered the nature of refugee protection across the UK with variations in legal rights and entitlements, funding provisions, and operational processes”.ⁱⁱⁱ
3. Historically, Glasgow was the only ‘dispersal’ area in Scotland for **people seeking asylum**. However, in mid-2022 the UK Government announced the decision to move to full dispersal across Scotland, beyond areas with established support services from the public and third sector, including legal advice.

People seeking asylum have applied to become refugees and are awaiting their cases being reviewed by the Home Office. Applicants can be granted refugee status, and in some cases people can receive humanitarian protection or discretionary leave to remain. Seeking asylum is a legal and fundamental human right for everyone, it is not illegal to seek asylum, no matter the way in which someone enters the UK, despite attempts to undermine it through the Nationality and Borders Act or prohibit it through legislation such as the Illegal Migration Bill.ⁱⁱⁱ People seeking asylum do not have the same rights and

access to support as refugees. People seeking asylum generally do not have the right to work, have No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) and have limited cash support (around £9 per week for individuals staying in contingency accommodation and £45 for those in dispersal accommodation).^{iv}

Terminology

New Scots: The Scottish Government uses this term to refer to refugees, people seeking asylum, and people with another form of leave such as Humanitarian Protection or Discretionary leave. In 2014 this concept was incorporated in the first New Scots Refugee Integration Strategy to move away from the stigma and divisive political narratives prevalent in the UK on this issue. The term has also been used by scholars in a broader sense to refer to immigrants in Scotland. We are using the term “**New Scots**” in this paper to refer to refugees and people seeking asylum.^v

People seeking asylum: we prefer to use this term instead of asylum seekers to prevent dehumanising people. We aim to highlight that behind this and other similar labels describing a temporary legal status, there are individuals with diverse identities and life experiences.

The context and evidence in Grampian

4. People seeking asylum were moved into hotels in Glasgow at the start of the pandemic by the Home Office as an emergency measure. Aberdeen, together with three other local authorities in the central belt, started to receive people seeking asylum in November 2021 in contingency accommodation (hotels). This happened with very little notice and inadequate funding for the public and third sector, and occurred before the UK Government policy shift to full dispersal was announced.
5. MEARS Group is a private housing and social care provider commissioned by the Home Office and responsible for the accommodation and food provision for people seeking asylum in Aberdeen and other areas in Scotland, Northern Ireland, and some areas in the North of England. Among other obligations, Mears Group is contractually responsible for providing “safe, habitable, and fit for purpose” accommodation and should procure accommodation following a consultation and liaison with local authorities, and in compliance with relevant legislation and standards.^{vi}
6. In parallel, since late 2021 and as part of the Afghan relocation and resettlement scheme, Afghan nationals are also being accommodated in hotels in Aberdeen. As of January 2023, this continues to be the case. Ukrainian nationals are also arriving in Grampian, with

Aberdeen hosting around 1,200 people arriving through the UK Government and Scottish Government schemes, with a majority staying in hotels (data from August 2022). Resettlement teams from local authorities have had a general oversight and coordination over the mainstream support provided to Afghan and Ukrainian nationals.

7. In December 2021 and after the arrival of Afghan refugees and people seeking asylum in Aberdeen, GREC published the following statement:

GREC's position on welcoming people seeking asylum and refuge

GREC actively welcomes and supports refugee and asylum seeker resettlement, in line with the 1951 Refugee Convention.

We call on the UK government to do more to proactively resettle those seeking asylum and refuge. We support further investment in resettlement, integration, and inclusion capacity at a local level, into organisations motivated primarily by the public good, rather than profit. This will allow for an effective, sustainable and specialised infrastructure to be developed within localities such as Aberdeen.

We also call for the urgent development and implementation of a strategy for suitably housing people seeking asylum and refuge upon arrival. Keeping individuals and families in hotel accommodation for prolonged periods of time is detrimental to the mental health and community inclusion of already vulnerable people. We further call for an urgent review of work restrictions and the financial support provided to new arrivals.

8. The Home Office, COSLA and local authorities will have to agree on specific plans for full dispersal. Future progress and implementation of full dispersal occurs under the umbrella of the new Nationality and Borders Act, which virtually makes people seeking asylum inadmissible to stay in the UK, with the possibility of removal to Rwanda. This prevents the full delivery of the Scottish Government New Scots Refugee Integration Strategy, negatively impacting efforts that enable integration from day one of arrival. The situation could be made worse through the "Illegal Migration Bill", introduced by the UK Government in Parliament in March 2023. The aim of this bill is to remove the right to seek asylum for people arriving through irregular routes, making people's claims for protection permanently inadmissible and subject to removal, even though there are no safe and regular routes for people to claim asylum in the UK.

The UN Refugee Agency stated the bill is effectively an “asylum ban” and would breach the UK’s obligations under international law. That is why it has been called the “Refugee Ban Bill”.^{vii}

GREC’s position on New Scots resettlement

This paper sets out GREC’s position on resettlement of people seeking asylum and refuge. Our position is based on national evidence^{viii} and on local evidence gathered through our services and projects supporting both people seeking asylum and refuge in Aberdeen and the North East of Scotland. We have also developed our position through involvement in the No Recourse, North East (NR,NE) Partnership. The growing complexity and compartmentalisation of resettlement schemes is negatively impacting New Scots, a situation that accentuates the shortcomings of the current system and the need to implement a more comprehensive and planned approach to welcome, support and enable the integration of all New Scots.

- All New Scots should be supported to access their rights and entitlements and their human rights should be respected and protected in Scotland. To that end, we support the widening of dispersal areas and welcoming of refugees and people seeking asylum across Scotland and in Grampian under a comprehensive system centrally funded by the UK government (Home Office), with direct investment in localities and managed by local authorities to improve the capacity to offer support and meaningful inclusion.
- We support a system in which public oversight, the Scottish Government and local authorities are at its core. This will mean that the millions of pounds that today are directed towards private, for-profit contractors and hotels will be redirected and invested into local authorities, health and education services, and communities. Third sector and community-based organisations at a local level should work collaboratively with local authorities, who we encourage to take a leading role in developing the infrastructure and expertise required to ensure that the human rights of refugees and people seeking asylum are upheld in the long term and in a sustainable way. A decentralised approach that provides both guidance and flexibility will be central to enable a stronger local response to future emergencies, which will likely continue to cause displacement around the world.
- We oppose the use of hotels, barracks, asylum-camps, or any other similar setting as accommodation, especially for long periods of time, as there is overwhelming evidence that this is detrimental to the mental health and community inclusion of people in a vulnerable situation. People seeking asylum and refuge must have access to safe and dignified housing upon arrival, in line with Scottish housing and

homelessness support provision standards. This holds true in Glasgow, which has been a dispersal area for over 20 years and has the infrastructure and knowledge in place to better support asylum seekers, and even more so for other localities where this supportive infrastructure is not yet in place and where some services (such as solicitors providing immigration advice) are non-existent, as it is the case in North East Scotland.

- We also oppose any plans to send people seeking asylum arriving through unofficial routes offshore, including to Rwanda, and removing the possibility of seeking asylum in the UK. We urge the UK Government to reconsider these plans as they create a two-tier system of asylum that will put already vulnerable people in an even more vulnerable situation. Furthermore, authorities have acknowledged that the cost of removal to Rwanda will not save taxpayers money and the cost will not be less than what it is to accommodate asylum seekers in the UK.^{ix} The Nationality and Borders Act and related policies create many of the inequalities that refugees, asylum seekers and immigrants face in the UK (to review GREC's position on the Nationality and Borders Act see www.grec.co.uk/research/).
- We support an urgent review and implementation of actions to tackle the backlog of asylum cases pending review for over the indicated period of 6 months, which has been growing steadily during the last decade. This backlog keeps people living in limbo for years, with limited rights, unable to work or contribute to their communities and with a constant feeling of uncertainty and anxiety that negatively impacts their mental health in the long term.^x
- We urge the UK Government to review the current work restrictions and financial support provided to new arrivals and for those who have been waiting a resolution for years so there is no restriction to seek jobs only on the Shortage Occupation List (SOL). Free bus travel and support to be able to communicate with solicitors, family and the local community in an appropriate manner are essential living needs and should also be part of these financial considerations.
- The asylum system we advocate for, with a key role of the Scottish Government and local authorities, falls in line with and reinforces the Scottish Government New Scots Refugee Integration Strategy and its vision of “a welcoming Scotland where refugees and asylum seekers are able to rebuild their lives from the day they arrive”. It also enables the long-term and two-way process of integration established by this strategy by “involving positive change in both individuals and host communities, which leads to cohesive, diverse communities”.^{xi}

Summary and Implications for GREC's work

This paper sets out GREC's position on New Scots resettlement and the need to review the national and local response in light of the rapidly changing situation and international emergencies developing since 2020. We need to be better prepared and work collaboratively to both enable meaningful integration and respond to future emergencies.

As part of GREC's role and our aim of tackling inequalities and discrimination, we will continue to actively work with New Scots arriving to Aberdeen and Grampian. We will continue to work in partnership/collaboration with a range of national and local organisations to improve capacity, infrastructure and expertise to welcome, support, and empower New Scots in North East Scotland. We will collaborate both with like-minded organisations and also with those that currently play a role in the system and have a different perspective (i.e., private providers).

We will also continue to gather evidence of the consequences of current policies and support initiatives that do so, to feed into future reviews and influence change of policies, laws, and practice to advance equality and integration at both local and national levels.

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- ^{iv} Home Office, April 2022. Report on review of cash allowance paid to asylum seekers and failed asylum seekers. Available online: www.gov.uk/government/publications/report-on-review-of-cash-allowance-paid-to-asylum-seekers/report-on-review-of-weekly-allowances-paid-to-asylum-seekers-and-failed-asylum-seekers-2021
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