



SUPPORTING AND
EMPOWERING
REFUGEES

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council



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A journey towards safety

A report on the experiences
of Eritrean refugees in the UK

“ Take a journey towards safety
even if it takes years ”

Eritrean Proverb

ገበይ ሰላም ሓል ጊሳ። (Tigre)

መገዲ ሰላም፡ ዓመት ኪዶ (Tigrinya)

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Our deepest gratitude goes to all of the refugees who took part in the participatory assessment. Thank you all for generously giving your time and sharing your experiences, some of which were very difficult to recount. We hope that by doing so for this report, we are able to shine a light on the challenges faced by newly recognised refugees in the UK and provide constructive recommendations to improve their situation.

Thanks also to the following for their invaluable support in organising and carrying out the participatory assessment: Sara Palacios Arapiles, Sabeeha Lakha, Mathilda Grivell, Ezedin Osman, Ismail Moussa, Redi Aybu, Munir Adem, Miriam Woldu, Kidest A Beyene, Waldemichael Tsegay, Fiori Mezgebo, Ghezae Berhane, The International Centre for Eritrean Refugees and Asylum-Seekers, Eritrean Muslim Community Association, Saho Community Centre, Association of Eritrean Jeberti in the UK, West London Eritrean Community, Enhancing Educating Eritreans, Children in Care, Nottingham City Council, Volunteers at the British Red Cross in Nottingham, Refugee Action in London and After 18.

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FOR REFUGEES WHO HAVE LOST EVERYTHING, who are often without the support of family and friends, and who may carry the scars of trauma and tragedy, building a new life can be a difficult and daunting task. Mandated to protect refugees, UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency provides life-saving shelter and assistance to refugees around the world.

This report finds that for Eritrean refugees recognised in the UK, Government-provided integration assistance can be inconsistent and inadequate. Many of the refugees we interviewed faced lengthy delays in the determination of their refugee status, leaving them feeling anxious and unsettled. Even after they were granted status, difficulties accessing mainstream services, housing, and English language classes were common. Few were able to find work matching their skills and experience. Yet despite their setbacks, the majority of Eritreans who took part in this research were happy to be safe, felt welcomed in the UK, and were generally positive about their futures.

I am grateful for the collaboration with the Refugee Council and Scottish Refugee Council in preparing this report which provides the Government and Local Authorities with constructive recommendations to improve policies and services for refugees. With the right kind of support, refugees can thrive and give back to the communities that have welcomed them in. At a time when 68.5 million people are uprooted around the world, solidarity with refugees is needed more than ever.

Gonzalo Vargas Llosa, UNHCR Representative to the UK

EVERY DAY AT THE REFUGEE COUNCIL we support newly recognised refugees to start to rebuild their lives. Through our work, we regularly witness the mixed emotions that a positive decision on an asylum claim can evoke: the joy at finally having to stop running and finally reaching safety coupled with the anxiety about where a person is going to live and how they will support themselves.

Establishing a new life can be extremely challenging, and we are delighted to have partnered with UNHCR and Scottish Refugee Council to examine what it is like to be a newly recognised refugee in the UK through the lens of the Eritrean community. The experiences highlighted in this research tally with those we see through our support services and echo the findings of research we have carried out on this subject. Sadly many of the problems people face are a consequence of policies that serve to make life more difficult for refugees at the point we should be doing all we can to facilitate integration. I urge the Government and other service providers to heed the recommendations made in this report so that those granted protection in the UK are able to rebuild their lives.

Maurice Wren, Chief Executive, Refugee Council

REFUGEE EMPOWERMENT and involvement are at the heart of what we do. We warmly welcomed the opportunity to work with our colleagues at the Refugee Council and UNHCR to give a voice to the experiences of Eritrean refugees across the UK and vitally to hear their solutions to the challenges they encounter.

Whilst the report highlights some positive policies and support in Scotland that help newly recognised refugees to integrate in Scotland, it importantly shines a light on key issues experienced by Eritrean refugees across the UK that seriously hamper their paths to building a new life. From facing an immediate cliff edge of destitution when they are recognised as refugees, to restrictive policies on family reunion, this report clearly articulates the concerns of this particular population, but which other refugees sadly face. Resolving these issues will not only benefit refugees, but all our communities.

Sabir Zazai, Chief Executive, Scottish Refugee Council

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report presents findings and recommendations based on a Participatory Assessment (PA) conducted in England and Scotland in September and October 2017. The PA involved nine Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and 11 individual interviews with Eritrean men and women who were recognised as refugees in the United Kingdom (UK) within a period of 30 months preceding the PA on or after 1 March 2015.

In 2016, the UK received 3.2% of all asylum applications made in the European Union, the highest number after Germany, Italy, France, Greece and Austria. Currently, the UK is one of the top five refugee hosting countries in Europe and UNHCR works closely with the UK Government, including the Home Office and the Department for International Development, to protect refugees and other persons of concern to UNHCR inside the UK as well as in their countries of asylum. Notably, the UK Government has become a global leader in the resettlement of refugees, with the establishment of the Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme and the introduction of the Community Sponsorship Scheme for the resettlement of refugees displaced by the Syrian conflict to the UK.

Source: Eurostat, *Asylum in the EU Member States*, 16 March 2017, <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/2995521/7921609/3-16032017-BP-EN.pdf/e5fa98bb-5d9d-4297-9168-d07c67d1c9e1> and UNHCR, *Mid-Year Trends 2017*, 9 March 2018, <http://www.unhcr.org/uk/statistics/unhcrstats/5aaa4fd27/mid-year-trends-june-2017.html>

In mid-2017, figures from UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, showed that there were 121,280 refugees living in the UK,¹ the majority of whom would have gone through the asylum process inside the country after submitting an application. Providing protection and achieving integration for these refugees remains a central concern for UNHCR and its partners to this report: the Refugee Council and Scottish Refugee Council. At the same time, it is recognised that those refugees who go through the UK's asylum process lack the dedicated early integration support received by refugees who enter the UK through the Government-led resettlement schemes.² UNHCR, together with the Refugee Council and Scottish Refugee Council, conducted the PA, in order to examine how certain policies and practices in the UK impact upon their protection situation and integration prospects.

The PA, therefore, focused specifically on those who were recognised as refugees after having gone through the asylum process inside the UK. It gave the refugees interviewed the opportunity to share their experience in their own words, to gather information about this population's protection risks, capacities and solutions as well as about key stakeholders providing them with assistance.

WHAT IS A PARTICIPATORY ASSESSMENT?

A PA is a process employed by UNHCR that includes building partnerships with refugee women and men of all ages and backgrounds by promoting meaningful participation in the design of programmes and advocacy efforts through structured dialogue. PAs may include holding separate discussions with women, girls, boys, and men, including adolescents, to better understand their specific concerns and challenges and involve them in finding solutions. The information gathered from different groups also reflects a diversity of perspectives and viewpoints, minimising the risk of excluding certain groups in the design of programmes and advocacy efforts.

¹ UNHCR, *Mid-Year Trends 2017*, 9 March 2018, <http://www.unhcr.org/uk/statistics/unhcrstats/5aaa4fd27/mid-year-trends-june-2017.html>

² Resettlement programmes currently run by the UK Government include: the Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (VPRS), Vulnerable Children's Resettlement Scheme (VCRS), the Gateway Protection Programme and the Mandate Refugee Scheme (MRS). Each of these programmes provide refugees with a support package for a limited period of time with the exception of the MRS.

UNHCR, the Scottish Refugee Council and the Refugee Council chose to look at the experience of refugees recognised in-country through the lens of the Eritrean refugee population. This was done both to consider their specific protection situation (see *Focus Population: Eritrean Refugees* below) as well as to practically and effectively coordinate the PA with the resources available. Because Eritreans comprise one of the largest nationality groups seeking asylum in the UK,³ it was also hoped that the PA would be valuable in providing some context to the experiences of others who have been through the asylum process and recognised as refugees in the UK.

Overall, the PA identified some positive practices by different actors supporting refugees. However, it was found that these positive practices were not consistently applied and existed alongside notable gaps in support and assistance given to refugees recognised through the UK asylum process. These gaps were identified as creating barriers to their integration and as potentially exacerbating pre-existing vulnerabilities including for refugees who had survived violence, torture, and/or sexual and gender-based violence.

The participatory methodology helps place refugees at the centre of decision making regarding their own protection and welfare. Accordingly, refugees interviewed made suggestions and discussed possible solutions to the problems they have faced upon recognition. The PA also gave a voice to the Eritrean refugee population who, as shown by the consultations, typically experienced significant trauma either in Eritrea and/or, during their journey to the UK. Many participants felt that there was a general lack of awareness of the suffering that they had experienced to reach safety in the UK. The refugees who were interviewed felt empowered and pleased to be given the opportunity to talk about their concerns, and were grateful to UNHCR and partners for creating space for such discussions to take place and for highlighting their plight and concerns.

Based on the findings and solutions proposed by the participants, this report makes recommendations across six thematic areas, which are summarised below and discussed in detail in the subsequent sections. These should help inform the development of policy and law in the UK, including the design of a national integration strategy for refugees, which is currently being considered by the UK Government through the *Integrated Communities Strategy*

Green Paper consultation.⁴ The development of law and policy in this area should be designed to ensure that the support provided to refugees who have gone through the asylum process is approximated with that currently provided to resettled refugees.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The 'move on' period

We recommend that the UK authorities extend the 'move on' period beyond 28 days, giving newly recognised refugees more time before their accommodation and subsistence support, provided under Section 95 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999⁵, comes to an end. This recommendation is made to help ensure that refugees do not experience a gap in their support. The duration of the 'move on' period should reflect the time it reasonably takes to access accommodation and start receiving welfare benefits payments or move into work. The length of time should be considered in consultation with refugees (including those who have been recognised in the UK) and relevant organisations who support newly recognised refugees. It should also take into account previous reports and recommendations made concerning the 'move on' period.

We recommend that the UK authorities take measures to introduce a stronger support system for newly recognised refugees. This could, for example, include funding and working closely with organisations that can dedicate caseworkers for a set period of time to all newly recognised refugees so that they can navigate the system and ultimately become less reliant on Government support where possible. Further, the UK authorities should seek to assist newly recognised refugees in addressing challenges faced during the 'move on' period, such as difficulty in opening bank accounts and access to a Biometric Residence Permit (BRP).

We recommend that the UK authorities explore the possibility of starting the transition process from asylum-seeker to refugee before refugee recognition, especially for the provision of services such as language and vocational training, as well as information provision on access to social support, health-care and housing post-recognition.

³ There have been over 26,000 applications for asylum by Eritrean nationals since 2001 in the UK. See UK Home Office, *Immigration statistics*, October to December 2017 second edition, ("UK Home Office Immigration Statistics Oct-Dec 2017"), <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/immigration-statistics-october-to-december-2017>

⁴ UK Government, *Integrated Communities Strategy Green Paper*, March 2018, ("UK Government Green Paper"), <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/integrated-communities-strategy-green-paper>

⁵ Part VI of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999, <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1999/33/section/95>

Education

We recommend that the UK Government increase the number of fully-funded English language course hours available to refugees and increase the provision of child-care support to those refugees undertaking English for Speakers of Other Language (ESOL) classes. Where possible, this should be extended to those going through the asylum process.

We recommend that the UK Government provide a period of intensive English language classes for refugees who wish to fully concentrate on their English or who require specialist learning support in acquiring English language skills.

Employment

We recommend that the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) strengthen the training provided to Jobcentre Plus staff on the needs of refugee jobseekers so that their special circumstances are taken into account and they are approached with the requisite sensitivity by staff members. This should assist in providing a more tailored response which delivers labour market access and that, in some situations, may involve referral to other organisations such as Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs) or charities equipped to assist people further.

We recommend that the central and local government strengthen their coordination with service providers to improve the provision of support to refugees seeking access to the labour market. Consideration should be given to strengthening access to employment for asylum-seekers prior to refugee recognition. This could be done by bringing forward the date on which they are entitled to work and ensuring wider access to employment than that found in the shortage occupation list.

Health & Wellbeing

We recommend that the Home Office and the Department for Health take measures to ensure that in all circumstances, information is given to refugees upon recognition of their healthcare rights, including information on how to register with a general practitioner and what to do in a medical emergency. This information should be available in a number of languages.

We recommend that the Department for Health strengthen information given to relevant staff on the rights of refugees and how they can be assisted through the registration process as well as on their unique experiences and challenges.

We recommend that Asylum Support Accommodation Providers support those living in asylum support accommodation to access specialist services where necessary (e.g. pregnant women, complex health problems, families with children).

Family Reunion

We recommend that the Ministry of Justice lift restrictions on legal aid in England and Wales for beneficiaries of international protection seeking family reunion.

We recommend that the Home Office allows for reunification of families in a wider set of circumstances than under current policy. This includes:

- allowing child refugees in the UK the right to sponsor their close family, so they can rebuild their lives together and help them integrate in their new community; and
- expanding who qualifies as ‘family’, so that young people who have turned 18 and elderly parents can join their family in the UK.

We also recommend that the Home Office improves training given to caseworkers making decisions on family reunion applications, including to ensure sufficient understanding of practical and cultural factors which can impact on applicants’ ability to provide requested evidence to decision makers.

Community Cohesion & Safety

We recommend that where, during the asylum process, the Home Office identifies individual cases with early integration challenges, such cases are referred to local groups and NGOs to prevent isolation and diminished resilience.

We recommend that the UK Government and organisations working to protect and support refugees work more closely with the media to highlight the positive contributions made by refugees and migrants to local communities.



UNHCR, THE UN REFUGEE AGENCY, is dedicated to saving lives, protecting rights and building a better future for refugees, internally displaced persons, refugee returnees and stateless people. We work to ensure that everybody has the right to seek asylum and find safe refuge, having fled violence, persecution, war or disaster at home. Since 1950, we have faced crises on multiple continents, and provided vital assistance to refugees, asylum-seekers, internally displaced, refugee returnees and stateless people, many of whom have nobody left to turn to.



SCOTTISH REFUGEE COUNCIL is Scotland's national refugee charity. We provide advice and information to people seeking asylum and refugees living in Scotland. We campaign for a fair and humane asylum system in the UK, and support and promote diverse and welcoming communities. We provide advice support and advocacy to all newly recognised refugees and Scotland. Alongside the Consortium of Scottish Local Authorities and the Scottish Government we lead on the implementation of Scotland's national refugee integration strategy, New Scots.



THE REFUGEE COUNCIL is one of the leading charities in the UK working with asylum-seekers and refugees. We speak up for refugees drawing on evidence from our direct work, and make sure refugees have an influential voice in decisions that affect them. Experience of move-on and barriers to integration are an area of our ongoing service delivery, research and policy work. We strongly believe that people seeking protection in the UK should be enabled to integrate from day one.

BACKGROUND & CONTEXT

UNHCR commissioned this PA, which was conducted together with the Refugee Council (in England) and Scottish Refugee Council (in Scotland) to gain a better understanding of the experiences of Eritrean refugees recognised in-country and how these experiences have impacted upon their integration and protection in the UK. This is in line with UNHCR's mandate to support refugee integration and its call for a strengthening of related policy and practice for all refugees in the UK, irrespective of how they arrived. The Refugee Council and the Scottish Refugee Council have both worked for decades with refugees to ensure they are given the protection they need, that they are treated with respect and understanding, and that they have the same rights, opportunities and responsibilities as other members of our society.

All refugees interviewed as part of the PA were recognised as refugees after applying for asylum in the UK. In the year ending March 2018, there were 26,547 applications for asylum made in the UK, either once already inside the country or on arrival at a port.⁶ Whilst their application is pending, asylum-seekers who are facing destitution in the UK can apply to the Government for subsistence and/or accommodation support under Section 95 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999. At the end of March 2018, a total of 42,352 asylum-seekers and their dependants were being supported under Section 95.⁷ The majority of these asylum-seekers were supported in dispersed accommodation,⁸ which this report will herein refer to as Section 95 accommodation. In addition to accommodation support, the UK Government provides asylum-seekers with subsistence support which, in February 2018, was increased from £36.95⁹ per week to £37.75.¹⁰ This figure is slightly higher for those with specific needs such as pregnant women. Most of those interviewed for the PA received both accommodation and subsistence support whilst seeking asylum.

Refugees are not entitled to Government support under Section 95 and are instead afforded certain rights in line with nationals of the UK, such as the right to work. They

also have access to welfare support through the UK welfare system. After a total of 28 days from the date of recognition, refugees stop receiving cash support and are required to vacate the accommodation provided to them under Section 95. This time-frame is commonly referred to as the 'move on period'. Upon recognition, refugees are also issued with a BRP which serves as an identity document and proof that they can be employed and apply for welfare benefits and, if they have not already been provided with one, a National Insurance Number (NiNo).¹¹

The early integration experience of those recognised in-country can be contrasted with the experience of refugees brought to the UK via a Government-led resettlement scheme. Under these resettlement schemes, with the exception of the Mandate Refugee Scheme, resettled refugees can receive a year or more of housing support and assistance in accessing the labour market from the Government and its partner agencies. Despite integration being crucial to effectively protecting refugees, there is a lack of dedicated integration support and services that would help refugees who are recognised in-country to start rebuilding their lives in the UK. There have been previous statutory programmes in the UK, such as the Refugee Integration and Employment Service (RIES) which provided

6 UK Home Office, *How many people do we grant asylum or protection to?* 24 May 2018, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/immigration-statistics-year-ending-march-2018/how-many-people-do-we-grant-asylum-or-protection-to>

7 Ibid.

8 UK Home Office, *Immigration Statistics*, April to June 2017, ("UK Home Office Immigration Statistics Apr-June 2017") <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/immigration-statistics-april-to-june-2017>

9 The National Archives, *The Asylum Support (Amendment No. 3) Regulations 2015* Explanatory Note No. 1501, 2015, http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukxi/2015/1501/pdfs/ukxi_20151501_en.pdf

10 *The Asylum Support (Amendment) Regulations 2018*, <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukxi/2018/30/regulation/2/made>

11 Since January 2018, the NiNo has been printed on the BRP although this would not have been the case for participants in this PA.

12 months support for securing access to employment and social services upon recognition to individual refugees and their dependants who went through the asylum system. However, funding from the UK Government for RIES ended in September 2011.¹²

This PA seeks to assess the experience of Eritrean refugees who have gone through the asylum process in the UK to gain an understanding of their particular protection and integration situation. Previous publications by the Refugee Council and Scottish Refugee Council¹³ have explored the challenges faced by refugees following their recognition and the problems, including homelessness and destitution, presented by the brevity of the ‘move on’ period and the impact that this has on access to employment and education. This PA seeks to complement and expand on this research.

FOCUS POPULATION: ERITREAN REFUGEES

This PA focuses specifically on the experiences of Eritrean nationals who have been recognised as refugees in-country. It was decided to focus on this population group due to its size - with over 26,000 applications for asylum lodged by Eritrean nationals since 2001 – and the recent challenges faced in having their refugee status recognised owing to asylum policy developments.¹⁴ Between 2015 and 2016, Eritreans experienced a high rate of successful appeals overturning initial Home Office refusals.¹⁵ As a result of lengthy asylum processing, affected Eritreans – including many of those who took part in the PA - faced delays with integrating into British society and rebuilding their lives. UNHCR, the Refugee Council and Scottish Refugee Council therefore acknowledge that there are some unique challenges specific to the protection and integration of the Eritrean refugee population in the UK, which this PA aims to capture.

In March 2015, the Home Office updated its Country Information and Guidance on Eritrea¹⁶ (the 2015 Eritrea Guidance). Relying on a contested Danish Immigration Service Fact Finding mission report, the 2015 Eritrea Guidance reduced the risk assessment for certain categories on return to Eritrea, including draft evaders and deserters. Subsequently, the rate for first instance grants of asylum for Eritrean asylum-seekers by the Home Office decreased from 77% in the first quarter of 2015 to 24% in the second quarter of the same year.¹⁷ This compares to 34% of grants of either asylum or an alternative form of protection across all first instance decisions between April and June 2015.¹⁸

12 Scottish Refugee Council, who previously delivered RIES in Scotland, continues to provide a dedicated integration service developed from the RIES model, to all newly recognised refugees in Scotland. See The Scottish Government, *New Scots: Integrating Refugees in Scotland's Communities 2014 - 2017 Final Report*, March 2017, (“New Scots 2014”), <http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2017/03/5825/0> pp.42.

13 Refugee Council (“RC”), *28 days later: experiences of new refugees in the UK*, May 2014, (“RC 28 Days Later”), https://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/assets/0003/1769/28_days_later.pdf, Refugee Council, *England's forgotten refugees: out of the fire and into the frying pan*, May 2016, (“RC Forgotten Refugees”), https://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/assets/0003/7935/England_s_Forgotten_Refugees_final.pdf, Refugee Council, *Refugees without refuge*, September 2017, (“RC Refugees Without Refuge”), https://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/assets/0004/1432/Refugees_without_refuge_Sept_2017.pdf, Strang, A, ‘I want to participate’: transition experiences of new refugees in Glasgow, 16 May 2017, (“Strang I Want to Participate”), <https://eresearch.gmu.ac.uk/bitstream/handle/20.500.12289/4835/eResearch%25204835.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>

14 UK Home Office Immigration Statistics Oct-Dec 2017, note 3 above.

15 Refugee Council, Policy briefing from January 2016, https://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/latest/news/4531_outrage_over_government_mistreatment_of_eritrean_asylum_claims

16 UK Home Office, *Country Information and Guidance - Eritrea: National (incl. Military) Service*, 11 March 2015, <http://www.refworld.org/docid/552779c34.html> and UK Home Office, *Country Information and Guidance - Eritrea: Illegal Exit, March 2015*, <http://www.refworld.org/docid/5507fe424.html>

17 UK Home Office Immigration Statistics Oct-Dec 2017, note 3 above.

18 UK Home Office, *National Statistics*, April to June 2015, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/immigration-statistics-april-to-june-2015/asylum>

Some of these asylum policy changes made in the 2015 Eritrea Guidance were reviewed in the 2016 case of *MST and Others*¹⁹ in which UNHCR intervened. In *MST and Others*, the Upper Tribunal issued updated country guidance on Eritrea, which led the Home Office to subsequently reverse and update its position from the 2015 Eritrea Guidance.²⁰ Following the publication of both the case decision and the updated guidance in October 2016, the rate for first instance grants of asylum for Eritrean nationals increased from 21% in the third quarter of 2016 to 78% in the final quarter and 81% for the year ending December 2017.²¹ Many participants felt that their asylum process was prolonged on account of the impact of the 2015 Eritrea Guidance. Indeed, this guidance was mentioned a number of times by participants during the FGDs, with many having sought asylum after this was published and being of the view that it impacted on the processing of their asylum claim.

The period of time participants spent with their asylum applications pending a decision was widely identified by them as extremely stressful, especially for those who had been separated from their children and other family members. Participants described feeling particularly helpless given that they had approximately £5.00 per day to cover all their expenses. Alongside this, the uncertainty regarding their future made it harder for them to transition into their new communities and some reported coming out of the asylum process feeling depressed, even where they had been granted leave to remain.

Against this backdrop and understanding, UNHCR, the Refugee Council and Scottish Refugee Council were interested in gaining a clearer understanding of the impact of shifting government asylum policy on the integration prospects and protection situation of newly recognised refugees in the UK.

Overall, although only one nationality was focused upon, these findings can be used to identify protection and integration issues that affect many other newly recognised refugees in the UK as highlighted in previous research.²²

19 *MST and Others (national service – risk categories) Eritrea* CG, [2016] UKUT 00443 (IAC), United Kingdom: Upper Tribunal (Immigration and Asylum Chamber), 11 October 2016, http://www.refworld.org/cases,GBR_UTIAC,57fc91fc4.html

20 See UK Home Office, *Country Policy and Information Note Eritrea: National service and illegal exit*, October 2016, https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/565635/CPIN-Eritrea-NS-and-Illegal-Exit-v4-October-2016.pdf

21 UK Home Office Immigration Statistics Oct-Dec 2017, note 3 above.

22 See All Party Parliamentary Group on Refugees ("APPG"), *Refugees Welcome? The Experience of New Refugees in the UK*, April 2017, ("APPG Refugees Welcome?"), https://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/assets/0004/0316/APPG_on_Refugees_-_Refugees_Welcome_report.pdf, British Red Cross, *The Move-On Period: An Ordeal For New Refugees*, 2014, ("British Red Cross The Move-On Period"), <https://www.redcross.org.uk/about-us/what-we-do/we-speak-up-for-change/improving-the-lives-of-refugees/refugee-move-on-period>, RC 28 Days Later, note 13 above, RC Forgotten Refugees, note 13 above and Strang I Want to Participate, note 13 above.

METHODOLOGY

The PA took place in September and October 2017. The PA team was comprised of UNHCR staff members together with a consultant, the Refugee Council and Scottish Refugee Council representatives and volunteers, as well as community facilitators and interpreters.

Approach to Data Collection

The PA utilised a qualitative approach to data collection, which allows participants to be at the centre of discussion and express their realities and proposed solutions to the problems they identify as important. Thus in addition to desk-based research, qualitative research methods including semi-structured FGDs and individual interviews were used to collect data for this PA. Individual interviews were conducted where requested by a participant or where participants were unable to attend a FGD, but still wanted to take part.

In collaboration with the Refugee Council, the PA conducted eight FGDs and nine individual interviews in Nottingham, Barnsley, London, Middlesbrough and Derby. In addition, together with Scottish Refugee Council, one FGD and two individual interviews in Glasgow were conducted.

Participants

All 79 participants were Eritrean refugees recognised in the UK on or after 1 March 2015 (within 30 months prior to the PA), above the age of 18 and living in England or Scotland. The PA did not interview those below the age of 18 because of the complexities associated with interviewing this group and the distinct integration and asylum processes they are subject to.

Using the snowball sampling method and by directly contacting service users, UNHCR, the Refugee Council and Scottish Refugee Council worked with trusted members to the different Eritrean communities, known to us through our previous work with them, to identify individuals to attend the FGDs and individual interviews. An information and consent sheet in English and Tigrinya²³ was also circulated to potential participants in advance, setting out the details of the PA.

Focus Group Discussions & Interviews

As the participants contacted spoke a range of languages and to ensure that each participant felt able to express themselves in the language in which they feel most comfortable, interpreters who spoke at least three languages (Tigrinya, Arabic and Tigre) were made available in each FGD and interview. Each FGD and interview was principally conducted with interpreter support.

Reflecting the preferences of the participants and practical constraints, FGDs were either mixed gender or single gender of between four to 13 individuals. In those cities where there were a large number of respondents, the group was divided into two FGDs according to language to encourage easy conversation flow, save time and therefore, allow each FGD to cover more topics.

In each case, the FGDs and interviews started with an introduction to the work of UNHCR, the Refugee Council (in England) and Scottish Refugee Council (in Scotland) respectively, the purpose of the PA, and an explanation that the discussions and interviews would not have any impact on their individual asylum case. The confidential and voluntary nature of the process was also stressed and participants were informed that, should they wish to, they could talk to the interviewers in a one-on-one session.

In each FGD and individual interview, the same topics were covered and similar questions were asked to prompt discussions. The PA aimed to ensure, to the extent possible, that there was a gender balance among those interviewed, both individually and as part of FGDs, and that a number of different groups within the Eritrean refugee population were represented. However, overall, approximately 63 men and 16 women were interviewed for the PA. That more men than women were interviewed may reflect the fact that Home Office statistics show that there are more Eritrean male refugees in the UK than

²³ Tigrinya is one of the working languages in Eritrea and therefore is a common language which all participants were likely to be able to understand.

female refugees.²⁴ It was also not possible to conduct an FGD comprised solely of women participants, often due to difficulties women faced in managing the PA with their childcare responsibilities, causing them to either be unable to attend or to leave discussions early. To support women to fully participate in the PA, they were given the option to attend individual interviews instead because these could be arranged around their schedules. Thus more women attended individual interviews than FGDs. Across those interviewed, a diverse range of ages, ethnic groups and religions were present.

Ethics

Before every FGD and interview, participants were required to give informed consent by signing the information and consent sheet provided. Where participants could not read the consent form, interpreters explained the contents to them.

To ensure the anonymity of the participants, no names of the participants were taken and each participant was assigned a unique number. Each participant was informed that they should not share another participant's responses outside of the FGD. At the start of each FGD or individual interview, participants were informed that they were free to leave at any time should they feel uncomfortable.

Constraints

Some members of the Eritrean community expressed hesitation to come forward due to their fear of surveillance by diaspora with links to the Eritrean Government. It is believed that for this reason, in some locations, numbers of participants were lower than expected. Indeed, those participants who attended were the ones who had been invited by trusted community members or service providers.

In view of this expressed fear, so that participants would feel comfortable sharing their stories, the PA ensured that the interpreters used were trusted members of the community. Therefore, in many of the FGDs or interviews, the interpreters were also the same trusted members who provided access to the community. This proved useful as it helped encourage participants to talk about their experiences openly, however, the PA facilitators needed to ensure that the interpreters did not steer the discussions themselves or provide their own opinions because of their familiarity with the participants.

²⁴ UK Home Office Immigration Statistics Apr-June 2017, note 8 above, Asylum table as_14_ (Asylum volume 4).

THEMATIC AREAS

The PA covered the following six thematic areas: the ‘Move On’ Period, Employment, Education, Health and Wellbeing, Family Reunion and Community Cohesion and Safety. These topics were jointly chosen after a literature review, UNHCR visits to Eritrean community centres and in consultation with the Refugee Council, Scottish Refugee Council and Eritrean community members. These topics reflect some of the priority concerns held by Eritrean refugees in the UK regarding their protection and integration situation. Further, they reflect some of UNHCR’s, the Refugee Council’s and Scottish Refugee Council’s broader priorities pertaining to the protection and integration of refugees in the UK. Additionally, during the course of PA interviews, participants were made aware of the opportunity to raise concerns that did not fall within the thematic areas chosen.

FINDINGS

THE 'MOVE ON' PERIOD

This topic generated intense discussion amongst the participants who identified a range of specific protection challenges brought about as a result of this period, but who also put forward concrete recommendations to address the concerns raised.

Participants reported mixed feelings after being recognised as a refugee, including happiness, relief, fear and depression. Participants commonly stated that happiness was their initial feeling upon recognition, but that they felt anxiety once reality set in and they were faced with the question of what to do next. One participant stated: “What’s worse is when you get your status and you are left in limbo.” This feeling of limbo was in large part due to the requirement that they had to leave their Section 95 accommodation after 28 days.

In England, the requirement to vacate their Section 95 accommodation after 28 days presents a major challenge. Many participants experienced homelessness whilst transitioning from asylum support into the mainstream housing market. For example, at the end of the period, some participants had moved into hostels, overstayed at their Section 95 accommodation, “couch-surfed” or stayed either in the homes or the Section 95 accommodation of their friends or family members. One participant had spent a night sleeping under a bridge and another spent nights sleeping in a train station.

One participant explained that she had moved to London from the North West after the ‘move on’ period because there were very few people in the North West from her community who she felt could support her. She moved to London to stay with friends, but ended up living on the streets for three months. Where participants did find accommodation, this was often in poor condition. Friends and family members were identified as an important source of support for some. However, those who did not know anyone were left with minimal assistance.

One participant stated: “If you don’t have friends, you have nothing.” Another participant summarised the challenges posed by the ‘move on’ period, stating that “they gave me 28 days to leave the asylum accommodation from the Government and I had to get a bank account, apply for jobcentre and apply for housing benefit and a place to live. That was hard. After they told me 28 days I knew I couldn’t do everything. The bank appointment was after two weeks and jobcentre was after a few days but it was only after 2-3 weeks I would receive my money...28 days was finished and I had to leave and didn’t have any home and still had not received money from the jobcentre. I went to my friend’s house who was in NASS house [National Asylum Support Service] and put my stuff with her. For one week I was with her while I waited for a house. I asked the manager for the house that I needed to find a home – they told me I had to go. They told me it was illegal to stay there.”

How participants received information on where to go after the 28 days varied, with some learning from refugee friends. Many commented that they were not given any direction from the Government or their lawyer on what to do next. In some cases, local NGOs provided significant support in the form of emergency cash, interpreters or food vouchers. One participant explained that they had moved to London where they had more friends and job opportunities, but due to the requirement in place at the time by Local Authorities in England to have a local connection in the area where you are applying for housing,²⁵ they had to move back to the town where they had been dispersed to in order to be eligible for housing from the Local Authority.²⁶ In cases where housing had been offered by Local Authorities, participants reported a number of problems, including poor quality and long waiting times.

In Scotland, the requirement to leave their accommodation after 28 days was also described as presenting a significant challenge for refugees with reports of being compelled to stay in hostels and “couch-surfing” prevalent amongst those interviewed. However, participants also spoke positively of the possibility of addressing these challenges in Scotland, particularly through the support of Scottish

25 Under section 166A(5) of the Housing Act 1996 (as amended by the Localism Act 2011), Local Authorities had the discretion to take into account any local connection (within the meaning of section 199 of the Housing Act 1996) which exists between a person and the authority’s district. See also UK House of Commons Library, Briefing Paper Number 06397: Allocating Social Housing (England), 9 June 2017, <http://researchbriefings.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefing/Summary/SN06397#fullreport>. Changes in this have now been brought about as a result of the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017.

26 On 3 April 2018, the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 came into force in England. It brings in two new duties for Local Authorities that aim to prevent homelessness: the first is a prevention duty (owed to every single household under a threat of homelessness, regardless of priority need or intentional homelessness), and the second is a relief duty (owed to every single household, regardless of priority need or intentional homelessness). The Act has also extended the period in which someone must be treated as being threatened with homelessness to 56 days.

Refugee Council. For example, one participant in Scotland explained that Scottish Refugee Council supported her engagement with the Local Housing Authority which had initially allocated unsuitable housing due to safety-related concerns. The Housing Authority subsequently provided her with alternative accommodation.

Many participants reported that there were delays in receiving their BRP and their NiNo after the 'move on' period commenced. Sometimes this was because they did not have an address to which these documents could be sent. Many of those staying with friends reported that their friends were not comfortable with providing their address for receipt of the documents, thus contributing to further delay.

Moreover, to start receiving welfare payments, individuals are usually required to have a bank account. However, many reported obstacles to opening a bank account because of the lack of proof of address, such as a utility bill. Some participants also stated that they were unable to open a bank account as they did not have their NiNo. They had struggled to get a NiNo as there were delays in it being dispatched and/or there was no address for it to be sent to. It was described by some as a "vicious circle."

As a result of the delays in receiving their BRP, NiNo and in opening a bank account, participants highlighted that they did not receive many of these documents within the 28 days and therefore there were delays in receiving welfare payments after Section 95 support was terminated. As a result, many of those interviewed were left with limited financial means, were forced to borrow money and/or stay at the homes of friends. Effectively many of those interviewed were pushed into destitution, homelessness and uncertainty about their future.

A number of interviewees reported that their lack of English language skills exacerbated the problems they faced during this period. When participants went to the Jobcentre Plus or the bank to explain their problems, they reported not being able to properly communicate and, in most cases, the Jobcentre Plus not providing them with an interpreter.

Participants described that the limbo caused by the 'move on' period negatively impacted their ability to start their new life and to feel at home in the UK. Some participants reported that they were told by friends or other asylum-seekers beforehand that, after being recognised as a refugee, they would have to leave their Section 95 accommodation. However, as they were unaware of when they would receive their status and given the limited monetary support they received under Section 95, it was not possible to adequately prepare for this period and their initial integration in advance.

Solutions proposed by the participants

In addition to describing their experiences, participants were particularly vocal in providing solutions to the challenges they faced during the 'move on' period. For many participants a clear solution was to extend the 'move on' period or to provide interim accommodation for those who are newly recognised. They explained that this would give them more time to receive all the necessary documentation and to arrange alternative accommodation. As many did not receive their NiNo until after the 28 days were finished, the limbo they experienced was prolonged and therefore a longer 'move on' period would allow them to move on from asylum support with greater autonomy.²⁷

Other solutions proposed included receipt of the BRP and NiNo on the first day of recognition or the provision of a post office box assigned to them to which they can receive documents. This would reduce delays and help them to utilise the 'move on' period fully and more effectively. Participants discussed whether this could be achieved through more communication between the concerned Government departments.

An alternative solution proposed included a mentoring system so that there would be someone who could help newly recognised refugees navigate the 'move on' period and also assist with their integration.

Discussion

The challenges faced by newly recognised refugees during the 'move on' period are well-documented and have been explored in previous reports in the sector including by the Refugee Council, Scottish Refugee Council, the British Red Cross and the All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Refugees.²⁸

²⁷ Since January 2018, the NiNo has been printed on the BRP although this would not have been the case for participants in this PA.

²⁸ See APPG Refugees Welcome?, note 22 above, British Red Cross The Move-On Period, note 22 above, RC 28 Days Later, note 13 above, RC Forgotten Refugees, note 13 above and Strang I Want to Participate, note 13 above.

In the PA, most participants interviewed were reliant on welfare benefits to survive and eventually build their life post-recognition as refugees. However, they experienced a gap in their support as they transitioned from being an asylum-seeker to a refugee. Preparing for this gap is very difficult for those with limited financial support, a general denial of permission to work during the asylum process as well as limited English language communication skills. Being unable to save any money during the asylum period (due to the low level of asylum support and not being allowed to work) means that, for example, they cannot raise the funds necessary for a deposit or upfront rent to obtain private-rented accommodation. In this way, refugees recognised in-country are often dependant on accessing social support, such as housing benefits. Without the correct documents received in a timely manner to access these social services, their ability to start integrating and to feel a part of society in the UK is delayed.

In light of this, proposals were made by the participants to expand the 'move on' period to provide some relief for those who are unable or struggling to establish life in a new society, experience destitution and/or homelessness. This suggestion was particularly prevalent in cases where the brevity of the 'move on' period had resulted in homelessness and destitution. The APPG on Refugees report published in April 2017 examined the 'move on' period in depth, it highlights that "28 days is not long enough for newly recognised refugees to migrate to other forms of support" and recommends that the period be extended to reflect "the time it takes in reality for refugees to access accommodation and financial support."²⁹ The APPG on Refugees report recognises that, with the recent move from Jobseeker's Allowance to Universal Credit, having more time to navigate the benefits system is crucial. Indeed, one participant in the PA highlighted that navigating the transition to Universal Credit was particularly tough. The expected average wait time to receive a first payment of Universal Credit by DWP is around five weeks after claiming,³⁰ which is longer than the 'move on' period.

In Scotland, the New Scots Refugee Integration Strategy is in place. It was developed in 2013 by the Scottish Government, Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA), and the Scottish Refugee Council and updated in 2018. The March 2017 report of the strategy, recognises

that a key outcome for refugees to avoid destitution is for "new refugees to be supported to 'move on' from asylum support within the 'move on' period by ensuring benefits are in place when asylum support ends."³¹ The report highlights that COSLA has established a multi-agency working group to agree on an action plan to address 'move on' issues. Scottish Refugee Council will also work with the DWP to identify a pathfinder solution for the implementation of Universal Credit for newly recognised refugees.

The final report of the strategy also highlights the different legal framework for social housing provision to avoid homelessness in Scotland, which is more flexible than in England. In contrast to England, a refugee is not considered to have formed a local connection with the Local Authority area where they lived in Section 95 accommodation.³² Further, in Scotland, there is a statutory duty on Local Authorities to find permanent accommodation for all applicants who are unintentionally homeless or threatened with homelessness.³³ As a result, it can be easier for refugees to seek homelessness assistance as they can apply to other Local Authorities for social housing regardless of whether they have a local connection. Additionally, Scotland abolished the Priority Need Test in 2012 meaning that refugees (and others) do not need to establish particular vulnerability to access homeless accommodation support.

Those PA participants who received support from local charities and NGOs tended to fare better in gaining access to social services. It is clear that dedicated support to guide the transition and prevent destitution is invaluable for newly recognised refugees. The provision of dedicated support is consistent with the report by the APPG on Refugees which recommends that "the Government should reintroduce a programme of support to newly recognised refugees similar to that provided by the Refugee Integration and Employment Service. The support should include the provision of a caseworker to help and advise newly recognised refugees during the 'move on' period."³⁴

29 APPG Refugees Welcome?, note 22 above, p. 24.

30 See Department for Work and Pensions ("DWP"), *Universal Credit: different earning patterns and your payments (payment cycles)*, 14 February 2018, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/universal-credit-different-earning-patterns-and-your-payments/universal-credit-different-earning-patterns-and-your-payments-payment-cycles>

31 New Scots 2014, note 12 above and The Scottish Government, *New Scots Refugee Integration Strategy 2018 – 2022, Final Report*, January 2018, ("New Scots 2018"), <http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2018/01/7281>

32 See Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government, *Homelessness code of guidance for local authorities*, 23 February 2018, <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/homelessness-code-of-guidance-for-local-authorities/chapter-10-local-connection-and-referrals-to-another-housing-authority#para10-23>

33 Wilson, W & Barton, C, *Comparison of homelessness duties in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland*, Briefing Paper Number 7201, 5 April 2018, <https://researchbriefings.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefing/Summary/CBP-7201#fullreport>

34 APPG Refugees Welcome, note 22 above, p. 55.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **The UK authorities should extend the ‘move on’ period beyond 28 days, giving newly recognised refugees more time before their accommodation and subsistence support, provided under Section 95 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999, comes to an end. This recommendation is made to help ensure that refugees do not experience a gap in their support. The duration of the ‘move on’ period should reflect the time it reasonably takes to access accommodation and start receiving welfare benefits payments or move into work.** The length of time should be considered in consultation with refugees (including those who have been recognised in the UK) and relevant organisations who support newly recognised refugees. It should also take into account previous reports and recommendations made concerning the ‘move on’ period.
- **The UK authorities should take measures to introduce a stronger support system for newly recognised refugees.** This could, for example, include funding and working closely with organisations that can dedicate caseworkers for a set period of time to all newly recognised refugees so that they can navigate the system and ultimately become less reliant on Government support where possible. Further, the UK authorities should seek to assist newly recognised refugees in addressing challenges faced during the ‘move on’ period, such as difficulty in opening bank accounts and access to a BRP.
- **The UK authorities should explore the possibility of starting the transition process from asylum-seeker to refugee before refugee recognition,** especially for the provision of services such as language and vocational training, as well as information provision on access to social support, healthcare and housing post-recognition.

EDUCATION

“ Education and integration go hand-in-hand.”

Many participants expressed the importance of learning English. One participant stated that “*you think about language so you can integrate into the community.*” Some were happy with their ESOL classes. However, others expressed concerns. They felt that the way in which ESOL classes are organised prevented them from progressing as each class had students with a variety of levels of English. Some who were frustrated with the ESOL style of learning mentioned that they wanted to look for alternative courses but that there was a lack of information and guidance on alternative providers.

What is English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL)?

ESOL refers to English language learning opportunities for adult learners (aged 16 or over) in the UK. ESOL programmes can be provided by colleges, Local Authorities, or other qualified centres. In some instances, ESOL is fully-funded by the UK Government.

In England, refugees must have been resident in the UK for six months to be entitled to attend fully funded ESOL classes. Asylum-seekers can receive partial funding to cover 50% of the ESOL course if they have been waiting six months for a decision on their asylum application.

Conversely, in Scotland and Northern Ireland, adult asylum-seekers are eligible for free ESOL classes on arrival.

All ESOL courses are taught by specially qualified teachers and the availability of courses varies widely. Upon completing an ESOL course, learners are awarded a qualification as a certificate, which is intended to validate successful completion of the course for the purpose of further education, employment, or in applying for citizenship.

Source: Refugee Action, *Let Refugees Learn*, May 2016.

Mothers who spoke to us stated that it was hard to attend English language classes without childcare which was not provided by learning centres. Participants also identified barriers to education faced by their children. One mother described not having a permanent address, which impacted on her child's education and caused her much anxiety. She stated, *"my child is supposed to be in nursery, but because I don't have an address, no one is willing to accept him. Children have many needs and I feel bad that I can't provide him with what he needs."*

Whilst catering for their basic needs in the UK was their main priority, many were interested in undertaking further study. However, they felt that both higher and further education were difficult to access. In particular, many participants commented that their caseworker at the Jobcentre Plus was pushing them to work rather than acknowledging their desire to focus on education, including their English language development and interest in going to school, college or university to study. With this lack of support and encouragement to learn, many participants stated that they had given up on pursuing education once in the UK. One participant stated that *"when you get your status, they force you to work even if you say that you are going to college."* Many participants reflected this sentiment and added that there is no information given to them by the Jobcentre Plus on options for continuing with studies.

“ Education is a right...so once I got my refugee status I wanted to go to school, but I was pushed by the jobcentre to find work.”

Difficulty accessing further or tertiary education, either as an asylum-seeker or once they had been recognised as a refugee, was raised by a number of participants, who had tried to enrol in college but were turned away as they had not been resident for over six months in the UK or because of their lack of English language skills. Some expressed particular frustration with colleges which did not allow them to take courses such as accounting or mathematics, which they felt required minimal English language skills, on the basis that they had not completed the necessary English language courses. Parents with young children also felt that they were prevented from accessing education in colleges because they did not have any childcare or were required to pay extra money for childcare, which was not

available. Of the refugees who participated in discussions, the responsibility of childcare fell primarily to women. Mothers, therefore, felt disproportionately disadvantaged when it came to accessing education. Some participants felt that had been burned out by the asylum procedure and as a result did not feel encouraged to learn or participate in activities that would give them new skills. Many said that because of the unstable situation they are in coupled with constant worry about the welfare and safety of their family members, who they would like to be reunited with, they are not able to focus and learn effectively.

Solutions proposed by the participants

The responses and solutions proposed on this particular topic were varied given the distinct experiences based on gender and level of English language knowledge. To overcome the barriers created by their lack of English language skills, one solution proposed by participants was the provision of a period of intensive English classes following recognition as refugees. Another suggestion was sponsored programmes which allowed refugees to gain both work experience and English language training at the same time. Specially designed programmes, which combine both English learning and voluntary work, study or employment, were identified a number of times as a good idea which would significantly aid integration.

Discussion

Knowledge of English language is consistently recognised as fundamental for integration. The European Commission's Handbook on Integration for policy-makers and practitioners states that "basic knowledge of the host society's language, history, and institutions is indispensable to integration."³⁵ The Welsh Government's Refugee Inclusion Strategy, also asserts that, "as well as being the means through which individuals within a community communicate and learn about each other, language carries important cultural and historical signals, which can facilitate inclusion."³⁶ Similarly, the UK Government has acknowledged the importance of English language provision for refugees, most recently in the UK Government's *Integrated Communities Strategy Green Paper*.³⁷ In September 2016, the UK Government made a funding commitment of £10m towards English language classes for those arriving under the Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (VPRS) and the Vulnerable Children's Resettlement Scheme (VCRS) which would not benefit the participants in this PA.

35 European Commission, *Handbook on Integration for policy-makers and practitioners, Third Edition*, April 2010, https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/e-library/docs/handbook_integration/doc1_12892_168517401_en.pdf, p. 160

36 Welsh Assembly Government, *The Welsh Government Refugee Inclusion Strategy*, 2008, <https://gov.wales/dsjlg/publications/communityregendevelop/refugeeinclusionstrategy/strategye.pdf?lang=en>, p. 19

37 UK Government Green Paper, note 4 above.

The PA found that lack of English language was a major impediment to most participants' successful integration in the UK. The provision of English language courses and different ways in which refugees can learn English outside of the classroom are essential to helping them navigate the 'move on' period in the short-term, and integrate into their local communities in the longer-term. Furthermore, a lack of language skills often results in the isolation of refugees, leading to a negative impact on their mental health. Under the current language provision schemes provided by the Government, studies have found that refugees in England can wait for over a year for English lessons and that the average waiting list size for some providers is over 700 people.³⁸ Extra funding provided by the Government to address these concerns, extends only to those refugees brought to the UK under the VPRS and VCRS. Scotland has established an action plan that seeks to review the ESOL strategy and English as an Additional Language Support in schools. England could also benefit from a similar strategy that seeks to ensure that no refugee is marginalised as a result of their lack of English language skills. Additional programme support for in-country recognised refugees similar to that provided to resettled refugees should also be introduced.

As found in the PA, other reports have highlighted that refugee women with childcare responsibilities are often disadvantaged when it comes to accessing ESOL and other English language classes.³⁹ Challenges they face include balancing childcare responsibilities and a lack of childcare provision during English language classes, which can mean that women with children are unable to attend classes. Consideration should, therefore, be given to strengthening the provision of childcare or child-friendly classes which take into account the difficulties that mothers can face in accessing language classes.

In the PA, higher and further education were also recognised as extremely important to many participants and some expressed disappointment that they were not able to access these opportunities when they came to the UK. Education improves the employment prospects of refugees and helps them to develop their skills and interests and to – be empowered. The Home Office's report entitled *Indicators of Integration*, similarly recognises that "education creates significant opportunities for employment, for wider social connection and for language learning."⁴⁰ Education can therefore give refugees greater autonomy over their lives. The proposals made by PA participants for specifically designed work and/or study programmes could be an excellent way to aid the integration prospects of refugees recognised in-country and should be considered further.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **The UK Government should increase the number of fully-funded English language course hours available to refugees and increase the provision of child-care support to those refugees undertaking ESOL classes.** Where possible, this should be extended to those going through the asylum process.
- **The UK Government should provide a period of intensive English language classes for refugees who wish to fully concentrate on their English or who require specialist learning support in acquiring English language skills.**

38 Refugee Action, *Locked Out of Learning: A Snapshot of ESOL provision in England*, March 2017, http://www.refugee-action.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Locked_out_of_learning_briefing_paper_February_2017.pdf

39 Refugee Action, *Let Refugees Learn*, May 2016, <http://www.refugee-action.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/letrefugeeslearnfullreport.pdf>

40 Ager, A. and Strang, A., *Indicators of Integration: Final Report. Home Office Development and Practice Report 28*, 2004, <http://qoo.gl/TnSNTS>

EMPLOYMENT

Many of those interviewed described finding employment as a key concern and as central to their successful integration. Both barriers and good practices with regards to employment were discussed and some personal examples were openly shared. The Jobcentre Plus was reported to be the main actor available in helping each participant find work in both England and Scotland. However, reviews of their contact with the Jobcentre Plus were mixed but were generally not positive. Many participants described feeling pressured into taking a job by the Jobcentre Plus with little focus on the individual's educational and professional background and their suitability for the job. Rather than work straight away, some felt that it would be better to focus on learning English. Others wanted to gain an education (academic or vocational) so that they could work in their desired job or wanted to volunteer at organisations in a sector which they aspired to work in. Further, participants highlighted that Eritreans face an additional hurdle when looking for work in the UK because they are unable to obtain their work certificates from their home country and as such they cannot prove that they worked in a certain profession and have the skills required for jobs in that profession in the UK.

“ How can I get work if I don't speak the language? My first aim is to learn English.”

Some participants highlighted that they did not feel mentally ready to work given the trauma they had experienced in their home country, on the journey to the UK and/or during the asylum process. Therefore, they were not ready to work straight away and felt that the Jobcentre Plus did not fully understand or acknowledge their mental health issues.

Most participants were not provided with an interpreter by the Jobcentre Plus and this further exacerbated frustrations. One participant in England drew attention to what they described as a new programme by their Jobcentre Plus in which they carried out a two-week assessment for each job-seeker and assessed their skills and goals and provided guidance on what kind of employment or course would suit them according to their specific circumstances. This was recognised as a good programme by participants in the FGD. Some participants explained that they would like to be provided with training to help them build up their Curriculum Vitae (CV) and that, if such training was available,

What is the Jobcentre Plus?

The Jobcentre Plus is a part of the DWP and is responsible for paying working-age benefits for those entitled to them. Once an individual has their NiNo, they are able to apply for Jobseeker's Allowance online. If they do not have a NiNo, or if they cannot use the online service or are unable to work, they can contact the Jobcentre Plus over the phone. Those refugees of working age will be invited for an interview with a work coach at the Jobcentre Plus. At the first interview refugees will meet their work coach who will explain the support available. Support may include training programmes to help them find a job. The work coach will also help to assess what benefits the refugee is eligible for.

If a skills need is identified, the work coach will refer the individual to a relevant course/training e.g. an ESOL course in the case of English language needs.

Refugees will have regular appointments with a Jobcentre Plus work coach where they need to show what they are doing to find work.

Source: Department for Work and Pensions, *Guidance: Help available from the Department for Work and Pensions for people who have been granted leave to remain in the UK*, 10 July 2017, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/refugees-guidance-about-benefits-and-pensions/help-available-from-the-department-for-work-and-pensions-for-people-who-have-been-granted-leave-to-remain-in-the-uk>

it was not offered to them. One person interviewed spoke of employability training offered by their Local Authority, but explained that there were challenges accessing it due to long waiting lists and priority given to those with good English language skills and existing experience.

Participants with a lack of work experience expressed difficulties in building up their CV and were volunteering to address this. Even volunteering positions, however, were noted as hard to come by.

“ I'm doing voluntary work but looking for paid work. The hardest thing to do is find a job. The very hardest. The first thing they ask for is language and then experience.”

Some participants also highlighted the need for more training to get them ready to work. One explained that the Jobcentre Plus had sent them on an employability training but that it did not teach him “anything tangible.”

One participant in London, who had previously worked as a nail technician for two years, was pleased to share that she had recently been offered a job in her chosen field. She had been given advice on finding employment by a local charity. Others who had work experience from Eritrea or other countries where they had lived, or those with professional qualifications, were disappointed that they were not assisted with finding work that matched their skillset and could only find unskilled work.

Those who were employed were largely working in factory jobs mostly involved in unskilled work and on zero-hour contracts where their employer is not required to provide them with a minimum number of working hours and, as an employee, they were not obliged to accept any work offered. Some participants who were in work reported a lack of job security as well as no explanation from their employers on their rights in the workplace or an identified complaints procedure. The participants were, in general, happy to have jobs but acknowledged that the jobs required little skill and were not the type that they would like to be doing. One participant stated, *“to get a good job, you have to study. You can only get jobs in warehouses which involves no skill, even if you are skilled.”*

In addition, those who did have work experience explained that they faced some difficulties in the workplace such as racial discrimination. They felt that some other nationalities were given more favourable tasks by middle-management no matter how hard they worked and they described experiencing verbal abuse and bullying. They did not feel that they could report this to senior management because of fear of losing their job, lack of awareness of the complaints procedure and/or because they were not used to speaking up for their rights. At times, this made some feel isolated in their everyday lives. At the same time, it was recognised that despite these difficulties, being in work helped some participants with their integration as they were able to meet people and practice their English language skills.

Solutions proposed by the participants

Responses on this topic tended to be consistent across all locations, and participants spoke both with passion and with some frustration about their desire to enter the job market.

Participants proposed a number of solutions such as being provided with work training that is specific to their individual circumstances. Some participants recommended being able to borrow money from the Government to help prepare them for work, which indicated that they were unaware of the existence of loan policies already in place for refugees.⁴¹ It should be noted, however, that loan programmes have been experiencing issues with delivery and as such cannot be reliably cited as source of financial support.⁴²

Participants also expressed a desire for more understanding of the experiences of refugees from those working in the Jobcentre Plus. They noted, for example, that refugee jobseekers may first wish to volunteer and gain more experience before taking up fulltime employment or may be facing mental health issues inhibiting their ability to work. Participants felt that a greater understanding and appreciation of their circumstances would benefit their integration.

Despite DWP policy⁴³ to provide an interpreter to individuals in a vulnerable situation and those who cannot adequately communicate in English, participants appeared unaware of this and proposed that the Jobcentre Plus should provide interpreters, even if the interpreter is provided by phone, so that they could get the most out of the service.

Discussion

As mentioned above, many of those interviewed described finding a job as one of their key priorities. According to a report by the European Parliament’s Directorate-General for Internal Policies, “participation in the labour market is, according to experts, the most significant factor favouring long-term integration into society. Labour market integration is also central to fiscal contributions refugees make to the host society.”⁴⁴ Employment plays a key role in integration.⁴⁵ A study for the DWP⁴⁶ published in 2002, echoes many of the findings of the PA and shows that this is an enduring problem that needs to be addressed. Notably that English language, literacy and a lack of work experience are commonly identified barriers to employment for refugees. Therefore, finding ways to overcome these barriers is central towards achieving the successful integration for refugees recognised in the UK.

41 The Integration Loans for Refugees and Others Regulations 2007 enable loans to be made to those granted refugee and humanitarian protection status and their respective dependants. Refugees can apply for interest-free loans for e.g. a housing deposit, training/re-training or work clothing and equipment. See: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/410929/Updated_loan_guidance_2015_v1_8.pdf

42 For more information on concerns regarding loan policies for refugees, see APPG Refugees Welcome?, note 22 above, p. 21 and RC Forgotten Refugees, note 13 above, p. 26.

43 DWP, Central Freedom of Information Team, *Freedom of Information Request VTR 138*, 10 February 2016, <https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/310794/response/766235/attach/3/138%20Reply.pdf>

44 European Parliament, *Labour Market Integration of Refugees: Strategies and good practices*, March 2016, [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2016/578956/IPOL_STU\(2016\)578956_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2016/578956/IPOL_STU(2016)578956_EN.pdf)

45 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development & UNHCR, Migration Policy Debates N°10, Hiring refugees - *What are the opportunities and challenges for employers?* September 2016, <https://www.oecd.org/els/mig/migration-policy-debates-10.pdf>

46 Bloch, A, *Research Report No 179: Corporate Document Services Refugees’ opportunities and barriers in employment and training*, <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20130125102620/http://research.dwp.gov.uk/asd/asd5/rrep179.pdf>

Many of those interviewed expressed disappointment that Jobcentre Plus staff did not take into account their specific needs and barriers to employment. They explained that this created an obstacle to refugee jobseekers learning about what options are available to them in accessing the job market. From the consultations, it appears that, even when programmes are available to them, refugees had very little information and guidance on those programmes. In addition, an inability to communicate with Jobcentre Plus staff also resulted in participants not knowing what options are available to them. With a lack of interpreters provided by the Jobcentre Plus, they were not able to properly engage with the Jobcentre Plus staff and the services provided by them.

Lack of awareness of refugee experiences risks undermining the ability of Jobcentre Plus staff to provide a service that recognises the specific needs and barriers to employment that some refugees may have. This ultimately can impact on their ability to enter the job market with appropriate speed.

A number of charities and NGOs have sought to address refugee unemployment and fill this gap by guiding refugees into work. For those refugees who have been able to access these support services, this dedicated assistance appears to be extremely helpful. Such services demonstrate the value in providing dedicated and person-centred employment support to refugee jobseekers. Refugees could, therefore, benefit if training provided to Jobcentre Plus staff was strengthened to consider their specific needs and circumstances similar to these specialist providers. This would place Jobcentre Plus staff in a better position to assess the needs of refugee jobseekers. Where necessary, they would also be in a better position to direct them to organisations who can adequately support them.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **The DWP should strengthen the training provided to Jobcentre Plus staff on the needs of refugee jobseekers so that their special circumstances are taken into account and they are approached with the requisite sensitivity by staff members.** This should assist in providing a more tailored response which delivers labour market access and that, in some situations, may involve referral to other organisations such as NGOs or charities equipped to assist people further.
- **The central and local government should strengthen their coordination with service providers to improve the provision of support to refugees seeking access to the labour market.** Consideration should be given to strengthening access to employment for asylum-seekers prior to refugee recognition. This could be done by bringing forward the date on which they are entitled to work and ensuring wider access to employment than that found in the shortage occupation list.

ACCESS TO HEALTHCARE

The PA considered access to healthcare for Eritrean refugees in both England and Scotland. Most participants were registered with general practitioners (GPs). Participants learned how to register with the GP in a variety of ways. For example, some figured it out for themselves by searching online, going to local organisations such as the YMCA or from friends and other asylum-seekers. Many felt that there was a lack of information given to them on how to get treatment for health issues. This resulted in delays for many of them in registering with a GP. One participant, who arrived in the UK with her son, was unaware of what to do when her son became seriously ill. Therefore, she went to the YMCA, where she was lucky to find a doctor on-call who assisted her in calling an ambulance. She stated that this experience was extremely frightening for her and that no one had given her advice beforehand on what to do if her son became sick.

“It would have been better if the Government tells you when you arrive where to go for medical emergencies especially for people who have children. This information is really important.”

In terms of registering and seeking treatment at the GP, many described their experience as positive and were also very happy with the treatment that they had received. They had also been provided with an interpreter. In contrast, some participants complained of long waiting times or that they did not receive the treatment they had hoped for. Some stated that they were not provided with an interpreter at the GP, which presented problems with registration and that they had to find friends who would accompany them there.

Participants highlighted the need for treatment amongst the Eritrean refugee population, for mental health issues arising from the trauma that many had experienced either in Eritrea, on their journey to the UK, or after arrival. However, participants explained that sharing personal mental health problems is not common in their culture. They noted that this is because Eritreans rarely complain about their current suffering because what they have experienced in their past is so grave in comparison. One participant stated that “*whatever we experience here is no comparison to what is going on back home.*”

Are refugees entitled to healthcare?

Anyone in the UK may receive primary care services such as GP consultations and treatment without charge. There is no set length of time that a patient must reside in the country to become eligible to receive NHS primary medical care services. Therefore all asylum-seekers and refugees, overseas visitors, students, people on work visas and those who are homeless, whether lawfully in the UK or not, are eligible to register with a GP practice.

In regards to secondary healthcare services, individuals who are not ordinarily resident in the UK may be required to pay for their care. However, some services and some individuals are exempt from payment. Refugees and asylum-seekers and those receiving support under Section 95 and Section 4 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 are included in the list of those who are exempt from payment in England, Wales and Scotland.

Source: Public Health England, *NHS entitlements: migrant health guide*, 8 January 2018, <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/nhs-entitlements-migrant-health-guide>

“We go to the GP if we are sick but not if it’s a mental or emotional problem. Because of our culture, we do not talk about mental health issues. We do not know how to deal with mental health issues.”

Nonetheless, there was a recognition that mental health issues exist among the Eritrean refugee population. Participants stated that they experience stress due to the prolonged asylum process. Some described that they had friends suffering from depression and who wanted to commit suicide after having come out of the asylum process. However, participants reported not being provided with any information on how to access counselling or where to go for mental health treatment. Some, who had undergone specific trauma such as sexual and gender-based violence, were concerned that there was a lack of information provided to them on mental health services when they were an asylum-seeker or upon recognition, and despite the Home Office being aware of what they had been through due to the substance of their asylum claims. Although many knew of other resources available, some

mentioned visiting mosques or churches to help them deal with any mental health issues instead.

Solutions proposed by participants

Responses on this topic and appraisals of their interaction with the health services in the UK were mixed depending on where the participants lived and given their varied medical concerns. Nonetheless, despite having differing medical needs, many participants felt that they would greatly benefit if information on healthcare, including how to register at the GP, was more readily available. In addition, they mentioned that they would appreciate more information on what they were entitled to in terms of access to health-care when they are recognised as refugees. This would allow them to register with a GP sooner and get support where they felt that it was needed. It was also suggested that information on health issues held by the Home Office could be shared with the Department of Health. It was felt that this would minimise delays in treatment and referrals and provide doctors with a more holistic understanding of any pre-existing trauma or health concerns. It should be noted however that any data-sharing would require informed consent and data should only be used for treatment purposes.

Participants also proposed that staff at GP surgeries, particularly those working at receptions, should have training on the particular circumstances of asylum-seekers and refugees so that they are better equipped to help register them. Some had difficulties because the frontline staff were not immediately aware that they were entitled to free healthcare, which delayed their registration, and some said they were unable to communicate with them. Therefore, such training would ensure that all frontline staff are aware of refugee rights and will be able to assist them in the registration process.

Discussion

Refugees in the UK are entitled to use NHS services at no charge. However, this PA found that language barriers and a lack of awareness of the rules by those in charge of registration at GP surgeries or hospitals are generally the main obstacles in the timely accessing of healthcare for some refugees. The necessary information on what they are entitled to appears to not be clearly relayed to refugees who are recognised in-country. As a consequence, the health system is very difficult to navigate for some refugees. This finding reflects other surveys and assessments on this topic which have also found that “despite being legally entitled to healthcare, some organisations raised concerns regarding the ability of refugees to access the health services they needed”⁴⁷ and “there is a lack of cultural awareness and understanding of refugee issues among mainstream healthcare professionals and third sector staff.”⁴⁸

Addressing the mental health needs of refugees in the UK is crucial to facilitating their integration and ensuring that they remain properly protected. It is particularly important for those who have been through the asylum process in the UK. As highlighted previously, many of those interviewed experienced prolonged waiting times as a result of the UK policies previously in place. Currently in the UK, more than 50% of applicants are waiting longer than six months for their asylum claim to be processed.⁴⁹ Living in stress and uncertainty has a negative impact on the mental health of many asylum-seekers who are at risk of developing mental illness, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression and anxiety. That risk can be exacerbated by their immigration status, time in detention, unemployment, absence of family support and complex asylum processes.⁵⁰ Similarly, research in Scotland recognises that “studies have identified a worsening of mental health problems among refugees since arrival in the UK. One of the main causes of poor mental health particular to refugees is pre-migration trauma, which could have been caused by torture or gender based violence. This can lead to isolation and loneliness caused by ‘dislocation from home and culture’ and the status of being an asylum-seeker.”⁵¹

47 APPG Refugees Welcome?, note 22 above, p. 33.

48 MIND, *A civilised society: Mental health provision for refugees and asylum-seekers in England and Wales*, 2009, <https://www.mind.org.uk/media/273472/a-civilised-society.pdf>

49 UK Home Office Immigration Statistics Apr-June 2017, note 8 above.

50 Sen P, *The mental health needs of asylum-seekers and refugees-challenges and solutions*, British Journal of Psychiatry International 13, 2016, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5619616/pdf/BJPI-13-30.pdf>, pp 30–32

51 The Mental Health Foundation, Scottish Refugee Council & See Me, *Policy Briefing: Refugees, mental health and stigma in Scotland*, August 2016, http://www.scottishrefugeecouncil.org.uk/assets/0001/1369/Anti-stigma_briefing_FINAL.pdf

The experiences shared during the PA suggest that at least some refugees are not informed about how they can access mental health-care. Given such vulnerabilities, as a result of their circumstances, this can impact upon their integration prospects, so consideration should be given to strengthening information provision to in-country recognised refugees on their entitlement to healthcare. In Scotland, The New Scots Refugee Integration Strategy emphasises that all those resident in Scotland, including refugees, are entitled to access healthcare on the same basis. The Strategy plans to work with NHS 24 and health and social care partnerships to improve the availability of information about people's rights and entitlements and how to access services.⁵² Moreover, access to healthcare for refugees and therefore their integration, could be improved if all relevant frontline staff, including GPs have increased awareness of the forced migration experience, mental health and the rights of refugees.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **The Home Office and the Department for Health should take measures to ensure that, in all circumstances, information is given to refugees upon recognition of their healthcare rights, including information on how to register with a GP and what to do in a medical emergency.** This information should be available in a number of languages.
- **The Department for Health should strengthen information given to relevant staff on the rights of refugees and how they can be assisted through the registration process as well as on their unique experiences and challenges.**
- **Asylum Support Accommodation Providers should support those living in asylum support accommodation to access specialist services where necessary** (e.g. pregnant women, complex health problems, families with children).

⁵² New Scots 2014, note 12 above and New Scots 2018, note 31 above, page 57

FAMILY REUNION

“ It helps you integrate if your family is here. We face loneliness. If you have a family, they can help you.”

Participants generally agreed that one of their main priorities after being recognised as a refugee was to be reunited with family members, in particular spouses, children, parents or siblings. Most participants agreed that reuniting with their family in the UK would greatly improve their mental health and their integration prospects.

Over the course of their stay in the UK, many understood that they were unable to apply for their siblings to come to the UK and that family reunion was generally only possible where the applicant was a spouse or child. Some had applied for their spouse and children to join them and had been successful, but others could not as they were unable to afford it and expressed sadness over this. Specifically, the cost of DNA testing sometimes acted as a barrier to family reunification. The cost of legal representation in the absence of available legal aid was also reported as a barrier to submitting applications for family reunion. This limits applications either to those who could afford legal representation or had knowledge of the relevant legal procedures and the language skills needed to complete them. Many participants also stated that they had siblings who they would love to join them in the UK and expressed sadness over not being able to apply for them to do so.

“ Not having someone with you from your family is like one of your body parts is cut off. Not having them affects you no matter how well off you are here or what decent job you have. If your family is not with you, then you are not happy. And when you have a child in the UK, you can teach them British values.”

“ If my mother was here, I could have good relations with my neighbours...we could bring some home-cooked food...for now they see me as a single man and are hesitant to get to know me.”

Some mothers interviewed had been separated from their children. Even in cases where they had since been reunited with them, the period of separation from their children was a particularly difficult subject for them to talk about. They felt that not having their children with them almost paralysed their everyday life and prevented them from interacting with the world around them.

One group of participants stated that there was a lack of understanding of the situation and culture in Eritrea from those in the Home Office determining family reunion applications. For example, some had been refused applications to bring their spouse to the UK because the Home Office did not accept their relationship as credible. They reported that the Home Office, when considering their family reunion applications, questioned why family members had not lived together full-time when in Eritrea. This is despite the well-known requirement to complete military service in Eritrea, which commonly results in families being separated for years at a time inside the county. They expressed frustration at what they considered to be a basic lack of appreciation of such nuances specific to family situations in Eritrea. They also explained that they felt that there was no consideration of the fact that marriage varies between different cultures and countries and that it was unreasonable to expect applicants to prove their marriage against UK standards. For example, some participants explained that when they provided photos of themselves and their spouse to the Home Office, their relationship was questioned because they were not holding hands, hugging or kissing in those photos. They explained that this was because of their culture and was not a reflection of the fact that they were not married. Similarly, at times, it was questioned why applicants could not provide evidence of text messages, phone calls and video calls with their spouses. Participants reported that many may not have access to phones, computers or devices needed to provide such evidence.

“ The length of the family reunion process puts a real strain on relationships. It’s so hard when your children are somewhere else...I didn’t have the money for a DNA test. It’s very difficult to get documents like marriage certificates out of Eritrea and requesting them can put people in danger.”

Can refugees apply for their family to join them in the UK?

Family reunion is a process by which refugees can be reunited with their immediate pre-flight family. Where refugees apply for a family reunion visa, they do not need to pay an application fee and do not need to meet any financial, accommodation or English requirements.

To bring their family to the UK, an individual must be over 18 and currently have refugee status or humanitarian protection. A child who has been granted refugee status or humanitarian protection in the UK does not have a right to be a sponsor for refugee family reunion under the UK Immigration Rules. Refugees who have become British citizens cannot bring family to the UK under the refugee family reunion route.

Refugees can only apply for certain family members to join them in the UK. These are:

- A spouse (wife or husband) or civil partner.
- An unmarried/same sex partner, providing that they have been together for two years or more before they fled their own country to seek asylum and the UK partner was granted asylum or humanitarian protection on or after 9 October 2006.
- An unmarried child under the age of 18 who is not leading an independent life.

Source: British Red Cross, *Applying for Refugee Family Reunion*, <http://bit.ly/2KHxQjU>

- A child who had been conceived but was born after the parent left to seek asylum.
- Step-children who are under the age of 18 and who were part of the family unit before the UK step-parent fled to seek asylum in the UK. This only applies if the child's biological mother/father is dead.

Applications for other family members, not described above, may be considered outside the Immigration Rules and may be successful where there are exceptional or compassionate factors, though guidance provided to decision makers suggests that such cases will be "rare." Applications for other family members can also be made under other provisions of the Immigration Rules in specific circumstances (e.g. for dependent adult relatives and applications for children under Rule 319X). However, such rules are very narrow in their application and the requirements difficult to meet.

Applicants need to provide evidence to support their family reunion application. Because of the complex nature of some applications, refugees will often need to instruct a solicitor to assist with their application. Since 1 April 2013, refugee family reunion applications are no longer eligible for free legal advice under Legal Aid.

Solutions proposed by participants

Participants recommended providing legal aid for family reunion applications⁵³ and expanding the definition of family so that they could apply to bring their siblings and parents to the UK. One FGD put forward the notion of providing training on country-of-origin information to those who are making decisions on family reunion applications to ensure that case workers understood the nuances of Eritrean culture. Whilst participants understood the need to prove that family relationships did indeed exist, they felt that insensitive questions, misunderstandings and back and forth with the decision maker would be reduced if there was a better understanding of the situation in Eritrea.

Discussion

When discussing the possibility of reuniting with family, participants were initially hesitant to share their experiences. Mothers interviewed in the PA, who had been or were currently separated from their children, found this topic particularly difficult to talk about. This is indicative of the significance of family to those interviewed and how important it is to their integration. In a recent report, UNHCR noted that "being able to reunite with family members can play an essential role in helping beneficiaries of international protection rebuild their lives and provide critical support as they adapt to new and challenging circumstances. It can fundamentally affect their ability to integrate in their new country and is often a crucial step in

⁵³ Family reunion applications are within the scope of legal aid in Scotland.

their integration.”⁵⁴ Indeed, refugees who are reunited with their family benefit from a reinforced social support system which promotes their integration.⁵⁵

Given the importance of family unity in improving integration prospects and the well-being of refugees, the UK authorities should reconsider the limitations set on legal aid eligibility for beneficiaries of international protection seeking family reunion. Qualified and regulated legal advisers are best placed to deal with and resolve the significant and diverse complexities that may be experienced throughout the UK family reunion process. In addition, the UK authorities should expand the definition of who qualifies for family reunion.⁵⁶

Furthermore, UNHCR recognises the difficulties that some refugee populations can have in providing documentary evidence for the existence of their family relationships and encourages the UK and other States to ensure that such legal requirements to family reunion do not present insurmountable obstacles to refugee applicants.⁵⁷ Similarly, a report by the Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration on family reunion applications found that, for a range of reasons, “applicants from conflict areas or fragile states, such as Somalia and Eritrea, or those who are displaced and residing in a third country or in a refugee camp, may struggle to provide documentary evidence of identity or relationships.”⁵⁸

Given these difficulties and how they can negatively impact upon integration, UNHCR, the Refugee Council and Scottish Refugee Council encourage the Home Office to consider the possibility of strengthening training given to caseworkers so that they can ensure that decision makers have a sufficient understanding of practical and cultural factors that may be relevant in family reunion applications. This is in line with the recommendations of a recent report by the Council of Europe⁵⁹ which recommends that measures be taken to account for the particular (practical) problems refugees and their families face in reunification procedures. More flexible approaches to account for the distinct situations of different refugee populations and their families abroad could reduce the administrative burden on decision makers as it would result in less back and forth between them and the applicants.

“ Having family with you would help make you feel at home, comfortable, and would make it easier to integrate.”

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **The Ministry of Justice should lift legal aid restriction in England and Wales for beneficiaries of international protection seeking family reunion.**
- **The Home Office should allow for reunification of families in a wider set of circumstances than under current policy.** This includes:
 - **allowing child refugees in the UK the right to sponsor their close family, so they can rebuild their lives together and help them integrate in their new community; and**
 - **expanding who qualifies as ‘family’, so that young people who have turned 18 and elderly parents can join their family in the UK.**
- **The Home Office should improve training given to caseworkers making decisions on family reunion applications, including to ensure sufficient understanding of practical and cultural factors which can impact on applicants’ ability to provide requested evidence to decision makers.**

54 Nicholson, F, UNHCR Division of International Protection, *The “Essential Right” to Family Unity of Refugees and Others in Need of International Protection in the Context of Family Reunification*, 2018, (“UNHCR Essential Right to Family Unity”)

55 Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, *Issue Paper: Realising the right to family reunification of refugees in Europe*, June 2017, (“Council of Europe Issue Paper”) <https://rm.coe.int/prems-052917-gbr-1700-realising-refugees-160x240-web/1680724ba0> and Refugee Council & Oxfam, *Safe but not Settled*, January 2018, https://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/assets/0004/2515/Safe_but_not_settled.pdf

56 UNHCR, the Refugee Council, Amnesty International, Oxfam and the British Red Cross lead the the Families Together coalition (see <http://refugeestogether.co.uk/>) which calls on the Government to expand the definition of family, grant family reunion rights to refugee children and bring refugee family reunion back under the scope of legal aid.

57 UNHCR Essential Right to Family Unity, note 54 above.

58 Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration, *An inspection of family reunion applications January to May 2016*, September 2016, https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/561815/ICIBI-inspection-of-family-reunion-applications-January-to-May-2016.pdf

59 Council of Europe Issue Paper, note 55 above.

COMMUNITY COHESION & SAFETY

Generally, participants reported having positive interactions with their local communities. Many described their local community as friendly and explained that they had British friends and friends from other nationalities. A few participants in both England and Scotland explained that they were too busy sorting out their lives to get to know their neighbours and to get involved in the local community. Some participants reported incidents of racism and verbal abuse and said language was a barrier to getting to know members of their local community.

One participant explained that she felt that it was hard to make friends in the UK. After she began attending her local library's conversation group, she said that she was able to make friends there. She said it was a positive experience to attend events run in her community. One focus group in England described how a local charity had organised football training with individuals from different countries who would speak to each other in English and share a meal. They described this as an effective way to learn English and meet others. They mentioned being able to learn what they described as common behaviour in the UK, such as saying "sorry" and "thank you" and holding open doors.

Churches and mosques, particularly those linked to their own Eritrean community, provided a key source of community for many of the participants. They were also an important source of support and advice. Some participants were assisted through the 'move on' period by friends whom they had met at church or at the mosque.

Participants had mixed feelings towards the Eritrean community in the UK. Some explained that in bigger cities, they were able to attend Eritrean community centres and a lot of participants had only or mostly Eritrean friends. However, some did not want to actively participate in the Eritrean community. This was a reflection of the fragmentation that some described as being present in the Eritrean community in the UK. Many spoke of discord in the community along political lines and of difficulty trusting other Eritreans. In fact, participants in one FGD reported that their community centre had closed down because of tensions along these political lines. Some also reported that those within the Eritrean community whom they did not know, were not very supportive of them upon recognition and did not help them as they started their new life.

As regards their safety and whether they felt protected, many participants who had stayed in hostel accommodation described feeling unsafe there. Some participants highlighted negative incidents from local communities such as discrimination or racism. One participant in Scotland felt discriminated against because she wore a headscarf based on the way she was spoken about and treated in the wider community.

Despite these incidents, the overall feedback from the consultations was that participants felt safe in the UK. They felt that their human rights were protected with one participant stating, *"From the beginning, I felt like I'm human when I arrived here, like anybody else here."* Another stated, *"I feel free and respected here. I like how I am being treated."*

Solutions proposed by participants

Participants felt generally positive about how they had mixed with the local community around them. However, they expressed a wish for more structured opportunities to do so. They also expressed the desire for members of their community to approach them and they hoped that media and other outlets would show them and their religions and customs positively. This, it was felt, would help them find friends in the local community. Participants were thankful that they were given the opportunity to meet others within their community at the PA and many wanted to see the establishment of more Eritrean community centres so that they could find support from other refugees.

Discussion

Social cohesion is a large part of integration and UNHCR, the Refugee Council and Scottish Refugee Council recognise that for refugees to feel fully integrated in society, they need to feel connected and safe in the area and community that they live in.

Refugees have often faced trauma and further social isolation and these experiences can be detrimental to their well-being and their ability to contribute positively to society. Those at the local community level can play an important role in making refugees feel included and ensure that they are not socially isolated or marginalised. A number of good practices regarding community cohesion were highlighted by the participants, such as community organised events. UNHCR, the Refugee Council and Scottish Refugee Council therefore recognise the benefits of a possible initiative by the Government to work closely with the charity and voluntary sector to promote refugee social inclusion.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Where, during the asylum process, the Home Office identifies individual cases with early integration challenges, such cases should be referred to local groups and NGOs to prevent isolation and diminished resilience.
- The UK Government and organisations working to protect and support refugees should work more closely with the media to highlight the positive contributions made by refugees and migrants to local communities.

CONCLUSION

Overall, whilst the PA identified that newly recognised refugees had some positive experiences in the UK, the findings demonstrated that several procedural aspects of the UK's asylum system had negative bearings on their lives. These impacted upon their ability to integrate into British society and engage with the communities they live in.

In PA discussions, the short 'move on' period was recognised as a significant challenge to integration. Furthermore, it was observed in areas including employment, language and local community integration that charities often fill the gaps in asylum-seeker support and frequently provide refugees with advice, information and amenities. Operating on limited resources, these charities are unable to offer newly recognised refugees a comprehensive system of support. Other major challenges raised were mostly in relation to access to education and English language classes, particularly with the need to receive more tailored support that considers other responsibilities such as employment and childcare.

In the PA, participants also expressed a desire for more information to be given about accessing and making use of the NHS in England and Scotland. Discussions on health emphasised the need for more clarity on accessing mental healthcare support, as many pre-existing mental health concerns such as PTSD, anxiety and depression had been exacerbated during the asylum process and by the challenges faced following recognition. Finally, the limitations surrounding family reunion provisions and the inability of many participants to have their remaining relatives join them in the UK were also identified as inhibiting integration.

In light of these challenges, the PA therefore considered the solutions proposed by participants and makes recommendations focused on addressing certain gaps within the asylum system to improve the integration prospects of newly recognised refugees in the UK and to strengthen Government policy and practice for all refugees, regardless of how they arrived.

Throughout the duration of the PA, participants expressed what integration meant to them. Many echoed the sentiment of one participant who stated that *"integration for me is belonging in the place that you like and benefitting from equal opportunities in that place."* Almost all participants agreed that successful integration is not one-sided and that it involves the host community also learning about their culture and experiences. These responses correlate with the approach and work that UNHCR, the Refugee Council and Scottish Refugee Council do to enable refugee integration in the UK and to help refugees rebuild their lives in dignity and with respect for their identity. UNHCR's Executive Committee's recognises that "the integration of refugees is a dynamic and multifaceted two-way process which requires efforts by all parties concerned, including a preparedness on the part of refugees to adapt to the host society without having to forego their own cultural identity, and a corresponding readiness on the part of host communities and public institutions to welcome refugees and meet the needs of a diverse population."⁶⁰ The PA reiterated that successful integration is a fundamental component of protection and provides individuals with the opportunity to rebuild their lives.

UNHCR, the Refugee Council and the Scottish Refugee Council are very grateful to the Home Office and stakeholders for their positive and constructive engagement with this study.

60 UNHCR Executive Committee, Conclusion on Local Integration, No. 104 (LVI) – 2005, 7 October 2005, No. 104 (LVI) – 2005, <http://www.refworld.org/docid/4357a91b2.html>

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UNHCR, UN Refugee Agency

10 Furnival Street
London
EC4A 1AB

www.unhcr.org/uk/

Scottish Refugee Council

6th Floor, Portland House
17 Renfield Street
Glasgow, G2 5AH

www.scottishrefugeecouncil.org.uk

British Refugee Council (commonly called the Refugee Council)

Gredley House
11 Broadway
London
E15 4BQ

www.refugeecouncil.org.uk

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