Housing provision for New Scots

Chapter extract from ‘The New Scots Refugee Integration Strategy: A report on the local and international dimensions of integrating refugees in Scotland’.

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# Terminology and list of abbreviations

In line with Scottish Government policy, this report uses the term ‘New Scots’ to refer to: individuals and family members who arrive in Scotland under various refugee resettlement schemes; people who are claiming asylum and resident in Scotland; individuals who receive refugee status or another form of leave such as Humanitarian Protection or Discretionary leave and their family members; people who arrive in Scotland to be reunited with a family member who is a refugee; young people who are claiming or have claimed asylum or have been trafficked into the UK. The New Scots Refugee Integration Strategy is also relevant to other displaced groups such as survivors of human trafficking and people who are stateless.

AIRE – The Advice, Isue Reporting and Eligibility Contract

COMPASS – Commercial and Operating Managers Procuring Asylum Support

COSLA – Convention of Scottish Local Authorities

DA – Dispersal Accommodation

IA – Initial Accommodation

LA – Local Authority

LtR – Leave to Remain

NGO – Non-Governmental Organisation

NHS – National Health Service

NSRIDP – New Scots Refugee Integration Delivery Project

NSRIS 2 – New Scots Refugee Integration Strategy (second iteration)

SRC – Scottish Refugee Council

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# Introduction

This publication is a chapter extract from ‘The New Scots Refugee Integration Strategy: A report on the local and international dimensions of integrating refugees in Scotland’.[[1]](#footnote-1) In the main report, we provide interpretive frameworks through which integration can be understood, a comprehensive overview of research findings concerning refugee integration in Scotland, and a series of recommendations to inform the development of the third iteration of the New Scots Refugee Integration Strategy. The findings and recommendations presented in this chapter are based on academic research conducted by the University of Glasgow as part of the New Scots Refugee Integration Delivery Project (NSRIDP), a partnership project led by the Scottish Government with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA), the Scottish Refugee Council (SRC) and the UNESCO Chair in Refugee Integration through Languages and the Arts (RILA) at the University of Glasgow. The project sought to expand good practice and innovation in the context of integration in Scotland, as well as conduct primary research on refugee integration in Scotland to support the development of the third iteration of the New Scots Refugee Integration Strategy (NSRIS).

This chapter extract is focused on housing provision for New Scots – specifically people seeking asylum in Scotland – and is aimed at New Scots, those working in resettlement and housing, policymakers and other key stakeholders in Scotland.[[2]](#footnote-2) Concerning housing, NSRIS 2 sought to achieve three key outcomes:

* Refugees and asylum seekers live in safe, welcoming and cohesive communities and are able to build diverse relationships and connections.
* Refugees and asylum seekers understand their rights, responsibilities and entitlements, and are able to exercise them to pursue full and independent lives.
* Refugees and asylum seekers are able to access well-coordinated services which recognise and meet their rights and needs.[[3]](#footnote-3)

# Asylum housing background

While housing policy is a devolved to the Scottish Parliament, asylum accommodation remains reserved to the UK Parliament. As a result, the UK Government has oversight over the dispersal scheme, asylum housing contracts, and housing standards,[[4]](#footnote-4) although housing must also meet the minimum standards set by the Scottish Government.[[5]](#footnote-5) Glasgow has been the only dispersal site in Scotland. The number of people in dispersal accommodation in Glasgow in December 2022 was 4,400).[[6]](#footnote-6)

In 2012, the provision of asylum seeker accommodation was privatised through the COMPASS contracts which, in Scotland, led to Serco Group plc taking over the housing contract from previous providers, including Glasgow City Council and Ypeople. Meanwhile, in 2012, the Home Office contract for providing advice and support for people navigating the asylum process was granted to the charity Migrant Help – a predominantly phone-based helpline charity service. While the move to Migrant Help did allow for a centralising of language provision (with Migrant Help offering support in 15 languages), it also resulted in people losing access to local face-to-face support. These two decisions have led to serious challenges that local groups and New Scots have struggled to overcome. During the period when Serco Group plc held the asylum housing contract in Glasgow, the sector was faced by a number of difficulties which included:

* Issues regarding the quality of housing, as well as dispersal to areas throughout Glasgow with no history of receiving New Scots.[[7]](#footnote-7)
* Uncertainty amongst people being housed concerning the boundaries of Serco Group plc’s power (specifically whether or not housing managers had the power to affect asylum cases); the role of Migrant Help in providing assistance; their ties to the UK Home Office.[[8]](#footnote-8)
* Highly unbalanced power dynamics through which people seeking asylum felt unsafe in their own homes.[[9]](#footnote-9)
* The loss of a fluid process to move people on from asylum housing to long-term housing following their receipt of refugee status.[[10]](#footnote-10)

In September 2019, the existing COMPASS asylum contracts were replaced by the New Asylum Accommodation and Support Services Contracts following engagement with local authorities, potential providers and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) (Home Office 2019). In Scotland this resulted in Serco Group plc losing the contract for asylum accommodation to Mears Group plc, and it was hoped that the standard of asylum accommodation would improve. Despite the inclusion of the need for providers to carry out inspections of accommodation in advance of the contract transition, however, the new contracts closely resemble the previous ones and many of the issues that New Scots experienced with Serco Group plc have remained unchanged.[[11]](#footnote-11)

# Current housing issues

*“I went to someone's house because he was really depressed, and I was frightened he was going to do something. And he showed me round his house, and on his bed was a piece of cloth so thin, if you held it up to the window you could see out. […] Now that man comes from Iraq, how is that going to keep him warm in bed in the winter, and how do you sleep if you're frozen?”* (Mary, volunteer ESOL teacher, community group).

When the Covid-19 pandemic reached the UK and Scotland went in to ‘lockdown’, many asylum seekers in Glasgow were transferred to hotels in order to provide accommodation that was Covid safe and would “reduce the need for both asylum-seekers and Mears Group plc staff to make regular journeys to and from multiple accommodation locations”.[[12]](#footnote-12) However, the combined effect of being transferred from existing accommodation with little warning, poor food quality in hotels (which frequently did not take account of cultural and religious observances), the removal of cash support, the inability to prepare food and poor social distancing measures took a significant toll on asylum seekers housed in hotels during the Covid pandemic.[[13]](#footnote-13)

The New Scots and refugee groups that we spoke to as part of this research also shared many frustrations with the current situation concerning asylum housing now that Scotland has partially moved out of lockdown. In the current arrangements, people seeking asylum are first housed in ‘Initial Accommodation’ (IA) - which for most is hotel accommodation - and then they are transferred to ‘Dispersal Accommodation’ (DA). Through interviews, conversations and observations, we have learned of the following issues which still persist within initial accommodation housing:

* Workmen and maintenance staff are entering people’s rooms without their permission or prior notice, often leaving rooms unlocked when they leave.
* Residents report feeling under surveillance by Mears Group plc staff, who they believe are checking whether or not they are occupying their rooms.
* There have been issues registering people in IA with NHS General Practitioners (GPs), although these are largely being resolved. Timescales to organise a meeting between a new arrival with the Asylum Health Bridging Team in Glasgow have been fluid, but are now reportedly set at 48 working hours.
* Residents in IA in Glasgow have been unable to request specific dietary requirements.
* The information pack that IA residents in Glasgow receive contains superfluous information and needs to be redeveloped with input from New Scots to provide information better targeted to their needs.
* Residents report that they have been unable to request specific dietary requirements and the quality of food provided in the hotel in Glasgow is considered unhealthy.

Issues with accommodation also persist beyond the initial accommodation stage. The housing contract with Mears Group plc states that residents will be given 5 days’ notice and information concerning their new accommodation, and the area in which it is located, before being moved from their IA to their DA. However, residents are being moved without notice (i.e. being told that there is a taxi waiting for them outside the hotel residence). As a result, people are frequently losing their possessions and are (re)traumatised by the abrupt (forced) movements they experience to new accommodation. Once they arrive at their DA, new residents are asked to sign a form, which they frequently do not understand, to confirm that the accommodation is in a satisfactory condition.

Under these circumstances, however, residents are frequently unaware of their rights and/or too fearful to utilise them. As Ashraf (Community Group) noted, “*[People] don’t have enough information to assert their rights and the majority don’t know that their [Mears Group plc] Housing Manager has no control over their asylum case.”* Community groups also reported that residents were often unsure of the extent of Mears Group plc’s powers or the role of Migrant Help to support them. Residents fear that both Migrant Help and Mears Group plc are able to negatively influence their asylum claims, with some residents claiming that some Mears Group plc housing managers have threatened to report troublesome residents to the Home Office if they make complaints to Migrant Help. Residents also complained of housing managers and other housing staff entering people’s homes unannounced and without prior notice – despite housing contracts stipulating that residents will be given five days' notice.

Upon entering their DA, residents are given induction documents by Mears Group plc concerning the rules of their accommodation, and a Home Office guide to [living in asylum accommodation](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/821324/Pack_A_-_English_-_Web.pdf), yet they are given almost no information about the local area in which they have been dispersed to. Information that residents wanted to receive included locations of nearby supermarkets, halal butchers, schools, libraries, community support groups and parks – none of which they currently receive. There is a strong sense, therefore, that people are moved to their DA and then being abandoned by those charged with their housing and further support. Moreover, those New Scots we spoke to in the context of housing were unaware of the current NSRIS or how it was intended to support them in learning about and accessing their housing rights.

Community groups and people in asylum accommodation reported that Migrant Help is not sufficiently assisting people in dispersal accommodation. People complained of “never ending” time spent waiting on hold for Migrant Help to answer the phone, while receiving assistance is “getting harder” as the accommodation context becomes more complicated. New Scots reported being asked by Migrant Help employees if they were in IA or DA, yet for many this is unclear as not all IA is in hotels – which causes further confusion when seeking assistance (see the [Asylum Inquiry Scotland 2022](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/62af1289a666c80e00b17253/t/636b9190408f81778746eaa7/1667994032702/AIS%2BPhase%2B2%2BReport%2BFull.pdf) for more information). As a result, many people seeking asylum in Scotland have turned to community groups (which do not receive funding from the Home Office) in order to receive support with their asylum housing; this has further restricted the capacity of community groups to conduct the work they have been set up to do.

The lack of information received by people seeking asylum when housed in either IA or DA is of great concern, and links both to the need for New Scots to know their rights (as per the NSRIS) and the need for information to be communicated in simple terms and in a variety of languages. Moreover, once a person is informed that they will be moved to dispersal accommodation, the process of transportation to the new accommodation often happens at such speed that community groups are unable to organise anyone to accompany them to the new accommodation in order to help them read and understand the information provided by Mears Group plc and to make complaints before signing the lease forms.

# Long-term housing needs

This publication has focused exclusively on housing issues pertaining to asylum housing. However, housing for New Scots with refugee status is also a matter that requires sustained attention. Following the war in Ukraine especially, sourcing accommodation for New Scots has become a significant challenge for LAs amidst an already-expensive housing market. Initial findings from IPPR indicate that LA participants fear that the current mixture of short-term funding uncertainty and housing supply issues will undermine longer-term strategic action to deliver integration initiatives across Scotland. Ensuring long-term housing creates the platform from which people can gain stability and access a range of services and activities to deepen their sense of belonging and engage in cross-community activities.

# Recommendations

* NSRIS 3 must work across sectors to secure a long-term housing plan for New Scots, because many of the housing issues facing New Scots with refugee status are linked to broader issues relating to a [shortage of affordable housing](https://livrepository.liverpool.ac.uk/3089891/1/Affordable%20Housing%20Need%20in%20Scotland%20Post-2021.pdf) in both Scotland and the UK.
* Housing provision for resettled people must urgently move from congregate accommodation in hotels, cruise ships and home-based hosting, to a hospitality management approach through rented and social tenanted sectors. This is essential for ensuring long-term agency and normalcy for people whose lives have been disrupted in many traumatic ways.
* An accountability structure should be developed in accordance with the provisions set out in service contracts with the UK Home Office. Such an accountability structure is urgently needed to monitor the providers of Asylum Accommodation and Support Services (AASC) and the Advice, Issue Reporting and Eligibility (AIRE) service. This accountability mechanism must also provide New Scots with the opportunity to anonymously submit evidence of problems without fear of reprisal.
* More care needs to be taken by housing providers when moving New Scots housed in hotels to their dispersal accommodation. In particular, people must be given adequate notice of the fact that they will be moved – as stipulated in the AASC contract.
* There needs to be wider awareness and recognition of the fact that, when people are entered into the asylum system, the initial information they receive concerning their rights and responsibilities in Scotland is delivered through a Home Office induction booklet and user handbook issued by the accommodation provider. The information provided in these booklets should be urgently reviewed, as should the quality of the translations of the documents.
* More clarity is needed concerning the boundaries between the Scottish Government and the UK Government concerning the provision of housing – especially for those with no recourse to public funds. The Scottish Government should commission and publish legal research into the boundaries between reserved and devolved matters that concern the needs of New Scots specifically.
* Alternative Scottish housing models should be sought and promoted so that Scotland can manage its own accommodation provision for New Scots.
* A ‘Welcome to Scotland’ induction booklet or series of short informational videos should be prepared in multiple languages to introduce recently arrived New Scots to NSRIS 3 and ensure they are welcomed. Information given by housing providers to New Scots concerning their local area should be focused on both the wider scale of the locality (e.g. city-wide in the case of Glasgow) *and* the immediate area (i.e. what is accessible within a 20-minute walking distance).
1. The full report can be accessed at <https://www.gla.ac.uk/media/Media_900243_smxx.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. It is anticipated that the forthcoming report by the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR), which was also conducted as part of NSRIDP, will cover housing for New Scots with refugee status. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Scottish Government. (2018), pp. 43. New Scots: Refugee Integration Strategy 2018 – 2022.

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9. *Ibid.* [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Meer *et al* (2019) [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
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