Social Security Committee
Child Poverty (Scotland) Bill – Call for Written Evidence
Evidence submitted by Scottish Refugee Council
March 2017

About Scottish Refugee Council

1. In 2015 Scottish Refugee Council celebrated 30 years of working to ensure that all refugees in Scotland are treated fairly, with dignity and that their human rights are respected. Our vision is for a Scotland in which all people seeking refugee protection are welcome.

2. As an independent charity, we provide essential information and advice to people seeking asylum and refugees in Scotland, campaign for change, raise awareness about issues that affect refugees, and work closely with local communities and organisations.

3. Our Scottish Refugee Integration Service assists new refugees and their family members reunited in Scotland to access their rights and entitlements. We provide advice, advocacy and assistance in a range of areas, including housing, social security, health, education, employability, and encourage people to participate in their communities and wider society.

4. Along with the Scottish Government and Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA), we lead on the implementation of Scotland’s Refugee Integration Strategy, *New Scots: Integrating Refugees in Scotland Communities*.

About the consultation

5. The Scottish Parliament’s Social Security Committee is seeking views on the general principles of the Child Poverty (Scotland) Bill.

Introduction

6. We welcome the opportunity to contribute to this call for evidence. As we do not claim to be experts in some of the issues addressed in this call for evidence, we have not answered every question raised by the Committee. Rather, we have outlined our understanding of child poverty amongst asylum seekers and refugees in Scotland and where we consider the provisions of the proposed bill could be improved to take better account of this significant and growing population in Scottish communities. Our recommendations are highlighted in bold type.

7. Decisions on refugee protection are reserved to the UK parliament but most of the policies and services relevant to the reception and integration of asylum seekers and refugees are devolved wholly or in part to the legislative competence of the Scottish parliament. Asylum dispersal should be an area of joint working between the Scottish and UK governments and social security is a hybrid policy competence straddling reserved and devolved areas. Relevant Scottish public services (notably council social work or children's services and NHS health services) are not only supported by excellent
strategies, such as GIRFEC, but they are fully accessible to all children, regardless of immigration status. This non-discrimination principle is a prerequisite to the recommended objective against refugee and asylum child poverty in Scotland.

8. We therefore urge the Committee to make a recommendation to the Scottish Government that these principles are supported with a clear, targeted objective to better prevent and mitigate refugee and asylum child poverty in Scotland.

9. Underpinning this recommended objective is Scotland’s enduring, cross party, and cross-sectoral commitment to refugee integration, as demonstrated by the New Scots strategy. Scottish Refugee Council’s direct advice and advocacy services to asylum seekers and refugees are an integral part of this strategy and are key to reducing poverty. We recommend that this Bill and associated strategies reflect the aims of the New Scots strategy.

Overview of refugee child poverty in Scotland

10 In 2015 (the latest figures released by Home Office) 39,968 people applied for asylum in the UK, 7,235 of these applications were from “dependants”. While the Home Office does not publicly release figures about how many people are dispersed to Scotland, it is estimated that around 10% of people are dispersed to Scotland, amounting to around 4,000 people, approximately 700 of whom are likely to be children. These figures are subject to change according to the Home Office’s dispersal priorities and, from meetings with the Home Office, we know that the number of families with children being dispersed to Scotland has increased rapidly in the past year.

11 Although the Home Office releases data on the outcomes of asylum decisions made at a UK level, it does not release data at a Scottish level, nor does it break these down. According to Home Office Figures, approximately 50-60% of initial applications for asylum are granted or overturned at appeal stage. Scottish Refugee Council’s Holistic Integration Service Final Report suggests that approximately 17% of refugee families in Scotland contain children.

12 Severe poverty and the acute risk and reality of destitution are built-in to the UK asylum process. We articulated this ‘end-to-end poverty’ in our written and oral evidence to the Equalities and Human Rights Committee’s ongoing inquiry into destitution, asylum and insecure immigration status. Key points that we would like to highlight are:

   a. The ban on asylum seeker employment and extremely low level of asylum financial support means that almost all asylum seekers and their children are required to live at below-poverty levels, often for years at a time, while they await their decision;

   b. Asylum seekers have no control over where they live and are dispersed to and there is evidence that asylum accommodation is often overcrowded, of poor quality and in areas of high deprivation. The Home Office’s outsourced delivery of this public service of housing was subject to severe and widespread criticisms by the Home Affairs Committee, in the report of its inquiry into asylum accommodation (2017) (see also our written and oral evidence), including

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numerous criticisms of the service’s delivery in Scotland. The committee’s proposed measurement mechanisms recognise the importance of area and accommodation quality on child poverty levels and it is important to consider the extent to which this the asylum accommodation system contributes to this;

c. the UK government’s Immigration Act 2016 will significantly increase the risk of destitution for families that have been refused asylum by the Home Office. Without accessible advocacy for families at the earliest stage they will lose entitlement to Home Office support and present to Scottish local authorities, health services and third sector bodies for help. In the year 2015/16, Scottish Refugee Council’s Family Keywork Service supported 75 families with children under the age of 8. Key issues faced by asylum seekers through this services are outlined in our evaluation report.

d. Our Holistic Integration Service Final Report a continued risk of destitution and poverty for refugees gaining status including homelessness, benefit delays, (especially Child Benefit/Child Tax Credit), and difficulties in accessing education and employment. Refugee Children, therefore, face enhanced barriers to exiting cycles of poverty started in the asylum process.

13. There is also a considerable, and growing, population of separated asylum-seeking young people in Scotland. The Scottish Guardianship Service (a partnership between Scottish Refugee Council and Aberlour Child Care Trust) provides an independent guardian to all unaccompanied asylum seeking children in Scotland. The service has worked with over 350 children since 2010 and has experienced a 200% increase in referrals in the past two years. These numbers will increase further when the UK government’s national (unaccompanied child) transfer scheme is implemented in Scotland later this year. Guardians support young people over 18 to understand and navigate certain processes, including systems for financial and housing support.

14. Asylum seekers and refugees often lack the family and social support often taken for granted by Scottish nationals, resulting in increased risk of social isolation and absolute reliance on charitable sources of help.

Interim targets

15. We consider that it is important to impose interim targets and regular reporting mechanisms to examine whether these targets are being met. Asylum numbers and policy change regularly (as do other policy areas such as welfare reform) so there is a need to continually assess what action is being taken to alleviate child poverty. However, in order to do this, it will be necessary for the Scottish Government to ensure that accurate and up-to-date data is received from the Home Office for adequate planning. **We recommend that the Committee liaise with Home Office to obtain accurate information regarding the number of asylum seeking children (separated and as part of families) dispersed to Scotland.**

Reporting requirements

16. We consider that there is a need for more emphasis on delineated income-based measurements when reporting against targets, including the delineation of the key reasons for individuals having a lack of income. We have noted above how child poverty amongst asylum seekers and refugees is built into both the asylum and social security
systems and it is important to be able to pinpoint accurately the key causes to effectively implement practical solutions.

Local councils and health boards

17. We agree that local councils and health boards should make local progress reports against Child Poverty targets. We would like to see local councils more accountable for practices towards alleviating child poverty amongst asylum seekers refugees. Furthermore, although current dispersal arrangements mean that the majority of the burden of this falls with Glasgow City Council, the Home Office continues to seek ways to widen dispersal to other local authority areas. Information on how Glasgow deals with child poverty will be vital to ensuring other dispersal authorities learn from the Glasgow experience. We recommend that these bodies should report against the measures that they are taking to address child poverty with explicit reference to asylum seeking and refugee children.

Indicators

18. We agree with the general thrust of the Child Poverty Measurement Framework but would like to see more analysis of the causes of these problems and the inclusion of immigration-related income reduction so that the impact of the policies outlined above on the wellbeing of children should be fully analysed and understood. This will allow for a recognition of the income barriers faced by asylum seekers and refugees, in particular at key transition points of individuals’ time in asylum, their transition from asylum to gaining status in the UK and the point of family reunion and the resultant endemic low income, delays accessing financial support and risk of destitution. With this information, the Scottish Government will be able to better shape its Child Poverty Strategy to set practical measures to alleviate child poverty during these stages, and shape the role, remit and priorities of any new national poverty and inequality commission.

19. We, therefore, recommend that the indicators are examined again to ensure child poverty targets are meaningful and targeted towards of refugee and asylum seeking children.

Conclusions

20. Experiences of asylum seekers and refugees are complex requiring a clear focus to disentangle the many drivers of child poverty amongst this group. In many cases, refugees face multiple barriers to raising themselves out of poverty including their immigration status, language barriers, lack of understanding of complex systems and the lack of available social support. We, therefore, consider that this group (perhaps alongside other key groups experiencing periods of destitution as well as multiple barriers) deserves particular focus when implementing this bill.

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