



# HOW WILL WE SURVIVE?

Steps to preventing destitution in the asylum system

A research report on behalf of the Destitute Asylum Seeker Service, led by:

**RST**  
Refugee  
Survival  
Trust

**BritishRedCross**



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# 1. Foreword

Destitution is a major problem faced by people in the UK asylum system. Coming from different cultures and backgrounds, some not speaking English, newly arrived people seeking asylum face many difficulties as they settle in the UK. But making the limited support stretch to meet their basic everyday needs – without being pulled into destitution – is often the biggest challenge. In our role as peer researchers on this project, and with lived experience of the asylum system, we know first-hand what life is like existing in the asylum system, and we have heard familiar stories from those we interviewed about their experiences of destitution.

Destitution prevents people from living a healthy life, affecting their mental wellbeing and reducing their quality of life. Many people seeking asylum have already been exposed to multiple traumatic events before arriving in this country and, in many cases, the trauma is prolonged or repeated while being in the asylum system.

It is clear that parts of the system are not working. Home Office-provided asylum support is insufficient to ensure people can meet their basic needs; organisations working to help people lack the necessary funding; mental health services are strained<sup>i</sup> and often unavailable; and the information and assistance given to those in the asylum system is often inadequate or not straightforward to access. Taken individually and collectively, these factors can eventually lead to destitution. And yet with no right to work, no right to a bank account, and no real financial independence, people in the asylum system have little option but to become dependent on the limited support available. This dependency, which is built into the asylum system, is a significant source of unhappiness, with people desperate but unable to contribute to the society that is protecting them.

It is very important to listen to the voices of people seeking asylum, so that we can all try to find appropriate ways to solve the problems faced, many of which are as much an issue now as they have ever been. The pandemic has also highlighted the need for preparedness and resilience in different communities. As we emerge from the pandemic and positive initiatives, such as the moratorium on evictions from Home Office accommodation,

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<sup>i</sup> For example, a healthcare team (Asylum Health Bridging Team) of four nurses supports 400 people seeking asylum, illustrating the pressure on services that support and care for people in the system.

start to end, people are at even greater risk of being made destitute. The tragic situation we have witnessed unfolding in Afghanistan is also a reminder that, as long as there are worldwide conflicts and disasters, people will continue to be forced to find sanctuary, including in the UK. Unless the underlying causes of destitution as revealed in this research are addressed, destitution will continue to be a reality for too many.

The research you are about to read shows that flaws in the asylum system and inadequate services have left many people in limbo, dealing alone with past traumas and poor mental health, and feeling fearful and unsafe. It focuses on Glasgow, which has a proud history of welcoming people seeking safety. Yet despite the stated intentions of authorities to support people seeking asylum and refugees, and to reduce destitution, the picture remains bleak. The lived experiences of the many people who participated in this research, including our own, is a call for change. By taking part in this study as peer researchers we were encouraged to reflect on our own journeys, and we were able to think constructively about issues surrounding destitution. We are hopeful that our input as experts by experience will help this research gain the attention of those who shape the asylum system – governments, policymakers, stakeholders and others who can effect change.

### **The time for action is now!**

Adnan, Ronnie, Tandy and Zainab  
Peer researchers

## 2. Introduction

### Defining destitution

This report draws largely on Joseph Rowntree Foundation definitions of destitution and financial hardship, which are based on extensive research carried out with the UK general public.<sup>1</sup> Throughout this report, the terms destitution and hardship are used in line with the definitions below:

**Destitution** means **not having access to the essentials** we all need to eat, stay warm and dry, and keep clean **without the support of others**. This includes access to food, shelter, suitable clothing and basic washing facilities.

**Financial hardship** means being in a state of financial difficulty, where a person **struggles to afford their basic essentials**, such as food, shelter, etc. and also often struggles to afford to pay bills and/or debts.

Based on these definitions, destitution and financial hardship are real and constant risks for people who go through the UK asylum system, the majority of whom experience both at least somewhere along their journey.<sup>2</sup>

Bringing together a range of voluntary and community sector organisations that work to support people in the asylum system in Glasgow, Scotland's only dispersal city, Destitute Asylum Seeker Service (DASS) was established in 2014 to support people experiencing destitution. DASS is a partnership whose members include the Refugee Survival Trust (RST) as the lead partner, the British Red Cross, the Scottish Refugee Council (SRC), University of Strathclyde Law Clinic, Safe in Scotland (formerly Glasgow Night Shelter for Destitute Asylum Seekers) and Castlemilk Community Church. The DASS partnership provides needs-based support across a range of areas, including accommodation (SIS, Castlemilk, RST), casework (SRC), and legal advice (University of Strathclyde Law Clinic).

Previous DASS research '[From Pillar to Post](#)' (2019) illuminated the extent to which people who had been refused asylum and were experiencing destitution could exercise their rights and access support, and how service providers could meet their needs. It also highlighted the shortcomings of the UK asylum system which can often leave people destitute, and the strain this puts on local statutory and voluntary and community sector organisations that try to support those who are destitute. Working within these parameters of the asylum system, it is clear that more work is needed to understand what other factors play a role in people becoming destitute; what can help to make people more resilient when facing destitution; and what work needs to be done to stop people from becoming destitute in the first place.

With this objective in mind, Refugee Survival Trust and the British Red Cross have partnered again to develop further DASS research that sets out to answer the questions of how we can prevent destitution within the framework of the UK asylum system and how we can mobilise, coordinate and fund the prevention of destitution more effectively.

As such, the main aim of this research is to explore what steps need to be taken so that destitution can be prevented among people seeking asylum in the UK, with a particular focus on Scotland. To do this, we carried out 26 interviews with people with lived experience of the asylum system, and eight interviews with the practitioners who support them. We recruited four peer researchers to conduct interviews with those seeking asylum in the UK, and trained the peer researchers in interviewing techniques and research ethics. The peer researchers were also actively involved in research design, analysis and recommendation-setting. We also conducted a survey with people with lived experience of the UK asylum system (135 responses) to generate a broader picture of people's experiences of destitution and financial hardship. Together, these have led us to the findings outlined in this report, summarised below.

## 2.1 Summary of key findings

### **1. The first six months of a person's time in the UK asylum system is one of the most difficult periods.**

The difficulties arise from factors such as delays in receiving asylum support; lack of knowledge about the asylum system and their rights within it; language and cultural barriers; not knowing how to access support, advocacy and advice; being repeatedly moved within asylum accommodation; and, consequently, being unable to establish and maintain social connections and support networks.

To be eligible for asylum support, people must be classed as destitute. They arrive in the dispersal area with no savings, very few belongings, and no start-up fund to begin life in the UK. This makes building a life and also everyday living difficult. It takes time, planning and sacrifice for people to start to have enough to meet their essential needs, even with significant support from the voluntary and community sector.

As a result, people are more vulnerable to destitution in the first six months. These first few months also set the tone for a person's claim. Negative interactions with Home Office officials and other parts of the system lead to people disengaging from the process and feeling less confident about asking for help when they are in crisis.

### **2. Experiences of destitution are widespread among people seeking asylum, resulting from complex Home Office processes, long waiting times, poor decision making and inadequate asylum support.**

The trigger points for destitution can relate both to the claim for asylum and also the claim for asylum support. They include poor Home Office decision making, long waiting times for decisions and incompatible timescales for the start and end of support.

The risk of experiencing destitution is particularly high in the first few months after arrival in the UK, typically caused by delays or problems in receiving asylum support. This risk increases when a person receives a decision about their claim, even if it's a positive decision.

People experience destitution and financial hardship across all stages of their asylum claim. This has serious effects, including on mental and physical health, the ability to make and maintain social connections, and for some, the ability to engage with their asylum claim. Every interviewee spoke about the impact that being destitute or experiencing regular financial hardship had on their mental health and wellbeing. The consequences of not receiving adequate support are significant, with eight people we interviewed

and nearly a quarter of survey respondents saying they have had suicidal thoughts or wanted to die as a result of feeling they had no other way out of the difficulties they faced.

Even when receiving asylum support provided by the Home Office, many experience periods of destitution, with consequent dependency on the voluntary and community sector for essential needs.

### **3. Being moved multiple times between different types of Home Office accommodation, with little or no explanation or notice, erodes people's networks and makes them more vulnerable to destitution.**

Multiple moves cause significant stress and disruption. It prevents people from settling in and learning about local services or from establishing social connections and support networks within their local community. These are fundamental for developing resilience and helping people manage when they face financial hardship, preventing this turning into destitution.

### **4. Good quality advice and advocacy, including interpreters and legal support, are paramount if people are to navigate the asylum system, understand rights, get support, and be in a stronger position when facing destitution.**

Where a good relationship is established with a solicitor this can be vital, serving as a source of information about people's rights and access to support, thereby developing people's resilience. Similarly, an interpreter who speaks the correct dialect and is unbiased is crucial for communicating a person's experience accurately in asylum interviews, and for helping people understand their rights and learn about their new area.

Some people who participated in our research had been deeply disappointed with the legal support they received, saying they had experienced poor communication from their solicitors; loss of documentation; delays; failure to submit applications/evidence; and reactive rather than proactive engagement. Issues with interpreters included incorrect translation; political partisanship on the part of their interpreter; and feelings of intimidation. Legal advice and interpreting services are gateways to fair and efficient claims. Improving people's experiences of both will help with the claims process, help people settle, and help them access essential support when experiencing financial hardship and destitution.

The majority of people with lived experience we spoke to felt that this support would best be provided by those who already have knowledge and an understanding of the UK asylum system, for example peer mentors or peer support circles. In this way, a peer could guide them through the asylum process, such as supporting them to access legal representation and guiding them towards organisations that could help them to access the support they need.

**5. One connection or person can be enough to turn an individual's situation around and prevent them from becoming destitute. The voluntary and community sector is where people often turn for their essential needs, though the sector can sometimes seem over-stretched, and there is some lack of clarity about support and eligibility.**

The people we spoke to mentioned the transformative impact of friends, mentors, solicitors, caseworkers and others who listened to and believed them. Those who lack this sort of contact, experience greater isolation and otherness, and a notable lack of hope.

Support from the voluntary and community sector is a lifeline to many for essential needs such as food and clothing. However, some of the people we spoke to with lived experience queried the eligibility for support, perceptions of gatekeeping, a lack of responsiveness, and insufficient provision for ongoing needs.

**6. Being able to develop social connections and support networks, and to contribute to society, are essential to building resilience, meaning that people are better able to navigate the asylum process and to deal with the threat of destitution.**

Over time, and with increased knowledge and exposure to different organisations and services, the people we spoke to were able to develop strong connections, learn about the system and their rights, and engage effectively with their asylum claim.

Contributing to the local community is an important step in the asylum journey: access to education and volunteering are important means of enabling this, along with the right to work. These were seen as allowing them to become more independent members of society and the biggest factor in preventing destitution in the longer term.

## 2.2 Summary of recommendations

Many of the issues relating to destitution in the asylum system are well known, and there are long-standing recommendations for addressing destitution, though most remain unaddressed. What has emerged from our research is the focus people place on their experiences at the **start of the asylum journey**. This has given a unique perspective into the early stages of the asylum process, the gaps that can leave people vulnerable to destitution, and importantly the solutions for filling those gaps. Reflecting the input from our peer researchers and participants who have lived experience of the asylum system, we make a number of overarching recommendations:

### 1. Ensure that asylum support prevents destitution and improves agency and choice in people's daily lives

- ▶ The Home Office should provide an initial cash grant to people entering the asylum support system so they have start-up support to purchase clothing, phones and other essential items.

### 2. Make wider Home Office processes and procedures more efficient and trauma informed

- ▶ The Home Office should improve and speed up asylum decision-making, recognising the impact that poor quality decision-making and delays can have on the health, wellbeing and financial resilience of those seeking asylum.

### 3. Enable people seeking asylum to access good quality information, advice and advocacy early on

- ▶ The Scottish Government should invest in and pilot a peer support system for people seeking asylum in Scotland. This would ensure new arrivals, and those who are more vulnerable at any stage of the asylum process, are able to access support, guidance and friendship from people who have shared experiences of navigating the asylum system.

#### **4. Provide people with the skills and opportunities to support themselves financially**

- ▶ The Home Office should automatically grant people the right to work if they have been waiting for longer than six months for a decision on either their initial asylum claim or following the submission of further evidence. This right should not be constrained to jobs included on the shortage occupation list.

#### **5. Improve emergency provisions and support for people with no recourse to public funds (NRPF)**

- ▶ The Scottish Government should make the provision of cash grants for vulnerable people at risk of destitution, including those with NRPF – as included in the anti-destitution strategy – permanent, and link this with a wider package of crisis support in the forthcoming review of the Scottish Welfare Fund.

#### **6. Increase access to health services, in particular mental health provision for people seeking asylum, recognising the high levels of mental health need and complex trauma among this group**

- ▶ The Scottish Government should prioritise funding specifically aimed at improving access to mental health services for those with NRPF and, in particular, those who have experienced complex trauma and have to find their way through the complex asylum process.

#### **7. Improve access to support and services provided by the voluntary and community sector**

- ▶ Work towards better coordination across the voluntary and community sector in Scotland so that there is improved information and clarity on the support available for people at different stages of the asylum process.

For a full list and discussion of the recommendations we outline, see section 6.1. Key lessons in preventing destitution and recommendations.



## 3. Aims, objectives and methodology

### 3.1 Research aims and objectives

- ▶ Explore and reveal the most effective ways to prevent destitution among people seeking asylum in Scotland specifically, and the UK more broadly.
- ▶ Develop a set of recommendations on how the asylum system and the services that support people in the system can work to better prevent destitution.
- ▶ Consider both the challenges and opportunities that Scotland's devolved status provides for better preventing destitution among people seeking asylum.
- ▶ Ensure that the lived experiences of people in the asylum system are at the heart of the sector's work on preventing destitution and that their voices are heard.

### 3.2 Methodology

#### 3.2.1 Phase one: preliminary investigations and recruitment of peer researchers

The first phase of our research began with a series of activities, including:

- a. Consultation with the DASS partners** helped to lay out the parameters of the research and refine research questions. DASS partners service data, including quarterly reports (July 2018 to December 2020) and legal case studies from University of Strathclyde Law Clinic, allowed for preliminary analysis of common experiences among those seeking asylum in Glasgow.
- b. Engaging with academic, public sector and third sector discourse** on asylum and destitution, including reviewing the literature and attending seminars, workshops and information sessions.<sup>ii</sup>
- c. Recruitment and training of four peer researchers to** conduct interviews with people with lived experience. Training was provided in interviewing techniques, research ethics and having difficult/traumatic conversations.

<sup>ii</sup> In order to gain a deeper understanding of the third sector and the work it undertakes, alongside people in the asylum system. For a list of these sessions attended see appendix.

All with lived experience of the UK asylum system, these peer researchers brought their own perspectives to the research. The research also benefited from the peer researchers' foreign language skills in interviews and with translating survey responses.

Beyond their main role as interviewers, the peer researchers also helped to design survey questions, and contributed to interview analysis, policy recommendations and the content of the final report.

Because of this research's core aim of situating people with lived experience at front and centre, it follows a participatory action research approach which is driven by the need to influence social change and challenge inequality.<sup>3</sup> It seeks to bring together researchers and those who are the most reliable sources of evidence, in an attempt to better understand the problematic situation under investigation and, ultimately, change it for the better. A key aim of this approach is to bring advantages for those involved in the research, including enabling 'participants to have a greater awareness of their situation in order to take action'.<sup>4</sup>

This research sought to achieve this not only for the peer researchers, but also for those who participated as interviewees, by inviting them to participate in an analysis and recommendations workshop at the end of the project (see below).

## My journey as a peer researcher

### Ronald Tagwireyi, peer researcher



*The summer of 2020 was dominated by the global pandemic Covid-19. The world was at a standstill.*

*Travel of any kind was restricted to the essential. Journeys of any note were virtually non-existent. While the world was at a standstill, my journey as a peer researcher was about to begin.*

*Refugee Survival Trust was distributing grants to people seeking asylum who were destitute and/or suffering financial hardship. The description was fitting so I made an application. Conversations with them revealed that a research project would be starting up later in the year or early in 2021. I expressed an interest in being a part of it. RST had been good to me by giving me a generous grant and I was totally ready to assist them in any way I could. A few months went by and then the call came... "I understand you are interested in being a peer*

*researcher,” the lady said. I answered in the affirmative. A couple of Zoom meetings, satisfactory referees and my signature to a peer research agreement later...I was confirmed in the role.*

*But not just me, another three. As the four amigos we set out to interview persons with lived experience in order to investigate how we could help to prevent destitution for people in the UK asylum system, with a focus on people in Scotland.*

*Our journeys were in motion. Refugee Survival Trust and the British Red Cross set about fine tuning us for this incredible journey. Vroom, Vroom!! Not quite. More like Zoom, Zoom!! Meeting after meeting was arranged, during which my input was always valued... practice interview sessions were facilitated... equipment was availed (laptops and data) and then came lift off... the interviews.*

*As peer researcher, I led the interviews but was fully supported. In a virtual arena the stories were REAL, from REAL people, evoking REAL emotion. REAL emotion not only from interviewees, but from me as well. The debrief sessions were welcome. I interviewed persons from across the globe and was struck by the similarity of our experiences, which include, among others, so many of the same day-to-day struggles of life and the overwhelming desire to work and contribute to society, all the while waiting for the Home Office to process our claim. Our journeys continue...*

### 3.2.2 Phase two: empirical qualitative research

The second phase of the research (February to June 2021) focused on gathering empirical data from those with lived experience of the asylum system and those who support them.

To do this, a mixed methodology approach was adopted:

#### **Interviews<sup>iii</sup>**

**20 key informant interviews** conducted at the start of the research to help guide the research. This involved interviews with people who work to support people in the asylum system in a variety of capacities, predominantly those within organisations of the DASS partners.

<sup>iii</sup> A breakdown of our interviewee sample is in the appendix.

**26 in-depth semi-structured interviews** carried out by peer researchers with people with lived experience of the asylum system in the UK. Interviews lasted between one and two hours. 24 interviews were conducted on Zoom (due to Covid-19 restrictions) and two by telephone due to lack of internet access. Incentives to participate were offered to all interviewees.

**Eight interviews with practitioners** conducted with individuals who support people within the asylum system in a variety of capacities, including those in the University of Glasgow, NHS Scotland and voluntary and community sector organisations.

Interviewees were identified through DASS partners, other prominent voluntary and community sector organisations in Glasgow, and through the peer researchers.<sup>iv</sup>

### **Survey<sup>v</sup>**

A 15-minute survey with around 50 questions was completed by 135 respondents.<sup>vi</sup> The survey was shared with all interviewees, as well as through DASS partner networks in Glasgow and prominent voluntary and community sector organisations in Glasgow which distributed the survey among their clients, service users and guests. Some UK-wide organisations also shared the survey more widely, to try to reach as many people in the asylum system as possible.<sup>vii</sup>

The nature of the networks through which the survey was shared, and the self-selecting method of recruitment, means that the survey findings are not representative of the whole community of people seeking asylum in Scotland or the UK. However, the survey results can be seen as indicative of experiences of financial hardship and destitution.

The survey was conducted online, and was available in English, Amharic, Arabic, Kurdish Sorani and Persian. Respondents who chose to share their contact details were automatically entered into a prize draw to win a high street voucher.

### **Interviewee co-production workshop**

All interviewees were invited to a workshop where initial findings and recommendations were presented and then discussed in two focus groups (breakout rooms) led by peer researchers. The subjects discussed were based on initial findings from interviews and the survey. This was an important session because it kept interviewees informed of our findings, and ensured that all those involved in the research were part of its analysis.

<sup>iv</sup> A list of the organisations that supported the recruitment of interviewees is in the appendix.

<sup>v</sup> A breakdown of our survey sample is in the appendix.

<sup>vi</sup> This survey was not designed to gather a representative sample of people in the asylum system in the UK. Its main aim was to draw out key themes and insight to complement the qualitative data gathered from interviews.

<sup>vii</sup> A list of these organisations is in the appendix.

## 4. Background

### 4.1 The asylum system in the UK and Scotland

The Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 introduced a number of changes to the process of claiming asylum, including the introduction of a dispersal system that would send new asylum claimants who required housing and social support<sup>viii</sup> to ‘dispersal’ areas across the UK, mainly away from London and the south east of England. The rationale for this was to alleviate pressure on local authorities in the areas where most people make their asylum claims. In these new dispersal areas housing tended to be allocated in traditionally hard-to-let accommodation and in more economically deprived areas.<sup>5</sup>

The provision of support through this new scheme was separated from mainstream welfare support and became The National Asylum Support Service (NASS).<sup>ix</sup> The NASS<sup>x</sup> directorate was disbanded in 2006 and this service is now referred to as ‘asylum support’, however it functions in much the same way.<sup>6</sup> Asylum support provides a weekly allowance of £39.63<sup>xi</sup>, or £5.66 per day, to cover essential living expenses, including clothes, food, toiletries and travel. This weekly amount is less than half of that provided to people on Universal Credit and when the amount for Universal Credit was increased by £20 per week during the Covid-19 pandemic there was no equivalent increase for those in receipt of asylum support.

Accommodation provided through asylum support is offered on a no-choice basis in one of the dispersal areas, and is sourced and maintained by private companies.<sup>xii</sup> There have been more recent moves toward using larger scale institutional accommodation rather than community housing: a move that has had detrimental effects on people’s ability to establish and maintain social connections, as well as on their mental health and general wellbeing, factors that this research shows are pivotal in preventing destitution.

<sup>viii</sup> Their eligibility is based on whether they can prove to have no assets or other means of support from family or friends. See ‘Spotlight on Home Office Support’ later on in the section for more information on this destitution test.

<sup>ix</sup> As a result of this, people in the asylum system are left having no recourse to public funds (NRPF), discussed below.

<sup>x</sup> The term NASS is still used by many people with lived experience of the asylum system and by some practitioners.

<sup>xi</sup> This was increased in June 2020 from £37.75 to £39.60; and raised by a further 3p a week in October 2020 after months of assessment by the Home Office.

<sup>xii</sup> Since 2006 a new housing contract model has been introduced which has moved progressively away from partnerships with public sector providers. As of 2012, housing contracts were handed over entirely to private companies, including Serco, G4S and Mears. This leaves questions about accountability and responsibility for housing provision and the conditions of the accommodation. This tends to be provided in properties considered ‘hard to let’, in more economically deprived areas of the UK.

According to the most recent data from the Home Office (June 2021), approximately 58,000 people seeking asylum in the UK are in receipt of asylum support (accommodation and subsistence), while about 4,600 people receive subsistence support.<sup>7</sup> There are over 16,000 people in receipt of emergency/temporary support (Section 98 and Section 4) – compared to about 7,000 people pre-pandemic in December 2019.<sup>xiii</sup>

The distribution of people seeking asylum across the UK is uneven, with people most likely to be dispersed to Glasgow and North East England. The data shows that ‘just 20 local authorities, five per cent of the total, hosted around 50 per cent of all asylum seekers on Section 95 support. The local authority with the most asylum seekers was Glasgow City’.<sup>8</sup>

**Figure 1: The ten local authorities that take in the highest number of people seeking asylum**

Dispersal council	Number of people seeking asylum at March 2021
1. Glasgow City	3,904
2. Birmingham	1,408
3. Cardiff	1,322
4. Liverpool	1,205
5. Bradford	989
6. Stoke-on-Trent	860
7. Bolton	938
8. Sandwell	867
9. Newcastle upon Tyne	837
10. Coventry	831

Source: Home Office, March 2021

<sup>xiii</sup> According to Migration Observatory statistics, on 31 December 2020 there were around 65,000 people awaiting an initial decision on their asylum claim (including main applicants and dependants). According to UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) statistics, at the end of 2019, there were 61,968 pending asylum cases and 161 stateless persons in the UK.

### Spotlight on Home Office asylum support<sup>xiv</sup>

When a person makes an asylum claim, and in order to receive asylum support<sup>9</sup> from the Home Office, they must undergo a **destitution test**, which usually takes place at the time of the initial interview.

According to Section 95(3) of the Immigration and Asylum Act (1999) a person is destitute if they currently, or for the next 14 days:

- ▶ do not have adequate accommodation or any means of obtaining it (whether or not their other essential living needs are met) or
- ▶ have adequate accommodation or the means of obtaining it but cannot meet their other essential living needs<sup>10</sup>

If a person is found to be destitute, the types of support that can be provided by the Home Office include:

#### Ongoing support

**Section 95 support** provides a person and their dependants with either accommodation and subsistence or subsistence only.

As well as accommodation – provided by private housing contractors on a no-choice basis – a weekly allowance of £39.63 is provided as subsistence per person and is paid through the ASPEN card, which acts as a debit card and can allow people to withdraw cash.

This ongoing support is provided while a person is awaiting a decision on their asylum claim.

#### Emergency support

**Section 98 support** provides a person and their dependents with temporary (initial) accommodation, usually in a hostel, directly after the initial screening interview. Meals and toiletries are provided at this time.

This emergency support is provided pending a person's application for Section 95 support.

**Section 4 support<sup>xv</sup>** provides temporary accommodation and subsistence through the ASPEN card. However, unlike Section 95 support, people cannot withdraw cash.

This emergency support is provided when a person becomes Appeal Rights Exhausted (ARE) but is unable to return<sup>xvi</sup> to their home country or if they can show that they are taking all reasonable steps to return.

<sup>xiv</sup> All the following information was gathered from the Right to Remain Toolkit, available to help people navigate the asylum system.

<sup>xv</sup> During the pandemic, Section 4 asylum support became pivotal for people in the asylum system who were facing destitution, with this support being granted more widely by the Home Office.

<sup>xvi</sup> If a person is unable to return, it is at this stage that a person is likely to be able to submit a fresh claim of asylum.

## 4.2 Asylum and destitution in Scotland

Glasgow City is one of the key dispersal zones in the UK asylum system, and the only dispersal city in Scotland. However, in July 2020, Glasgow City Council indefinitely suspended its dispersal status following concerns over the accommodation available, including on the back of the Park Inn incident<sup>xvii</sup> – and wider challenges in meeting people’s needs.<sup>11</sup> Up until then, Glasgow had consistently hosted significant numbers of people in the asylum system who are dependent on support provided by the UK Government. Glasgow and its community has a long tradition of welcoming and supporting people seeking protection<sup>12</sup>, and it continues to offer support to people arriving in the city. However, its withdrawal from the dispersal scheme echoes concerns shared by other local authorities in the UK about the system of dispersal and the responsibility placed on councils.

Although asylum and migration are reserved matters for the UK Government, Scotland is able to offer additional help to people in the asylum system to mitigate some aspects. For instance, Scotland’s approach to migrant integration into the host society<sup>13</sup>, which touches on the devolved areas of health, education, children’s services and legal aid, considers new migrants as New Scots from ‘day one’.<sup>xviii</sup> This means that people seeking asylum in Scotland have greater access, from the day they arrive, to free education, including English language classes, healthcare, childcare, protection and equivalent access to legal aid as any other UK national resident in Scotland.<sup>14</sup>

There are, however, certain areas that remain restricted. This applies largely to supporting people who have NRPF, who have no entitlement to child support, disability living allowance and homelessness assistance. As such, although Scotland is often seen as having more progressive homelessness legislation<sup>15</sup> than the UK generally, it has traditionally been restricted in its ability to implement such support to people seeking asylum who fall under NRPF rules because of a complex system of accommodation provision.<sup>xix</sup>

It has been difficult to estimate the real numbers of people who face destitution in Scotland. However, DASS’ previous research, *From Pillar to Post* (2019), estimated that approximately 1,000 people living in Scotland at any one time who had been refused asylum were at risk of destitution. This research has found that destitution can be experienced by people throughout the asylum process and not just at the point of refusal. Therefore, the number is likely to be far higher. To provide a picture of the broader context of the problem of destitution across the UK, a 2020 study by the

<sup>xvii</sup> For information on the Park Inn incident see Section 5.3.2.

<sup>xviii</sup> This idea is built into the *New Scots: refugee integration strategy 2018 to 2022* developed by the Scottish Government. This is in contrast to England, where integration begins when a person seeking asylum is granted refugee status.

<sup>xix</sup> While housing is devolved, asylum housing is not, and is reserved under UK governance.

Joseph Rowntree Foundation found that ‘people who had migrated<sup>xx</sup> to the UK faced disproportionate risks of destitution and had less access to cash and in-kind forms of support than UK nationals living in destitution’.<sup>16</sup> This group was also found to have experienced the largest increase in destitution between 2017 and 2019. While the average for other groups increased to around 25 per cent, the rate of destitution among migrant groups increased to 42 per cent, meaning that ‘the share of migrants in destitution now exceeds their population share’.<sup>17</sup>

Data recorded by the British Red Cross shows that, across the UK, the organisation provided 6,206 forms of destitution support<sup>xxi</sup> to people in the asylum system between March 2019 and March 2020. Of these, 4,683 (75 per cent) were to support people who were awaiting a decision on their asylum claim, while 1,522 (25 per cent) were to support people who were refused or ARE. There were also 1,877 destitution actions that were taken to support people who had received some form of leave to remain (30 per cent of the total) and 523 actions supported people facing issues with their family reunion visa (eight per cent).<sup>18</sup>

In many ways, Glasgow’s voluntary and community sector organisations have been at the forefront of tackling destitution and supporting those most vulnerable. They have often taken the lead in building partnerships and coalitions that focus on pressure points in the asylum system, such as housing, detention and destitution.<sup>xxii</sup> Among the different approaches to supporting those who are destitute there are models that have proved successful, including DASS, which has provided destitution support for many years with no core government or statutory funding.<sup>xxiii</sup> In the year 2019 to 2020 Refugee Survival Trust gave out the highest number of grants in its history, including 1,213 destitution grants and 479 travel grants<sup>19</sup>, and this number continues to grow. According to figures from Glasgow Night Shelter (now Safe in Scotland), in the year 2019 to 2020 7,080 nights of accommodation were provided, with all of its 24 beds occupied every day of the year, and approximately 120 individuals staying there over this period. DASS provided 3,285 nights of accommodation through four properties in 2019 to 2020 to people in the asylum system who would otherwise have been street homeless. In the same period, the Scottish Refugee Council saw 346 new people who required destitution casework support, the demand for which continues to increase. The University of Strathclyde Law Clinic received

<sup>xx</sup> This group was made up of EEA nationals, people who applied for asylum, and ‘other’ who didn’t fit these other two categories. People in the asylum system made up just over a third of this category.

<sup>xxi</sup> This could include any type of action that supports someone facing destitution, from providing a food parcel to finding temporary emergency accommodation.

<sup>xxii</sup> Examples of this are the Roof Coalition, Glasgow Asylum Destitution Action Network (GLADAN) and DASS.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Indeed, most organisations that make up the No Accommodation (NACCOM) network across the UK have had no government or statutory funding. They rely on grant funding, donations and income generation from other activities.

25 referrals from DASS partners (2019 to 2020). 14 of those were taken on for ongoing advice and assistance, much of which revolved around supporting people to submit a fresh claim or explore alternative immigration options.

This model of partnership and cross-sector working has also involved working in collaboration with the Scottish Government and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA) with a strong emphasis on involvement of people with lived experience. It has been through collaborative work between different parts of the refugee and asylum sector, and people in the asylum system, that other positive actions have been progressed, in particular the anti-destitution strategy developed by the Scottish Government in collaboration with a working group of people with lived experience, Refugees Ending Destitution.<sup>xxiv</sup>

The strategy takes a preventative human rights approach that coordinates its work under three broad action areas that have been used as the basis of this research. These include:

1. **Essential needs:** focusing on actions that will help to increase the provision of dignified access to accommodation, food and financial assistance via local authorities and the third sector, as well as removing barriers to health services including mental health provision.
2. **Advice and advocacy:** focusing on actions that will increase access to specialist advice and advocacy, including legal advice, to help people to navigate immigration and asylum systems and make informed decisions about their future.
3. **Inclusion:** focusing on actions that will support inclusive approaches to the design and delivery of support by ensuring that people with lived experience will continue to inform and shape its implementation.<sup>20</sup>

Responding to the anti-destitution strategy's focus on inclusion, Fairway Scotland presents a problem-solving 'gateway to a fair way forward', which is built as a multi-sector collective led by people with direct and lived experience of having NRPF status.<sup>xxv</sup> Its model is based on providing an integrated service of support which offers 'a complete package to resolve their homelessness and destitution and get access to a safe place to stay, support and advice'.<sup>21</sup> However, despite support from the Scottish

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<sup>xxiv</sup> The Refugees Ending Destitution group was supported by the Scottish Refugee Council and Govan Community Project (and funded by the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust) to work in collaboration with COSLA and the Scottish Government to co-produce the strategy.

<sup>xxv</sup> According to a practitioner from the Scottish Refugee Council, Fairway Scotland was designed and will be delivered as an evolution of the Humanitarian Project which supported people who face evictions from Serco, for more about this see Just Right Scotland. (2020). A site of resistance: an evaluation of the Stop Lock Change Evictions coalition: <https://www.justrightscotland.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Stop-Lock-Changes-FINAL-VERSION.pdf>.

Government, there remain limitations in accessing sufficient funding for accommodation provision, largely a result of the restrictions on the statutory provision of homelessness support to people with NRPF.

The Scottish Government has pioneered a Scottish Crisis Fund for vulnerable people facing destitution, including those with NRPF.<sup>xxvi</sup> As a result of its successful trial over the winter of 2020, the Scottish Government has committed this fund for 12 months, aiming to distribute 600 grants in partnership with the British Red Cross. There are ongoing discussions within the voluntary and community and public sectors about how this fund can become more integrated with other initiatives that support people in the asylum system.<sup>22</sup> This action taken on public health grounds to protect people who would otherwise be destitute during the pandemic, provided significant learning opportunities for the Scottish Government and voluntary and community sector organisations about how to work around an issue that has prevented assistance for those with NRPF.

As stated in the Scottish Government's anti-destitution strategy, 'During the unprecedented public health crisis caused by COVID-19, we have demonstrated that it is possible – although extremely challenging – to deliver services that recognise the human rights of people with NRPF and make sure that help is available in times of crisis.'<sup>23</sup>

While the Scottish Government has demonstrated a commitment to supporting people in the asylum system and those facing destitution, there is still significant work needed to identify how such models of prevention can best be implemented, supported and funded. These models often promote long-term solutions to destitution. Therefore, the funding invested needs to reflect this, rather than focusing only on short-term support. While short-term provisions, such as emergency cash payments, alleviate destitution, they do not prevent or address the medium- to long-term issues that lead to destitution.

### 4.3 Destitution in the asylum system

The literature on destitution among those seeking asylum and refugees is rich and extensive. It considers the extent of destitution within the UK asylum system<sup>24</sup> and its causes and impacts<sup>25</sup>, such as delayed decision making<sup>26</sup>, people's ability to exercise their rights and access support<sup>27</sup>, and the everyday survival strategies of those who are destitute or experiencing financial hardship.<sup>28</sup> The British Red Cross has also reported on the public spending costs of destitution, and shown these could be reduced through improved Home Office processes, such as extending the move-on period.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>xxvi</sup> Another key piece of work developed by the Scottish Government is its guidance on NRPF for people working with those who fall into this category.

Research has also explored destitution among different cohorts within the asylum process, including women<sup>30</sup>; expectant and new mothers<sup>31</sup>; and individuals who cannot be returned to their home country.<sup>32</sup> The literature also examines destitution in specific geographical locations, including Glasgow<sup>33</sup>, Greater Manchester<sup>34</sup> and the north of England.<sup>35</sup>

Research to date has shown us that destitution is a real and constant threat for people throughout their journey in the asylum system. For people who are destitute when they arrive in the UK to claim asylum, the UK Government is responsible for providing them with financial assistance through asylum support (see Spotlight on Home Office asylum support in Section 4.1).<sup>xxvii</sup> If eligible, this support is a lifeline as people's only possible source of income, with no legal right to work and NRPF. However, even when in receipt of this support, people are still at risk of becoming destitute. This is partly because of the difficulty of making an allowance of just over £5 a day stretch to cover a person's essential needs, and partly because of the barriers to making an initial claim and delays in receiving asylum support.

Those who have had a decision on their asylum application reached by the Home Office are particularly at risk, especially those whose claims have been refused and who do not, or more likely cannot, return to their home countries.<sup>36</sup> For those who have been refused and are ARE, within 21 days of this decision they face having all support terminated<sup>xxviii</sup>, including being evicted from their accommodation. Even people who have been granted refugee status can experience destitution because the timeframe from when their asylum support ends (28 days) is shorter than the time required to apply and receive mainstream welfare support (35-day waiting period), which also doesn't allow enough time to find a job and suitable accommodation.

Refugees are also at risk of destitution when they apply for family reunion. With the increasing costs of travel, and the likelihood of having to borrow money to cover these costs, people are often left with large debts and face difficulty repaying them. This point of vulnerability is not directly experienced by those in the asylum system as such, since people who are in a position to apply for family reunion, by definition, are no longer seeking asylum. This alters support available to them (that is, they no longer have NRPF status and can access public-funded support, homelessness support and so on). Therefore, although the family reunion process is outside the remit of this research, it is a potential point of re-traumatisation as many people who are applying for family reunion will have gone through the asylum system and are likely to have experienced episodes of destitution as a result. It is also within the remit of the Home Office to improve the process in order to prevent such experiences.

<sup>xxvii</sup> For more information about what this support includes see the introduction.

<sup>xxviii</sup> This support remains in place if the person has a child/children to support.

For people seeking asylum, financial hardship is extremely common and it is important to stress that the line between that and destitution can be blurred. People in the asylum system who rely on Home Office support must pass the destitution criteria in order to receive this support and even when in receipt of support, people are living on the bare minimum. Current levels of Home Office asylum support mean that a single person seeking asylum will be living below the relative poverty line, with no right to work and NRPF. Many, whether in receipt of Home Office support or not, also rely on support from the voluntary and community sector, without which they would not be able to access their essential needs, leaving them destitute.<sup>37</sup> This means many in the system live between financial hardship and destitution.

Much of the research reviewed finds that voluntary and community sector organisations and faith groups play the primary roles of caretaker and advocate for people in the asylum system, and this is amplified for those who face destitution. With NRPF, people with vulnerable immigration status who become destitute rely almost entirely on voluntary and community sector organisations for emergency accommodation and hardship funds – the alternative is street homelessness and its associated vulnerabilities. This type of support can often be provided on only a temporary and short-term basis due to insufficient and short-term funding. As a result, this sector is often forced to react to crises rather than having the time to plan and act proactively, despite significant efforts to do otherwise.<sup>38</sup>

Prevention is taking a more central role in the public and voluntary sector's work on destitution, including in the Everyone Home Collective<sup>xxix</sup> route map out of destitution (October 2020)<sup>39</sup> and the Scottish Government's anti-destitution strategy Ending Destitution Together (June 2021).<sup>40</sup> Both aim to end destitution by ensuring that 'everyone living in our communities has equal rights to access support in times of need, including people in the UK immigration and asylum systems'.<sup>41</sup>

At the same time as this work is being undertaken, the UK Government has put forward the Nationality and Borders Bill 2021 which introduces what the Home Office has referred to as 'the most radical changes to the broken asylum system in decades'.<sup>42</sup> While there have been many calls for radical change to the system, the changes that this new Bill seeks to implement do not reflect what is required to ensure people's safety and to prevent further hardship, trauma and destitution.

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<sup>xxix</sup> The Everyone Home Collective is a combination of 19 influential charity sector organisations working to end destitution, homelessness and rough sleeping across Scotland.

Instead of providing more safe routes for people to claim protection in the UK, the Bill as introduced will criminalise people who are at their most vulnerable and who have already made treacherous journeys to the UK. It would also place people at even greater risk of exploitation, or potentially worse, including by restricting access to public funds for those granted refugee status and who have arrived irregularly.<sup>43</sup> There has been significant criticism of the Bill across sectors and many have submitted evidence to the consultation for the New Plan for Immigration, raising concerns that its introduction would create ‘an ever-increasingly two-tier system that will undoubtedly increase destitution, detention, and misery for many people unable to access safe and legal routes through no fault of their own’.<sup>44</sup>

Alongside the 2021 Bill, the Home Office is also likely to bring in changes to the asylum support system contained within the Immigration Act 2016.<sup>45</sup> This would see the removal of support from families who have been refused asylum, increasing destitution significantly. This research found that the duty to provide families with accommodation has been an essential safety net for many families who continue to pursue their claim.

This direction of travel by the Home Office heightens the urgency of this work and the need for its focus on prevention. As such, in order to support the ongoing work being done on prevention across the third sector and within the Scottish Government, and to complement existing evidence on how those experiencing destitution can best be supported, this research provides a rich evidence base about how destitution can be better prevented, through direct changes to the asylum system and the support available, and through initiatives that help to increase resilience among people seeking asylum.

## The value of this research

### Zainab Mohamed, peer researcher



*I was in the asylum system for one year and I did not struggle a lot like some of the people I interviewed. I had been in the UK for four years before I went through the asylum system, so I had some knowledge about the system, the language and the culture of this country; this made a big difference.*

*Since getting my refugee status I have helped people seeking asylum and their families settle into daily life in Glasgow, with translation support, completing application forms, and helping them register in schools and with GPs. From this experience I have learnt a lot about their struggles and their needs, and this has made me want to make sure their voices are heard. I believe that, through this research, we can help do that by raising awareness of how people struggle in their day-to-day lives.*

*These people who are seeking protection are suffering from destitution, financial hardship, language barriers, issues with legal advice, and stress, especially the families who have children. For example, the initial journey is full of stress and fear. It is difficult for parents to explain to their children why they can't have what their peers have, including being able to eat out at restaurants and afford things like a bike. Our research will help to highlight more about such difficulties that asylum seekers face and their ongoing needs.*

*In the end, I would like to say it was a great pleasure to be a part of the DASS research team and I feel privileged that people have shared their experiences with me. As a team we have really felt every single word that has been said or shared with us.*



Image © Syeda Sadaf

## 5. Research findings and analysis

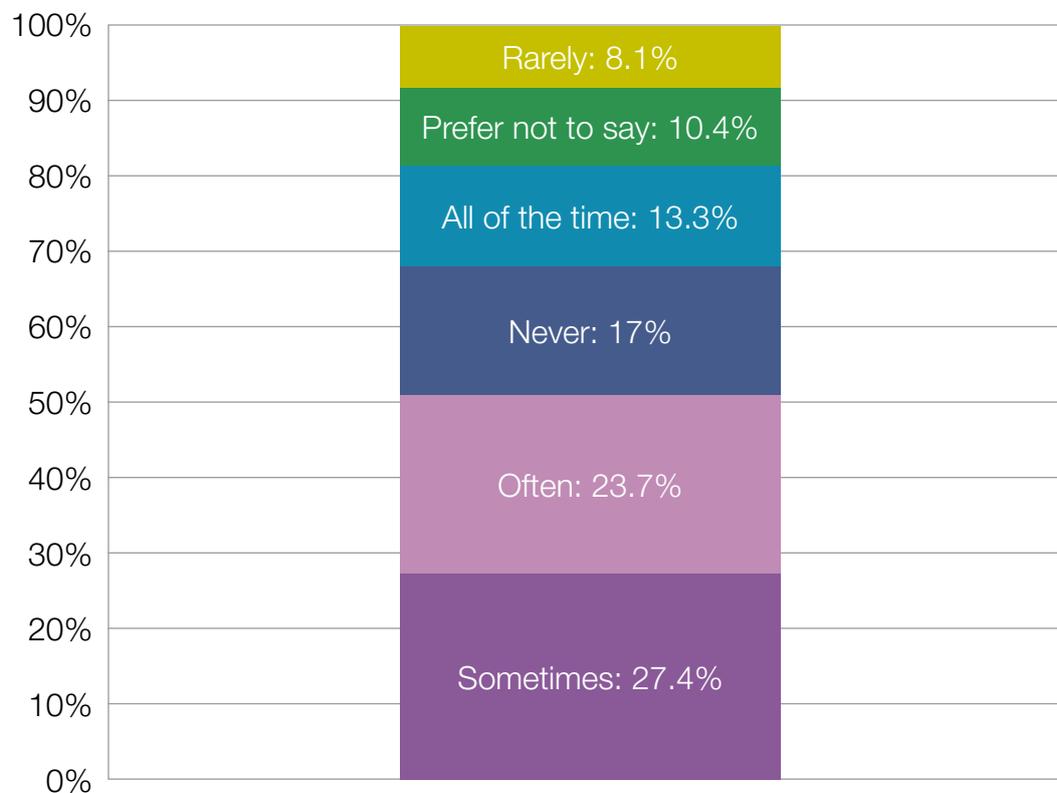
This section summarises the main findings from this research, including the evidence review, interviews with practitioners, and views of people seeking asylum. We outline the patterns in people's experiences of destitution and financial hardship, following the typical journey through the asylum system from the moment they arrive in the UK.

We explore the factors that lead to destitution and consider what is required to prevent people becoming destitute in the first place, placing a particular focus on the three core areas set out in the Scottish Government's anti-destitution strategy: essential needs, advice and advocacy, and inclusion.

### 5.1 Experiences of destitution and financial hardship in the asylum system

Experiences of destitution in the UK asylum system are not new. Those in the asylum system, as well as organisations that support them, have consistently called for an increase to the Home Office allowance of £5.66 a day, on the basis that it is not enough to cover essential needs such as food, transport, clothes, top-up mobile credit and data, and toiletries, and leaves people trapped in a cycle of poverty.<sup>46</sup>

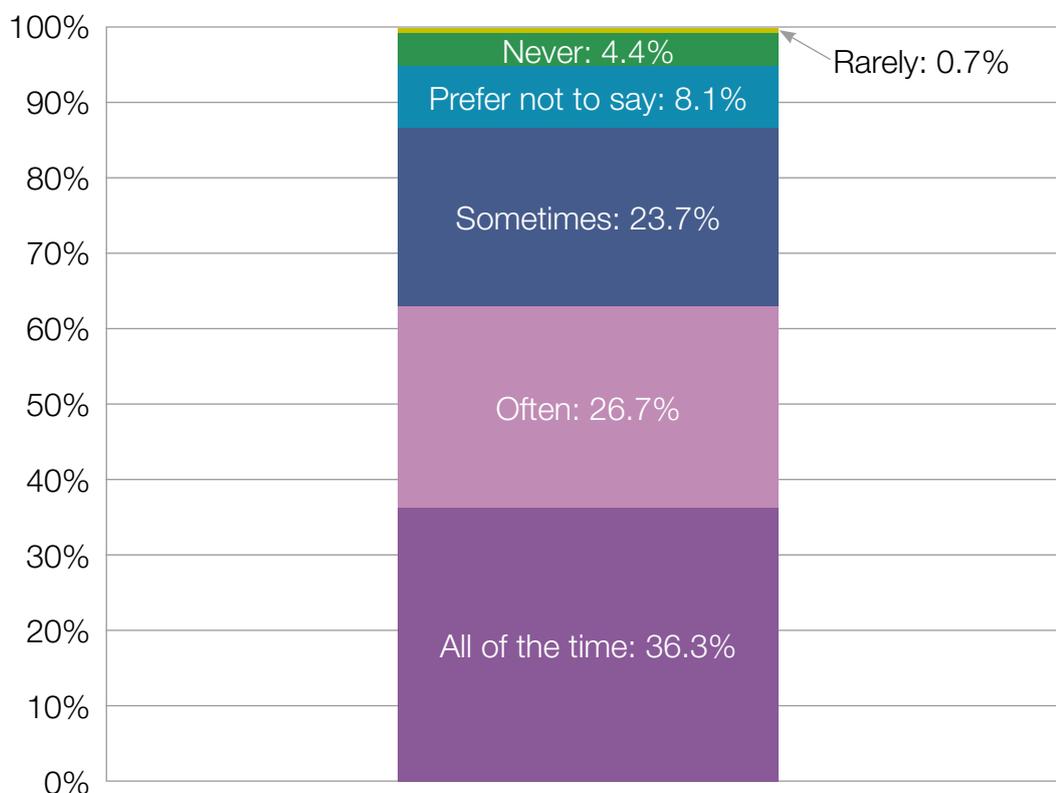
We conducted our research with people seeking asylum for whom both destitution – defined as the inability to afford essentials without the support of others – and financial hardship had had a profound impact. Around two-thirds of those who responded to our survey said that they had experienced destitution sometimes, often or all of the time since they came to the UK (64 per cent), while a quarter said they had rarely or never experienced destitution (25 per cent).

**Figure 2: Experience of destitution**

Q: Since you arrived in the UK, how regularly would you say you have experienced destitution?

Base: all respondents (n=135)

While destitution was not experienced by everyone we spoke to or surveyed, the vast majority had experience of financial hardship – the struggle to afford basic essentials – since arriving in the UK. The majority of our survey respondents, too, have experienced financial hardship since they arrived in the UK (87 per cent), including 63 per cent saying they experience it often or all of the time, and only five per cent saying they rarely or never experience it.

**Figure 3: Experience of financial hardship**

Q: Since you arrived in the UK, how regularly would you say you have experienced financial hardship?  
 Base: all respondents (n=135)

People we interviewed told us that their small weekly allowance, coupled with the high cost of everyday living, meant they were often forced to make difficult choices between basic essentials such as food or transport. People told us they often walked long distances so they could still afford food for the week. This included walking to the most affordable shops or shops that people could spend their vouchers in. Others talked about skipping meals for the day so that they could take a bus to an essential appointment.

As a result of destitution and financial hardship, many told us that they live hand-to-mouth, which makes it impossible to plan ahead. Most of those who participated in the research said that they had very little financial cushion, and that they often worried about receiving an unexpected bill or cost that would push them over the edge, and unable to afford the bare essentials, such as food. Many of those we spoke to had used foodbanks or got vouchers to see them through to their next support payment. Others thought that destitution was an ever-present threat, and were anxious they would experience it at some point, having seen it happen to many others they had met who were seeking asylum.

Around three-quarters of interviewees were in receipt of Home Office support. While this group had experienced periods of destitution, these tended to be shorter-lived than for those who were not in receipt of support. For instance, people receiving support struggled when they had an unexpected cost to cover and could not afford their weekly food shop or when a person's weekly payment was delayed, and they had no access to their money, and could not afford to travel to important appointments. At such times, people would have to depend on foodbanks and soup kitchens to feed themselves and their family, or apply for crisis grants or bus passes to meet other essential needs. This suggests that Home Office support payments, when made consistently, are important for preventing people from becoming destitute. However, findings from Joseph Rowntree Foundation research on destitution found that, even when in receipt of both elements of asylum support (housing and subsistence), 'the level of such support is not sufficient to keep them out of destitution under our definition'.<sup>47</sup> Similarly, most of those we spoke to, even when receiving Home Office support, also accessed support from voluntary and community sector organisations. Having to depend on others for support throughout the asylum journey, was a major source of distress.

One interviewee, a practitioner from Positive Action in Housing, said that the reliance on others in every aspect of their lives removes all agency from people in the asylum system. He gave an example of a family whose shower head broke. Unable to afford to replace it, the family had to wait on their housing provider to fix it for them, which took weeks and caused significant disruption to their daily schedule. He said,

*"Even when support is provided with care and kindness, that doesn't mean that it takes away the harm it does to have to rely on someone else for everything, no matter how small, no matter what. People have lost all control and agency."*

It is common for people in the asylum system to rely on either Home Office or voluntary and community sector support to access their essential needs, which means that the line between destitution and financial hardship can be thin. Both leave people in a constantly vulnerable state, with similar effects on mental health and the ability to engage with one's asylum application.

In addition to the challenges that financial hardship can pose in and of itself, it is often also a precursor to destitution<sup>48</sup> and merits serious attention. Below, we outline how destitution and financial hardship can impact people's ability to meet their essential needs, across a number of areas.

### 5.1.1 Inability to afford essential needs

Research participants, including those seeking asylum and practitioners, described the difficulties faced in accessing essentials such as food, transport, clothing and mobile phone data while seeking asylum:

**Food:** most participants said they often have to compromise on the food they buy for themselves and their families. Spending money on anything but the bare minimum of food is not possible. They often have to cut out fresher, healthier food that is usually more expensive, as well as the traditional food that they would usually cook. This would ideally come from specialist African, Asian or Middle Eastern shops: a luxury they could only rarely afford, when they were willing to go without in other areas.

All participants said that having bare cupboards and going hungry was a regular occurrence and as a result all had needed to use foodbanks repeatedly during their asylum journey. This could occur for reasons including delays in receiving their weekly payment of £39.63, or facing an unexpected cost, like having to pay for bus travel to an appointment, or having to buy a winter coat.

**Transport:** making asylum support payments stretch to cover the cost of transport was a problem for all interviewees. A practitioner from Positive Action in Housing said that financial assistance for travel was the most common request from people in the asylum system.

As a result of this, many people find they are unable to travel, which not only limits their social networks and their ability to volunteer, but also makes it difficult to get to essential appointments. Despite it being possible to be reimbursed for travel to NHS appointments (Healthcare Travel Costs Scheme/HC2 certificate), most interviewees, including practitioners, were not aware of this offer or had no idea how to access this fund.

Affording travel for Home Office interviews is another significant challenge for people, as it often involves long distances, that is to Liverpool or London. Indeed, people also have to cover the cost of an overnight stay if they are unable to return on the same day. Although this had not been a recent problem for research participants because the Home Office suspended in-person appointments during the pandemic, interviewees expressed significant anxiety about the possibility that the Home Office might reintroduce it soon. Since completing these interviews, the Home Office has resumed the need for in-person appointments, with the option to submit fresh claims by email no longer possible. This could result in increased stress for people when being forced to travel at a time of ongoing risk from Covid-19 and the cost of travel continuing to increase.

**Clothing:** research participants rarely had enough money to buy new clothes, and rely almost entirely on charity shops or donations. This makes finding weather-appropriate and correctly-sized clothing difficult.

**Mobile phone credit and data:** wifi is not provided in the vast majority of Home Office accommodation<sup>xxx</sup> and nearly everyone we spoke to said that they depend largely on top-up and data vouchers from voluntary and community sector organisations, without which people have to pay for data and phone credit from their weekly allowance. This is quickly used up when finding their way around an unfamiliar city.

Having mobile phone data is vital. Being able to keep in touch with family, friends and other essential contacts was fundamental for research participants in developing support networks and protecting their mental health. It provided them with a means of staying connected to friends and family within or outside of the UK, accessing essential services, and communicating and meeting with solicitors. Being able to maintain communication was key to successfully engaging with and progressing their asylum application. During the pandemic, having access to a working mobile phone with credit has been a lifeline for many people, especially when it enabled them to access and keep up to date with public health information. With a reliance on services being provided virtually and face-to-face meetings still not possible in most situations, for example for solicitor or GP appointments.

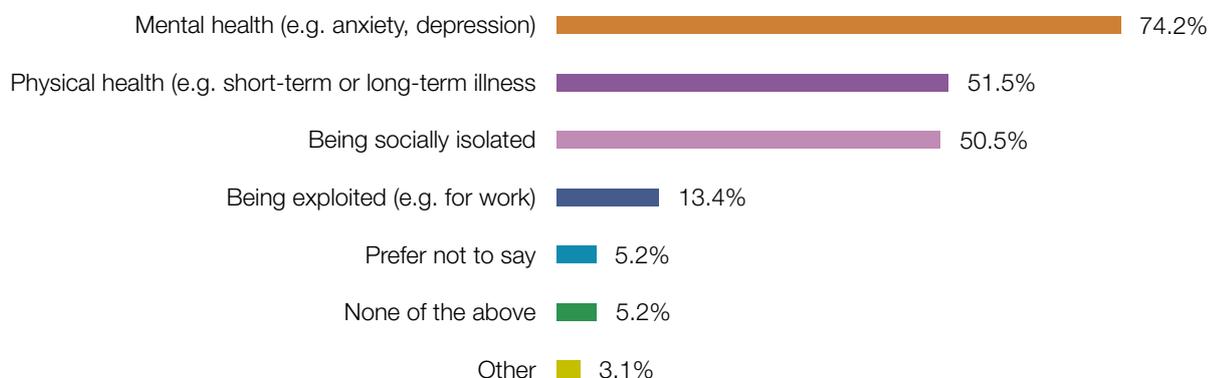
## 5.2 Impact of destitution

The results from the survey show that, for those who had experienced destitution during their time in the asylum system, the most common impact of this was on mental health (74 per cent).

Other impacts of destitution include physical health (51 per cent), being socially isolated (50 per cent) and, for a significant minority, being exploited (13 per cent). This is broadly reflective of the findings from our interviews, with people reporting poor mental health; an inability to maintain their physical health due to insufficient access to healthy food, stress and insomnia; feelings of social isolation; and experiences of exploitation.

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<sup>xxx</sup> Apart from, for example, when wifi was available in some of the hotels used by the Home Office to house people during the pandemic.

**Figure 4: Impact of destitution**

Q. How did being destitute impact on you? Tick all that apply

Base: those who have experienced destitution while in the asylum system (n=98)

### 5.2.1 Mental health and trauma

Every interviewee spoke about the impact of being destitute or experiencing regular financial hardship on their mental health and wellbeing. As a result of struggling to make ends meet on a daily basis, all said that they experienced high levels of stress, as well as a lack of dignity, control and sense of agency. This was largely because of their near complete dependency on others to maintain an adequate standard of living for themselves and their family, and having little choice or control over most aspects of their lives. They also felt that they were living in a state of fear and uncertainty with no clear end in sight to their financial hardship, alongside the constant threat of refusal and removal.

*"I feel like I'm in the boat ... [and] I don't know if I'm going to sink or I'm going to survive, if I'm going to go to the right destination or, by the time I get my status, if I'm going to be half mental. I don't know what it's going to be, because I came here to safeguard my life, my son and me. We escaped from a real incident, for a real reason, but the way the Home Office treats us, the way they treat everybody, not just me, is as a criminal." [Woman, 45 to 54 age-group, Malaysia]*

All interviewees had arrived in the UK with trauma that was exacerbated by their experience in the asylum system. This finding coincides with the Mental Health Foundation Scotland (MHF) finding that *'the increased vulnerability to mental health problems that refugees and asylum seekers face is linked to pre-migration experiences (such as war trauma) and post-migration conditions (such as separation from family, difficulties with asylum procedures and poor housing)'*.<sup>49</sup> Interviewees described different points of re-traumatisation during the asylum process (see 5.3).

There have been ongoing calls by many organisations for a more trauma-informed approach within the asylum system itself, and from those coming into contact with people seeking refuge and protection more widely. In response, the Scottish Government has included this approach in its anti-destitution strategy, thereby taking people's experiences into consideration and 'transform[ing] how we understand and respond to trauma and adversity, where people experience empathy rather than shame or stigma, and are empowered to access the services they need to support their recovery, without being re-traumatised or subject to further harm while doing so'.<sup>50</sup>

*"I left my country to save my family and my life but our lives are going to be ended by the depression and stress during the asylum process here."* [Man, 35 to 44 age-group, Iraq]

*"The asylum system is a very traumatic one, you have to deal with a lot of rejections... you need to have a resilient mind or else you will die in the process."* [Man, 35 to 44 age-group, Sierra Leone]

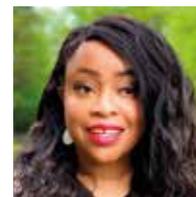
People seeking asylum are generally entitled to NHS mental health support, and many voluntary and community sector organisations also provide mental health support. However, the demand for mental health support within the general population is extremely high, with many services unable to meet this growing need, and long waiting lists.<sup>51</sup> Research by MHF has suggested that, although people in the asylum system are five times more likely to have mental health needs than the general population, they are less likely to receive support.<sup>52</sup>

Participants who required mental health support said they had been put on waiting lists by their GPs, and many were still waiting for an appointment many months later. Five people mentioned that they had received the mental health support they required. While it was hugely valued, they had had to wait a long time for it, with one waiting for over a year. According to a Scottish Government civil servant who had consulted widely with people with lived experience of the asylum system and of destitution, consultees thought that the lack of mental health support was a shared societal problem for which they should not be prioritised above anyone else in the community.

The consequences of not receiving the required mental health support when it is needed are significant. Eight interviewees and nearly a quarter of survey respondents said that they have had suicidal thoughts/wanted to die as a result of feeling they had no other way out of the difficulties they faced. Many interviewees suffer from insomnia as a consequence of untreated mental ill health, and they said that this had a cumulative effect on their ability to engage with their claim, in social situations, with their studies and even with their personal care.

## Mental health in the UK asylum system

### Thandiwe ‘Tandy’ Matikiti, peer researcher



*There is very little recent data on the availability of mental health services for people seeking asylum, which in my view has been severely neglected. According to the Scottish Government’s Ending Destitution Together Strategy (2021), people who have experienced destitution have expressed feeling of stress and anxiety, and in some cases, suicidal thoughts. Furthermore, the strategy also recognises that people’s mental health can be affected by uncertainty about their immigration status, distance from family and support networks, and restrictions which prevent people from ‘feeling able’ to make progress or positive decisions about their future.<sup>53</sup>*

*Having been through the asylum system for almost two years, I am one of many people who faced rejection from services, went for certain periods without any financial support, and was unable to receive the required medical attention when I was in need.*

*Instead of supporting the wellbeing of people seeking asylum and refugees, many of whom also face racism, hostility and poverty in the UK, the Home Office has pursued a hostile environment policy, which has had a harmful impact on people’s mental health. I have witnessed first-hand how the policy of placing people seeking asylum in hotels has led to a deterioration in mental health in many people and specific mental health illnesses such as depression, social anxiety and sleep disorders. A few interviewees who had spent time being accommodated in the Home Office hotels also highlighted the effects of not receiving any income support during the pandemic, and how this had a toll on their day-to-day living and their mental abilities.*

*A lot of people have experienced complex trauma in their past from pre-migration experiences such as war, and post-migration circumstances such as separation from family and difficulties within the asylum system.<sup>54</sup> During the interviews some interviewees highlighted that how they were treated reminds them of their past ‘hurtful/painful’ events.*

*I have seen that there is a lack of mental health support for people who are in the asylum system, and this is especially so at the beginning of the process. Without doubt, mental health support is also necessary for the purpose of tribunal hearings, to help people go through the process safely, to empower them and to build their resilience. In my eyes, this might actually influence the outcome of the individual’s case and help people rebuild their lives.*

*Efforts to improve the wellbeing of people involves commitment, working in partnership and cooperating across multiple levels including mental health care, physical health care and social services. With the right support that is provided early on, people could begin to more easily process information and understand their entitlements and how they can access specific care services.*

### 5.2.2 Physical health

Over half of interviewees said that destitution and financial hardship had affected their physical health. This was often attributed to poor-quality or insufficient food, and inability to access fresh fruit and vegetables, fish and meat. As a result of being undernourished, people say they tire more quickly and have trouble staying focused. Some said this had a direct impact on their ability to concentrate on their studies and to engage with their asylum application.

At least a quarter of people mentioned that they suffer from insomnia as a result of the stress. This also left people feeling exhausted and unable to engage in daily or social activities, leading to isolation. This was expressed particularly strongly by those who were destitute at the time of interview and who were staying in Safe in Scotland or other emergency accommodation, which was more restricted because of Covid-19 regulations.

*“Sitting in a room, thinking 24/7, you can’t go out and meet friends, you can’t cook or eat what you want, you are thinking about your family and friends, I feel like I am in a prison, I feel like I am physically disabled.”*

[Man, 25 to 34 age-group, Kurdish]

People in the asylum system are entitled to all primary health care (GPs, dentists, health visitors, and so on). However, for secondary and tertiary care (specialist hospital-based care), access varies between the four nations of the UK. Scotland offers all New Scots, including those refused asylum, access to healthcare services.

Despite this, people’s experiences of accessing healthcare in Scotland tend to vary depending on their geographical location, with some GP surgeries within Glasgow being more aware of the rights of people seeking asylum, and more experienced at managing this group’s needs, and providing clear guidelines for accessing the service. A few interviewees mentioned having to wait long periods to be seen, especially if they needed support for a pre-existing condition.

Nearly all interviewees could not afford the fares to get to medical appointments.

### 5.2.3 Family and social life

All interviewees had experienced periods of feeling lonely and socially isolated during their time in the asylum system. This tended to be early on in the process when they were finding their way around a new city and the asylum process. However, we heard from interviewees about points across the entire cycle of claiming asylum when going through a period of destitution had left them feeling cut off, isolated and unable to ask for help.

Feelings of isolation were mentioned more often by those who did not have their families with them. Those with their families mentioned their partners and children being a vital source of human contact. However, a few felt disconnected from the rest of the community, especially if their children were having a hard time settling in school. A few, who had received support to communicate more effectively with their children's schools, said that this had improved their confidence and connectedness in the community.

Experiences of destitution, and the perceived risk of it, can differ significantly depending on a person's family situation. People on their own are at more risk of being made homeless, as people with children must be provided with some form of accommodation. We found that people arriving in the UK on their own were also more likely to report feelings of isolation and loneliness, suggesting that they have less access to support networks that could help to prevent them from becoming destitute.

Parents' experiences revolve predominantly around being able to provide a safe, stable life for their children. All of the parents we spoke to told us about the stress of not being able to provide adequately for their children, including providing regular and healthy meals; affording presents for them on special occasions; or ensuring that they have clean, weather-appropriate clothes, in decent condition. This caused significant distress and a few of the fathers were brought to tears at what they felt was their inadequacy and failure to provide for their families. Many described the difficulty of having to explain to their children why they were not working like other parents. They also described the challenge of explaining their vulnerable status to their children, and why this meant they had certain restrictions on their lives.

*"I really want to make my children comfortable. I've seen my children going to bed hungry, I've seen my children going to bed for a whole week without showering because I couldn't afford basic needs, I don't want that to ever happen again."* [Woman, 45 to 54 age-group, Kenya]

*"It took me six months to find a suitable-sized bike for my daughter, how do I explain that to her?"* [Man, 35 to 44 age-group, Iraq]

Feelings of social isolation, both for individuals and families, have increased during the pandemic, and nearly everyone we spoke to mentioned feeling lonelier and more helpless, with many of the places they would go to for support, including community centres and foodbanks, being closed.



### 5.2.4 Exploitation

Five interviewees reported finding themselves in dangerous or abusive situations. This included being left homeless and destitute after being abandoned by a partner or friend they had arrived with; and finding themselves in an abusive relationship with someone who had taken them in and who had said they would help them. The lack of alternative places to turn to for help, and the unavoidable reliance on others in order to avoid destitution, has the twin effect of making people more in need and more vulnerable to exploitation. They may also be at risk of entrapment in an unsafe situation that they cannot see a way out of without becoming destitute. Echoing all the respondents who had such experiences, one woman said, *“It is what I had to do, it’s how I survived”*.

## 5.3 A person's journey through the asylum system and their encounters with destitution

Our research has shown that there are certain moments during their asylum journey when people are at particular risk of destitution. Below, we follow a typical journey through the asylum system, and the factors that commonly lead to destitution.

### 5.3.1 First arrival: making an asylum claim; dispersal; and settling in

#### *Making an asylum claim*

People with lived experience of the asylum system told us that their experience of arriving in the UK sets the tone for the rest of their asylum journey: it can determine the nature of subsequent interactions with different parts of the system; their understanding of how the system works; their confidence to ask questions and learn more about their rights; how welcome they feel; and the strength of their integration and social connections. These aspects affect confidence in and engagement with the asylum process. When they do not work well, it can mean that people are less aware of the support available to them, and less able and willing to ask for it.

The majority of interviewees said that they experienced problems from their very first appointment with the Home Office, irrespective of how they arrived in the country, or how quickly they made their initial claim. All said that the process of arrival was stressful, and that they were made to wait for hours, with little guidance or information about the processes they would need to follow.

We spoke to people who had arrived by plane, boat and truck, and some who had been trafficked. All had similar experiences when making their initial claim. Every person we spoke with thought that Home Office officials distrusted them and the details of their claim. For instance, on arriving at the Home Office in Croydon in December, three interviewees were asked to come back weeks later due to the holiday period, and were then questioned during their initial interview about why they hadn't made their claim earlier, as soon as they arrived. One woman who was trafficked into the country by her in-laws thought that her case was not taken seriously when she was made to return to that family to gather evidence and wait for a letter with further instructions, putting her back in direct danger. It was only when the police and social services got involved that she was then taken back to the Home Office to have her initial interview. Another interviewee, a man who arrived at the airport with his young family in the middle of the night, was told that no one at the airport could process their paperwork there and then, but that they couldn't stay in the airport overnight. They were removed by airport security at 2.30 in the morning with nowhere to go, and told to come back the next day.

Similar experiences of hostility and distrust from border and Home Office officials were described in open survey questions relating to general experiences of the UK asylum system and destitution. One woman from Nigeria stated, *'With all my evidence they still don't believe me as a single mother of three'*. Another woman from Namibia expressed feeling *"bullied in a way like I did something wrong"*. As a young man from Kenya put it, the whole process of sharing your story is traumatic in itself and is only exacerbated by being doubted. *"It takes a lot out of you because you are telling someone your life story and they outright say that you are a liar and you know you are telling the truth and all you want is to be safe."*

People told us that the consequence of such encounters with Home Office officials left them feeling confused and uncertain of their future, and fearful that the system they had entered into would not provide them with the protection that they came in search of. This often made them feel more cynical about the system, and made it much harder to engage productively with their asylum claim and to settle into their new communities.

### ***Dispersal***

Once a person's initial claim is made, they can also make a claim for asylum support which is assessed via a destitution test.<sup>xxx</sup> If they are eligible, they are then 'dispersed' on a no-choice basis, often by coach, to one of several dispersal areas across the UK.

Following the initial interview, the majority of those we spoke to were moved to Section 98 temporary accommodation for a short period to wait to be dispersed (anywhere from two days to two weeks), while a few who arrived with some money – this could be as little as a few hundred pounds – were asked to source their own accommodation until dispersal. For one man, the money he had was not enough to cover the cost of a room for one night in a nearby airport hotel, and he found himself pleading with the hotel staff to allow his wife and children to rest for a few hours at a reduced cost. He felt that the hotel manager who let them stay had saved his family's life that night. A mother and son told us they spent all the money they had on accommodation, and had to rely on soup kitchens and charities for food and other essentials when their wait to be dispersed took several weeks. In these cases, people found they had exhausted their emergency funds before they arrived at their final destination.

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<sup>xxx</sup> See more about this in 'Spotlight on Home Office Support' in Section 4.1.

Interviewees, including practitioners and people seeking asylum, said that the destitution assessment – for both temporary emergency Section 98 support and Section 95 support – is often inaccurate as it is not based on the actual costs of the essentials, even for a short period of time. Having a more realistic assessment would prevent people from being left in precarious situations such as those described above.

This was the point when the majority of people who took part in this research were taken to Glasgow, although some moved to Scotland later on in their asylum journey, based on advice from people they knew. The dispersal journey to Glasgow is very long, often over 12 hours, with numerous other stops on the way, and without permission to get off the coach. People spoke of being dispersed with little information or clear direction about where they were being taken or what was to come when they got there. There were also several reports of destinations changing mid-journey, with little explanation. Over a quarter of people told us that the overall experience of ‘dispersal’ was made more difficult by a coach driver who was rude and unhelpful.

For those travelling with young children, this experience can be particularly traumatic, with little opportunities or funds to buy food and water, and no stopping to allow for nappy changes or to settle exhausted and crying children.

### ***Settling in and getting to know the system***

Upon arrival in Glasgow, the majority of interviewees told us they had been dropped off at the main offices of the Home Office accommodation supplier<sup>xxxii</sup> and were left to wait for hours, sometimes into the early hours of the morning, before being escorted to their temporary accommodation. People are also given the contact details for Migrant Help, which is located close to the Home Office in Glasgow. Migrant Help is contracted by the Home Office to be the first point of call for most issues relating to the asylum process, including about people’s claims and the support services available.

The information provided by Migrant Help in this initial instance is extremely important, and serves as the entry point for most people going on to make a claim in the UK asylum system. The information provided covers next steps in the asylum process, a list of immigration lawyers, a list of voluntary and community sector organisations and the services they provide, people’s rights, and much more.

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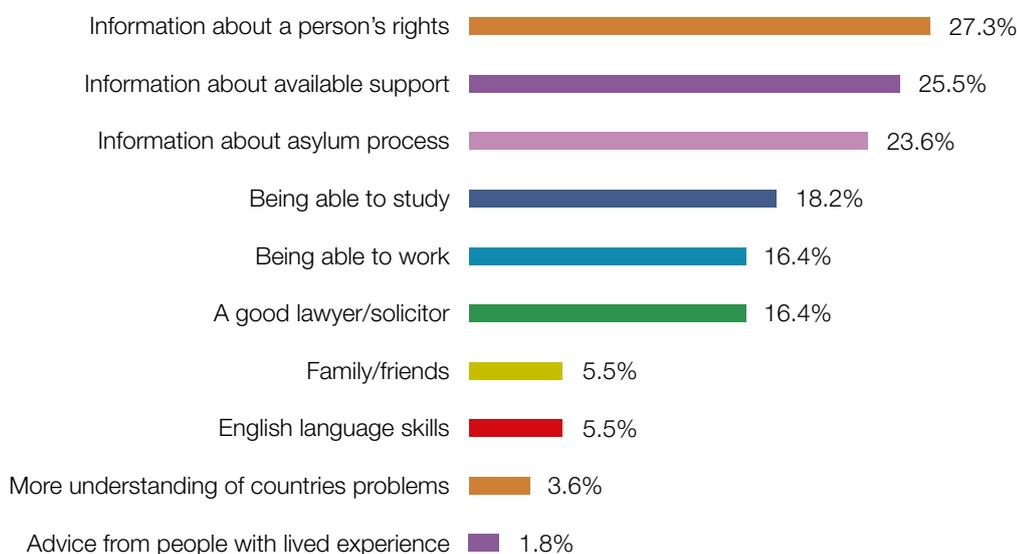
<sup>xxxii</sup> Among those we spoke to, this included both Mears, the current supplier in Glasgow, and Serco, the housing supplier for Glasgow from 2012 to 2019.

Much of this information is provided in as accessible a way as possible, including in a variety of languages, and in easy read formats. Although none of the people we interviewed had literacy problems, a few people did tell us about having to support others in understanding the information from Migrant Help because of literacy problems.

While the information was seen as broadly useful, some said that it came to them at the wrong time, and that they lost the literature in one of their 'moves' before they were able to make use of it. They thought that the information does not take into account how overwhelmed people can be at the time of arrival. The majority felt inundated with information from Migrant Help, and faced problems in processing and understanding it, which made them feel less confident and less able to use the information and advice in the information pack. This included practical information and support that would have helped them to manage their situation better and to know where to turn to for help. This leaves people more vulnerable to destitution at the outset, even though the support that could help them is available.

Interviewees thought that certain measures could make these first steps within the asylum process much clearer for people to process and understand. They also expressed the importance of treating each person as an individual and supporting them for the first few weeks or months in a way that meets their specific needs. The majority thought that this support would best be provided by those who already know about and understand the UK asylum system, for example peer mentors or peer support circles. In this way, a peer could guide them through the asylum process; help them get legal representation; guide them towards organisations that could help them to access mental health support; and link them with voluntary and community sector organisations and faith groups in their local community. This was seen as far more useful than receiving pages of information that is difficult to digest.

When we asked people what could have helped them more during the asylum process, 21 per cent of survey respondents said that access to information was key, and this information pertained to i) their rights in the asylum system; ii) the asylum process; and iii) the availability of support. Interviewees also said that the key to this information being useful was that they receive it at the right time and in the most accessible format. This point was also echoed by most of the practitioners we interviewed.

**Figure 5: What could have helped people more in the asylum system?**

Q: *What could have helped you more during your time in the asylum system?*

Base: those who answered the open-ended question (n=81)

People seeking asylum said that if they had been given some time to settle into their accommodation and surrounding area, with more regular, ideally personalised, follow up and guidance during the first few weeks, they would have been in a better position to engage with the materials and the steps they needed to take to strengthen their asylum claim, such as choosing a solicitor and learning about support available.

These findings show that there is a need for clear communication relevant to each stage of a person's asylum claim, particularly at the start, when there is so much to take in. They also demonstrate the importance of a trauma-informed approach that is appropriate for each stage, recognising the inherent stress caused by the asylum process, and the impact this has on people's ability to engage with information.

Many people arrive in the UK believing that they will be protected, and their human rights upheld. However, their initial experiences make them feel that the system is more likely to penalise them than to protect them. This belief that the system is 'out to get them' was expressed by around half of the people we interviewed, as well as a quarter of survey respondents. This made it even more difficult for them to engage with their claim when they saw little hope of a positive outcome. While some voluntary and community sector organisations have been working to provide preventative and early intervention support to people as close to their point of arrival as possible – including the Scottish Refugee Council, the British Red Cross and Govan Community Project, for example – the majority of interviewees said that there

had been a significant delay in finding out about and accessing this support. Practitioner interviewees were frustrated at not having a more systematic way to reach and engage with new arrivals.

Improving the above will ensure that people can begin their journey with an awareness of the tools they need to engage with their claim, and the confidence to engage with their community and to ask for help when they need it.

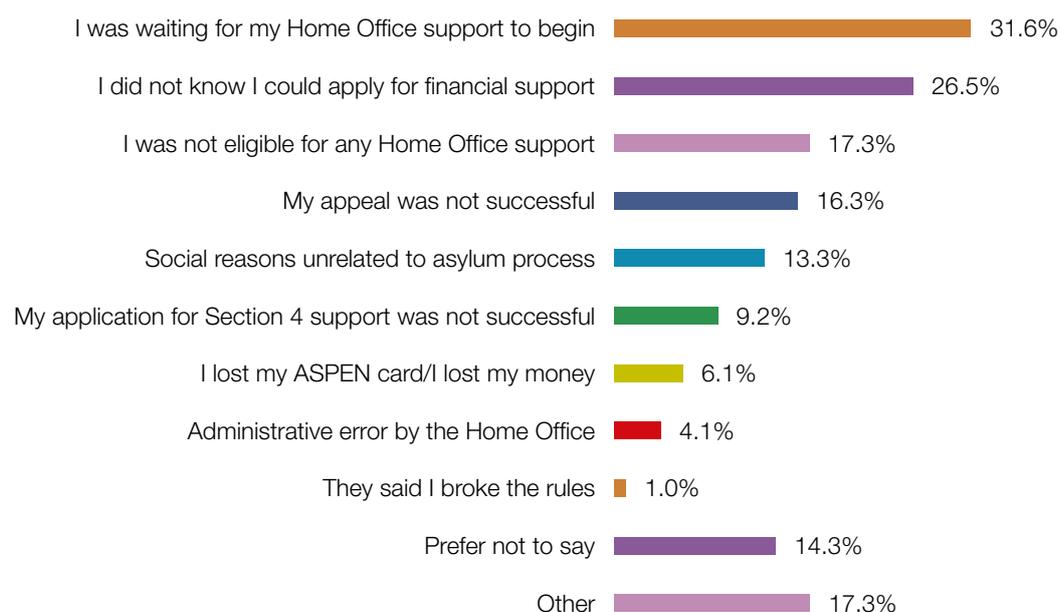
### 5.3.2 Finding your feet: the first six months

*“My first six months in the asylum system was the worst period in all my life.” [Man, 25 to 34 age-group, Morocco]*

Many respondents said that their first six months in the UK was the most difficult period. This was mainly attributed to their lack of knowledge about what the asylum process would involve, how the system works, and their rights within it. This was exacerbated for many by language and cultural barriers, which made it difficult to get to know the facilities in their local area and to establish a support network, making them more vulnerable to destitution at an early stage.

Most commonly, survey respondents told us that they experienced destitution because they were waiting for their Home Office support to begin (32 per cent) or because they did not know they could apply for financial support (27 per cent).

**Figure 6: Causes of destitution**



Q: In your case, what would you say was the cause of destitution? Tick all that apply

Base: all who have experienced destitution since arriving in the UK (n=98)

Interviewees had problems because of delays in receiving Home Office support during their first few days or weeks in the UK, making access to information about other sources of support even more important at this point in the process. Information gathered by the British Red Cross services before the pandemic shows that people in Scotland waited an average of 29 days to receive a decision on their asylum support application, and 89 days to be accommodated (in Section 95 accommodation) once a positive decision has been reached.<sup>55</sup> Moreover, about a quarter of both interviewees and survey respondents reported times when they had either not received their weekly allowance on time or had not received the correct amount, sometimes for months on end.

One young man we interviewed from Sierra Leone whose claim for asylum support from the Home Office was stopped after an issue was raised with his bank account, said he had to go without any subsistence (no weekly payment) for two weeks until he was able to appeal the decision in court. He was also threatened with eviction from his Home Office temporary accommodation during this time, but this fortunately was not enforced. He relied on a soup kitchen and other charities in Glasgow city centre for his other essential needs until his appeal was successful.

A researcher from the University of Glasgow, who had volunteered with one of the main voluntary and community sector organisations in Glasgow, told us about his work in supporting people applying for asylum support and emergency asylum support through Migrant Help. With a significant part of the work of Migrant Help being conducted over the telephone, this voluntary and community sector organisation would provide people with access to a telephone and a person to assist them with making their support application. This involved waiting for long periods to get through to a representative and supporting the person to complete a 30-page application with questions including whether the applicant is part of a terrorist organisation. The application also demands a high threshold of evidence, so he would spend significant time on gathering letters from people explaining or verifying information. He also highlighted that organising emergency accommodation was a priority because of the delay between receiving a decision on a person's asylum support application and the support beginning. However, sourcing emergency accommodation is difficult and time consuming, often relying on the goodwill of people through initiatives like Rooms for Refugees, through which people in the community offer their spare rooms to those in need.

*"If any organisations/charities/solicitors would have helped me by guiding me earlier about the asylum claims, maybe I would have prepared myself for the Home Office's first asylum interview and also from becoming destitute."* [Woman interviewee, 55 to 64 age-group, Malaysia]

*“If I had known that there were charities from day one, I think things would have been different for me, because I would have been getting the help and the understanding that I need, but I had to learn as I went, I had to learn these things as my life was mapped out before me.”*

[Woman interviewee, 35 to 44 age-group, who experienced multiple periods of destitution, St Vincent and the Grenadines]

Even when there are no problems with receiving their support payments, people undergo a significant period of adjustment, in particular learning to live on a little over £5 a day in an expensive and unfamiliar country. For most of our interviewees, fear and uncertainty stopped them venturing far from their accommodation for the first few weeks at least, only travelling to the Home Office, their solicitor’s office and Migrant Help. This also prevented them from learning about some of the bigger and cheaper supermarkets where their money would go further. Instead, they relied on more expensive local corner shops to feed themselves and to buy essentials.

People attributed the difficulty of the first six months to coming to terms with how difficult gaining refugee status would be, and the reality of substandard and often unstable accommodation, a prohibitive cost of living and, for many, a reliance on support from voluntary and community sector organisations. As they settle in, people encounter the rigidity of the system and the realisation that the process of applying for asylum will be more complicated and protracted than they first thought, with no guarantee that their claim will succeed. This can be a significant disappointment. A few of our interviewees and a survey respondent reflected on the UK asylum system and their experiences with Home Office officials:

*“We are not just a piece of paper, we are human, we have a heart, a heart that hurts... They could say, OK you know what, you have faced a lot in your country, you are running here for help, but instead of getting help they are making the matter ten times worse... I always say, had I known that this would have been my life, although my life was threatened, I would have stayed there and died because even though you are not dying here, you are dying inside, because it is constantly something you have to live with.”* [Woman, 35 to 44 age-group, St Vincent and the Grenadines]

*“They should make it easier for people. But I feel, I’m not sure if I am right or wrong... they want to put more pressure on the people who come here to apply for asylum... maybe I am mistaken but I feel they meant to do it. I want to put you under pressure, stress on your physical and mental health.”* [Man, 45 to 54 age-group, Libya]

*“I’m not safe. And as a human being I’m not free. Which is something I should feel if I had any human rights here.” [Man, 25 to 34 age-group, Iran]*

### **Accommodation**

Under the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999, the Home Office has a duty to provide accommodation and/or financial support to anyone applying for asylum who would otherwise be destitute. If someone is facing immediate homelessness, the Home Office should provide emergency support (often called ‘initial accommodation’), while the person’s application for asylum support is considered. People are then moved to ‘dispersal accommodation’ around the UK, which is usually provided in shared housing with other people seeking asylum.<sup>56</sup>

Within the first year of arrival people can be moved multiple times between different types of accommodation. Nearly all those we spoke to who were seeking asylum said that this had happened to them, and both they and practitioners reported that this often happens with little to no explanation or notice, and with no opportunity to contest it.

*“I was moved again; I can’t even remember when I was moved. I was moved to Easterhouse from Ibrox, from Easterhouse I was moved to Drumchapel but I can’t remember when I was moved to these places... So that is really what I am struggling with, one minute you are settled here and then you feel comfortable and safe and then another minute they say I am going to move you over here. Instead of saying, OK let’s give her her status and answer her case they are just moving you round and round and round. That’s the thing you don’t know, you never know, you wake up tomorrow and there is a letter in the post ‘you have to be packing – next week we are coming’ so you are never too sure what is going on.” [Woman, 35 to 44 age-group, St Vincent and the Grenadines]*

The experience of being repeatedly moved from one type of accommodation to another had a significant impact on the people we interviewed. Apart from the stress at the time of moving, it also had a longer-term effect on their ability to build and maintain social connections in their new place of refuge, and to learn about the area they live in and the facilities and services available. Having this knowledge and building these networks are fundamental for people who are either at risk of destitution or who are experiencing it<sup>57</sup>; a sentiment echoed by many interviewees.

A person’s social and support networks are also crucial to their mental health. An employee of Positive Action in Housing told us about a person they were supporting who had built strong connections in the area of his temporary accommodation in Glasgow’s city centre, where he had been living for many

months before being provided with his permanent accommodation in the East End of Glasgow, a long distance from the area he knew. At the thought of no longer having this support network, the man was willing to be street homeless rather than move to an unfamiliar area. After being convinced to accept this new place, his main concern was being able to afford the transport costs so that he could maintain those relationships.

One interviewee, part of a newly granted refugee family, said there had been a significant struggle to find suitable accommodation that was near to the areas they were familiar with and had connections to, and which fell within their children's school catchment area. Trying to source private accommodation was not an option for them yet, since finding sufficient work during the pandemic has been difficult.

One practitioner noted that within Scottish Government Guidance, people seeking asylum can and 'should be entered on to a social landlord's list if they apply'.<sup>58</sup> Although not entitled to social housing until they receive refugee status, adding people to the list early would reduce the chance of them being made homeless if and when they receive a positive decision.<sup>59</sup>

Over half of interviewees said that they experienced a regular changeover of 'housemates', which they described as unsettling and a barrier to building meaningful social connections. One man from Zimbabwe, who has had at least eight different sets of housemates over the course of two years, said it was difficult when another person's asylum application appeared to be processed more quickly than his own.

While Home Office accommodation does provide people with the essential need of shelter and, therefore, some protection from destitution and exploitation, the standard of housing often falls far short of what it should be. Given the importance of these connections, especially for those facing financial hardship and destitution, it is extremely difficult when accommodation moves separate people from their social and support networks.

These poor standards are also reflected in long delays to fixing accommodation issues. Nine interviewees reported waiting more than three months for maintenance works to be carried out, and three people waited more than six months. One woman told us that her front door still could not be locked properly, despite having reported the issue multiple times to her housing provider. This left her feeling unsafe and anxious, and in the absence of a proper solution, she had taken to barricading herself in.

Nearly a quarter of people told us that they do not feel safe in their own homes and, as a result, are suffering from mental health problems and insomnia. They said that this was having a detrimental effect on their ability to deal with their asylum cases and everyday life.

### **Home Office hotel accommodation during the pandemic**

At the start of the pandemic, the Home Office private housing providers moved many people into hostels and hotels, not only causing significant disruption to many people in the asylum system but also affecting their ability to access their essential needs, in some cases making this more difficult. In Glasgow alone, the private housing provider Mears moved more than 300 people seeking asylum from mainly self-contained flats into hotels by late April 2020.<sup>60</sup> Although the stated purpose of this was to preserve public health, many people were moved from private flats into accommodation with shared facilities. A statement by a Home Office spokesperson on 22 April 2020 asserted, “We are only moving asylum seekers where it is necessary, strictly following guidance from public health authorities, and into accommodation that ensures social distancing. This is to help stop the spread of the virus, protect the NHS and save lives.”<sup>61</sup> But many interviewees thought that being moved into hotel accommodation during the pandemic left them financially worse off, and that by being forced to use communal spaces, they were much less safe. As one interviewee who was moved into the Park Inn hotel from a private flat said,

*“The explanation was a flimsy one, which I don’t think made any sense. The explanation was, coronavirus is spreading wide and we need to protect you and here you will be more secure. But where I was staying, I was staying alone, I shared nothing with anyone, so if you want to protect me, leave me where I am and not where hundreds of people are – and you say you want me to be safe? It’s like you want me to die quickly.”* [Man, 18 to 24 age-group, Sierra Leone]

Interviewees, both practitioners and people with lived experience, said that people were moved at very short notice, with no assessment of need, and no explanation about where they were being moved to. Many were forced to dispose of food they had bought because there would be no self-catering facilities. On the basis that three meals a day would be provided by Mears, people’s weekly payments were stopped. However, everyone we spoke to who had been moved into a Home Office hotel described being given poor-quality food, and for some this was not provided three times a day.

Having no access to money meant that people had no control over what they could eat or when, and had no ability to buy any other essentials. One man who was cut off from financial support at this time felt this left him with no sense of control or agency:

*“Even having £10 or £5, I can feel that I have something in my pocket. But thinking that I have nothing and I have no way I can get it. I can’t even buy an apple because there weren’t any in the hotel.”* [Man, 35 to 44 age-group, Sierra Leone]

As a consequence, practitioners said that, during this time, voluntary and community sector organisations were put under increased pressure to provide essentials to people in the hotels, including mobile phone top-ups, food parcels and toiletries. They reported increasing demand for mental health support due to the stress and uncertainty people were experiencing in the hotels at the start of a global pandemic.

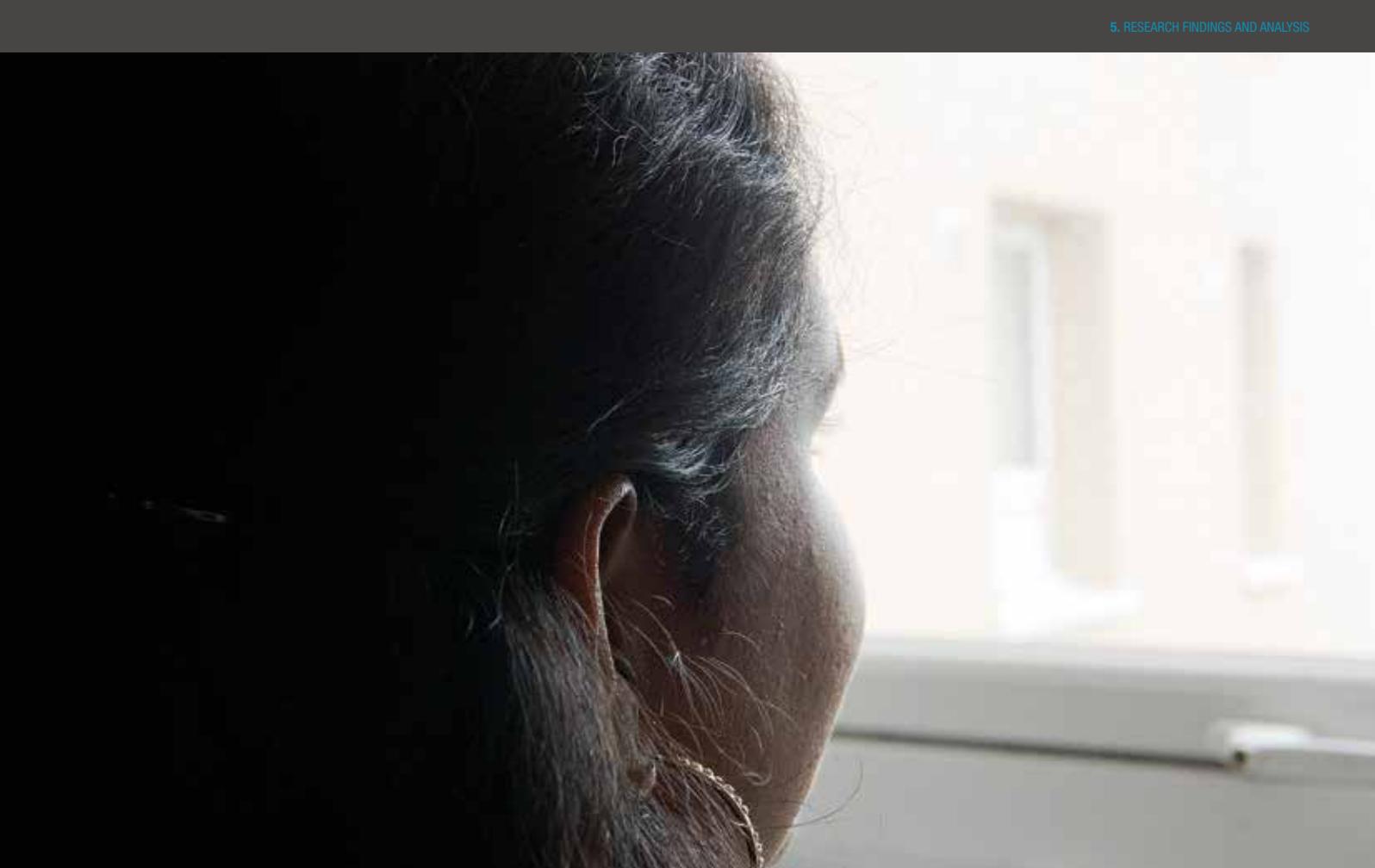
### Park Inn incident

The extreme stress and vulnerability of people who were placed in Home Office hotels during the pandemic were most evident on 26 June 2020 in the Park Inn, when a 28-year-old man from Sudan stabbed and injured five other residents and a police officer. He was shot and killed by an armed police officer.

Five of those we interviewed had been at the hotel during the incident. Two who had interacted with the man reported that he had been frantic and needed mental health support, and that other residents had raised concerns with hotel staff. For all of those we spoke to who were caught up in the attack, this is a traumatising experience that they will not forget.

One interviewee, who was stabbed five times, is left with life-changing injuries affecting his ability to sleep, to maintain his physical fitness and to pursue his studies. The support he has received has not been sufficient to meet his needs. While his physical conditions continue to be treated, mental health support has been limited – with most of this provided directly after the event. He is still on a waiting list for further mental health support.

Voluntary and community sector organisations provided essential support to all those living in the Park Inn at the time of the incident, through a coordinated effort with Mears staff. The practitioners and the people in the asylum system we spoke to said that these organisations had been vital in advocating for residents and ensuring their needs were assessed before they were moved to alternative accommodation. They provided food parcels, telephone data and toiletries. This was essential for ensuring that those involved avoided destitution and could communicate with others.



Our research co-production workshop which was, coincidentally, held around the anniversary of the incident, elicited painful memories for interviewees with frustrations expressed about an asylum system that seemed to drag its feet, stalling lives and affecting wellbeing.

This incident shows the terrible consequences of unmet needs in extreme circumstances. However, those working in the sector can point to hundreds of others with critical mental health needs left untreated. Interviewees who were living in Home Office hostels and hotels during the pandemic, compared this to being in detention. They felt destitute. They were dependent on their housing provider for all their needs, many of which were not met; experienced restricted freedom of movement; were allowed limited interactions with others; and were under curfew in their own 'home'.

Given that destitution means not having certain essentials without the support of others, it's clear that those housed in Home Office hotels during the pandemic were at increased risk of destitution. The asylum system exposed those who had already suffered extreme trauma to further stress and trauma.

### 5.3.3 Interpreters, legal aid and preparing for court appearances

Being able to access high-quality interpreters and legal representation is fundamental to the asylum process and the progression of a person's asylum claim.<sup>62</sup> Although the link between these services and a person's ability to fight destitution may not at first be apparent, the people we spoke to and the literature we reviewed highlight the detrimental impact of not having adequate support in these areas, in particular for a person experiencing destitution.<sup>63</sup> The Scottish Government's anti-destitution strategy highlights this need. It focuses on advice and advocacy as one of its three main action areas for preventing destitution, working to increase people's access to specialist advice and advocacy which can help a person understand, and progress through, the asylum system.<sup>64</sup>

People often arrive in the UK with existing trauma, and are then placed in unfamiliar surroundings in a new city and face complex asylum processes they need to learn how to navigate. These factors place people in a vulnerable position, and this makes it very difficult for people to engage in their legal case and have any clarity over their immigration status. Legal aid providers need to be supportive and proactive when supporting people in the asylum system, and this need is even greater when people are facing crisis point.

Previous research has shown that limited access to and poor-quality legal advice commonly experienced by people in the asylum system can have a negative impact on their initial asylum application, often resulting in people being refused and having to appeal.<sup>65</sup> This places people at direct threat of destitution if they face support being withdrawn and being evicted from their accommodation. Without adequate legal representation, appealing is almost impossible, and people face being detained and deported. From Pillar to Post (2019) showed how 'homelessness and hunger' make it almost impossible for people 'to effectively engage with their legal case' which ultimately 'affects a person's ability to timeously and effectively gather new evidence, source witnesses and, ultimately, submit coherent fresh representations to the Home Office'.<sup>66</sup>

We found that people's legal representation was often the main source of information about the asylum process and service provision. Therefore, solicitors are a vital resource for people learning about their new environment and knowing where to turn when facing destitution.

The quality of interpreting also has a significant impact on a person's asylum claim. Without interpreting support people who do not have a high fluency

level in English are unable to effectively and accurately communicate their stories to the relevant parties.<sup>67</sup> As we have seen, people often report experiencing hostile questioning and distrust from Home Office officials, and this makes it all the more important to have accurate interpreting to reduce a negative credibility finding.

Having access to interpreting and legal representation is even more important when many of the people seeking asylum do not have documentation or evidence of their persecution, having been forced to flee their country of origin at short notice.

### **Interpreters**

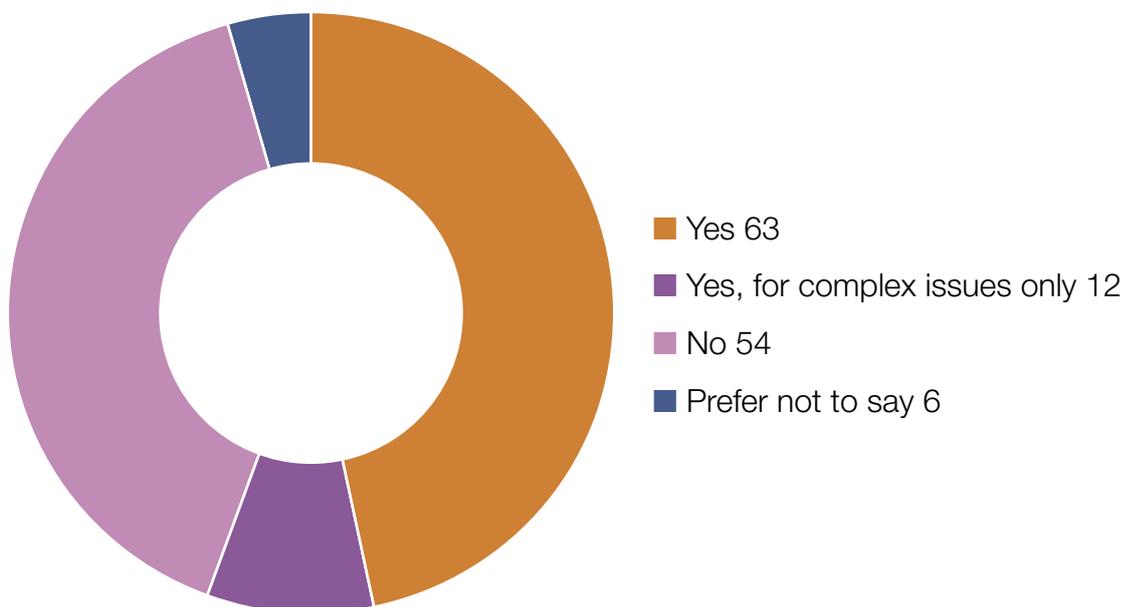
Findings from interviews with practitioners and those with lived experience of the asylum system, and the survey, show that accessing interpreters is generally straightforward, with people who do not speak English at all automatically offered an interpreter for all formal interactions with the Home Office or with advice and advocacy support providers: legal support, caseworkers or housing providers.

Those who speak English as a second language are often not initially offered an interpreter unless they specifically request one, which can sometimes be needed when dealing with more complex issues, for example when attending asylum interviews or court appearances. Over half of survey respondents said they had used an interpreter, with nine per cent using interpreters only for complex issues. Many interviewees had still wanted to use an interpreter for their asylum case even when they spoke English, just in case they didn't understand a part of the conversation, or couldn't express themselves properly. This was also sometimes needed when the interviewer had a strong accent that they found difficult to understand.

*“Even though I speak English, sometimes you need someone to help you express your feelings, sometimes you are not in a mood to express it in a good way, so the interpreter can help you and they can help transfer that feeling.”* [Man, 45 to 54 age-group, Libya]

By contrast, at least a quarter of interviewees said they'd been given an interpreter even when they said they didn't need one. In three of these cases, because the person was able to understand and speak English, they identified problems with translations and had to correct the interpreter at various points. They expressed concern that, had they not been in a position to do this, the inaccurate information interpreted would have been included as part of their asylum claim. This reflects that there are some quality risks around interpreting, which could, in some cases, affect a person's claim.

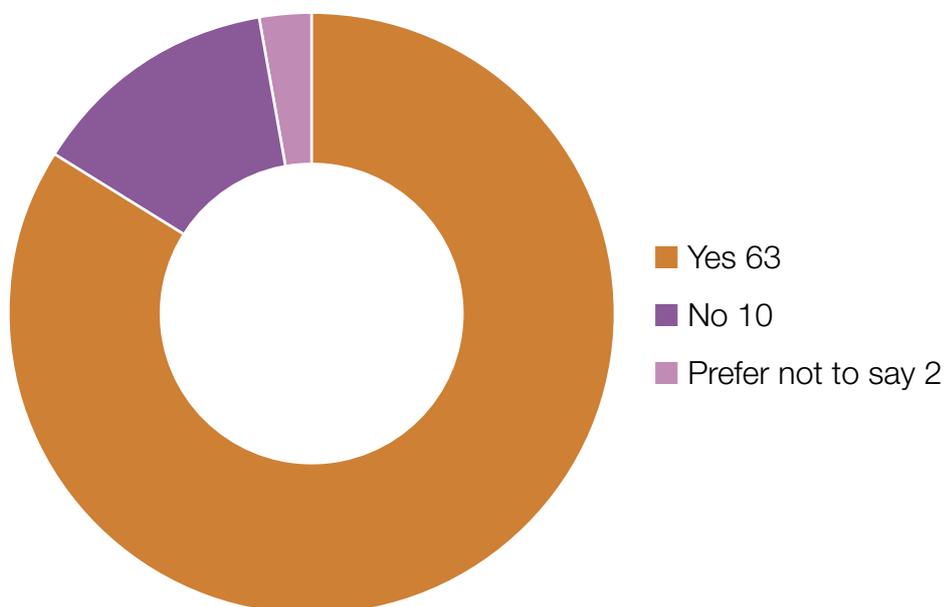
**Figure 7: Use of interpreters**



Q: Have you needed to use interpreters at any stage of your asylum claim?

Base: all respondents (n=135)

**Figure 8: Access to interpreters**



Q: Were you able to access an interpreter when you needed one?

Base: all who needed an interpreter (n=75)

Most interviewees and survey respondents said that they were able to access an interpreter when they needed to. However, approximately a quarter of interviewees and survey respondents had a negative experience of using interpreters. Problems included inaccurate interpreting; incorrect dialect; poor etiquette; and interpreters from opposing political/ethnic groups (which felt threatening for those claiming asylum on that basis). Around a quarter of those who took part in the interviews also mentioned an intimidating atmosphere, which often resulted in a feeling that the interpreter and Home Office interviewer were working together against them. People felt frustrated and often helpless at not being able to express themselves and their cases properly.

*“[The Home Office] had an interpreter who was from the Tigray ethnic group... and he was challenging me, because I was defending my position against that party – who is ruling Ethiopia brutally. He started saying – is that so?! I was furious. He was questioning the documents I had, the International Red Cross documents from when they visited me in prison in Ethiopia... I tried to tell [the Home Office interviewer] but they agreed together and they became one against me.”*

[Man, 55 to 64 age-group, Ethiopia]

All such experiences are felt by respondents to have had a direct impact on their asylum claim, leading to potential delays, mistakes and, ultimately, wrong decisions being made, thereby extending a person’s wait further. Not having an interpreter who can accurately relay your information to your legal representation, Home Office officials and/or a judge will inevitably lead to problems with the claim, and have potential to affect a person’s eligibility for asylum support, leaving them at even greater risk of destitution.

There are practical difficulties too, as highlighted by a legal specialist who told us that factors like limits on legal aid interpreting budgets and cancellation fees can negatively impact a person (for example, if a client misses an initial appointment or has to cancel at the last minute, after an interpreter has been booked, the appointment has to go ahead without an interpreter once it can be rescheduled).

### ***Legal aid and court appearances***

The importance of having good legal support in progressing and engaging with their claim was evident in all 26 interviewees with lived experience. Around 13 people said that their legal support also acted as an important source of information about their new city and the support available. Similar findings from the survey reveal that 41 per cent of people thought that their legal support informed them about the asylum system; 34 per cent said they learned about their rights; and 24 per cent said that their solicitor had informed them about support services.

The link between legal support and destitution was also highlighted by survey respondents.

*“If I’d had a good lawyer and wasn’t scared to speak up, argue and defend myself at the appeal then I wouldn’t have ended up being destitute.”* [Woman, 35 to 44 age-group, The Gambia]

Having to choose a legal adviser from a list of possible options was highlighted as highly stressful, especially when this needs to be done early on in the process, and can often seem like their cases are left to chance. The list<sup>xxxiii</sup> consists of a list of names, addresses and contact details of solicitors who offer free legal aid to people in the asylum system. People are not given any direction or guidance on how to ‘choose’ but often look for the provider closest to their accommodation. As they are still learning how to get around a new city, they prefer to stay in or near familiar areas until they are more settled. Less than a quarter of people said that a friend or acquaintance had been able to recommend a good solicitor from the list.

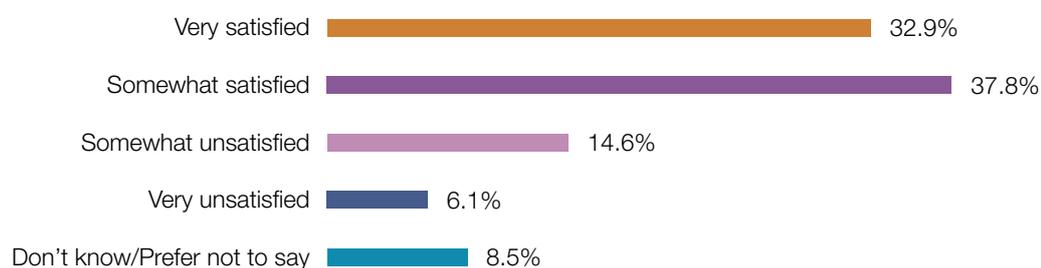
*“When you move to a new environment, or a new society, if there is any person you need to trust, to open up to, then it is your lawyer, because how can a person talk on behalf of you, or fight your case or fight your battle on behalf of you without you trusting that person? It’s like fighting a wall and you don’t know what is behind it.”* [Man, 18 to 24 age-group, Sierra Leone]

For those who were ‘lucky’ on their first selection, they were satisfied with their legal support and had been able to build good relationships with their solicitors. In these cases, even if there had been problems with their asylum case, with the necessary support and if kept informed, people remained satisfied with their legal advice.

*“The words I received from my new lawyer, ‘You don’t have to fear. It’s okay’ stuck with me, reassured me. This is after I changed from my old lawyer.”* [Woman, 45 to 54 age-group, Kenya]

Findings from the survey seem to reflect this, with the majority of people (70 per cent) responding that they were either somewhat or very satisfied with their legal support. This emphasises the importance of having good legal representation, especially as, when a solicitor/client relationship works well, the solicitor can often play a wider role than providing solely legal advice and support.

<sup>xxxiii</sup> This list is provided by the Home Office, Migrant Help and a number of voluntary and community sector organisations.

**Figure 9: Satisfaction with legal support**

Q: How satisfied were you with the legal support you received?

Base: all who received legal support (n=82)

For those who weren't as 'lucky', some of the potential barriers and problems included:

- ▶ **A lack of or limited communication and meetings with solicitors:** leaving people unclear and in fear of 'annoying' their solicitor if they were to ask further questions. People reported going many months without any communication from their solicitors, with a few finding out, after trying to contact them for an update, that their legal representative had either left the firm or that the firm had closed.
- ▶ **Solicitors being reactive rather than proactive:** some solicitors did not follow up on issues, for instance when there were delays, but waited to hear from the Home Office first. Most people reported having to chase things up many times before getting a response.
- ▶ **Loss of documents or applications not being submitted on time or being 'lost':** over a quarter of respondents said that their solicitor had either not submitted an application on time or had lost their documents, impacting directly on their asylum claim/appeal/fresh claim. None were provided with answers, and no one within the legal practice was held accountable.
- ▶ **Feeling that legal aid is treated as a business:** the idea that solicitors take on legal aid work to make money was expressed by interviewees and survey respondents. Some solicitors were seen as not caring about individual cases and would spend what seemed to be very little time on each case, with little interest in the success of a person's claim for asylum and protection.
- ▶ **Not always knowing where to go to access or change legal advice:** when people face such problems, they wonder when the right time is to change solicitors, especially given the added fear of having to start from the beginning, and to recount their experiences repeatedly. This is re-traumatising. Not only is a person going through the trauma all over again, but they are often confronted with not being believed or trusted again.



In addition to these challenges to developing good relationships with their solicitors, for many, the asylum process is the first time they ever experienced going to court, which can be scary, and often makes people feel like criminals. Nearly half of interviewees said that a lack of adequate support in preparation for their substantive interview with the Home Office had exacerbated an already stressful situation. Respondents believed that this lack of preparation had an impact on the outcome of their asylum claim, leading them towards even greater financial hardship and destitution. Nearly a quarter of our interviewees suggested that having a practice or mock interview would have helped them to prepare for the hostile questioning that they had experienced.

These findings highlight a number of key areas that need further consideration, including the need for better guidance for people when they are choosing their legal support; changing legal support when required; legal aid providers to be both accountable to and better supported by the Scottish Legal Aid Board and Law Society of Scotland; and support in preparation for substantive interviews.

Improving these aspects is important because of the fundamental role that legal support is to a person's asylum claim. The legal representative advocates between the individual and the Home Office. Without this people feel lost, confused, hopeless and unable to engage in their asylum claim, especially when they have received a refusal. Knowing when or how to appeal or submit a new claim, or even knowing you have the right to do this, is difficult without legal support that cares about individual cases.

**Catelena, woman, 35 to 44 age-group, from St Vincent and the Grenadines, asylum claim based on torture**

Catelena came to the UK for a visit in 2006 with someone who was helping her escape sustained abuse, violence and torture in her home country of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines. For nearly ten years Catelena was unaware of the fact that she could claim asylum, and was homeless for much of this time. In early 2017 an acquaintance explained the process of claiming asylum, and called the Home Office and reported her presence in the UK.

She was then detained by the Home Office and held in Dungavel for three days on the grounds of being an overstayer. Catelena says that, despite this, she felt that she finally had some hope now that she was able to make an asylum claim, “At the end of the day I got help”.

Catelena’s claim for Home Office asylum support was successful and she was soon provided with accommodation and a weekly allowance. She was, however, moved repeatedly between different flats, with different flatmates, and this proved very difficult for her. She felt unable to settle down and build the connections she needed. She was grateful to have one particularly strong connection with another person in the asylum system who proved to be a vital support when she later faced being made street homeless.

Catelena’s initial claim was refused in 2018 due to a lack of evidence, and she believed she had then submitted an appeal. However, when she went to report in with the Home Office in February 2019, she was detained at Dungavel again, and held for two months. She later found out that the solicitor who was due to submit her appeal had ceased working, with their office closed down. Catelena strongly believes that her solicitor had a direct negative impact on her claim and the events that followed her second period of detention. This included Catelena being threatened with removal on three occasions and being made homeless on her release.

When Catelena was sent back to her previous Home Office accommodation, she arrived to find that it was already occupied by other people seeking asylum. Being late in the evening when she arrived, Catelena was forced to call the one person she had previously befriended, who let her sleep on her couch. The next day when she approached Migrant Help, it said it couldn't help her find somewhere else to stay as, officially, the Home Office said it was housing her. She relied on her friend to buy her toiletries and sanitary towels, and on foodbanks to feed herself. The Scottish Refugee Council was later able to provide her with emergency accommodation until the Home Office sorted out the mix up.

Catelena's release from Dungavel was made possible with the support of Medical Justice which supported her to compile a fresh asylum claim that drew on medical evidence showing the extent of her abuse and torture. She is happy with her new solicitor who has been a significant source of support, despite waiting for nearly two years with no decision. She receives Section 4 asylum support on medical grounds, so is provided with accommodation and an ASPEN card. But she cannot withdraw cash, which she needs to buy food from some of her local shops.

As a result of her combined trauma, including her experiences at Dungavel, which she vividly recalls, Catelena has been diagnosed with PTSD. She is receiving psychological support for this. She says that this has proved vital for her survival. She has ups and downs, including feeling suicidal, but that the support she gets from both her GP and her counsellor keep her going. Based on the extent of her PTSD, her GP has also supported her case with the Home Office, by insisting that she should not be moved to alternative accommodation or, at the very least, should be given enough notice before being moved again. She has been in the same accommodation since November 2020. and feels much more settled and able to manage her mental and physical health, despite the lack of clarity about the progress of her fresh claim.

### 5.3.4 Accessing support from voluntary and community sector organisations

The information that is provided to people by Migrant Help includes details of some of the main voluntary and community sector organisations and the services they provide in the local area. However, people told us that they often rely on **word of mouth** to find out about the support provided by these organisations. In some instances, people can also be referred to these organisations by their solicitors or caseworkers.

How quickly people learn about the support available from voluntary and community sector organisations varied significantly between the people we spoke to. It appears to be very much up to chance, and coming across someone who can give the right advice when it is needed. This also depends on whether such support is available, with the level of need often being far greater than the level of support available. Nearly three-quarters of people told us that they wished they had known earlier about the additional support available to them as, having this, enabled them to access essentials that they would otherwise have gone without. This included accommodation, destitution grants and travel grants provided by Refugee Survival Trust, the hardship grant facilitated through the British Red Cross, or the emergency accommodation provided by Safe in Scotland.

24 of 26 interviewees had received some form of support from voluntary and community sector organisations. 60 per cent of survey respondents (135 respondents) had received such support in the past, and just over 43 per cent were currently receiving some form of voluntary and community sector support.

Despite this significant dependency on support from voluntary and community sector organisations, there is some uncertainty on the part of people seeking asylum about the support provided, including:

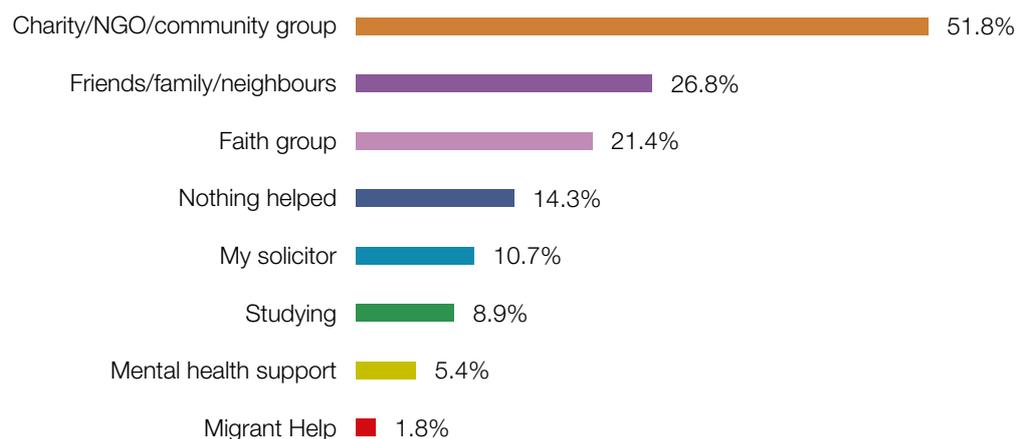
- ▶ **Eligibility for support:** lack of clarity about eligibility of support for people in different stages of the asylum process, for example, awaiting decision, refused or those who have refugee status. Most people saw differences between organisations and could not understand the discrepancies.
- ▶ **Staff keeping their word and being consistent:** there were a few reports that a staff member did not follow up or keep their word. Over three-quarters of respondents described wide variation in how they had been treated by voluntary and community sector staff, from being extremely helpful and understanding to being dismissive and uncaring.
- ▶ **Elements of gatekeeping:** about a quarter of respondents expressed concern about what they perceived to be an uneven/unclear approach to who received support. They believed that whether or not they got support depended on either who they spoke to, or who had referred them.

► **Limited support available:** all interviewees with lived experience and some survey respondents mentioned there was limited support for a large number of people in the asylum system. This was reiterated by practitioners who highlighted the significant financial constraints they were under and the decreasing funding they had access to. There is significant demand for additional funding for people in the asylum system in general, in particular to support those facing destitution.

The importance of voluntary and community sector organisations to people in the asylum system came through very strongly. This is highlighted by the fact that 51.8 per cent of respondents said that charities, NGOs and community groups helped them the most during their asylum process, and when they were experiencing financial hardship and/or destitution (50 per cent). After the voluntary and community sector, friends, family and neighbours were most likely to have helped during the asylum process (27 per cent), while 17 per cent said the Home Office support had helped them with financial hardship and destitution.

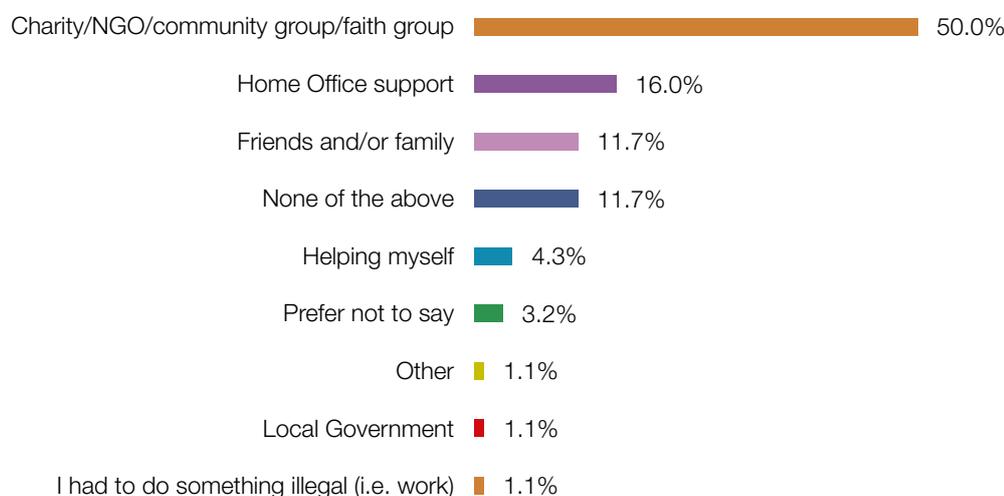
The majority of interviewees, and a broad proportion of survey respondents, agreed that voluntary and community sector organisations and faith groups take on much of the responsibility for supporting people seeking asylum and refugees, who struggle to subsist on the support provided by the UK Government alone.

**Figure 10: What helped most during the asylum process?**



Q: What helped you most overall during the asylum process?

Base: All respondents who answered question (n=98)

**Figure 11: What helped most with financial hardship/destitution?**

Q: What would you say helped you the most when you were experiencing financial hardship and/or destitution, if anything?

Base: all respondents who answered question (n=94)

When we asked survey respondents to give us more detail about the additional support that they received and which voluntary and community sector organisations had provided this, the most common forms of support required were food and clothing. They depended significantly on foodbanks, food parcels provided by certain organisations, and charity shops. The most common organisations to be named were the British Red Cross, Govan Community Project, Scottish Refugee Council and a number of local churches. Interviewees responded similarly, with Maryhill Integration Network, Refugee Survival Trust and Safe in Scotland mentioned as significant sources of support when facing financial hardship and destitution.

*"I always say thanks to the Refugee Council, because had it not been for them, I would have been on the street... the biggest help to me has been the charities... they are also a shoulder to cry on because there are times when you feel you can't go any further and they encourage you to continue."* [Woman, 35 to 44 age-group, St Vincent and the Grenadines]

*"Maryhill Integration Network is now like a backbone to me."*  
[Man, 18 to 24 age-group, Sierra Leone]

While foodbanks plug an essential gap, they are designed to be used in an emergency. However, those we spoke to relied on foodbanks regularly, with over half using them at least once a month. Some foodbanks have also had to tighten their access criteria due to a lack of resources, for example some have restricted people to coming only once every six months. Moreover, interviewees told us that foodbanks don't always supply the most nutritional

or culturally appropriate food, and many found that fresh and fast-expiring food such as fruit and vegetables were often not available. Some people were unfamiliar with some of the tinned foods they had been given, and therefore didn't use them. It is for these reasons that providing people in the asylum system with cash-based assistance is a preferable means for people to access healthy and culturally appropriate food. This would give people more control and agency.

Many interviewees reported that it was often a single person or a specific organisation that made a significant difference to them. The support of just one person or organisation can be enough to allow someone to turn their situation around. This could be a friend, a mentor, a solicitor, a caseworker and so on. Whoever they are, they are someone who is willing to listen, to believe and to be consistent in their support.

For one interviewee it was her housing officer:

*"My housing officer, oh he is so good... he will phone, leave a message, he knows I may not have credit so calls me back. He will make me feel so nice, because he is concerned, he asks how he can help me, and he goes a step ahead to recommend you to other people who can help, for example at Christmas he arranged so I could get my children Christmas gifts."* [Woman, 45 to 54 age-group, Kenya]

For another, it was his solicitor, despite a lack of progress with his case:

*"My solicitor is like a godfather to me now."*  
[Man, 18 to 24 age-group, Sierra Leone]

While most interviewees had been dispersed to Glasgow, those who had not been said they had moved to Glasgow following a recommendation made by someone. For three, this was a helpful acquaintance who had seen that they were in trouble and had bought them a train/bus ticket. For two others, another person further on in the asylum process offered some vital advice. For each of them, they were either told that Glasgow was a safer place to claim asylum or that they could access better destitution support there, in particular through Safe in Scotland. Four interviewees were staying in Safe in Scotland, having moved there after being street homeless elsewhere in the UK. They all expressed deep gratitude for the secure housing, food and further support that they were now receiving. However the uncertainty over their future and their lack of control and agency over their everyday lives weighed heavily on them. The survey revealed similar responses, with 12 people stating that they had moved to Glasgow, after being dispersed elsewhere, on the advice that Glasgow could provide better support.

For those who did not have this one ‘lifeline’ person or organisation, there is a far greater sense of isolation and otherness, and a lack of hope. For some who were more socially isolated, this significantly affected how they viewed Glasgow and the UK in general, seeing it as a cold and inhospitable place. They considered their ‘decision’<sup>xxxiv</sup> to seek asylum in the UK to be the biggest mistake of their lives. One man who is here with his family, and who recently received his first refusal after nearly two years of waiting, said:

*“I’m sorry to say but Glasgow has not been a nice place for us. Every day I question if I made a mistake, if we should have gone somewhere else.”* [Man, 45 to 54 age-group, Egypt]

Indeed, most people said they felt the same until they felt more settled and had opportunities to get to know their communities and neighbours.

### ***Unmet needs among research participants***

Around two-thirds of those we spoke to had support needs that weren’t being met and/or questions that they couldn’t find the answers to. This was preventing them from getting on in day-to-day life. The research team ensured we were able to provide information and/or signpost people to relevant support services, the most common of which related to mental health needs, and accessing education and volunteering opportunities. The team also provided extended follow up and additional referrals for support with transport; ASPEN card problems<sup>xxxv</sup>; accessing education and qualification equivalence; and accommodation problems.

<sup>xxxiv</sup> People do not have a choice over seeking asylum.

<sup>xxxv</sup> This related to the changeover of providers of this service.

**Figure 12: Number of referrals for and follow ups with interviewees**

Initial referrals directly following interviews		Extended follow ups or additional referrals	
More information	4	Transport	4
Education	3	ASPEN cards	3
Mental health	3	Education	2
Volunteering	3	Data	1
GP/dentist	2	Accommodation issues	1
Domestic abuse support	1		
Transport	1		
Financial	1		
Family/child support	1		
Accommodation issues	1		
Family tracing	1		
Casework support	1		

This was needed because people faced significant difficulties in accessing the essentials and support services, even though the majority had some form of Home Office support.<sup>xxxvi</sup> From this, we can conclude that people can get 'stuck' when they are unable to find anyone to help them answer questions; point them in the right direction; or when someone who has offered support doesn't get back to them.

The difficulties in accessing essential needs and the impact of living in such financial hardship, with the threat of destitution, leaves people in an even more vulnerable position, making it even harder for them to engage effectively with their asylum claim.

### 5.3.5 Settling in and contributing to the community

Our research shows the importance of having connections to individuals or organisations that can help people through the asylum process. Many of those seeking asylum told us that, over time, with increased knowledge about and exposure to different organisations and services, they were able to develop strong connections, become more informed about the system and their rights, and feel more able to effectively engage with their asylum claim.

<sup>xxxvi</sup> Due to the pandemic, the majority of people in the asylum system who would otherwise not be entitled to support were issued with Section 4 support.

The benefits of voluntary and community sector organisations go beyond providing essential services and emergency support. This included people attending an information session, a public meeting or English lessons; or volunteering in one or more of these organisations.

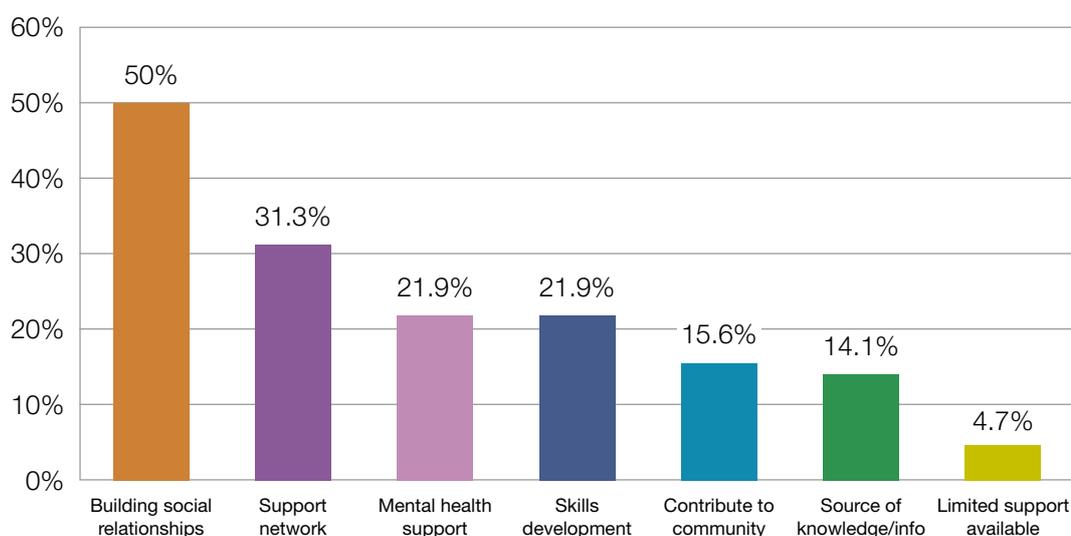
About 20 per cent of interview and survey respondents had no involvement of this kind with voluntary and community sector organisations. The rest were involved to varying degrees, with nearly 60 per cent participating at least once a month.

According to the interviewees, the main benefits of becoming involved with voluntary and community sector organisations included:

- ▶ A new sense of control with access to information and available support services
- ▶ An increased sense of awareness about their rights and asylum processes
- ▶ An opportunity for the development of social connections which helps to build a feeling of community and belonging
- ▶ Volunteering and skills development opportunities that can often be the next best thing when people have no right to work

The benefits reported by survey respondents reveal very similar results, with 50 per cent saying that being involved with voluntary and community sector organisations help to build social connections; 31 per cent saying they provide a support network; and 22 per cent seeing them as a source of mental health support, and providing an opportunity for skills development.

**Figure 13: Advantages of being involved with voluntary and community sector organisations**



Q: Can you tell us about your experiences of being involved in such groups (the benefits and/or negatives)?

Base: those who responded to the non-compulsory open-ended question (n=67)



Image © Mala Jayhindaran

While many conditions of the asylum system force voluntary and community sector organisations into reactive responses, there is great effort to ensure their work can also be proactive. According to practitioners, this included offering people information sessions to raise awareness about their rights; and how to get more actively involved in their asylum claim, including campaigning for improved conditions for people in the asylum system. It also involved offering people opportunities to develop their skills, make social connections and build networks that help to support their mental health and overall wellbeing. People mentioned attending such initiatives at a number of organisations, including Govan Community Project, Maryhill Integration Network and the different local integration networks.

### ***Contributing to the community***

Another important take from these findings revolves around people's desire to contribute and to 'give back' to society. 15.6 per cent of those surveyed said that the benefit of voluntary and community sector organisations was in providing opportunities to contribute to society. Most interviewees also mentioned this. People told us that their desire to contribute to the community that had protected them was at least partially fulfilled through their involvement with such organisations. Many become aware of opportunities to contribute after receiving support from voluntary and community sector organisations and becoming more engaged in their local communities.

One of the main ways that people talked about being able to make this contribution is through volunteering with these organisations and groups. This helped them to build social connections, get to know their local community and continue to develop their skills.

People encountered some limitations and restrictions with this however, including long and complicated application processes and unrealistic training requirements. In one instance, the number of training hours exceeded the number of volunteering hours of the post being applied for. Many opportunities are in certain sectors, for instance in refugee and asylum support, which limits people's opportunities to develop other skills or interests. Having more varied volunteering opportunities would help ensure that integration can begin early in a person's time in the asylum system, by helping people to better understand UK society and improve their long-term prospects.

Another means to contribute as New Scots is through engagement with the political discussion on forced migration and asylum. For instance, a number of interviewees were part of co-production workshops and sessions

on this topic, with voluntary and community sector organisations, the public sector and politicians. An example of this, in which nearly a quarter of our interviewees participated in some capacity, was the working group Refugees Ending Destitution that contributed to the Scottish Government's anti-destitution strategy published in June 2021.<sup>68</sup> The importance of this type of engagement in civil action is described best by Tandy, one of our peer researchers:

*"By using our voices, I and others, have been engaging with MPs and MSPs and this has created a political pathway between politicians and people seeking asylum. These pathways provide opportunities for us to bring in difficult conversations, raise concerns about the current system and work towards the change we need to see."*

All interviewees recognised that life would be significantly harder without the lifeline provided by voluntary and community sector organisations and faith groups, and that this type of support prevented more than three-quarters of them from becoming destitute. However, for nearly all of them there was a strong desire to break their dependency on support from others, whether the Home Office or voluntary and community sector. To be able to do this however, it would be necessary for them to have the right to work. With strict restrictions around this, most people are never granted the right to work during their time in the asylum system.

The need to work, therefore, runs deeper than providing mere subsistence, although this is clearly fundamental. Everyone we spoke to talked about their need to work and/or study in order to survive, both physically and mentally. This desire was also about having the opportunity to give back to and contribute to the community that is protecting them.

*"I don't want to be someone who is on the receiving end... I want to use my hands, my sweat, and contribute to the economy, to nation building... The right to work is the right to one's freedom. I have been limited in my contribution."* [Man, 35 to 45 age-group, Sierra Leone]

*"The people who have ambition to study are going to be part of society, they are going to contribute to society."* [Man, 45 to 54 age-group, Zimbabwe]

There is a significant lack of clarity (among practitioners included) about the right to work and the parameters around the right to study. This creates a significant barrier to people accessing what they need. This is all the more frustrating when there are means of accessing educational opportunities, but only if you happen to meet someone who happens to know about this. For instance, in Scotland, people have access to English language classes

and some further educational courses (college and vocational courses). The majority of people we spoke to said they had benefited from these opportunities intellectually, psychologically and socially. Most of the people we spoke to who do or did not have a strong command of English were enrolled in ESOL classes. These are important, and those we spoke to said that these had provided them with language skills and opportunities to meet people and engage in their new community. One said that gaining proficiency in English had completely changed his situation:

*“How I tried to change things for myself, the first thing that was my target was to learn the language, because without learning the language I would be miserable because I can’t explain myself, I can’t share my thoughts with people, I can’t share my experiences because of the language barriers. And when I started learning the language I started to engage with the organisations, like VOICES ambassadors, like Freedom from Torture, so in case I have any problem I can go to them so they can be my voice.”* [Man, 45 to 54 age-group, Zimbabwe]

He describes how having a command of English enables him to support and defend his asylum claim more effectively:

*“It is quite different when I am speaking on my own, and someone else is speaking on my behalf... the way I will explain it to the people, and the connection of myself and the way I’m talking to you is quite different from someone who is interpreting on my behalf.”*

Nearly half of interviewees had attended some form of further education course. They wanted to continue to develop their skills so that they would be in a stronger position if and when they get their refugee status. Undertaking these courses also provided opportunities to engage their minds, meet people in their community and work on improving their mental health.

Access to higher education (university), on the other hand, is more complex, with some universities now offering university of sanctuary scholarships (or fee waivers) to people in the asylum system. However, this appears to be less well publicised, and most interviewees were not aware of such opportunities. One has such a scholarship and is studying for an undergraduate degree in human rights law. For him, this opportunity enables him to work on the problems in his country that forced him to flee for his safety:

*“The LGBT community are really suffering in Sierra Leone and in Africa in general, people are denied their basic human rights like work and medical facilities and I want to be able to contribute to changing things.”* [Man, 18 to 24 age-group, Sierra Leone]

Having access to English language classes or higher and further education courses put interviewees in a much stronger position to engage effectively with their asylum claim and to build the social connections and networks they need. It made them feel that, if and when they are eventually granted refugee status, they will be in a better position to find work.

Access to education and opportunities for skills development also falls within Scottish Government's action area of inclusion within its strategy towards preventing destitution<sup>69</sup> and the New Scots refugee integration strategy.<sup>70</sup> There are also grants that can help facilitate people's access to education. Refugee Survival Trust, for example, offers an education and employment grant which can be used to fund the cost of, for example, enrolling in college, transport, books, retaking qualifications or qualification equivalency applications.

From our research, it appears that people seeking asylum are broadly able to take advantage of educational opportunities in Glasgow, though more could be done to make sure that these opportunities are well publicised, and to clarify eligibility criteria for access and funding. For example, according to Just Right Scotland, the funding provided by the Scottish Government to people accessing higher education (SAAS) does not fall under the statutory definition of public funds and therefore 'having NRPF [status] should not in itself mean that an individual cannot receive funding for their further or higher education'.<sup>71</sup> Unfortunately, many educational institutions are not aware of this and end up turning potential students away unnecessarily at the point of application.

### 5.3.6 Restrictions on the right to work

For the people we interviewed, the missing step in their asylum journey is having the ability to work. While none thought that getting the right to work at the start of their journey would have helped them, all said it is required eventually, especially given the increasingly long waiting times people are facing.<sup>72</sup>

Once people have submitted their claim with the support of a solicitor, who communicates and advocates for their client; had the opportunity to learn about their rights and the processes to come; and been able to settle into their new communities and develop support networks, they are in a position to look for employment, support themselves and give back to the community. The reality however is that most people never get the right to work while they are in the asylum system. Only one of our interviewees had been granted the right to work.<sup>xxxvii</sup>

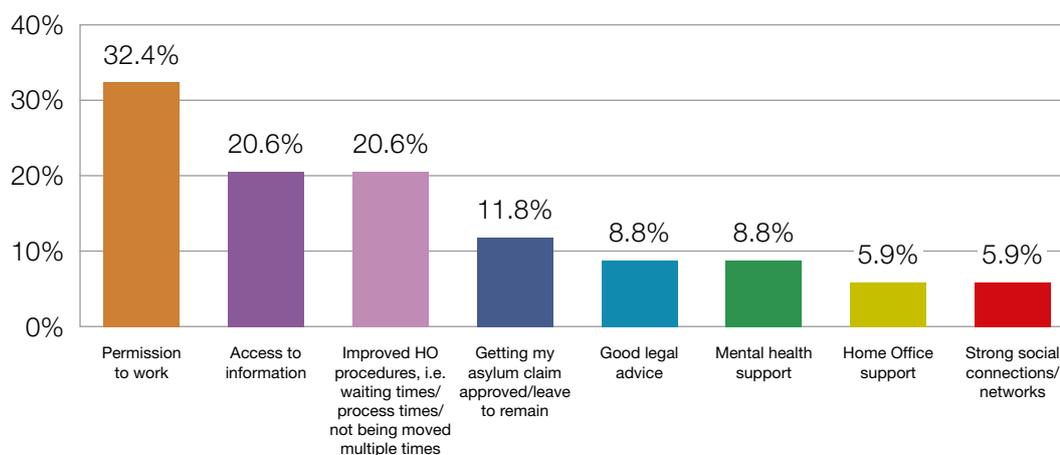
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<sup>xxxvii</sup> For more about this see the case study at the end of this section (5.3.6).

Current regulations stipulate that people in the asylum system can apply for permission to work if they have been waiting for over 12 months for an initial decision on their asylum claim or for a response to a further submission for asylum; and if they are not considered responsible for the delay in decision making.<sup>73</sup> Some of the language within this regulation can make it difficult for people to make a valid application, however. For example, it is necessary to provide evidence to the Home Office to prove that delays in a person's asylum claim have been out of their control, which can be very difficult. People are also restricted by the type of work they can do, as they are limited to a shortage occupation list which contains unusual professions such as ballet dancer and geophysicist.

The right to work was the number one factor that people thought would prevent destitution. We found this through all avenues of investigation: interviews with people in the asylum system, interviews with practitioners, the survey (32 per cent) and the interviewee co-production workshop (100 per cent).

**Figure 14: Factors that could have prevented destitution**



*Q: What could have helped you more when you were experiencing financial hardship and/or destitution?*

Base: those who experienced destitution while in the asylum system (n=98)

The right to work would have a direct impact on people seeking asylum, allowing them to provide for themselves and their family, and if they are able to find appropriate work and are properly remunerated, making them more financially secure. Interviewees emphasised the indirect benefits of being able to work: a sense of purpose that they often feel they lack; and access to a wider support network that would serve as a safety net if they become at risk of destitution.

Practitioner interviewees agreed that the right to work is a major restriction on people seeking asylum and that this should be reviewed. Many voluntary and community sector organisations support the campaign to Lift the Ban.<sup>xxxviii</sup> However, there is not yet clear agreement on the technical details of how this would work. Some practitioners said that the rules guiding a person's right to work while they are awaiting the outcome of their asylum application would be complex, with several questions needing consideration. At what point during a person's asylum claim would this right be granted? What percentage of people would realistically be in a position to begin a job after fleeing their homes in search of protection? And what percentage of those who would be prepared for this would be offered a job with sufficient pay to maintain a decent standard of living, without also putting them at risk of destitution or exploitation?

While these questions need to be answered, this should not prevent this policy change from being explored and pursued as a matter of priority.

*"We wouldn't be having this conversation if we had the right to work."*  
[Woman, 35 to 44 age-group, Pakistan]

*"One thing I will always say here is, people seeking asylum deserve the chance to work. If we had the right to work, I don't think we would be here talking about the HO giving us this tiny money, that would not even upkeep a baby that was born yesterday. So, if we had the right to work, I think this would be a very big step because what they are giving us is the money to buy toothbrush and toothpaste not for the personal upkeep of a human being."* [Man, 35 to 44 age-group, Syria]

There has been a significant UK-wide campaign effort to 'Lift the Ban', which urges the UK Government to lift its ban preventing people who are seeking asylum from working. They call for the right to work without restriction<sup>xxxix</sup> once someone has been waiting for six months for a decision. So far, however, this has been unsuccessful, despite the coalition's suggestion that a change to policy could 'benefit the UK economy, through net gains for the Government of £97.8 million per year'.<sup>74</sup>

For one peer researcher, Adnan Aslan, who has a legal background, the right to work is a fundamental human right which is covered under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and, therefore, must be recognised under international law. He states:

<sup>xxxviii</sup> Lift the Ban is a 240-member strong coalition of charities, trade unions, businesses, faith groups and think tanks that campaign to overturn the ban on people seeking asylum being able to work. In October 2020 its petition was signed by more than 180,000 people.

<sup>xxxix</sup> By removing the shortage occupation list.

*“One of the rights that the UDHR covers is that of the right of any human being to work. Article 23 of the UDHR states that ‘1. Everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favourable conditions of work and to protection against unemployment. 2. Everyone, without any discrimination, has the right to equal pay for equal work. 3. Everyone who works has the right to just and favourable remuneration ensuring for himself and his family an existence worthy of human dignity, and supplemented, if necessary, by other means of social protection’. This clearly states that any human being has the right to work and provide for themselves and their family, including people seeking asylum.*

*In addition to this, Article 30 of the UDHR states that ‘Nothing in this Declaration may be interpreted as implying for any State, group or person any right to engage in any activity or to perform any act aimed at the destruction of any of the rights and freedoms set forth herein.’ Article 7 of the UDHR also states that ‘All are equal before the law and are entitled without any discrimination to equal protection of the law. All are entitled to equal protection against any discrimination in violation of this Declaration and against any incitement to such discrimination.’*

*According to these articles, no one, state, group or individual, has the right to take any of these rights away from any person. And every person is equal and should be treated equally in terms of their rights. However, the right to work freely and to the free choice of employment has been taken away from people who are seeking asylum and living in the UK. This will make them feel that the rights that everyone else is enjoying cannot be recognised for them due to their immigration status.*

*As a lawyer, I would recommend that people seeking asylum in the UK should be given the right to work, without which they cannot enjoy their full rights. Furthermore, many people seeking asylum in the UK already have skills and experience which would enable them to be beneficial to the community if they were allowed to work.”*

**Yonas, man, 55 to 64 age-group, from Ethiopia, political asylum claim**

Yonas arrived in the UK in November 2012 to visit his brother who was living in London. While there, he was informed that his wife and mother-in-law were being held by the government in Ethiopia which also issued a warrant for his arrest. Yonas, in his mid-40s at the time, had been a political prisoner as a supporter of an oppositional party and, when he left the country, the government was concerned about his movements. On the advice of his brother and some colleagues, he decided to make a claim for asylum. By not returning to his country, he would appease the government and reduce the risk to his family.

When he had been waiting over a year for a decision, for reasons unrelated to his case, he applied for the right to work, and was eventually granted a permit in June 2015. However, because his asylum ID stated that his right to work was 'restricted' to the shortage occupation list, Yonas was unable to find work for the first few years. It was only after receiving a new ID that stated his right to work as 'permitted' on the shortage occupation list that he began to be invited for interviews and was offered a job. As a result, for nearly two years, Yonas was able to pay his own rent, buy his own food and cover all his own costs. He was outside the asylum support system and he felt that he had significant control over his life. He was issued with a National Insurance number (and therefore paid taxes), and was able to have his own bank account, though he was unable to apply for a driving licence. He raised the question about the real rights of people in his situation and their protection as employees, since he experienced periods when he was not paid on time and felt he was not in a position to take legal action because of his immigration status.

In December 2018, six years after first making his asylum claim, Yonas received his first decision: a refusal. As Yonas was working at that time, he decided to pay £5,000 for a private solicitor. The outcome was no different, however, and he began to consider making an agreement with the Ethiopian Government to return voluntarily. When advised against doing so for his own safety, he decided to continue with his asylum journey.

Things changed drastically for Yonas during the second Covid-19 lockdown when he lost his job. He could no longer afford his rent and was forced to turn to faith charities for support. His NRPF status made it more difficult to find him emergency shelter, and he was made street homeless. For Yonas, this experience of 'laying bare on the street' affected him both psychologically and physically, and he describes this as one of the most difficult periods of his life, and painful to recall.

It was at this low point that a fellow Ethiopian he had met earlier on his asylum journey told him that services in Scotland offered better destitution support for people in the asylum system. Based on that advice, Yonas arrived in Glasgow in November 2020, where he was supported by Safe in Scotland with 24-hour accommodation, food and access to wifi. He receives £30 a week from the Scottish Crisis Fund to cover his other costs. This has given him a safe space from which to read and write, and to pursue his interests. However, he feels he has no autonomy or control over his daily life, and this has been difficult for him to bear.

Having received asylum support, been granted the right to work (and, therefore, been outside the asylum support system) and now being refused and destitute, Yonas has reflected on these different experiences. Having the right to work and being in employment was by far the most productive experience because, as he says, *"The aid received from others... it cripples you as a person, your identity, your personal freedom"*. Working also provided Yonas with the mental and physical stimulation he required, while simultaneously enabling him to build social connections and integrate. It was also a vital means for supporting his family in Ethiopia who had no other source of income.

*"It has crippled me totally, mentally, emotionally and physically, my mind is constantly wandering and physically, it is difficult to fulfil my health needs, to exercise... Emotionally, it leaves you imbalanced, and that's where I am. It is to add pain on top of another pain."*

The experience of being 'a refused asylum seeker' and destitute has been re-traumatising for Yonas. At the same time, he thinks there is always a reason to be optimistic, and that his faith has taught him that. His case is now progressing with a new solicitor who has submitted a fresh claim with additional evidence to ensure Yonas cannot be deported because of the threat to him if he returns to Ethiopia. He is hopeful that tomorrow will bring more positive news.

### 5.3.7 Home Office processes and destitution pressure points within the asylum system

As we have seen so far, people with lived experience told us that their experiences of destitution were often triggered by common problems a person can face when trying to navigate the asylum system and actively engage with their asylum claim.

21 per cent of survey participants who had experienced destitution and all interviewees said that better Home Office procedures could have prevented them from becoming destitute. Issues included: delays in receiving Home Office support; problems with Home Office decision making or refusal to accept evidence; and long waiting times.

While a call for increasing asylum support came out strongly in the qualitative research, only six per cent of survey respondents who had experienced destitution selected Home Office support as something that would have prevented them from becoming destitute. This is mostly likely because, at the time of this research, during the pandemic most people in the asylum system who would otherwise be destitute would have received asylum support from the Home Office, including many who applied for Section 4 support after they received a refusal during the pandemic.

Practitioner interviewees stressed that the threat of destitution was present throughout a person's asylum journey, but that this increases when a person receives a decision about their claim, even if that decision is a positive one. They also highlighted the triggering effect of poor decision making, long waiting times<sup>xxxx</sup> and incompatible timescales for the start and end of support, and the fact that these leave people under the direct threat of destitution. For instance, statistics from the Migration Observatory (2020) show that 36 per cent of cases get a positive initial decision. However this increases to 54 per cent after a person has had a chance to appeal that initial decision.<sup>75</sup> The figures also reveal that the number of asylum applications that received an initial decision within the first six months fell from 87 per cent in 2014 to 20 per cent in 2019, and 22 per cent in 2020.

Research by the British Red Cross has also shown that destitution becomes such a significant risk to people when they receive a decision because of a short move-on period (21 days for a negative decision and 28 days for a positive decision) that is incompatible with the speed at which homelessness and welfare support can kick in, making it very difficult for people to access the essentials within the time allocated to them.<sup>76</sup>

Another trigger point for destitution is when newly granted refugees apply for family reunion, resulting from the high travel costs for which a family gets only limited support<sup>xxxxi</sup> and because of the delays in receiving mainstream support for all family members. Although none of our interviewees had applied for family reunion, according to practitioners from the British Red Cross, the

<sup>xxxx</sup> At the end of March 2021, 66,185 people were waiting for the outcome of their initial claim for asylum. Of these, 50,084 (76 per cent) had been waiting for more than six months, up from 31,516 the same time the previous year (Migration Observatory).

<sup>xxxxi</sup> This was recently reduced to cover the cost of one flight only.

person sponsoring their family for reunion can apply for mainstream support, only once the whole family is in the country, which often leads to people having to borrow money, then leaving them in significant debt that they are unable to repay. They also observed that financial difficulties, and in many cases outright destitution, experienced during the first few months of family reunion may also be a re-traumatising experience for the sponsor if they have already been made destitute at an earlier stage.

There are a few important points to take from these findings:

- ▶ While we have identified the first six months of a person's time in the asylum system as particularly vulnerable due to lack of knowledge, awareness and support networks, we have also found that the longer a person is in the asylum system the more likely they are to experience sustained periods of financial hardship and, subsequently, destitution. This is also because the longer a person is in the asylum system, the more times they are likely to have received a decision, and been required to leave their existing accommodation and welfare support, which has left them at risk of becoming destitute.
- ▶ Many people are left waiting years to receive a decision. The latest statistics show that there are 70,905 applications pending an initial decision, with 76 per cent of those waiting for more than six months for a decision. These delays and poor decision making leave many people vulnerable to experiences of endured financial hardship and destitution. People's access to support is dependent on the status of their asylum claim and their immigration status, and both positive and negative asylum decisions can lead to a person's support being withdrawn. The success rate of asylum appeals in March 2021 was up to 47 per cent, a rate that has been steadily increasing over the last decade (up from 29 per cent in 2010).<sup>77</sup> There is an urgent need for the Home Office to improve its decision making, first time around.
- ▶ High costs of travel, and delays in being able to apply for financial support for the whole family, put people who are finally in a position to be reunited with their family in a difficult financial situation, which also places them at threat of destitution.
- ▶ Long and rigid application processes for asylum support put people at a greater threat of destitution and leave them relying entirely on voluntary and community sector organisations to support them until their asylum support, mainstream welfare support (Universal Credit) or employment begins.
- ▶ A lack of awareness of rights to financial support (from the Home Office and voluntary and community sector organisations) can also put people at greater risk of destitution.

Having reviewed all the evidence from our research and identified the key pressure points in the asylum system, the following section outlines the steps needed to prevent destitution for people in the asylum system.



## 6. Key lessons, recommendations and conclusion

### 6.1 Key lessons in preventing destitution and recommendations

Our research has shown that, across the asylum journey, the factors that can cause destitution are many and varied. It has also highlighted the many ways in which the system could be improved and the incidence of destitution reduced and prevented. But based on these findings, what are the concrete steps that need to be taken to reduce the risk of destitution, and to make people more resilient to it over the course of their asylum journey?

Through our own analysis, as well as the research participants' shared perspectives on the biggest factors leading to destitution, some clear areas emerge as priorities if we are to prevent destitution among people seeking asylum. These broadly fall into the following categories:

- a. Direct impact: changes to the asylum system that would provide sufficient financial and emergency support for people seeking asylum, ensuring they have what they need to avoid becoming destitute
- b. Indirect impact: improvements to the broader conditions of people seeking asylum that ensure they are resilient and can easily access support when they are at risk of destitution

The following recommendations for policymakers are based on the findings from this research, with particular input from peer researchers and participants who have lived experience of the asylum system. Similarly, we recommend that people with lived experience are closely involved in shaping and developing future policy and services on preventing destitution for people in the asylum system.

#### **1. Ensure that asylum support prevents destitution and improves agency and choice in people's daily lives**

According to all of our interviewees, both those seeking asylum and the practitioners working across the sector, the best way to ensure people do not face persistent financial hardship, and as a result destitution, would be to make sure that asylum support payments enable people to meet their costs of living and to prevent the delays people often face in accessing support when they first apply for asylum. Moreover, by supporting people more

significantly with the cost of starting life in the UK and lifting the restriction on cash withdrawal (mainly affecting people on Section 4 support), these steps would provide people with the ability to make their own choices about how and where their money can be spent and to access cash in an emergency.

Connected with asylum support, many interviewees told us of the strain that being moved between different types of asylum support accommodation. This puts severe strain on mental health, and affects the extent to which people can develop a sense of community and support networks that are vital if they are at risk of, or fall into, destitution.

We recommend that the Home Office:

- ▶ Simplifies the asylum support application process and address delays in processing and providing asylum support.
- ▶ Provides an initial cash grant to people entering the asylum support system so they have start-up support to purchase clothing, phones and other essential items.
- ▶ Increases the weekly asylum support allowance to an amount that reflects the real cost of living, and ensure this is provided consistently.
- ▶ Ensures everyone receiving asylum support is provided with financial support in the form of cash, including those receiving support under Section 4.
- ▶ Ensures people are not moved multiple times between asylum accommodation locations without good justification and without providing reasonably timed notice – in recognition of the impact on building and maintaining social and support networks.
- ▶ Reviews the cessations process for asylum support and improves the safety net for move-on periods, for both negative (21 days) and positive (28 days) asylum decisions.

## **2. Make wider Home Office processes and procedures more efficient and trauma-informed**

The impact of Home Office processes and procedures was raised by all our research participants as a key area that directly affects people's experiences of destitution and financial hardship. We have seen that people are particularly vulnerable to destitution when they first arrive in the UK and are applying for support; when they receive a decision on their claim; and also when they apply for family reunion. At these significant transition points there is often little to no support to help people manage these changes, or bridge gaps between different support systems, leaving people vulnerable to destitution and homelessness.

In addition to the recommendations above, we recommend that the Home Office:

- ▶ Provides trauma-informed training to all relevant staff and representatives including its contractors in order to ensure people are treated with compassion and dignity, right from the start, including for example the coach drivers taking people to dispersal areas.
- ▶ Improves and speeds up asylum decision making, recognising the impact that poor quality decision-making and delays can have on the health, wellbeing and financial resilience of those seeking asylum.
- ▶ Ensures the family reunion process adequately supports those being reunited in the UK.<sup>xxxxii</sup>

### **3. Enable people seeking asylum to access good quality information, advice and advocacy early on**

The Scottish Government's own anti-destitution strategy stresses the importance of people seeking asylum having access to quality advice and advocacy, to help them navigate immigration and asylum systems and make informed decisions about their future. In our research, we have also seen the impact on people when this is lacking, including delayed progression of a person's claim, a breakdown in trust and disengagement with the asylum process. Not only can delays mean a person is trapped in the cycle of poverty that so often accompanies the asylum-seeking process, but this can also affect their resilience, meaning they may feel they have fewer places to turn for help, or are less likely to do so.

Access to good quality legal representation is fundamental to the progression of a person's asylum claim. Choosing legal representation was an issue that came up throughout the research, with participants describing the need for better support, more guidance about choosing their legal support, and more information about what to expect from their solicitor and their right to change solicitor.

Community lawyering has become popular as a means of providing legal advice to some of those most vulnerable who are at risk of destitution. Such advice and advocacy support is a major feature of a number of the coalitions formed including, for example, the Humanitarian Project that supported people when Serco threatened lock changes and evictions.<sup>78</sup> These examples have shown that the provision of dignified and stable accommodation is also a fundamental component of these collaborative projects and coalitions.

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<sup>xxxxii</sup> A forthcoming report by the British Red Cross covers this in more detail.

Better access to information, provided at the right time and in an accessible format, was a key factor that people said could have helped them more during their time in the asylum system. This includes rights in the asylum system; the asylum process; and the availability of support. By empowering people with information they are then able to navigate the asylum system successfully, thereby enabling people to regain a sense of agency and control and build the resilience they need when faced with prolonged financial hardship and destitution.

- ▶ The Scottish Government should invest in and pilot a peer support system for people seeking asylum in Scotland. This would ensure new arrivals, and those who are more vulnerable at any stage of the asylum process, are able to access support, guidance and friendship from people who have shared experiences of navigating the asylum system.
- ▶ The Scottish Government should continue to invest in collaborative advice and advocacy projects. This must include funding for high-quality legal advice and safe and dignified accommodation, which must be built into any model of holistic support.
- ▶ The Home Office and its providers should provide regular and personalised follow up information and guidance to people in the asylum system, in recognition of the effects of complex trauma and the need to allow time for people to settle into their new environment.

#### **4. Provide people with the skills and opportunities to support themselves financially**

Every person interviewed recognised the right to work as fundamental to preventing destitution. Many believed that destitution was intrinsic to the UK asylum system because of the restriction on work. Being prevented from working, especially for long periods of time, can have a detrimental impact on people's skills and on their long-term job prospects, and, consequently, increases their risk of destitution in the future.<sup>79</sup> For the practitioners we spoke to, the questions around how the right to work would play out in practice, necessitates efforts in developing opportunities to enable people to retain and develop their skills through other avenues.

We recommend that the Home Office:

- ▶ Automatically grants people the right to work if they have been waiting for longer than six months for a decision on either their initial asylum claim or following the submission of further evidence. This right should not be constrained to jobs included on the shortage occupation list.

The Scottish Government's anti-destitution strategy highlights how having the right to work may be a pathway towards preventing destitution. However, it acknowledges that there are other potential barriers to employment, including language barriers and skills recognition. As a result, it prioritises inclusion by supporting 'people and communities to share and build their skills, knowledge and experience'<sup>80</sup>, through improving access to education, volunteering opportunities, employment and digital access.

In order to ensure people have access to such opportunities for skills development, we recommend that the Scottish Government:

- ▶ Facilitates collaboration across public sector and third sector organisations to provide improved volunteering opportunities, with realistic application processes and training requirements across a variety of fields of work.
- ▶ Provides more clarity around people's right to access education and their eligibility for funding opportunities at different stages of the asylum process. This information needs to be accessible to both practitioners and people with lived experience. In particular, the Scottish Government should clarify that SAAS funding is not public funds, and therefore, it should be accessible to those who otherwise meet the eligibility requirements, even if they have NRPF status.

### **5. Improve emergency provisions and support for people with no recourse to public funds (NRPF)**

A significant part of the work of many of the practitioners we interviewed focuses on the rules and regulations around NRPF as this puts significant restrictions on the support that can be provided, particularly suitable emergency housing to people who would otherwise be street homeless. While NRPF rules are set by the UK Government, there is a role that the Scottish Government can play in improving the provision of support and accommodation for people seeking asylum who are based in Glasgow.

The Scottish Government is piloting the provision of emergency cash assistance to vulnerable groups identified as at risk of destitution, as an action from its anti-destitution strategy. This includes people with NRPF status and consists of cash grants to those eligible, currently delivered in partnership with the British Red Cross. The Scottish Government should make this provision permanent, connecting it to a wider package of crisis support and including it in a review of the Scottish Welfare Fund scheduled to take place in 2021-22. The Scottish Welfare Fund is counted as public funds and, therefore, is inaccessible to people with NRPF status.

Organisations in Glasgow, for example Glasgow Night Shelter<sup>xxxxiii</sup>, have transformed their services into 24-hour accommodation. However, the shortage of appropriate housing in Glasgow, increasing costs and limited funding make sustaining these services and offering more services like this very difficult. This is particularly the case with the provision of emergency housing for women, with Ubuntu Women Shelter in Glasgow being one of the only places in Scotland that offers from 72 hours to one week of emergency accommodation for women who are in crisis because of the UK's immigration system. Although there is movement within the Scottish Government towards finding alternative approaches, for example with the recent government agreement with the Scottish Green party that places social housing as a priority<sup>81</sup>; the ending the use of night shelters; and the suspension of the local connection rules, there are still significant steps required to support and provide long-term funding for implementing community housing models to support people with NRPF.

People in the asylum system who are living in Scotland can be added to the social housing list before they receive a decision on their asylum claim but this is not well known. This places them in a stronger position if and when they receive a positive decision. Removing the two weeks it takes to be added to the waiting list at point of receiving their positive decision, reduces the length of time people experience destitution at this stage in the asylum process. This is also an approach that can be taken by local authorities and social housing providers across the UK.

Therefore, we recommend that the Scottish Government:

- ▶ Makes the provision of cash grants for vulnerable people at risk of destitution, including those with NRPF – as included in the anti-destitution strategy – permanent, and links this with a wider package of crisis support in the forthcoming review of the Scottish Welfare Fund.
- ▶ Introduces national asylum seeker discounts including expanding concessionary public transport schemes.
- ▶ Works with COSLA to fully implement and adequately resource their joint Ending Destitution Together strategy 2021-2024 in particular by working throughout with the refugee and homelessness charity sector's Fair Way Scotland collaboration, which seeks to design out migrant destitution in Scotland. This must be done by providing accommodation-based holistic services to those at risk of destitution or in homelessness predicaments.

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<sup>xxxxiii</sup> Now Safe in Scotland.

- ▶ Promotes, sources and invests in greater provision of suitable housing within the community. This should include specific provision for women in need of emergency accommodation.
- ▶ Raises awareness of the provisions for people seeking asylum who are living in Scotland to be added to the social housing list before they receive a decision on their asylum claim. This would alleviate some of the challenges to positive transitions.

### **6. Increase access to health services, in particular mental health provision for people seeking asylum, recognising the high levels of mental health need and complex trauma among this group**

People in the asylum system are likely to suffer from poor physical and mental health and to have experienced complex trauma. Despite this, healthcare provision and mental health support can be difficult to access, with many who took part in this research saying they had waited a long time for support, in one case for as long as a year. The Scottish Government has included a trauma-informed approach in its anti-destitution strategy and has committed to improving access to mental health services for adults and children with NRPf status. This includes improving understanding, removing the barriers people face in accessing public services, and increasing funding for services. This funding should support permanent partnerships that offer comprehensive and long-term support where and when it is most needed.

The Scottish Government should:

- ▶ Publish a plan setting out actions that are being taken across local authorities, government and the NHS to improve access to GP practices and mental health services, and to engage with the third sector.
- ▶ Prioritise funding specifically aimed at improving access to mental health services for those with NRPf and, in particular, those who have experienced complex trauma and have to find their way through the complex asylum process.

### **7. Improve access to support and services provided by the voluntary and community sector**

The voluntary and community sector is vital for supporting people through the asylum system, and preventing destitution. A number of these organisations have provided practical support, including cash support, plugging the gaps in a lack of provision of local welfare assistance which can be a lifeline for people at risk of or experiencing destitution.

Voluntary and community sector organisations were praised throughout this research for the central role they play in supporting people who are seeking asylum. For many people, there would be no safety net if it were not for the voluntary and community sector. Despite this, people told us there could be better awareness around the support available, eligibility criteria and the process for accessing support.

We recommend that the voluntary and community sector works towards:

- ▶ Better coordination across the sector in Scotland so that there is improved information and clarity on the support available for people at different stages of the asylum process.
- ▶ Consistency in the quality of support provided by staff and ensuring that staff are well informed and well trained.
- ▶ Mapping and identifying unmet needs to ensure that future service development meets the needs of people in the asylum system, in particular those facing destitution.

## 6.2 Conclusion: building a model of prevention

Our findings show that destitution can be experienced at various points throughout a person's asylum journey and that financial hardship is persistently experienced by many. This leads to a high level of dependency on the voluntary and community sector to meet people's essential needs, even when they are in receipt of Home Office asylum support. Without the support of this sector, people in the asylum system would face much higher levels of destitution. However, insufficient and short-term funding mean that this sector struggles to meet people's needs, especially of those facing destitution who have NRPF and no access to mainstream homelessness shelter and support.

While we found that building social connections and support networks in their community over time helps people to feel more settled, we also found that the longer people are in the asylum system waiting for a decision, the more likely they are to experience repeated episodes of destitution, and to feel like their lives are wasting away. This points to shortcomings in Home Office policies and procedures, including poor decision making, long processing and waiting times, and inadequate asylum support, leaving people in a cycle of poverty and destitution. Privately contracted Home Office service providers were also found to often provide substandard services that do not sufficiently meet the essential needs of the people in their care.

Instead, what people told us they needed was compassion and a comprehensive package of support when they arrive at their dispersal area. This includes material support to help them start their lives in the UK; and a peer-led programme that would help them to understand their rights, and navigate the asylum system and life in their new place of refuge. This would help them to build their resilience and become more independent, with agency over their daily lives. When so much feels like it is left up to chance, from the situation in their home country to the decisions made by the Home Office, it is all the more important that the support, advice and advocacy that people receive are not. Instead, those in the asylum system must be able to rely on a comprehensive support system that identifies and responds effectively to their individual and complex needs. This should be throughout their time in the asylum system, but particularly at the pressure points identified in this research. By equipping people with the tools they need to manage the inherent difficulties of seeking asylum in the UK, people in the asylum system can play an active role in the model of prevention that is already building across Glasgow's community, and in the UK more broadly.



# 7. Appendix

## Seminars/workshops attended

Seminars/workshops attended
1. Lift the Ban coalition event
2. Roof Coalition meetings
3. GLADAN meeting
4. Leaders event on refugee activism, organised by Govan Community Project
5. Session on community lawyering, organised by Just Right Scotland
6. NHS/Maryhill Integration Network familiarisation session for people working with refugees and asylum seekers
7. British Red Cross policy and operational team meetings

## Interviewees with lived experience of the asylum system

Gender	
Man	16
Woman	10

Country of origin	
DRC	1
Egypt	1
El Salvador	1
Ethiopia	2
Gambia	1
Iraq	1
Kenya	1
Kurdistan	1
Libya	1
Malaysia	1
Morocco	1
Namibia	1
Nigeria	2
Pakistan	3
Sierra Leone	5
St Vincent & The Grenadines	1
Syria	1
Zimbabwe	1

Family status	
With child	11
No child	15

Interpreter	
No	21
Yes (languages: Spanish, Kurdish Sorani)	2
Peer (Arabic)	3

Status	
First claim – awaiting decision	7
First claim – awaiting initial interview	2
No claim made yet due to Covid-19	1
Appeal/fresh claim* – awaiting decision (plus Covid-19 delays)	7
Multiple fresh claims submitted*	9
*Trafficking/torture grounds added to claim	3

Year of arrival	No. of years waiting	
2021	1	Under 1
2020	6	1
2019	7	2
2018	2	3
2017	4	4
2015	1	6
2012	2	9
2006	2	15
2002	1	Nearly 20

Marital status	
Married	9
Single	14
Other	3

## Practitioner interviewees

Practitioner interviewees	
1. GLADAN representative	
2. Glasgow University researcher	
3. Govan Community Project employee	
4. MIN/NHS familiarisation session lead	
5. NACCOM researcher	
6. Positive Action in Housing employee	
7. Safe in Scotland employee	
8. Scottish Government civil servant	

## Organisations that supported the recruitment of interviewees

Organisations that supported the recruitment of interviewees	
1. Peer researchers	5
2. Scottish Refugee Council	4
3. Safe in Scotland	4
4. Govan Community Project	4
5. Survey (identified as isolated)	2
6. Refugee Survival Trust	2
7. VOICES Network	1
8. Other	4

## Survey sample

Gender		
Man	47.40%	64
Woman	48.90%	66
Prefer not to say	2.20%	3
Other	1.50%	2

Country of origin		
Nigeria	12.60%	17
Syria	9.70%	13
Zimbabwe	8.14%	11
Sudan	7.40%	10
Prefer not to say	5.18%	7
Iran	4.44%	6
Kenya	3.70%	5
Namibia	3.70%	5
Pakistan	3.70%	5
Iraq	2.96%	4
Egypt	2.22%	3
Sierra Leone	2.22%	3
Yemen	2.22%	3
Afghanistan	1.48%	2
DRC	1.48%	2
Malawi	1.48%	2
Palestine	1.48%	2
Other (not stated)	8.88%	12
Other (stated but only one response per country)	17.02%	23

Marital status		
Married	39.30%	53
Single	38.50%	52
Divorced	6.70%	9
Civil partnership	4.40%	6
Widowed	1.50%	2
Other	3.70%	5
Prefer not to say	5.90%	8

Age		
18-24	10.40%	14
25-34	28.90%	39
35-44	42.20%	57
45-54	13.30%	18
55-64	5.20%	7

Year of first asylum claim		
2020	24.60%	33
2019	18.50%	25
2018	8.88%	12
2017	3.70%	5
2016	2.20%	3
2015	2.96%	4
2014	2.20%	3
2013	2.96%	4
2012 or before	7.40%	10
Prefer not to say/other	26.60%	36

Dependants		
No	35.60%	48
Yes, children ages 17 or under (in UK)	41.50%	56
Yes, children ages 17 or under (not in UK)	14.80%	20
Prefer not to say	8.10%	11
Current status		
Awaiting outcome of asylum application	37.00%	50
Fresh claim	17.00%	23
Refugee status	14.10%	19
Application refused and awaiting outcome of appeal	11.10%	15
Leave to remain	8.90%	12
Application refused and I don't have any rights of appeal	5.20%	7
Prefer not to say	3.70%	5
Don't know	2.20%	3
I have not made my application yet	0.70%	1
Dispersal area		
Glasgow	60.80%	82
London	4.40%	6
Bradford	1.48%	2
Greater Manchester	1.48%	2
Liverpool	1.48%	2
Stockton on Tees	1.48%	2
Prefer not to say	5.18%	7
Other (not stated)	13.33%	18
Other (stated but only one person)	10.37%	14

## Organisations asked to disseminate survey

Organisations asked to disseminate survey
1. Asylum Seeker Housing Project (ASH) and the women's group (WASH)
2. British Red Cross Glasgow Operations Team
3. Central and West Integration Network
4. Community Info Source
5. Glasgow Asylum Destitution Action Network (GLADAN)
6. Glasgow Campaign Welcomes Refugees
7. Safe in Scotland
8. Glasgow Refugee and Asylum Seeker Solidarity (GRASS)
9. Govan Community Project
10. Maryhill Integration Network
11. Migrants Contribute
12. MORE (Migrants Organising for Rights and Empowerment)
13. North Glasgow Integration Network
14. Positive Action in Housing
15. Refugees for Justice
16. Roof coalition network
17. Refugee Survival Trust
18. South East Integration Network
19. Scottish Refugee Council
20. Stand up to Racism Scotland
21. Ubuntu's Women's Shelter
22. Unity Centre
23. VOICES Network

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**Refugee Survival Trust**  
Floor 3, Robertson House  
152 Bath Street  
Glasgow  
G2 4TB

**Tel: 0141 353 5602**

**Email: [info@rst.org.uk](mailto:info@rst.org.uk)**

**Website: [www.rst.org.uk](http://www.rst.org.uk)**

**British Red Cross**  
44 Moorfields  
London  
EC2Y 9AL

**Tel: 0344 871 11 11**

**Email: [advocacy@redcross.org.uk](mailto:advocacy@redcross.org.uk)**

**Website: [www.redcross.org.uk](http://www.redcross.org.uk)**