



Warm Welcome?

Understanding public attitudes to asylum seekers in Scotland

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Executive summary

Asylum seekers have been dispersed to Scotland since 2000¹. There are now approximately 5,500 asylum seekers living in the country, the vast majority concentrated in a few areas of Glasgow. As cases are decided, the number of refugees living in Scotland is also increasing. Media focus on the Dungavel Removal Centre, forced removals, and the murder of an asylum seeker in Sighthill in 2001 have heightened the profile of asylum seekers in Scotland. Ensuring that the public understands what is happening (and why) is essential if these new communities are to integrate effectively and contribute to Scottish life.

Following similar research in England and Wales, the Institute for Public Policy Research (ippr) set out to find out what people in Scotland think about asylum seekers and refugees, and to establish what informs these opinions. Much of the debate about public attitudes to immigration in Scotland has assumed that there is a more positive situation than in England. Polling evidence supports this theory, however there is no work that has focused specifically on asylum seekers rather than migrants in general.

ippr conducted focus groups in Dundee, Edinburgh and Glasgow to establish what people living in these areas think about asylum seekers. We carried out a total of 13 focus groups across the research areas, with a range of participants from different backgrounds. Each focus group brought together eight people from similar backgrounds. Structuring the groups in this way allows us to analyse the relative importance of different factors, including area, social background, age, economic status, gender and ethnicity. We also carried out a mapping exercise to establish what has happened in each area in relation to asylum, and met with key stakeholders to discuss their views on public attitudes and asylum seekers.

Main findings

There is greater tolerance to asylum seekers in Scotland than in England. Many people are supportive of the principle of asylum, and feel that people fleeing persecution should be offered sanctuary. There is a commonly expressed view that 'genuine asylum seekers' are welcome, but that the 'chancers' spoil it for them, by giving all asylum seekers a bad name.

However, this largely positive picture hides a more worrying set of views. Most people we interviewed in Glasgow were extremely hostile towards asylum seekers. Young people in all three research areas were quite intolerant of asylum seekers, and felt comfortable expressing a considerable degree of prejudice.

The perceived impacts of asylum seekers upon the economy and employment opportunities are a particular concern to people living in Scotland. Many people, particularly younger people and those from social classes C2DE, feel that asylum seekers are a threat to jobs, and are concerned about their impact on public services, particularly housing. Asylum seekers are thought to be both coming to Scotland specifically to find work, and targeting the UK for its benefits system. As this suggests, asylum seekers are commonly confused with other minority groups, particularly the increasing numbers of migrants from EU accession countries.

For some people, particularly older people living in Glasgow, asylum seekers are strongly associated with unwelcome social and demographic change. Asylum seekers and other minorities are widely perceived to receive preferential treatment from the authorities. They are blamed for dominant social problems, and 'asylum seeker' has become a catch-all term for any non-white person. The issue of asylum is indivisible in public debate from race and immigration more generally.

Factors underpinning these attitudes

Lack of information: There is general confusion about the issue of asylum. Very few people understand the differences between asylum seekers and other migrants, or settled BME communities. The numbers of asylum seekers in Scotland and the benefits they receive are greatly exaggerated. However, while

1. The UK Government's dispersal programme, under the 1999 Immigration and Asylum Act, came into force in April 2000. The programme aims to move asylum seekers from areas of the south east that have relatively high numbers of asylum seekers and refugees, such as Dover and London, into other areas.

misinformation and myth can support prejudice, they are not the main causes of it. Even very tolerant people know very few facts. This is partly because asylum is described as a 'taboo' subject and one that it is difficult to discuss. Getting accurate information into the public domain is an important way of countering misinformation, but cannot be relied upon to change attitudes alone.

The media: The media has some influence on attitudes. Although people are extremely distrustful of the UK press' treatment of asylum, negative views are imbued with the language of the tabloids. Many people say the only stories they can recall seeing in the Scottish press were about Sighthill. There has been much more positive coverage since then, but fewer people say they are aware of it. However, it is likely to have contributed to the largely more tolerant and better-informed debate than in England.

Political discourse: Strong political leadership from the Scottish Executive has made a difference, particularly in relation to broader issues of immigration. The Fresh Talent Initiative² and One Scotland campaign³ have helped the public to understand the positive impacts of migration. Most people are aware that Scotland is under-populated, and are more supportive of migration than their counterparts in England. However, these positive messages are, to some extent, undermined by the debate coming out of Westminster. Many people are very wary of the Labour Government's approach to asylum, and feel let down by them.

Meaningful contact: The most positive attitudes are found among people who personally know asylum seekers or refugees. The most negative are found among people who live near to dispersal areas, but not near enough to know people living in them. Increasing levels of meaningful contact is an important strategy to tackle hostility.

Racism: Racism underpins some of the debates about asylum. Hostility to asylum seekers is socially fairly acceptable, and can rapidly spill over into hostility towards other minority groups. People from BME communities feel that the debate over asylum is increasing racism.

Initial dispersal: The initial dispersal process still affects views. Many people living in Glasgow perceive asylum seekers to have been dropped onto the city, with little preparation or consultation. Integration efforts with communities living next to or among asylum seekers are working, and prejudice is declining among these communities. However, groups who have had little contact with asylum seekers are still hostile.

Ways forward

Peoples' attitudes are formed by a complex mix of personal circumstances, values and the external environment. Challenging them requires action at every level, from the very local to the national. There is plenty of good practice to build on in Scotland, which is, in part, responsible for the general, more tolerant debate.

However, immigration policy is not a devolved issue, making attempts to move debates, in some respects, more difficult. ippr's research found that hostility is increased by a lack of faith in the UK Government to address the issue. While this is outside the Scottish-specific focus of this report, it is vital that the national policy framework enables regional and local interventions to be effective. Chapter 6 lists recommendations for different levels of government, the media, business and the voluntary sector.

The priorities are to:

- tackle hostility in Glasgow, by building on and widening successful integration work, and by moving beyond the continuing public focus on Sighthill
- focus on young people and children, particularly those in tertiary education, to challenge hostile attitudes
- ensure that challenging racism sits alongside attempts to change attitudes to asylum seekers, but not to waste resources by focusing on the hard core minority of people who will never accept asylum seekers

2. The Scottish Executive's Fresh Talent initiative was set up to counter Scotland's falling population. Formally introduced in February 2004, the initiative aims to encourage people from the EU and beyond to live, work and study in Scotland.

3. One Scotland is the Scottish Executive's campaign designed to tackle racism in Scotland. It is supported by the One Workplace Equal Rights project that tackles racism in the workplace.

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- continue work to ensure that the Scottish media gives fair and balanced coverage of asylum issues
 - continue the multi-agency working that is a strength of the Scottish context, for example by putting out information endorsed by as many agencies as possible
 - increase the accurate information in the public domain, through accessible websites and leaflets
 - challenge concerns about the impacts of asylum seekers on employment and the economy, for example by including low-skilled workers in the Fresh Talent initiative
 - ensure that the One Scotland campaign includes facts about asylum
 - ensure that schools have the resources they need to teach asylum issues.