

Written statements from staff,
service users and volunteers,
Friends of Scottish Settlers



The following are short written statements for the consideration of the Scottish Parliament's Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee as it investigates the situation of people in the asylum system in Scotland. We are providing this so those with first hand experience in Falkirk who will not have the opportunity to give evidence verbally can have their experiences considered.

Please note that currently the regular public transport referred to by service users and volunteers is provided by funding from Paths for All that FOSS applied for. This is, for most of 2023, allowing men in the ex-hotel to travel to Edinburgh or Glasgow up to twice a week, and sometimes further afield. The funding will finish in January 2024 unless we are able to get it extended. Likewise, FOSS volunteers came together to offer ESOL once per week.

This information was collected and collated in May and June 2023 by FOSS' staff.



FOSS Client 1 - Asylum seeker from Eritrea

[This statement was prepared during an ESOL session with FOSS volunteers]

Positive things:

- The hotels have single rooms and a private toilet
- The house keeping services are good laundry service
- It is possible to discover new places now that we have access to public transport and go to events in Glasgow and Edinburgh as well as visit.
- The english classes we have are good, we work on understanding tenses and basic grammar.

Negative things:

- The food in the hotel is not good and doesn't always meet dietary needs
- Poor services from mears staff and neglect
- Benefits are not enough only £9.10 a week
- Issues with hayfever in summer - need to have medication for this.
- We only get a voucher which is enough for two trips on the train a week - we need to be able to travel on the train and buses for free.



- We need more english classes
- Before we had public transport we felt isolated from the local community
- Mistreatment from staff in the hotels.
- Lack of right to work.
- Lack of lived experience
- Stress from delay of process.



FOSS Client 2:

I would like to share with you my story and living conditions as an asylum seeker here in UK.

I was living in Hull City for ten months and I did the home office questionnaire four months ago, I have moved from Hull City to Falkirk and I stay here almost two months and I feel alot of depression, loneliness, and isolated never get the access to join Esol classes they say you didn't qualify to register you need to level up and then come, the diety is poor no body can eat what they cook, even the laundry service is below zero and the worst thing lack of respect, the hotel staff are rude and mears will not solve our complain even they will not raise to home office they decline it.



FOSS Client 3:

[This statement was gathered by a FOSS staff member interviewing a client who wanted the Scottish Parliament to consider this information]

Public transport is important particularly as it currently stands for people living in areas outside Edinburgh and Glasgow. The main reason for this is there is not enough access to education, particularly support for learning English, outside of Glasgow and Edinburgh. Whereas in the major cities there are more college places. It is good to have tickets from FOSS twice a week but this is not enough to undertake a language course.

It would be good to have adequate investment in English education for asylum seekers and refugees across Scotland as well as general programmes for education for asylum seekers who speak English.

[This client] is particularly concerned about lack of access to driving lessons for people in the asylum process. It would be great to be able to access driving lessons either during the asylum process or get support to learn to drive immediately at the point of receiving their refugee status.

[He] is also concerned that although he has a work permit after being in the asylum system for more than a year he is only allowed to work on the shortage occupation list and has struggled to find work as a result as the list is very narrow. This contrasts with experiences of friends of his in Austria, Germany, France and the Netherlands where asylum seekers are able to learn to drive whilst in the asylum process, able to work in any job after 6 months in the system and can access full time local language lessons immediately. All of these things help refugees integrate faster.



Volunteer 1: [REDACTED]

(FOSS Volunteer and English Tutor, [REDACTED])

Comments by asylum seekers and ourselves as FOSS Volunteers on matters relating to accommodation, travel and transport, English Language tuition and mental health:

- When I discussed the above areas of importance with 8 of the asylum seekers resident at the Cladhan Hotel in Falkirk (as a group) on 08.06.2023 they made the following comments:-
- When they first arrived at the hotel, and for the initial few months of their stay, they had felt very isolated - stuck in the hotel most days with no access to public transport, library or gym facilities, and many with little or no conversational English.
- Things have improved greatly over the past 5 months in some areas but there are ongoing difficulties for these men

Accommodation

Their rooms were sparsely furnished but adequate and they were warm enough during winter months.

One of the main complaints is over the lack of variety in the food provided – chicken with boiled rice or chips almost every day! To begin with there were hardly any fruit or vegetables available but after repeated requests, the hotel has begun to offer small amounts of fruit with meals or as snacks. They report being served a fish dish only once in 6 months.



The eating hours are very restricted, which means that a much-needed lie-in or late arrival back to the hotel after attending a doctor's appt. etc. might result in their meal being cancelled – just told: "Sorry, too late".

Hotel staff were mostly kind and considerate, with one or two rude and dictatorial exceptions.

Those who were issued with free passes to attend a local Recreation Centre with a gym were most grateful for these.

Travel: This has been very restricted due to their pocket money allowance being so small, and not having Bus Passes. They have recently been issued with travel vouchers at the rate of two each week, which has certainly improved their sense of freedom of movement. Many would really appreciate free Bus Passes as they wait for a HO decision on their application for asylum.



English Language Tuition

In general this has been very valuable and much appreciated. Some arrived with little or no English but now, after a year of weekly lessons, they can converse about many practical day-to-day matters – visit a shop or café, travel on the bus or train, attend a doctor's appointment. Several say that they would like more English language sessions each week. About 16 students have been given free English tuition for one term at Forth Valley College, which have been greatly appreciated. They learn a lot on outings and excursions with FOSS Volunteers to museums or places of historical interest.



Mental Health

This is difficult to assess because, in many of their home countries, concepts like 'anxiety' or 'depression' are not discussed or even considered. Life is more about daily survival as a blessing from God. However, as Volunteers we can learn a lot from their level of engagement (animated or withdrawn), body language e.g. lack of eye contact, physical energy (or lethargy) and facial expression. Some speak of sadness over being separated from their family and friends, sometimes because the latter have been killed in tragic circumstances of armed conflict. One lad was domiciled with friends from his own country when suddenly, they were transferred by Home Office officials to Ireland, whilst he was sent (alone) to Falkirk !

Please find attached another letter from one of our regular Volunteers ([REDACTED]) and also the hand-written comments by one of our asylum seekers from Eritrea who, after 14 months of awaiting a HO decision, has finally received permission to remain in the UK but is still awaiting his 'Discontinuation Cert.'

Finally, I wrote the following to our local MSP (Alex Cole-Hamilton, Edinburgh West) suggesting ways whereby our reception and care of genuine asylum seekers could be improved:-

'For the past 18 months or so I have been serving as a volunteer with FOSS Falkirk (Friends of Scottish Settlers), offering friendship and support and English tuition to Asylum Seekers from a number of different countries who are currently domiciled in a hotel in the town.



As you will probably be aware, the original intention of the UK Government was for such individuals, usually from war-torn countries, to be held in hotel or hostel accommodation for up to 6 months whilst their application for asylum in the UK is assessed by Home Office officials and a decision made as to whether they can or cannot stay in Britain.

For a number of different reasons, including the sheer number of these unfortunate people coming to our shores, the processing of their applications is taking far longer than 6 months. Many of our men have been banged up on the hotel for more than 9 months, some for over a year and not surprisingly we have noticed in them a growing sense of frustration and anger, occasionally spilling over into violence.

Would you be able and willing to persuade members of Scottish Parliament across all the Parties to do something to change the situation?

We as volunteers would like to see these people provided with temporary work or study visas so that they could 'earn their keep' as it were, practising the English that they are learning as they attend language classes, and receiving the dignity of being able to contribute to their host communities whilst their applications for asylum are being assessed.

To make this possible, it is vital that these asylum seekers are provided with free Bus Passes: transport becomes an issue especially when the housing provider routinely moves people from one place to another with little notice, and when people are placed in locations like Falkirk with fewer asylum resources. It is difficult to maintain a job or education with this sort of disruption, and impossible when you have no access to transport. I understand that this is something the Scottish Government is currently considering as it is within its devolved powers. Would you please lend your support to this proposal, as a matter of urgency.



Could you please also support the 'Lift the Ban' campaign', which is asking that asylum seekers have the right to work, <https://www.refugee-action.org.uk/lift-the-ban/>

In my experience, I have noticed that many of these men have skills to offer such as catering, hairdressing, mechanics, teaching or even scientific research – what a waste of human resources to leave them sitting around watching TV or playing cards all day long, often in rather third-rate accommodation! They and the community would benefit from such opportunities, and would enable us to demonstrate true compassion and Scottish hospitality at its best.

Any assistance that you could offer to move things forward in relation to the above, important humanitarian issues would be immensely valuable and much appreciated.

Yours sincerely,





Volunteer 2: [REDACTED]

1. Their main problem is the length of time it takes to get their interview with the Home Office and the fact there is no way to chase this up. One of the solicitors' secretary's told me that there is no system - i.e. it's not first come first served which is why some people who have arrived later are seen sooner than men who have been at the hotel for a long time. This is difficult for the guys to understand.
2. The lack of availability of structured English classes at college. Ideally they should be able to attend a class every day. I don't think some of them realise that they will struggle to find work without good English. We are trying to supplement this with volunteer lead ESOL classes once a week but it's difficult.

I think it's easy to forget how demotivating their situation must be. It's very bad for one's mental health to have so little agency.

3. I think FOSS seem to be doing okay on material needs, especially when compared to the horror stories of asylum seekers in England.
4. It is difficult to set them up with volunteering opportunities because of their lack of English and them not necessarily being available at the same time every week, also getting to and from opportunities (I know some have travel permits now but finding somewhere the first time they go etc.) Last year I took two of the asylum seekers to Camelon to help with a litter pick but I needed my car, it would have been too far to walk. It is vital that they understand the concept of volunteering i.e. no money, I know this caused confusion at one time.



5. One asylum seeker is very artistic, so we got him some drawing materials. One man helped for a while at the Sensory Garden as he liked gardening. I found details of the Park Run for a man who liked running. It's important to find out what individuals like to do e.g. are they musical, artistic, do they like gardening, football etc. etc. It would be fantastic if FOSS had an allotment or some raised beds somewhere. Even big planters on the grounds of the hotel to grow salad if allowed.

Fact: Most asylum seekers eventually get refugee status. At present they spend months and months in limbo doing nothing - wasting their time and tax payers money that should be spent looking after people. This cannot be good for their mental health.

If I was in charge of the system this is how I'd do it:

1. Person arrives. Immediately assessed for material needs, health needs, English level assessed, asked what kind of work they hope to do once they have refugee status.
2. Ensure sufficient translators are available.
3. Provide free full-time English courses at appropriate level where required - in college, attendance not mandatory but explained how important this is. In the long run as these people are probably staying I think this will pay off.
4. Example: One asylum seeker told me he wants to be a bus driver. Firstly he'd need a basic driving license. If he had funding for lessons that's something practical he could be working towards whilst 'in limbo' instead of just wasting his time and our money.



I handle grants for a development trust that has money from the wind farms. Young people in their area can get a grant of up to £250 towards driving lessons as it's an essential skill when living in a rural area. Something similar to this would be good for asylum seekers.

There must be other examples where apprenticeships could be available.

5. Ensure access to volunteering opportunities where appropriate, given often limited English.
6. Ensure asylum seekers have travel passes and gym/swimming passes. Very important for their mental as well as physical health

All of this would cost money but in the long run the asylum seeker will become a refugee who can earn and pay taxes and contribute so it would be worth it. The longer they are kept in limbo the worse the outcome for their mental health etc.



Accommodation:

- The Cladhan hotel is clean and safe. The food has improved but could be more varied (chicken every day).
- It is very close to the park and the town centre. This is much better than being in the middle of nowhere.
- Transport has improved now the guys have a pass and visit Glasgow and Edinburgh.
- Mental health - the stressful situation and having no agency and now 'end date' put a great strain on the asylum seeker's mental health.
- It is very important to have access to sports, gyms, swimming pools and bicycles for physical health and where appropriate art materials and musical instruments and libraries for mental health.
- An allotment would be great. Or even raised beds at the hotel. Gardening is good for mental and physical health.

ESOL - I have enjoyed helping with this. [REDACTED] (volunteer teacher) is an excellent teacher. This is needed on an ongoing basis. Asylum seekers need opportunities e.g. volunteering to practice English conversation.



P.S. I am anxious about proposals to use cruise ships / barge for asylum seekers - would people be able to leave each day to access local services?



Volunteer 3: [REDACTED]

Problems I see:

1. Home Office could not do a worse job of managing the asylum claims. No chance to find out what is happening, no news. No chance for anyone to act as an advocate. Not sure what the solution is here but this is the number 1 issue.
2. English lessons. The guys need to get the very clear message - No English, no job. Funded college tuition for all with professional English language teachers running Mon-Fri.
3. A managed approach. There's no consistency in what the guys experience. E.g. [one Mears Welfare Officer] was very good but her predecessor was not. Why not? Same contract, same company. Everyone should get that experience and not just hope you get a kind hearted, good person from Mears. Make Mears transparent - e.g. publish the contract so everyone knows what is expected.
4. End the people warehousing. Right now they are effectively warehoused in the hotel waiting for a decision. Nothing to do, just burning days and weeks and months.



On arrival they need:

- Material needs
- Health needs
- Skills - what do they bring?
- Aspirations - what do they see themselves doing?

Help them move towards their aspirations - e.g. college classes, driving lessons, whatever. Small cost but repaid many times over by future tax revenues when they are productive members of society.

5. Get them volunteering.

There is demand from the guys, I know they have skills, there are voluntary positions in the community. It cannot be beyond the wit of man to match up demand and skills to opportunities.

End the option of being moved at a moment's notice. The guys need to know they will be here for a period so they can start volunteering, attending college etc.

6. Have something joining the various groups together. I know of FOSS, the Maryhill group and Refuweegies - are there others? We could all share best practices, ideas and form a more effective lobby group if we can speak with one voice.



Volunteer 4

Please note that this volunteer works with a resettled refugee rather than people in the asylum system. However, their perspective reflects challenges men in the asylum system face in Falkirk, as well.

Main issues of New Scots with healthcare issues:

Interpreters often not booked by the NHS even though the need for one is in their notes

Health professionals going ahead with an appointment when an interpreter is not present, leaving the New Scot unclear about information, next steps etc

Reluctance among some health professionals to use the translation phone service they have access to when there is not an interpreter present

Cultural differences regarding going to appointments - often the New Scots do not realise what impact this has on service provision – there would be scope here to work with organisations like ours so we could support New Scots to get to appointments

Lack of access to mental health appointments – many of the New Scots have experienced traumatic events and access to mental health appointments is patchy. There can be quite a bit of a delay in some New Scots expressing trauma, so provision may not be needed initially.



Cultural differences around talking about mental health – still not a norm in many countries, or they see mental health as something very severe like psychosis or schizophrenia , not conditions like anxiety/ depression

Mental health professionals using a translation app to conduct a session – not appropriate?

Lack of trained interpreters who can specifically translate sessions for people who are survivors of torture

Cultural differences around health provision generally. Often the New Scots will be alarmed that medication isn't given for their children and they are instead advised to rest and take Calpol. It seems quite common for them to always be given medication in their country of origin

No provision to communicate via text messages to people not speaking English well. We had an instance during the pandemic of someone being advised they had tested positive but she was incapable of reading the message even though the person doing the test was aware of that this would be an issue.



Staff member 1

The biggest intervention I believe the Scottish government could make quickly is to give all asylum seekers and refugees free public transport. This would have a dramatic impact on all refugees and asylum seekers, as they would be able to access support, and social and religious networks in their local area and nationally.

In addition the Scottish Government should intervene to make sure all asylum seekers have access to up to full time English lessons across Scotland.

I would like to see the Scottish government offering more support to the third sector organisations who engage with refugees and asylum seekers on a regular basis. This would allow us to develop more consistency in the support we offer to refugees and asylum seekers across Scotland.

Examples of this support would include creating networks to support asylum seekers and refugees with accessing education, particularly English education. Also I would suggest creating a directory of leisure activities which refugees can access for free across Scotland, as well as a directory of organisations willing to offer volunteering opportunities.

The Scottish government and / or councils could also support third sector organisations by being more clear about the housing options for refugees, and making sure there was a named person to go for advice on housing pathways in each area, as well as a clear referral pathway for housing support for refugees.



In addition to these logistical matters I believe the Scottish government and Scottish MPs at Westminster have an ethical obligation to challenge the UK government on the language they use about refugees and asylum seekers. Their need to other and criminalise people seeking safety is not acceptable and I expect the Scottish government to echo this sentiment more than they do.

Friends of Scottish Settlers (known as FOSS) is a Scottish Charitable Incorporated Organisation (SCIO), SC050254, regulated by the Scottish Charity Regulator (OSCR)

