

Submission to the APPG on Refugees inquiry “Refugees Welcome?”

1. Still Human Still Here is a coalition of 79 organisations that are seeking to end the destitution of asylum seekers in the UK. Its members include nine City Councils, OXFAM, the Children’s Society, Amnesty International, Citizens Advice Bureau, Homeless Link, Crisis, Doctors of the World, National Aids Trust, the British Red Cross, a range of faith based organisations and all the main agencies working with refugees in the UK.¹

2. Home Office conclusions on effective refugee integration

2.1 In 2005, the Home Office launched its National Strategy for Refugee Integration. In the following five years it published several key documents in which it set out the findings from Home Office research and identified good practice which would further improve refugee integration into UK society.²

2.2 In these documents, the Home Office defines integration as taking place when refugees are empowered to: meet their responsibilities and achieve their full potential as members of British society, contribute to the community and access the services to which they are entitled. The Home Office underlined that “It is essential that we support refugees in realising their full potential – economically, culturally and in terms of social inclusion.”³

2.3 Indicators for achieving full potential are identified as: the employment rates of refugees; the levels of English language attainment over time; the number of refugees involved in voluntary work; the numbers of refugees in touch with community organisations; the proportion of refugees taking up British citizenship; and the proportion of refugees reporting harassment.⁴

2.4 The link between refugee integration and wider key departmental priorities such as building cohesion, reducing health inequalities, tackling extremism and increasing community empowerment, is underlined by the Home Office.

2.5 In these reports, the Home Office identified the 28-day period after being granted status as critical to a successful integration strategy and stressed the importance of providing intensive one-to-one caseworker support during this time. The caseworker assists refugees to address immediate needs and then develop and implement an individualised integration plan over the course of a year. The caseworker approach has been a successful part of all recent refugee integration strategies, including Sunrise and the Gateway programme.

¹ See <http://stillhumanstillhere.wordpress.com/> for a full list of members.

² These reports are: Home Office, *Integration Matters: A National Strategy for Refugee Integration*, March 2005; UKBA, *Moving on Together: Government’s recommitment to supporting refugees*, March 2009; Home Office, *The Gateway Protection Programme: an evaluation*, Research Report 12, February 2009; and Home Office, *Spotlight on refugee integration: findings from the Survey on New Refugees in the UK*, Research Report 37, July 2010.

³ UKBA, *Moving on Together: Government’s recommitment to supporting refugees*, March 2009, pages 7-8

⁴ Home Office, *Integration Matters: A National Strategy for Refugee Integration*, March 2005, page 81

2.6 Language proficiency and access to the world of work are consistently identified as both being pivotal to the integration of refugees and the principle barriers to progress. Home Office reports identified that caseworkers, working in partnership with mainstream service providers, have had some success in addressing these and other obstacles to integration, for example through:

- Prioritising and resolving immediate problems which inhibit integration. For example, healthcare needs may need to be addressed before language learning can be achieved; improved English may be needed before employment can be secured, etc.
- Finding routes into employment by: setting up volunteering opportunities; approaching employment agencies to outline refugees' skills profiles: and assisting with re-training, re-accreditation and helping refugees to apply for jobs.
- Facilitating access to mentoring programmes, like Time Together.
- Helping to resolve specific issues that arise (e.g. dealing with harassment, helping with family reunion, identifying further education opportunities).

2.7 Analysis of Home Office supported programmes shows that they have been successful in promoting refugee integration. In the Survey of New Refugees (2010), those granted protection between 1 December 2005 and 25 March 2007 were sent questionnaires after one week, eight months, 15 months and 21 months. 5,678 refugees responded to the first questionnaire and this gradually reduced to 939 responses to the final questionnaire.⁵ The indicators of successful integration after 21 months included:

- Those reporting a high level of English language ability increased from 26% to 38%, while those reporting a low level of English decreased from 38% to 15%.
- Employment rates increased from 34% at eight months to 49% at 21 months, with those in full-time jobs increasing from 22% to 33%. In the same period, refugees who were unemployed and looking for work fell from 23% to 12%.
- During the 21 months, at least 25% of new refugees were studying.

2.8 In considering these outcomes, it should be noted that refugees have poorer health than the general population. For example, at all time points in the survey around 12% of refugees described their health as bad or very bad, compared with 7% of the general population in England.

2.9 The positive integration indicators recorded above reflect the priority and resourcing given to integration work at this time. For example:

- In the financial year ending March 2005, the Home Office spent £11 million on integration activities;
- In October 2005, the Home Office established Sunrise through which a dedicated caseworker provided one-to-one intensive support to new refugees and developed an integration plan to enable them to access mainstream services effectively;
- ESOL provision was doubled in the three years to 2003;

⁵ Home Office, *Spotlight on refugee integration: findings from the Survey on New Refugees in the UK*, Research Report 37, July 2010, page 2

- the Home Office acknowledged “the vital role” of Refugee Community Organisations and committed to “sustaining their long term future”;
- A National Refugee Integration Forum existed specifically to promote the integration of refugees.

2.10 While these initiatives undoubtedly helped refugees to restart their lives in the UK, Home Office research concluded that the following issues need to be addressed to further improve refugee integration:

- Refugees need to be provided with their documentation as soon as possible after being granted status and certainly before the end of the 28 day move on period.
- Participation in intensive language courses at the earliest opportunity is integral to integration and the availability and accessibility of ESOL courses needs to be improved, along with access to courses appropriate to specific needs.
- At least 12% of refugees who took part in the 2010 survey had either lived on the streets or in a homeless shelter at some point in the 21-month since being granted protection. This will underestimate refugee homelessness since the survey was based on a postal questionnaire. Greater support covering the transition to more permanent housing would help reduce the rate of homelessness.
- The number of refugees entering employment needs to be increased, including by facilitating volunteering as a route to gain skills and references and by assisting refugees with overseas qualifications to quickly gain re-accreditation and/or retrain.
- Strategies should be developed to address specific integration problems experienced by some groups of refugees, such as women with children and older refugees. Some nationalities may also require more support than others.

3. Barriers to integration

No integration support for refugees who come through the asylum route

3.1 In 2009, the Government stated that its refugee integration strategy “applies equally to those who come through the asylum route or are brought to the UK through our resettlement programmes.”⁶ This is no longer the case.

3.2 Since 2012, funding for programmes which facilitate the integration of refugees who have not been resettled to the UK has either been substantially cut (e.g. ESOL provision) or withdrawn completely (e.g. RIES). In addition, the availability of mainstream support services from voluntary organisations and local authorities has been dramatically reduced.

3.3 This is of particular concern given that very substantial numbers of refugees come through the asylum route. In 2015 alone, nearly 15,000 individuals were granted protection in the UK, either at the initial decision or on appeal.

⁶ UKBA, *Moving on Together: Government’s recommitment to supporting refugees*, March 2009, pages 7-8

3.4 These individuals are not receiving any significant integration support, despite the fact that the Home Office has repeatedly concluded that such support would enable them to contribute more quickly to British society and would minimise the risks of their becoming socially isolated and victims of harassment, exploitation or those promoting radicalisation.

3.5 In January 2016, the importance of promoting integration at the earliest opportunity was underlined by the Prime Minister who announced £20 million for classes to improve the language skills of 190,000 Muslim women who spoke little or no English and had become “segregated.”⁷ Seeking to address social exclusion after it has become a problem is manifestly cost ineffective as it will be much more difficult for the individuals concerned to integrate after a prolonged period of marginalisation and years in which they could have been contributing to UK will have been wasted.

The 28 day move on period

3.6 Still Human has documented that newly recognised refugees consistently end up destitute because their asylum support is cut off after the 28-day move-on period expires and this does not give them enough time to access mainstream benefits or start working.⁸

3.7 Despite the Government’s repeated efforts to address this issue through procedural improvements (e.g. seeking to reduce administrative delays and poor advice), the evidence shows that the problem has actually got worse. For example:

- In 2015, the British Red Cross supported over 9,000 destitute refugees and asylum seekers of which 1,155 had refugee status (13%). This represents a significant increase on 2014 during which they supported 7,700 destitute refugees and asylum seekers of which 700 were refugees (9%).
- In 2015, 38% (225 people) of those housed by the No Accommodation Network (NACCOM) were refugees who were made homeless after obtaining leave to remain. An increase from 36% (186 people) in 2014.

3.8 Further analysis of local projects indicates that the situation has further deteriorated in 2016 and that this is a UK wide issue. For example:

- Between April 2015 and March 2016, the Refugee Survival Trust provided 877 emergency grants to destitute refugees and asylum seekers in Scotland. Of these, 238 grants (27%) were made to refugees who were still waiting to access mainstream benefits after the move-on period had ended.
- Between 1 January 2016 and 25 April 2016, a total of 118 destitute refugees were assisted by the British Red Cross destitution project in Greater Manchester - an increase of nearly 50%.

⁷ BBC, *Muslim women's segregation in UK communities must end* – Cameron, 18 January 2016, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-35338413>

⁸ For Still Human Still Here’s full analysis of why the 28 day move on period needs to be extended (including detailed case studies see: <https://stillhumanstillhere.files.wordpress.com/2009/01/28-day-move-on-period-briefing-final.pdf>

3.9 Evidence from service providers indicates that an even greater number of refugees are unable to access accommodation within the 28-day time frame. For example, in 2015, the Holistic Integration Service (HIS) in Scotland found that 93% of new refugees who engaged with HIS (816 people) presented as homeless to their local authority following cessation of their asylum support.⁹ As the majority of refugees are single people who are not considered vulnerable, they are usually unable to get homelessness assistance from the local authority.

3.10 There will always be a significant number of refugees who experience administrative delays which are not their fault or who struggle to engage with the system (e.g. because of health or language difficulties) and consequently cannot access benefits within 28 days. This happens even when they are supported by a dedicated caseworker. For example, the Holistic Integration Service in Scotland found that, even with a caseworker, refugees only received their first payment an average of 42-50 days after they received status, resulting in two weeks or more of destitution.¹⁰

3.11 When Universal Credit is rolled out, payments will only be made one month and one week after the completion of the online form (which is only available in English or Welsh). This will make it impossible for refugees to receive mainstream benefits before their asylum support ends even if they completed the form on the same day as they received their status.

3.12 For these reason, Still Human proposes that newly recognised refugees should stay on section 95 support until their mainstream benefits start so that there is a seamless transition between support systems. However, if the Government wishes to retain a fixed move-on period, then this should be increased to at least 42 days and preferably to 49 days. This will dramatically reduce the incidence of destitution amongst refugees; improve their integration; and save statutory and voluntary agencies significant amounts of time and money.

Asylum and immigration policy

3.13 Asylum seekers receive just over £5 a day to pay for food, clothing, toiletries, transport and other essentials (housing and fuel bills are paid for separately for those who have nowhere to live). At the end of June 2016, there were more than 6,600 asylum seekers who had been waiting more than six months for an initial decision on their application. These people have no route out of poverty as they are not allowed to work to support themselves.

3.14 This combination of long delays in the decision making process, being forced to subsist on inadequate levels of support and being prohibited from working, all impact on refugees' ability to integrate after they are given status. Living on £5 a day for extended periods of time, along with the uncertainty about their future, has a negative impact on many refugees mental and physical wellbeing. Not being able to work also affects their self-esteem and when they are eventually granted status they have often lost confidence and become de-skilled. All of the above means that it will take them much longer to adjust and realise their full potential in terms of what they can achieve and contribute to society.

⁹ *Insights into integration pathways in Scotland*, year two (1 April 2014 – 31 March 2015) of the Holistic Integration Service (HIS), June 2015.

¹⁰ *Insights into integration pathways in Scotland*, year two (1 April 2014 – 31 March 2015) of the Holistic Integration Service (HIS), June 2015.

3.15 Refugees will also face integration challenges as a consequence of recent immigration legislation (e.g. right to rent, charging for healthcare, etc.). These provisions do not apply to refugees, but do have a chilling effect on refugees' ability to access services. For example, many refugees have difficulty accessing accommodation as landlords do not generally accept a residency permit as proof of residency and want to see a passport as proof of immigration status. Some landlords are reluctant to rent to anyone who does not appear to be British.

3.16 In addition, the proposed 'safe return reviews' under which the Government will seek to return refugees to their country of origin when their temporary stay of protection comes to an end or if there is a clear improvement in conditions in their country, will make it much more difficult for refugees to get jobs and training as employers will know that they may be forced to leave the UK and return home.

Issues for resettled refugees

3.17 In contrast to refugees who arrive through the asylum route, resettled refugees continue to receive a programme of support designed to facilitate their integration into UK society. This is crucial as these refugees, whether they come through Gateway or the Syrian resettlement programme, will generally be more vulnerable than those who make their own way to the UK and will require a higher level of support. This is reflected in Home Office research which shows that between 50-66% of the Gateway refugees in Bolton, Hull and Rochdale reported physical health problems.¹¹

3.18 The same research noted that between 25-50% of Gateway refugees in four cities experienced verbal or physical harassment. In Hull and Rochdale, at ten months, almost one-sixth of each group had experienced a physical attack.¹² Refugees who are granted status through the asylum system are likely to experience similar levels of harassment, but the evidence indicates that the integration support offered to resettled refugees means they are more likely to seek help and report this harassment.

3.19 The Government's commitment to resettle 20,000 Syrian refugees and an additional 3,000 children from the Middle East and North Africa to the UK by 2020 presents significant integration challenges. This is because these resettled refugees are highly vulnerable and will require long term support. However, central government assistance to local authorities taking these refugees is only limited to the initial years. In addition, many of these authorities do not have previous experience of working with refugees and do not have an existing refugee support infrastructure they can rely on to help with the integration process.

4. Conclusions

4.1 The social and economic value of a comprehensive refugee integration strategy is not in doubt. The Home Office's own research has repeatedly stressed that successful integration is key to delivering a range of cross-departmental priorities and has identified which strategies will help ensure this takes place. In view of the above, the Government should as a matter of priority:

¹¹ Home Office, *The Gateway Protection Programme: an evaluation*, Research Report 12, 2009, pages 10 & 11

¹² Home Office, *The Gateway Protection Programme: an evaluation*, Research Report 12, 2009, p.15

- Design and implement a properly funded refugee integration strategy for all refugees, irrespective of whether they came through the asylum or resettlement routes, as is currently the case in Scotland.¹³
- Ensure a seamless transition between asylum and mainstream support or, at a minimum, extend the 28 day move on period for newly recognised refugees to between 42-49 days.
- Address existing policies in the asylum system which make the integration of refugees significantly more difficult, including: delays in the asylum determination procedure; inadequate asylum support rates; preventing asylum seekers from working even after waiting six months for an initial decision; the safe returns reviews, etc.

¹³ For details see: <http://www.gov.scot/Resource/0043/00439604.pdf>