

# THE COMING DECADE: SCOTTISH REFUGEE COUNCIL AND A NEW ERA OF ASYLUM

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Last year saw Scottish Refugee Council's 25<sup>th</sup> year of supporting refugees and people seeking asylum in Scotland as well as the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the UK Government's asylum dispersal policy. The implementation of this policy meant the arrival of thousands of people seeking asylum to Scotland, a country that until then had relatively low numbers of what the UK refers to as ethnic and black minorities. With the establishment of the Scottish Parliament one year previous, their arrival marked not just a dramatic demographic change to especially the city of Glasgow which had signed a contract to house incoming asylum seekers, but also marked an opportunity to re-think the vision of Scottish society in the twenty-first century. While the Scottish Parliament does not have jurisdiction over immigration (this is a 'reserved' competence of the UK Government) the Scottish Government has taken the position that integration of incoming asylum seekers starts when they arrive in Scotland, before their status as refugees has been determined, which is in sharp contrast to the position taken up by the Home Office. This means that in areas over which the Scottish Government has jurisdiction including education, health and housing, it has developed policies and programmes with the involvement of voluntary groups, educators, churches, unions, individuals and arts groups to support the integration and needs of asylum seekers. Importantly this has included setting up social support systems needed for all communities and services involved with people seeking asylum.

Scottish Refugee Council has played a pivotal role working with the Scottish Government, local government and other agencies and groups to ensure the rights of asylum seekers are protected and there is a system of support in place that facilitates their integration into as well as participation in Scottish society. Rather than viewing people

seeking asylum as a burden to society, we have worked to shift public attitudes and the media so these newcomers are viewed positively, as welcome new members of Scottish society who bring a new wealth of experience and international connections to Scotland.

To understand the radical change that Scotland has undergone with the arrival of asylum seekers it is important to note that since the year 2000, 1 in 10 of all asylum claimants in the UK have been sent and accommodated in Glasgow during their asylum claim. This has amounted to between 5,000 to 6,000 people seeking asylum being supported each year in Glasgow throughout the 2000s falling to around 2,500 in 2009 and 2010 as overall numbers of asylum claimants to the UK have dropped.

Despite this large number of asylum seekers sent to Scotland, most of whom have been housed in Glasgow (the total Scottish population is approximately 5 million and Glasgow's population is approximately 600,000), the integration of asylum seekers has been relatively successful, if the number of asylum and refugee run organisations, their participation in cultural projects in community centres and art galleries and their involvement in policy-making is any evidence. Again, this reflects the vision that asylum seekers are welcome—that integration starts from day one, not only once they have received the leave to remain.

This year, 2011, sees the 60<sup>th</sup> UN Convention on the Status of Refugees, which has saved countless numbers of lives. Scottish Refugee Council is an independent charity dedicated to the principles of the UN Convention on the Status of Refugees. Since 1985 we have been campaigning for fair treatment of refugees and people seeking asylum, raising awareness of refugee issues through the media, arts and local communities and working hard to influence policy in both Scotland and the UK. One of the essential services that Scottish Refugee Council provides to asylum seekers on their arrival

is an orientation session: advising them on what to expect with the asylum process, assisting them with accessing financial support, how to set up legal representation, introducing them to the services they will need, whether language, education or health services.

The 60<sup>th</sup> UN anniversary and the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Scottish Refugee Council are important opportunities to celebrate but also to reflect on the past and think to the future.

In the last decade the UK saw the highest number of asylum applications in its history, this combined with a fevered hostile atmosphere driven by the tabloid press created an environment where many decisions against asylum seekers were taken. In this atmosphere, even though asylum numbers began to decline reflecting the increasingly restrictive immigration policies, asylum and immigration had become confused amongst the public. All new arrivals to the UK were viewed with a mixture of hostility, fear and anger. This was detrimental for all concerned: asylum seekers, refugees, our communities and politicians alike.

The previous UK Labour government made progress in a number of key areas including quicker decisions and resolving asylum cases which had waited too long for a final outcome. However fairness was often compromised leaving vulnerable people in appalling situations including destitution and detention. A 'protection gap' opened up which trapped many people from countries with poor human rights records who, whilst unable to reach the threshold of the 1951 Convention, were denied any form of protection in the UK but could not be returned either for example, to Darfur or to Zimbabwe. The result has been that people were forced into destitution, living on the streets with no financial support, housing, food and were unable to support themselves. In Scotland over the last 10 years we have sought to cut a different path with an inclusive vision of society. We have seen positive political

leadership from different political parties in the Scottish Parliament on refugee integration and a focus on ensuring people seeking asylum are able to integrate from day one.

The first pronouncements of the new UK Conservative/Liberal Democrat Coalition Government in May last year on asylum were positive. A pledge to quickly end the detention of children for immigration purposes—something we and many others in Scotland and across the UK had opposed for many years; improvements to the treatment of LGBT asylum seekers and a commitment to improve the asylum determination system as a whole.

However the new UK Government brought with it a determination to slash public spending. And along with other refugee agencies across the UK, we learnt that we would face major cuts in funding to our services from 1 April 2011.

Our One Stop Service, which offers advice on accommodation and financial support to asylum seekers and refugees from our headquarters in Glasgow, will be cut by 62%, and that the grant for our orientation and support services for people who have just arrived in the city will be halved.

Additionally, the contract for our Refugee Integration and Employment Service (RIES), which helps refugees once they have had been given leave to remain in the UK to settle, find a home and a job in Scotland; will not be extended beyond 30 September 2011. These cuts are echoed across the UK, meaning that in effect there will no longer be any dedicated UK government funding to assist new refugees to integrate in the UK.

Scottish Refugee Council believes that savage and disproportionate cuts to the refugee charity sector will force people who have already fled torture, conflict and persecution in their own countries to suffer even further while seeking safety in the UK. This is unacceptable. Asylum seekers and refugees depend on the specialist services and expertise of

refugee charities to enable them to rebuild their lives.

We understand these are challenging times, but we are gravely concerned cuts this deep will not only devastate the organisations that provide asylum seekers with a lifeline, but will have a serious and lasting impact on the wider voluntary and public sector and community cohesion.

Sixty years on from the UN Convention for Refugees it is imperative the UK Government continues to protect those seeking refuge in the UK today and support their integration. They must do this by ensuring the organisations that support them can carry on with their life-changing work.