

## Migrants: Housing and Homelessness

### Background

As part of the JustCitizens Panel we are conducting community research across a number of different policy areas to support our aim to create a fairer Scotland for migrants. One of these topics is focused on housing and homelessness. These topics were chosen by migrant members on the panel and all research and recommendations were developed by them. Across April and May 2021 we conducted research through our migrants panel and their communities, to help us learn about their experiences. We also worked on desk-based research to understand the experience of migrants within the Scottish justice system.

This briefing provides an insight from focus groups conducted and information from our survey (which is still open for participants).

*'Having somewhere to call home is a basic human right. We want to ensure that nobody has to face the blight of homelessness and everyone has a safe, warm place they can call home.'*

Scottish Government website (May 2021)

Whilst this is an admirable statement, the reality for migrants and asylum seekers is very different. They are often caught and lost between devolved housing policy in Scotland and reserved immigration policy in Westminster. Whilst housing rights organisations have included migrants' experiences and access as part of their work, policy has not fully reflected or met the needs of migrants. Asylum seekers in particular who are housed under by contractors working with the Home Office, have reported rights violations and multiple harrowing experiences (particularly through Covid-19 and unacceptable hotel accommodation); yet nothing has changed.



### Focus Group Findings

#### Themes that are emerging include:

- ▶ **Issues of safety** – migrants experiencing abusive/unsafe situations and not feeling supported in reporting these (i.e. harassment from neighbour). We are following up reports of cases where HO accommodation provider was aware that people in the shared accommodation had poor mental health but had not put precautions in place.
- ▶ **Issues with accommodation standards** – Very basic provision in terms of asylum accommodation, which is not bound by Scottish housing standards. Some reported long times to carry out repairs/follow up – a repair to a toilet took two months. Some talked about having to go through many channels to report a relatively simple issue.
- ▶ **Lack of suitability assessments** – people being moved into homeless/temporary accommodation not suitable for them (ie torture survivor into hostel, single mother with temp flat seven miles from son's school) and not given a choice.
- ▶ **No Recourse to Public Funds preventing people from getting homeless accommodation** – sometimes even where children are involved.

### Focus Group Findings continued:

- ▶ **Delays** – long time spent in asylum accommodation after getting status, or in temp accommodation while awaiting permanent accommodation from council. Resulted in many sporadic moves.
- ▶ **Lack of migrant specific support** – Moved into flats with no furniture – and no money to furnish flat and poor social networks to offer help. Fear and reluctance to seek information or report issues due to feeling “less entitled” than Scottish neighbours.

### Isolation and its impact on sense of belonging:

We heard that housing is fundamental to people’s sense of belonging and has an impact on other areas of their lives in Scotland.

One talked about how she was unable to use letters from Mears as proof of address because it was asylum accommodation. She said:

*“It makes me feel like I don’t live here. I know that I am living here in Scotland but I have nothing I can use to prove it.”*

*“You feel like you’re not a human when you are an asylum seekers. You can’t work, you have no identification, you can’t start your life. We’re also into the second year of a pandemic during which the Home Office stopped everything. Most of the asylum seekers I know are very depressed. It really affects their mental health.”*

### Key questions that need to be answered:

- ▶ The Scottish Government states having somewhere to call home is a basic human right. How can it/will it ensure that is true for all migrants?
- ▶ How can we ensure legal housing conditions apply to all and are upheld? (especially in the private rented sector and by those with Home Office contracts e.g. Mears).
- ▶ How can we simplify the process for migrants, ensure they are provided with accessible information and report problems without fear of immigration reprisals?

### Recommendations:

- ▶ Independent reporting helpline – where migrants can report issues and seek help (similar to the line set-up for workers in the Agricultural Seasonal Workers Scheme).
- ▶ Challenging Home Office guidance and regulations, particularly in relation to NRPF (see below).
- ▶ More thorough monitoring and recording of issues reported by migrants related to housing and homelessness – without data sharing with the Home Office.

### Continued pressure on the Home Office

Whilst immigration policy is reserved, the Scottish Government must continue to put pressure on the Home Office and push for the creation of a fair and human rights centred immigration system. Recent changes to immigration for example, the policy which sees destitution and homelessness being a cause for detention, is hugely harmful and is absolutely the wrong way to deal with poverty and support the migrant community.