

Lay Report

The impact of COVID-19 on refugees and asylum seekers in Scotland: investigating the role of the third sector



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INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has had disproportionate impacts on groups and communities within society who were already vulnerable. This research focuses on the impact of COVID-19 on refugees and asylum seekers within Scotland in 2020 and 2021 and looks at the role of the third sector in mitigating these effects. Data collected throughout the research shows the crucial role of the third sector and the importance of a bottom-up approach in providing assistance and services to refugees and asylum seekers. Currently, much of the research that exists around refugees and asylum seekers in Scotland focuses on Glasgow, with other areas remaining under-researched as a result. North Lanarkshire and Highland were therefore chosen as case studies alongside Glasgow City to obtain information from divergent locations.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

- Eight individuals were interviewed anonymously. Ethics approval was sought and granted before this.
- Several relevant organisations were identified before the interviews were conducted, both from the third and the public sector, that worked with asylum seekers and/or refugees in Scotland.
- Interviewees were individuals from within these organisations
- These organisations were typically based specifically within one of three Scottish Council areas: Glasgow City, North Lanarkshire, Highland. Two had a Scotland wide focus and were able to cover one or more of the specified areas

Interview design and content

- Semi-structured interviews were used...
 - to allow for a reciprocal conversation between the interviewer and interviewees
 - to provide opportunity for follow-up questions that suited particular participants
 - to encourage participants to bring up points they believed were relevant, without being restricted to only the pre-prepared focus points

- to maintain a certain level of focus and control over the interview
- The themes and questions for the interviews were largely structured around: education, accommodation and well-being
- The interview transcripts were read and examined using a thematic approach. A thematic approach provided flexibility for identification of broad and recurring themes from the data.
- The main themes identified were: **frustration, disconnect from government and the exacerbation of existing issues.**
- As this research was part of an undergraduate project there were limitations. Time restrictions meant there was a limit on the number of interviews that could be conducted and analysed to ensure that the data could be extensively analysed and coded. As all interviews were transcribed and coded by hand, having an overwhelming amount of data would have made the process impractical

Profile of interviewees

Participant #	Geographical Location	Employment/involvement	Interview type
1	Scotland wide	Third sector	Written
2	Scotland wide	Third sector	Written
3	Scotland wide (Glasgow focus)	Public sector	Oral/Zoom
4	Glasgow	Third sector	Oral/Zoom
5	Glasgow	Third sector	Oral/Zoom
6	Highland	Third sector	Oral/Zoom
7	North Lanarkshire	Public sector	Written
8	North Lanarkshire	Public sector	Written

KEY FINDINGS

- Third sector organisations and staff repeatedly make up initial and frontline responses to the difficulties that refugees and asylum seekers face as a consequence of the pandemic. Shared characteristics of third sector organisations, such as ‘on the ground’ or localised work, and the consequent understanding of the needs of the individuals that they work with and for, is invaluable.
- The role of the local government is crucial and should be recognised. The Park Inn incident is the most notable example of the tragedy that can ensue from ignorance and disregard of vulnerable communities. Interviews with participants indicated that most believed that this would not have occurred if Glasgow City Council had greater sovereignty over accommodation services.
- Education is seen as the area that works best for refugee children in Scotland. This is likely due to the ability of local authorities and individual schools to create their own responses to support pupils and change these with observation and evaluation of their effectiveness. However, digital divide and youth well-being remain key areas of concern for refugee and asylum-seeking pupils. In order to adequately tackle these issues a corresponding and mutually appreciated approach is needed between schools, local governments and third sector organisations.
- There cannot be a ‘one size fits all’ approach to refugee accommodation. Different geographical locations have different requirements. Local governments and third sector organisations are best equipped with on the ground knowledge to respond to these unique challenges.
- The pandemic is aggravating the well-being of many refugees, asylum seekers and third sector workers. However, acknowledgement of this, and provision of support, is immensely insufficient.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- The opinions and insights of charities and local communities need to be acknowledged and encompassed in policy responses.
- Decision and policy making powers may benefit from being centered around bottom-up knowledge and recommendations. Policy creation and adaptation could then take into consideration lived experience and individual needs.
- Sincere improvements are needed in housing for asylum seekers through systemic change. One way of doing this may be by giving Glasgow City Council the opportunity to hold the Asylum Accommodation and Support Services Contract (AASC) and therefore have more self-sovereignty.
- Increased and direct funding to third sector organisations and local governments. Although charities are often most able to identify the areas of specialised support needed to aid asylum seekers and refugees, financial agency is needed to make these a reality.
- Specialised services and support for all groups in all areas is essential. Refugees, asylum seekers and third sector workers all require unique and adequate levels of support.

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, the third sector plays a crucial role in mitigating the impact of COVID-19 on refugees and asylum seekers. Relationships and dedication to individuals, local knowledge and multi-agency working are examples of key characteristics that allow organisations to provide the dynamic and commendable support to refugees and asylum seekers that is absent from the state. Third sector organisations across Scotland have reacted to the exacerbation of issues by working to offer enhanced and enriched services to those most vulnerable.