

LGBT+ NEW SCOTS

COMMUNITY CONSULTATION

How Scotland can improve opportunities for integration for LGBT+ people seeking asylum



Introduction

LGBT Health and Wellbeing, in collaboration with the Scottish Refugee Council, held a community consultation event with LGBTQ+ New Scots¹ who access our LGBTQ+ Refugee Project. The consultation took place on the 1st of February 2024 and was attended by approximately 60 LGBTQ+ people with experience of seeking asylum here in the UK.

We brought our LGBTQ+ New Scots community members together to discuss the Scottish Government's [newest iteration of the New Scots Integration Strategy](#), published March 2024. The consultation event provided all LGBTQ+ people with lived experience of the asylum process the opportunity to share their views on what they believe is important when supporting them to integrate and live well in Scotland. Attendees highlighted opportunities for the Scottish government, local authorities and third sector support organisations to improve the experiences of LGBTQ+ New Scots and enable them to live full lives as valued members of our communities and society.

The consultation event focused on [matters devolved to the Scottish Parliament](#), under the [Scotland Act \(1998\)](#). Devolved matters discussed included: advice and information, housing, employment and welfare, language, sport and leisure, legal advice and support, education, health, arts and culture and community development and social connections. In instances where reserved matters arose in discussions, community members discussed ways in which they believed the Scottish government might be able to alleviate distress whilst remaining within devolved competency.



Disclaimer: photographs used are stock images of our LGBTQ+ New Scots community and **are not** images of those who took part in this particular consultation event.

¹ We use the term LGBTQ+ New Scots as this is the term those who access our LGBTQ+ Refugee Project have told us they prefer. LGBTQ+ New Scots includes all LGBTQ+ people with experience of the asylum system living in Scotland, irrespective of the status of their asylum claim.

Approach

The consultation event began with a presentation by a representative from the Scottish Refugee Council which covered the principles of the New Scots Integration Strategy, its aims and the role of those with lived experience in shaping its priorities. Attendees then split into five focus groups – guided by LGBT Health and Wellbeing staff and Scottish Refugee Council staff – to share their views on how LGBTQ+ people seeking asylum can be better supported by the Scottish Government, local authorities and others throughout their journey from arrival to integration.

Contributions were anonymously noted by staff throughout the discussion. All findings from the focus group discussions were collated after the session, then thematically analysed by our National Policy Lead to inform this consultation report.² LGBT Health and Wellbeing staff present at the consultation event reviewed analysis to ensure findings within this report accurately depicted conversations that took place on the day.

Throughout the session, the importance of involving those with lived experience in decision making processes (safely and respectfully) was stressed by many of our community members who felt that their experiences are often disregarded. This Report aims to put forward the views of LGBTQ+ New Scots whom we support and shares priorities they believe will help to improve the injustices and forced hardships they face.

Findings

Our community members touched upon many issues which impact their ability to live well, freely and to integrate into their communities here in Scotland. We comprised views and experiences shared by LGBT+ New Scots into seven key themes: **Lack of support on arrival to Scotland, the importance of legal advice and support, Health, Education, Cultural integration, Transport, Collaborative working between Governments.**

Lack of support on arrival

A common theme discussed by LGBTQ+ New Scots who attended the session was the absence of meaningful support upon arrival to Scotland. One group discussed the commonalities of their arrival to Scotland, and the ways in which they were met with suspicion and hostility by police and airport officials. One focus group highlighted that for those from countries where there is legitimate mistrust in the police (due to police corruption, violence and queerphobic policing and laws) it can be difficult to have trust in the police upon arrival in the UK. One individual highlighted that the “authoritarian and unwelcoming” approach instils fear in the individual, and limits discourse. Everyone in this focus group stated that their arrival to Scotland was awful. Community members used words such as “judgmental” “cold” “unsafe” and “not trauma informed” to frame their experiences on arrival. Actions (by police) such as zip locking luggage bags and

² Findings were shared with Scottish Refugee Council and the Scottish Government prior to the publication of this Report (and the New Scots Integration Strategy 2024).

having their personal items taken from them added to the fear experienced by our community members, as did the use of language such as “detained”.

Such hostility had significant negative impact on our community members, who had committed no crimes, and were exercising their legal right to seek asylum as per the [1951 Refugee Convention](#).

Individuals who took part in discussions also highlighted the impact that trauma can have on the processing of information upon arrival. One group highlighted that the information received was not always accessible and that the high level/vague nature of the information provided to them made accessing local services difficult. One community member shared with us that their experience of trying to navigate complex systems without support, in a language that is not their first language, had significant negative impact on their mental wellbeing. When talking about their experience they said “I am so depressed by everything”, recognising the toll the stress was having on their mental wellbeing. Others in the group agreed, and emphasised there needs to be more support in this area.



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Relatedly, LGBTQ+ New Scots highlighted the importance of all those working in the public sector, and those offering support in the third sector, understanding the experiences of LGBTQ+ New Scots, and the particular barriers they face. experiences of systemic homophobia, biphobia, transphobia, stigma, hate crimes, violence, and persecution by governments and police forces have significant negative impact on the health and wellbeing of individuals. They also face significant barriers to healthcare, LGBTQ+ affirming mental wellbeing support, effective legal support, adequate and LGBTQ+ safe housing.

³ To read more about LGBTQ+ New Scots experiences in Housing here in Scotland see our Report “Experiences of LGBTQ+ asylum seekers and refugees in Scotland: Housing, houselessness, hotel detention and impact.” <https://www.lgbthealth.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Refugee-Report-Final-E-Copy.pdf>

Our community members also discussed the lack of information on LGBTQ+ affirming or specific support services made available to them upon their arrival. LGBTQ+ New Scots shared that they became aware of LGBTQ+ specialised support via informal networks, from friends and from search engines such as Google. Some added that they would have hugely benefited from support from LGBT Health and Wellbeing earlier, but were not aware of the LGBT+ Refugee Project until later on in their asylum journey. There was shared support within more than one focus group for ensuring that information on LGBTQ+ specific support organisations, and LGBT Health and Wellbeing's LGBT+ Refugee Project is included in the Scottish Government's Welcome Packs. One of our community members said "I want to find someone to help me that I know is an LGBT+ person or service. Someone who understands me." There were many suggestions from our community members, one of which included the development of an LGBTQ+ Hub for New Scots where they are signposted to and can receive support.

Importance of legal advice and support

There were a mix of experiences and views shared by our community members with regards to legal advice and support available, and the ways in which this information was (or was not) shared with them.

One focus group suggested it would be extremely helpful to be provided with information about asylum seeker's rights to legal assistance and what this actually means for the individual. Others agreed, adding that being provided information on finding a solicitor, and sourcing an LGBTQ+ friendly solicitor with experience in LGBT+ asylum claims, would help massively and lift significant stress from community members. The importance of LGBTQ+ friendly and competent solicitors was something the community termed "very important".

Some of our community members shared with us that they found legal support to be inconsistent across Scotland. Within one focus group, multiple community members shared that they had had more than one solicitor, and the legal support received was very different ("better" or "worse") each time. A different focus group shared that the quality of support you receive can be dependent on "who you find" their experience, and how LGBTQ+ informed they are. Another individual shared that their experience with their solicitor is "chaotic" and that they have no idea what is going on with their claim. Such engagements can be extremely distressing for our community members, particularly when there is threat of forced removal to Rwanda ([deemed unsafe for LGBTQ+ people by Human Rights Watch](#)). It was agreed by our community members that support should be more consistent, and effective communication should be prioritised to ensure that individuals are well informed on the progress of their case.

Our community also highlighted the lack of information shared on arrival highlighting their rights and entitlements as asylum seekers living in Scotland. It was discussed that this should be independent from the Home Office official documents, and focused on ensuring the community are aware of their rights, and how to source support if their rights are being violated.

Health

Our community members emphasised significant barriers to accessing healthcare as people seeking asylum. One community member highlighted the barriers to accessing healthcare and provided an example of them being unable to register at their GP in person (they were turned away). Due to having no mobile phone or access to the internet, they struggled for a significant length of time until they were able to access a friend's device to register online.

A different focus group also stressed the difficulty in accessing a GP, highlighting that delays to registering with a doctor's surgery can have an impact on a person's asylum claim. Community members stated that often a medical examination/evidence is required as part of an asylum claim, difficulty registering with a GP or accessing healthcare can really "slow down" the process. It was added that there had been instances where medical evidence needed to support community members asylum claims had not arrived in time, which had the potential to delay a person's claim.

Our community members also touched upon the complexities of attending doctors' appointments without a translator. One focus group highlighted that information is often missed, and the experience can feel stressful when there isn't clear communication understood by both parties (the individual, and the practitioner). LGBTQ+ New Scots felt that it was important to have access to interpreters to accompany them to significant appointments (including those outwith hospital/medical settings) and emphasised that it was an important access requirement.



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LGBTQ+ New Scots in multiple focus groups also touched upon the unaffordability of gym and leisure facilities here in Scotland for those with limited income or no recourse to public funds. Community members shared that the cost of a monthly

gym membership is often more than ¼ of their monthly income.⁴ The benefit of exercise to not only physical health, but wellbeing was recognised by LGBT+ New Scots who stated they would welcome introduction of free or subsidised access to gym and leisure facilities.

Education

LGBT+ New Scots stressed that so many people arrive here in Scotland with qualifications and experience that the asylum system deteriorates (by not allowing individuals to work or study whilst their claim is being processed). Community members told us that qualifications they have earned in their home countries are often not accepted here in Scotland, and that options for study are often at a lower level than qualifications they already hold. Options for study are limited, leaving individuals in a state of limbo whilst seeking asylum. One focus group expressed their support for “professional placements” for asylum seekers, to allow them to exercise their skills and knowledge, and engage in the workforce whilst waiting on their asylum claim being processed.

A different group discussed the importance of improving access to education for New Scots, and discussed possibilities on how access could be widened. One community member suggested entrance exams for particular fields (allowing those whose qualifications cannot be used here in Scotland to have equitable access to higher education).

The importance of access to English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) courses to help community members navigate life in Scotland, engaging with services and systems, and integration into communities. Access to ESOL was highlighted as a priority for community members in one of our focus groups.

Cultural integration

It was recognised by our community that there are many barriers to integration here in Scotland. One group highlighted the obscurity of the importance the Home Office places on LGBTQ+ New Scots integrating into LGBTQ+ communities to “prove” their LGBTQ+ identity. One group termed this “weird” as of course LGBTQ+ people can have straight and cis-gendered friends. It was agreed there needs to be more opportunity to integrate safely and comfortably, by choice.

Our community members also touched upon the difficulty of integrating into communities when they can be removed by the Home Office to another part of the UK with no notice, at any moment. LGBTQ+ New Scots recognised this was outwith the control of the Scottish Government, but stressed that it presented a significant barrier to building relationships and bonds within communities.

One group also discussed the financial barriers to cultural integration, highlighting that transport is expensive and many events or galleries have an associated cost. Those with no recourse to public funds often cannot afford to engage in cultural activities. One individual highlighted that there are many great events hosted by third-sector organisations which are free, but these are infrequent and still require the cost of bus travel.

⁴ As per the Gov.uk website, individuals seeking asylum receive £49.18 per week in cash support, or £8.86 if your assigned accommodation provides meals: <https://www.gov.uk/asylum-support/what-youll-get>.

Transport

It was highlighted by many in attendance that the unaffordability of transport is a barrier to healthcare, mental health support, engaging in social activities, accessing food support and cultural integration. Our community members shared their overwhelming support for the extension of free bus travel for asylum seekers here in Scotland, recognising that by providing free transport to asylum seekers, financial barriers to the aforementioned issues can be lessened significantly.

Collaborative working between Governments

There were many instances where community members highlighted issues which fell outwith the Scottish Government's devolved competence. LGBTQ+ New Scots highlighted that in these instances, the Scottish Government should strive to work collaboratively, and assert pressure on, the UK Government to improve the experiences of people seeking asylum in Scotland. These issues included:

- Improving housing conditions for those seeking asylum
 - Ensuring that LGBTQ+ affirming support and information is provided to LGBTQ+ people seeking asylum on arrival
 - Ensuring services supporting LGBTQ+ people seeking asylum are LGBTQ+ informed and affirming
 - Improving access to work and study opportunities for New Scots whilst they wait on their asylum claim being processed
 - Improving the service delivered by Migrant Help
- Working to improve communication between governments related to both family reunion and relocation



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Recommendations

The following recommendations were developed from the priority areas LGBTQ+ New Scots identified within their focus groups.

1. Improve understanding of experiences of (and barriers faced by) New Scots claiming asylum due to their LGBTQ+ identity. This should apply to those within the public and third sector, and particularly those who work with people seeking asylum

There needs to be improved understanding of the significant trauma experienced by LGBTQ+ people seeking asylum, and the barriers to safety and access to services and support that they face whilst living here in Scotland. It's critical that those working in healthcare, mental wellbeing support services, local councils and third sector organisations can respond appropriately to the needs of LGBTQ+ people seeking asylum.

2. Develop additional resources to include in the New Scots Welcome Pack which are LGBTQ+ affirming and provide information on LGBTQ+ support services available here in Scotland

It's crucial that LGBTQ+ people seeking asylum receive support from individuals and organisations who are LGBTQ+ competent and affirming to support them throughout their journey claiming asylum and integrating into society (and our LGBTQ+ community) as an LGBTQ+ New Scot.

3. Increase diverse opportunities for work experience and volunteering for New Scots awaiting the decision of their asylum claim

The community members we support have an impressive range of knowledge and skills. It's crucial that they are afforded opportunities to utilise these, and to gain new skills.

4. Improve access to sport and leisure for LGBTQ+ New Scots

Spaces should be LGBTQ+ affirming, and free to access for all.

5. Extend free bus travel to those seeking asylum here in Scotland

This has the potential to make a significant positive impact on the lives of all New Scots. Free bus travel would encourage and support cultural integration and travel within Scotland, allow New Scots to travel to support appointments, and help to alleviate the forced poverty associated with seeking asylum in the UK.



lgbthealth.org.uk

Scotland's health and wellbeing charity for LGBTQ+ adults (16+)

We welcome the entire diversity of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community, including non-binary, queer, intersex, asexual people and all identities under the LGBTQIA+ community - this includes those questioning their sexuality or gender identity, or who do not use labels for either.

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