



Refugee Council

Refugees without refuge

Findings from a survey of newly recognised refugees

September 2017



SUPPORTING AND
EMPOWERING
REFUGEES



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Summary

In April and May 2017, the Refugee Council conducted a survey of refugees who had been granted refugee status since 2016 and had used our integration services. The survey was commissioned by the Guardian. A total of 54 people participated in the survey by telephone and answered questions about their experiences when they were new refugees, particularly in relation to documentation, accommodation, employment and welfare benefits.

Key findings:

- The majority (32) of respondents received their Biometric Residence Permit within two weeks of being granted refugee status. However, 13 people waited for six weeks or more to receive this vital piece of identification which can prevent newly recognised refugees from being able to access services and accommodation.
- 12 people who had been receiving asylum support waited more than four weeks for their National Insurance number.
- Only one person had a job at the end of the 28 day move on period. This is not surprising given that most people seeking asylum are not permitted to work, may not have key documents in place, and be focused on securing accommodation.
- 27 people reported difficulties in opening a bank account.
- Most of these newly recognised refugees were forced to rely on charities, friends and family, and foodbanks once their asylum support payments were terminated as Home Office support dropped away and employment had not been secured.
- None of the people who were living in asylum support accommodation had managed to find secure accommodation by the time they were evicted at the end of the move on period.
- Of the 54 respondents to the survey more than half; 31, slept rough or in a hostel or night shelter in the period after they were granted refugee status.
- 30 people reported feeling uncomfortable about relying on others for food, money or accommodation, and 12 said they felt unsafe.
- Many respondents reported negative feelings after being granted refugee status, and one reported multiple suicide attempts.
- Participants reported high levels of loneliness and isolation.

Key recommendations

1. Where an application has been made for welfare benefits within the 28 days move on period, the Home Office should not cease asylum support until the first payment has been made, including where that payment is a short term benefit advance.
2. The Home Office should ensure that relevant documentation is received by refugees at the same time as they are informed of their status.
3. Government guidance to banks should advise them what documents are issued to refugees and others with leave to remain in the country so that they are encouraged to recognise them as evidence of identity.
4. Bank staff should also be familiarised with the types of ID refugees will carry. Compliance with this guidance should be monitored, possibly by the British Banking Association.
5. The Department for Communities and Local Government should provide adequate funding to local authorities and accompanying guidance to enable newly recognised refugees who are not considered priority housing need to benefit from rent deposit schemes.

Introduction

In April and May 2017, the Refugee Council conducted a survey with refugees who had been granted refugee status and had used our integration services since 2016. The survey was commissioned by the Guardian.

The survey questions covered issues relating to the refugees' experiences since being granted refugee status. This included questions about documentation, accommodation, employment and welfare benefits, all of which have been identified in our previous research as being areas where newly recognised refugees can face difficulties.¹

Profile of sample

A total of 54 people were surveyed, who had come from 17 different countries.² The sample consisted of 48 men and 6 women and their ages ranged from 21 to 57 years old. Interviews were conducted in Amharic, Arabic, English and Tigrinya. The majority (30) of respondents lived in London at the point they were granted refugee status, and 21 were outside London in: Birmingham, Bristol, Cardiff, Glasgow, Halifax, Lancashire, Liverpool, Middlesex, Newcastle, Newport, Sheffield, Swansea and Teeside.

Asylum support

People seeking asylum are entitled to apply for accommodation. To qualify for this support, they must meet a destitution threshold which was defined by the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999.³

Section 95 support can take the following forms: subsistence payments only; accommodation on a no-choice basis only, or; accommodation on a no-choice basis and subsistence support. The subsistence payment rates in 2017 are £36.95 per week. Once a person receives refugee status, they are told that the asylum support they are receiving from the Home Office will cease in 28 days. This is known as the 'grace' or 'move on' period – originally presumably because the government expected that the newly recognised refugee will be able to secure housing and income in this timeframe.

Eleven of the refugees we spoke to were not in receipt of asylum support when waiting for their decision. Of those who were supported by the Home Office, 22 received accommodation and subsistence money, and 22 received subsistence money only (meaning they had been living in they had found themselves). This means 22 will have faced eviction by the Home Office at the end of the 28 period and 44 will have had their financial support terminated at the end of the move on period.

Biometric Residence Permit

The Biometric Residence Permit (BRP) is a government issued identity document given to people who are granted leave to be in the UK, including as a refugee. The BRP includes information such as their name, date and place of birth, a digital photo of their face, their fingerprints, their signature, their immigration status and conditions of stay as well as their eligibility for mainstream services such as free NHS services and benefits.

For newly recognised refugees, the BRP is often the only form of identification they will have and the only one they are required to have. Many refugees will no longer have their passports. This means the BRP can be vital for newly recognised refugees to prove their identity and entitlements to statutory services, benefits, employment, accommodation and bank accounts. Any delays in receiving it can therefore have an impact on an individual's ability to secure an income and accommodation once their asylum support is terminated.

Participants were asked how soon they received their BRP after they received refugee status.

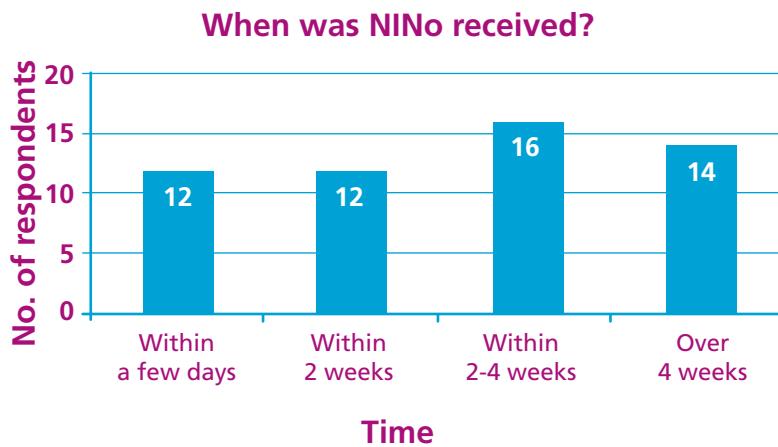
Approx. length of time	No. of respondents
Within a few days	19
Within 2 weeks	13
Within 2-4 weeks	6
4 – 5 weeks	1
6 weeks	5
8 weeks	4
3 months	2
Over 6 months	1
About a year	1
Don't know	2

The majority of the sample received their BRP within two weeks (32) and a further six received it within the four weeks. For 13 people, there was a wait of six weeks or over which could cause refugees many difficulties in being able to access services that they are entitled to.

National Insurance Number

National Insurance numbers (NINos) are crucial for gaining employment and accessing social welfare through the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). In order to apply for welfare benefits, a person has to show that they have a NINO or that they will be eligible for the allocation of one.

Survey respondents were asked how long it took to get their National Insurance number.



The later the NINO is received, the longer it will take to apply for, or be in receipt of benefits. Of those waiting over four weeks, 12 had been in receipt of asylum support and therefore are likely to have had their payments terminated before they received their NINO.

Employment

Given the fact that most people seeking asylum are not permitted to work, they may be without key documents and face losing their accommodation in 28 days, it is not surprising that there were extremely low levels of employment among the sample at the end of the move on period. In this sample, only one person had a job. Another was on job training for six weeks, but was not in paid employment at the time the move on period ended. Two people had become full-time students.

Bank accounts

In order to receive benefits payments, people ordinarily need a bank account for them to be paid into. It used to be possible for payments to be made through a Simple Payment card, but this service has recently been discontinued.

Opening a bank account should be a straightforward and fair process open to all who meet the criteria set by financial institutions. However, many newly recognised refugees face difficulties in doing so.⁴

While 49 of the 54 participants had successfully opened a bank account, 27 reported difficulties in doing so for the following reasons:

Problems	No. of respondents
No proof of address	18
No proof of income	13
ID not recognised	12

At a point when refugees are about to lose their accommodation and may face delays in receiving documentation, there is a high likelihood that people will encounter these problems. There is also a difficulty in banks requiring an income to open an account, and the Department for Work and Pensions requiring a bank account in order to supply that income. Three respondents stated that a charity wrote a letter for them to support their application for an account.

Welfare benefits

Given the difficulties newly recognised refugees face in terms of finding employment quickly, it is likely that most people will rely on welfare benefits to support themselves when their asylum support is terminated.

Most survey participants applied for welfare benefits, predominantly Jobseekers Allowance. The responses to the question 'Which benefits did you apply for?' are displayed in the table below. As people can apply for more than one type of benefit, the numbers exceed the size of the sample.

Type of benefit	No. of respondents
Jobseekers Allowance	50
Housing Benefit	14
Employment and Support Allowance	4
Child benefit	2
Disability Living Allowance	2
Universal Credit	2
Child tax credits	1
Integration loan	1

Most common by far was Jobseekers Allowance. A notable finding is that only one person had applied for an integration loan. This loan is available for newly recognised refugees and is supposed to be used for deposits on rental accommodation, rent in advance and essential items for gaining employment. At the Refugee Council, we have seen that the Home Office can take a long time to make decisions on these loan applications (typically many months) which renders them useless for the purposes that they are intended. It is therefore not surprising that newly recognised refugees do not see them as providing the support they urgently need at the end of the move on period.

When asked how long it took from the date of claim for welfare benefits until payment was received, the answers ranged between one week and 12 weeks.

Approx. length of time	No. of respondents
1 week	1
2 weeks	12
2-3 weeks	7
3 weeks	10
3-4 weeks	3
6 weeks	5
8 weeks	4
12 weeks	1

Whilst most had received payments within 3 weeks, 13 had to wait longer than this and find alternative ways to support themselves.

The 44 people who were receiving some form of asylum support faced termination of that support 28 days after the positive decision on their asylum claim. Only four people from that group were supported from statutory sources at this point - three people were successful in getting their asylum support extended for a little while and one had some welfare benefits payments. At the end of the move on period, others turned to a variety (sometimes multiple) of sources of support, as detailed below.

Support	No. of respondents
Welfare benefits	1
Employment	1
Charity/other organisation	20
Foodbank	6
Asylum support extended	3
Friends/family	25
Hosting scheme	2

These findings show that most of these newly recognised refugees were forced to rely on charities, friends and family and foodbanks once their asylum support payments finished. The types of support described included loans, food and money. Some respondents highlighted that they had been supported by friends who were refugees and people seeking asylum, and therefore not those who were in favourable financial circumstances. As one person stated:

"I borrowed from friends. I was feeling bad to borrow from them as they were struggling themselves."

Some received support from people they barely knew – examples included friends of the family, somebody who attended the same church as them, and other homeless people:

"I met people where I was staying on the street and some gave me money and food."

Accommodation

Of those living in asylum support accommodation (22), 21 had to leave their accommodation at the end of the 28 days. One person was initially made to leave, but after the intervention of a charity, he was allowed back for approximately two months as there was an error on his BRP. Where they were made to leave their asylum accommodation, people stayed in the following places (some described multiple places).

Where they stayed	No. of respondents
Temporary housing from local authority	3
Slept rough	2
Homelessness hostel or night shelter	5
Refugee hosting scheme	3
Friends	10
Friend of the family	1

It is important to note that nobody had managed to find secure accommodation by the time they were evicted. This underlines the extreme difficulties that people face trying to get stable accommodation in such a short period of time at a time when they may not have the correct documentation, be unfamiliar with the UK housing market and will not have funds available for the deposit and rent in advance required to secure housing in the private rented sector.

When asked how they felt at this particular time, respondents overwhelmingly reported negative feelings.

How did you feel?	No. of respondents
Not very well/not good/down/stressed	21
It was a difficult/very hard time	12
Cold	6
Afraid	6
Worried	4
Unsecure	3
Depressed (diagnosed)	2
Confused	2
Stuck/no alternative	2
Happy	2

This was an open-ended question and people described multiple feelings. Distressingly for one person, this led to attempts to take their own life: “I was feeling down and attempted suicide four times.” Others described feeling low and linked this to the practical difficulties they faced at this time:

“Difficult time. When I got status I didn’t have a place to live. [It was] very difficult because I have to move around a lot. It is not stable.”

“I was feeling down and in a foreign country. I didn’t know where to go.”

“Very difficult. My friends were having their problems solved but my issues stuck.”

“After I got accommodation I felt very good and was thankful to the Refugee Council, but before that it was not good.”

“It was confusing. It was too much. I had a panic attack in the Job Centre. They had to call an ambulance for me.”

Difficulties in finding accommodation were not only experienced by people who had been living in accommodation provided by the Home Office. Some of those who were receiving subsistence only support noted that once they received refugee status, their hosts soon expected them to leave as they were considered able to support themselves at this point. To get a snapshot of the housing circumstances of people since their grant of refugee status, they were asked where they had lived between that point and the time of interview. The responses are presented in the table below.

Where they stayed	No. of respondents
Private rental	19
Temporary housing from local authority	10
Permanent housing from local authority or housing association	4
Slept rough	23
Homelessness hostel or night shelter	21
Refugee hosting scheme	9
With family	7
Friends	26
Friend of family	1

There is a high prevalence of homelessness and housing insecurity across the full sample. Of the 54 respondents to the survey more than half, 31, slept rough or in a hostel or night shelter in the period after they were granted refugee status. While these are the most visible forms of homelessness, newly recognised refugees also found themselves in other homeless situations, such as in temporary accommodation and 'sofa surfing' with friends and family.

People had often stayed in multiple places and the answers showed instability and frequent moves for many. Respondents moved between different types of homelessness. Only 23 of the sample seem to have achieved tenancies (private rental or social housing).

Respondents reported having to rely on a range of people for food, accommodation and money since they gained refugee status and it was friends (31), relatives (6) and charities (4) who helped.

Support	No. of respondents
Friend	31
Charity	4
Host family	2
Relative	6
Asylum support/other accommodation provider	2
Stranger	1

Some of the support was received from people that these refugees did not know very well at all, with 12 being refugees or people seeking asylum who are likely to have few resources themselves.

The help given came in the form of accommodation (30), food (28), money (23), advice (2) and accompanying to appointments (1). In return for this support, some (4) respondents helped out with housework - which was not necessarily expected by their hosts, three people reported that the money they received was a loan so there was an agreement to repay, and two reported making a financial contribution. Nobody reported any exploitation, but it is not beyond the realms of possibility that this could be experienced by some newly recognised refugees who are forced to rely on others to prevent street homelessness and hunger. Even without any evidence of exploitative or transactional relationships 30 people stated that they felt uncomfortable relying on others and 12 said they felt unsafe.

Newly recognised refugees can find themselves in insecure accommodation for quite some time after their grant of status. Survey participants were asked what accommodation they were currently living in, and the responses are below

Type of accommodation	No. of respondents
Private rented accommodation	19
Temporary housing from local authority	8
Permanent housing from local authority or housing association	4
Sleeping rough	9
Homelessness hostel or night shelter	9
Refugee hosting scheme	2
With family	3
Friends	9

There is evidence of very significant levels of housing insecurity. Some people referred to multiple places, showing the lack of stability in their accommodation, hence the number of places exceeding the size of the sample. A high proportion were homeless at this point, even though some will have been granted refugee status quite some time before they were surveyed.

When asked if they had experienced difficulties finding accommodation, 48 out of the 54 respondents stated "yes". These difficulties included: difficulties in accessing help from local authorities and eligibility for social housing; lack of income and deposit; not being able to find suitable accommodation; landlord not accepting welfare benefits; having no bank account; no BRP; and English language problems.

One respondent identified the lack of a BRP as the cause of his homelessness:

"I stayed homeless for 3 months approximately because of the delay in getting my BRP"

Another described the process of going from one place to another in order to find somewhere to stay:

"I went to the council and they gave me addresses of [a homelessness charity] then they referred me to the Refugee Council whom applied for me to hostels and I was waiting for long time and they investigated and had to apply again and then I got the shared house accommodation I live in now."

Feelings at the time after being granted refugee status

Being granted refugee status represents a key moment in people's lives. It means that people can finally begin to rebuild their lives in the certainty that they are safe and will not have to return to the violence and persecution from which they fled. In addition to these positive experiences, this can be a time when people finally start to come to terms with what they left behind and the loss they have endured. To then be faced with the practical difficulties of finding housing and financial support can be particularly challenging.

Respondents were asked whether they had anticipated facing problems when receiving refugee status, and how this made them feel. Some underlined the happiness at the fact that they had gained protection received refugee status:

"I feel my life begins just then"

"I was so excited, happy and relieved"

"I escaped from danger so I'm happy"

Some of the participants were not surprised at having faced difficulties having witnessed others experience it:

"I was anticipating some problems. I was feeling down and it was very hard"

"I had been volunteering with [a refugee charity], so I knew what to expect"

However, there was surprise and disappointment for others who did not anticipate the problems they would encounter.

"I wasn't expected to be homeless and the difficulty in getting a home"

"I was just left helpless"

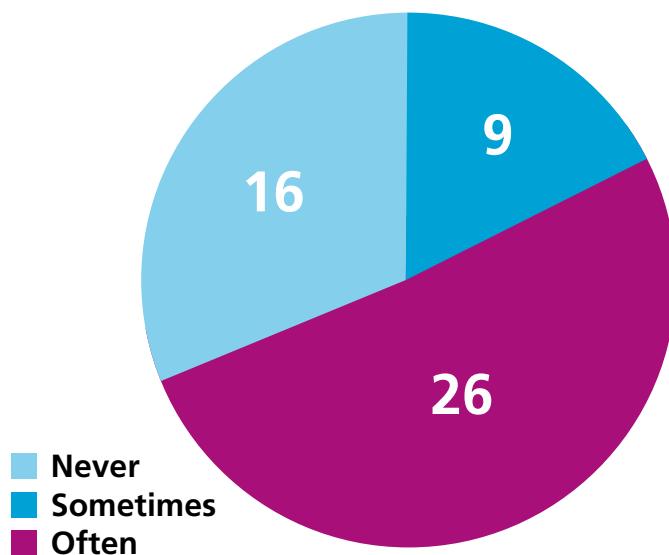
"Very surprised, everything was difficult, not a good feeling"

Despite these problems, quite a few people reflected that although it was difficult, it was better than still being in their country of origin.

Respondents reported high levels of loneliness and isolation, sometimes with a particular mention about how difficult it was being away from their family.

"Far away from important people and children"

Do you ever feel isolated and lonely?



In addition to the issues discussed above, some respondents identified other barriers to integration including English language, problems looking for work and not knowing who to turn to for help.

"it is very difficult to find work and to find opportunities to study. Also there is a shortage of good places to go to get advice as a new refugee, the different places keep giving contradictory advice."

One respondent ended his survey with the words:

"The government grants refugee status without granting refuge"

Support from the Refugee Council

These survey findings illustrate the key role that charities play in supporting newly recognised refugees. Participants in the survey were all former service users of the Refugee Council, so we asked what they felt they would have done without our support.

Many said they did not know what they would have done. Some stated that they would have still been homeless without the help of the Refugee Council, and that the organisation helped them with documentation and opening bank accounts. Many expressed gratitude for the support they had received. One man said:

"Maybe my children would have died because no-one cared at that moment"

Conclusion

The findings of this survey underline what has been documented before – newly recognised refugees face significant problems just after the point that they have been granted status. These issues can lead to destitution and homelessness which result from systems failures and the fact that Home Office support is cut off too soon. All too often voluntary organisations and friends and family are left to provide support when the safety net is pulled away.

Key recommendations

1. Where an application has been made for welfare benefits within the 28 days move on period, the Home Office should not cease asylum support until the first payment has been made, including where that payment is a short term benefit advance.
2. The Home Office should ensure that relevant documentation is received by refugees at the same time as they are informed of their status.
3. Government guidance to banks should advise them what documents are issued to refugees and others with leave to remain in the country so that they are encouraged to recognise them as evidence of identity.
4. Bank staff should also be familiarised with the types of ID refugees will carry. Compliance with this guidance should be monitored, possibly by the British Banking Association.
5. The Department for Communities and Local Government should provide adequate funding to local authorities and accompanying guidance to enable newly recognised refugees who are not considered priority housing need to benefit from rent deposit schemes.

Endnotes

¹ See *England's forgotten refugees* (2016) and *28 days later* (2015)

² Not everybody answered all of the questions, so not all answers add up to 54.

³ https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/257414/eligibilityandassessment.pdf

⁴ See *England's forgotten refugees* (2016) for more details.

The Refugee Council is one of the leading charities in the UK working with asylum seekers and refugees. As a human rights charity, independent of government, we work to ensure that refugees are given the protection they need, that they are treated with respect and understanding, and that they have the same rights, opportunities and responsibilities as other members of our society.

This report can be downloaded at www.refugeecouncil.org.uk



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