

Negotiating refugee identity en route to permanent accommodation

Glasgow is one of the main sites in the UK, where asylum-seekers are involuntarily dispersed. Scotland's declining population, need for a young labour force and progressive homelessness legislation would appear to provide a conducive policy environment for refugee settlement. However, a research study which examined the routes of 38 individuals prior to, and after they have gained recognition as refugees found that they faced considerable difficulties gaining access to temporary and permanent accommodation. This was partly due to a shortage of accommodation in areas perceived by them to be safe and the lack of appropriately sized accommodation for larger families. Fear and actual experience of racial harassment was a major concern. Using a social constructivist approach to identity negotiation and the concept of housing pathways, the paper explores refugees' attempts to negotiate their identity as they navigate their route to permanent accommodation. At different stages of the process, components of refugee identity work for and against these individuals. The paper examines the impact of housing outcomes of this group of individuals on preparing for employment, reuniting with families and settling down in their new country. It also examines the interactions within the housing system as experienced by individual refugees, including what this means in terms of negotiating the multiple layers of identity that are ascribed to them

Identity politics, including the enacting of identities by minority ethnic communities, has been the subject of extensive debate within a contemporary politics of citizenship. Identity has been viewed as being about 'belonging,' based on recognition of what is shared with some people as well as what is different from others (Weeks, 1990). Recent studies have tended to favour processual conceptions of identity, involving negotiation with others within and outwith the group, over fixed and immutable definitions (Hearn, 2000; McCrone, 2001). Song (2003), for instance, has found that the assertion of identity is necessarily a negotiated process, which engages with the dominant meanings and representations of groups, as found in wider society, as well as the attribution of meanings by members of each group. This relates to a fundamental issue in understanding identity construction, namely, the extent to which people enact their identities and the freedom that they have in interpreting them in ways that they wish to (Song, 2003; Hussain and Bagguley, 2005; Burdsey, 2006). Individual freedom in interacting identities is likely to be constrained not only by the perceptions of others, but by wider structural and institutional forces. In Giddens' (1984) terms, this might be viewed as the interaction between individual agency and structural forces or 'structuration.'

Within the field of housing studies, numerous studies have examined the needs of specific minority ethnic communities and the extent to which these communities are able to access accommodation of their choice or are constrained by external forces (Netto et al, 2001). Harrison (1999), for instance, has highlighted the diverse specificities of individual experiences alongside a broader analysis of structural or institutional forces impacting on housing options and constraints. According to this view, despite diverse household experiences, stratification and racialisation remain important causative factors

in explaining minority ethnic housing experiences within the context of an increasingly fragmented welfare state. Further, the notion of 'difference within difference' has been used to indicate recognition of diversity and 'agency' at 'micro' levels, for instance, within particular ethnic groups or other groups, such as young people or women facing domestic abuse in black and minority ethnic (BME) communities (Harrison, 1998). Inevitably, this involves questioning the extent to which citizenship rights, including any rights to housing, can be redefined to take account of the specific housing needs and experiences of these groups.

This paper builds on this work by examines identity formation and negotiation among individuals who have recently acquired refugee status and who have either obtained permanent accommodation or are living in temporary accommodation until they do so. It is based on a larger study which investigates refugee routes to accommodation, support and settlement (Netto and Fraser, 2007). In doing so, it will use the housing pathways approach (Clapham, 2005) to illuminate the interaction between internal and external definitions of identity, and the process of gaining permanent accommodation. Housing pathways are defined as:

'patterns of interaction (practices) concerning house and home, over time and space.'
(Clapham, 2005)

Clapham suggests that pathways may be used as a framework of analysis to foreground the meanings held by households and the interactions that mould housing practices. The concept can also be used to highlight the changing nature of housing experience and its relationship with other aspects of life, such as employment. For the purposes of this paper, the major strength of the pathways approach is that it can also be used to examine the dialectic interplay between external and internal perceptions of individual identity (Jenkins, 1996 cited in Clapham, 2005) as this impact on individuals' housing experiences. Individuals' housing experiences within the social rented sector provide a fertile arena within which to examine the tensions between negotiating external and individual perceptions of identity. On the one hand, the search for housing may be viewed as the expression of personal space, security and fulfilment (Clapham, 2005). On the other hand, the progressive residualisation of the social rented sector has resulted in rationing which has meant that allocations have been prioritised to those who are most vulnerable and in greatest housing need. This has led to the sector being viewed as the tenure of last resort, with allocation of housing being increasingly restricted to those who have limited or no access to housing outside the sector (Pawson, 2009). Access to the sector by minority groups, including refugees, is thus likely to be heavily contested. This makes the interaction between how this group of individuals are viewed by others, how they view themselves and how this impacts on their housing experiences worthy of scrutiny.

Using data gathered through interviews and focus group discussions with refugees, housing agencies and service providers, the paper examines the complex relationship between external perceptions of this client group and the views of individuals within the group at various stages of gaining access to, and settling into permanent accommodation.

The paper also explores the relationship between this group's efforts to negotiate their identities on their likelihood of continuing to stay in the area. The geographical context of the study is the city of Glasgow in Scotland, which is one of the main sites for the involuntary dispersal of asylum-seekers in the UK. In the paper, the terms 'asylum seekers' and 'refugees' are used to refer to the different immigration status of two categories of migrants. Asylum-seekers are those who have arrived in the UK and are awaiting a decision on their claim for asylum. They are not entitled to permanent housing or full welfare benefits and do not have permission to work. Under the United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (1951), Article 1A, a refugee is a person who has

'a well-founded fear of persecution due to race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his (sic) nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country, or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it (UNHCR, 1996, p. 16)

A person is recognized as a refugee when the government of the new country decides that he or she meets the definition provided above. As a signatory to the Convention, the UK is required to make social welfare available to those who are recognized as refugees on the same basis as its own citizens. Refugees now have Temporary Leave to Remain (replacing Indefinite Leave to Remain (ILR)) in the UK and a right to work, claim benefits, apply for social housing and access the full range of other public services, including education, health and social care.

In this paper, the terms 'asylum-seekers' and 'refugees' are used in the awareness that the entitlements of both groups to social housing in the UK differ. However, it would not be possible to consider the housing circumstances of refugees, without reference to their circumstances as asylum-seeker, particularly immediately before and soon after they received a positive decision on their asylum application. Further, the term 'refugee' is used to refer to those who have recently achieved refugee status and /or are not yet part of established BME communities in Scotland. In the next section, some contextual information on the policy and legislative framework in the UK which impacts on the position of asylum-seekers and refugees is presented. This is significant because the opportunities and constraints faced by individuals as they negotiate their identity through the process of gaining accommodation cannot be isolated from wider discourses relating to immigration, citizenship and welfare entitlements. This is followed by a discussion of the housing environment in Scotland, with specific reference made to Glasgow, the focus of the paper.

Policy and legislative framework in the UK

There have been significant reductions in the support provided to asylum-seekers through increasingly restrictive changes in asylum and immigration policy and legislation (Farland and Walsh, 1995; Kaye, 1995). One trend in this legislation has been to

systematically restrict welfare and housing entitlements and the options available to asylum-seekers on their arrival in Britain (Phillips, 2006). One of the most significant changes to housing and support provision for asylum seekers, resulted from the 1999 Immigration and Asylum Act. The Act provided for the centralisation of support mechanisms for asylum-seekers under the National Asylum Support Service (NASS) of the Home Office, which came into operation in 2000. NASS negotiated housing provision through a network of regional consortia, who secure contracts with local authorities, private landlords and housing associations. While some asylum seekers choose not to apply for NASS accommodation and/or support, many others have no choice but to take the accommodation offered to them by NASS.

A 'no-choice' dispersal policy was also introduced to reduce pressure on London and the South-East and to move asylum-seekers to other parts of the UK, including Scotland, where the demand for housing is lower. Glasgow City Council (GCC) was the only local authority in Scotland to sign a contract with NASS from April 2000 to provide housing for asylum-seekers. As a result, Scotland received significant numbers of asylum-seekers, the vast majority of whom were dispersed to Glasgow, primarily to areas of low demand and social deprivation. Asylum and immigration are reserved matters, responsibility for which resides under the Westminster government. However, the Scottish Government has responsibility for integration, social inclusion and key policy areas, including housing, for asylum seekers and refugees in Scotland.

Further changes in the form of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002 increased control over the asylum-seeking process through the introduction of accommodation and removal centres and the introduction of Section 55, which prohibits support for asylum-seekers who fail to make their claim as soon as 'reasonably practicable' after their arrival in the UK. Although Section 55 has been successfully challenged and the Home Office has been forced to accept a less restrictive approach to this clause, concerns about destitution and homelessness within the asylum process remain (Phillips, 2006).

In Scotland, under the 1987 Housing Act, local authorities have the power to refer an applicant who is assessed as being in priority need and unintentionally homeless to another local authority in Scotland. Local connection is defined in section 27(1) of the 1987 Act as a connection which a person has with the area:

- Because he or she is or was in the past normally resident in it, and this residence was of his or her own choice
- Because he or she is employed in it

Section 11 of the Asylum and Immigration (Treatment of Claimants etc) Act 2004 amended the local connection provisions in English Housing Law (Part 7 of the Housing Act 1996 but not the Scotland Act). Broadly, Section 11 provides for asylum-seekers to automatically establish a local connection with the last area in which they were provided accommodation under Section 95 of the Immigration and Asylum Act (i.e. NASS accommodation). Subsequently, if an asylum-seeker is given leave to remain in the UK

and makes a homeless application in a different area and they do not have a local connection there for any of the above reasons, the local authority can refer that person back to the area of dispersal. This has the effect of reducing refugees' ability to present as homeless to UK local authorities outside of Scotland and constrains their housing options, leading refugee organisations to argue for legislative reform to allow refugees from Scotland to move to areas of choice within the UK.

Controlling our borders: making migration work for Britain (Home Office, 2005) set out the Government's five year strategy for asylum and immigration. This was followed up by the setting up of the New Asylum Model (NAM) to speed up the asylum process in the shortest possible time, with a dedicated person taking responsibility for each claim from the beginning to the outcome of their claim. While the speeding up of the asylum process under NAM has reduced periods of uncertainty for new arrivals, it also means that newly recognised refugees typically will have had only a short time to become familiar with the housing and welfare system in the UK, their housing options, sources of advice and assistance and their eligibility for benefits. The Home Office has also recently set up a new executive agency, the Borders Immigration Agency (BIA) to manage immigration control in the UK. The Border and Immigration Agency is a new executive agency of the Home Office. The Home Office *Integration Matters* document recognises housing as one of the key indicators of integration. This, combined with the then Scottish Executive's Integration Action Plans, provide a policy framework for the inclusion of refugees in economic, social and cultural spheres. Also worthy of note is the significant fall in the number of asylum applications over the last five years (Home Office, 2007).

Housing policy, advice and provision for refugees in Scotland

In Scotland, growing concern over the need to address a declining and aging population, the need for a skilled labour force and progressive homelessness legislation would appear to provide a conducive environment for the housing, support and settlement of refugees in the newly devolved nation state. Policies and action plans to enable the successful integration of refugees were led by the Scottish Refugee Integration Forum (SRIF), established in 2002 in partnership with the then Scottish Executive and in consultation with the wider public and voluntary sector interests (SRIF, 2003). Two years later, a snapshot of progress made in relation to these action plans was documented in SRIF (2005). This report noted that a number of changes recommended by the Forum, including in relation to housing, had been met. The intended impact of the changes recommended was that the needs of refugees should be routinely considered, along with the needs of others, and that refugees should have the same options and opportunities as others. Research recommended by the SRIF into the housing and support needs of refugees and intended to produce a model service specification outlining how these needs can be met had also been commissioned by the then Scottish Executive (Bell Associates, 2006). Among the main findings of the research were the need for a multi-agency approach in meeting the multiple needs relating to the current and future housing of refugees; high levels of racial harassment, and their need for accommodation in decent and appropriate homes where they would be safe from harassment.

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Local authorities have had a longstanding obligation to prevent as well as respond to homelessness, both in law and good practice guidance. Since the Housing (Homeless Persons) Act 1997, authorities have had an obligation to assist people who are imminently threatened with homelessness (and classed 'in priority need'). The then Scottish Executive increased the official emphasis on homelessness, setting up the Homelessness Task Force (HTF) in 1999. The HTF reviewed the causes and nature of homelessness in Scotland, examined current practice in homelessness and made wide-ranging recommendations on how homelessness can be prevented or tackled effectively. This led to the broadening of homelessness prevention policy to encompass the full range of people at risk of homelessness. Consequential legislative changes were carried through in the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 and the Homelessness etc (Scotland) Act 2003. A key requirement of local authorities under the 2001 Act was to develop homelessness strategies to set out plans for preventing and alleviating homelessness in local authorities' area.

Former asylum-seekers who have been granted refugee status or Exceptional Leave (now Humanitarian Protection or Discretionary Leave) to remain in the UK may be at risk of becoming homeless as a result of having to leave NASS accommodation and will be eligible for homelessness assistance. Consistent with the recommendations of the SRIF, s.193 of the *Code of Guidance on Homelessness* highlights that this group might be vulnerable as a result of experiencing persecution or severe hardship in their country of origin. Housing authorities are also advised to carefully consider the possibility that clients from this group may be additionally vulnerable due to other factors

Further reform of homelessness legislation is incorporated within the Homelessness etc.(Scotland) Act 2003, which envisages broadening local authority responsibilities towards homeless households; in particular, through the abolition of the 'priority need' test. This includes the target that, by 2012, all people who are unintentionally homeless will be entitled to a permanent home (the 2012 target). The 2012 target involves increasing homeless people's rights to housing by removing bureaucratic distinctions between different 'categories' of homeless people and acknowledging that all homeless people, including newly recognized refugees, both families and single people, require sustainable accommodation.

The Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 places a statutory duty on Registered Social Landlords (RSLs) to provide accommodation to homeless people when requested to do so by a local authority, including through Section 5 referrals. A Chartered Institute Housing (CIH) examination of the extent to which Section 5 referrals were used by local authorities and the extent to which RSLs received Section 5 referrals found that overall, these are used to the benefit of the local authority, RSLs and the referred applicant (CIH, 2005). The study found that many local authorities had developed protocols with RSLs for Section 5 referrals. The CIH and the Scottish Federation of Housing (SFHA) have sought to encourage RSLs to accommodate refugees, including through producing good practice guides (CIH, 2005; SFHA, 2003). However, a review of 19 inspections since 2003, of RSLs operating in Glasgow, found that

'issues to do with access to housing, including observance of allocation policies, transparency of letting, equal opportunities etc., were the most prominent cause of criticism.' (GCC, 2008)

Although such criticisms were made of only 13 of the RSLs, the review suggests that similar issues were likely to apply to most of the 60 or so RSLs which were not inspected in this period, thus underscoring the serious nature of the problem. More generally, the lack of progress among housing agencies in implementing policies and procedures related to advancing equality is supported by two themed reports produced by the then national housing agency (Communities Scotland, 2002, 2006).

The Housing Environment in Glasgow

In Glasgow, the focus of the empirical work of this study, there have been a number of dramatic changes in the housing environment, not least of which has been the transfer of housing stock of Glasgow City Council (GCC) to the Glasgow Housing Association Ltd (GHA), a registered social landlord established to take over the stock through a large-scale voluntary transfer in 2003. A local network of Local Housing Organisations (LHOs) across the city provide local management services. GHA is tasked with implementing a major investment programme to upgrade the housing stock inherited from GCC and a demolition programme is currently (August 2009) ongoing, including in areas where asylum-seekers are being supported by NASS.

Although GCC no longer owns housing stock and its Housing Services Department has ceased to exist, it still retains responsibility for strategic development of housing provision across all tenures within Glasgow. It also has responsibility for the Local Housing Strategy, Housing Policy, Regeneration and Grants. The Council is also now responsible for managing Development Funding. *Glasgow's Local Housing Strategy 2003 – 2008* recognises the limited availability of social rented houses of the right size and type in or close to areas of traditional settlement for BME households, due to the sale of a large proportion of council stock through Right-to-Buy. The Local Housing Strategy also acknowledges the need to ensure equal access to housing and to overcome possible barriers, such as the common use of many languages by asylum-seekers and refugees in Glasgow. The need for appropriate training for staff to

enable them to respond to the needs of their diverse clients, provide appropriate information and respond effectively to harassment is also acknowledged. GCC has a responsibility under the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 to provide housing advice and information to people living in the Glasgow area.

The Glasgow Asylum Seeker Support Project (GASSP) was set up and coordinated by GCC to ensure that asylum seekers were able to access basic services. These include accommodation of a safe and suitable standard, GP services and access to education for children. The Refugee Support Team (RST) was set up within GCC as a specialist homelessness team in 2002 to work with nine other community casework teams. The main source of referrals for the team is the GASSP. The team carries out homelessness assessments for newly recognised refugees, and taking into account area preferences, size

and type of accommodation needed and preferred and potential support needs, makes Section 5 referrals to an RSL, which if accepted, leads to a permanent offer of housing for the individual. Joint working arrangements between GCC and GHA are in place in relation to homelessness prevention and alleviation and the creation and maintenance of sustainable communities within the City. Other formalised working arrangements are section 5 Homeless Protocols between the Council and many RSLs in the City. Referrals from the RST can be made anywhere within Glasgow. On accepting a Section 5 referral, RSLs have six to eight weeks to find accommodation. Under homelessness legislation, refugees are entitled to two offers of accommodation deemed to be suitable. Refugees are also able to individually apply to any of the RSLs in the city. In the next section, the methods employed in the study are outlined.

Methods

The research involved individual interviews with thirty two refugees. Further information was also gathered from two focus groups with 14 individuals currently living in temporary accommodation. An honorarium of £20 was paid to individuals in recognition of the time and goodwill in sharing what were often painful and tortuous experiences. Individual interviews were also organised with five RSLs, key service providers and the RST. In addition, a focus group discussion was organised with members of the West of Scotland Refugee Forum (WSRF) Housing and Welfare Group, a network of service providers related to the housing and settlement of asylum-seekers and refugees.

Permission for recording the interviews and focus group discussions was routinely sought and often declined by refugees who appeared to be uncomfortable with this. In these circumstances, extensive notes were taken and typed up soon after the interviews. Interviews with housing providers and the focus group discussion with service providers were recorded and transcribed. Grounded theories and procedures were used to analyse the data and emerging themes noted, and refined until data saturation was reached.

In total, the research drew on the views and experiences of 46 refugees. 27 of them were male and 19 female. The ages of the refugees in the sample ranged from 20 to 56. Eight were currently employed while several others had enrolled in training or educational courses. In terms of country of origin, the largest group was from Somalia (11), followed by Iran (7). Others came from a wide range of countries on the African continent (Zimbabwe, Congo, Sierra Leone, Rwanda, Erithea and the Ivory Coast) as well as from Algeria, Bangladesh, Cameroon, China, Kosovo, Iran, Pakistan, Russia, Syria and Turkey. Their length of stay in the UK varied from 2 months to 7 years.

Of the 32 refugees living in permanent accommodation, 30 were living in RSLs. Two refugees were living in private lets. As illustrated in Figure 1, a significant proportion of refugees live in either multi-storeyed accommodation, or in 4 or 6 in a block accommodation.

Gaining refugee status

As has been documented in studies of asylum-seekers (Barclay et al, 2003; Wren, 2004), the individuals interviewed had suffered considerable uncertainty and anxiety relating to

the outcome of their applications for asylum. Prior to gaining refugee status, individuals had been living in various forms of temporary accommodation, including detention centres in other parts of the UK, accommodation arranged by Glasgow City Council, hostel, bed and breakfast accommodation and with friends. A small minority had also experienced rooflessness. While positive decisions were actively sought and greeted with relief, the majority of individuals struggled to cope with an immediate increase in responsibilities:

As an asylum seeker, NASS provide all support and do not teach independent living while as soon as you are a refugee, you have to see to everything and there are so many things to do. It is very confusing.

'I was looking for everything. How to get a job, how to live independently, how to move house.'

'The key was to get a house and a roof over my head.'

The above quotes suggest that the transition to a new identity and legal status experienced by these individuals was sudden and fraught with practical difficulties. This required them to demonstrate considerable problem-solving and survival skills, with little time to adjust to their new identity. Amongst the challenges associated with refugee status, finding a home figured prominently.

Presenting as 'homeless'

All the refugees interviewed had been forced to move from their homes in their country of origin and been separated from family, friends and social networks. In this sense, the individuals concerned had already experienced what might be described as homelessness in their country of origin. Once individuals had gained refugee status, they were allowed to either present as 'homeless' to Glasgow City Council and to undergo a homelessness assessment or apply to individual Registered Social Landlords. Individuals spoke highly of local authority and voluntary sector caseworkers who had been helpful in informing them about housing options and enabling them to deal with the procedures for finding accommodation, including how to claim housing benefit:

'If (name of worker) did not help, we don't know what we would have done.'

'I believed he helped me a lot because he knew I was suffering at the time. He was sending me to different housing associations...he was trying hard to get accommodation.'

However, it was apparent that not all individuals either saw themselves as 'homeless' or wished to be perceived as such by others. Taking on the identity of a 'homeless' person, with associated legal rights to assistance and support from the state, was often a painful process, associated with uncertainty and powerlessness:

'When we became homeless, we were told anything could happen...we would have liked more information on how to avoid getting into horrible places. We didn't know what would happen next, didn't know what to expect. We would have liked to have been assured that we would get accommodation.'

'They told me that I was homeless and I had to take what was offered...But I was not homeless by birth. It (the remark) was offensive and rude. But I was grateful for getting a house'.

Few appeared to have acquired a clear understanding of the processes and procedures involved in applying for accommodation, including the level and type of support that could be expected. Neither were all aware of the two main routes to social housing, through Section 5 referrals and individual applications to RSLs:

'We were really unaware of the kind of support the UK government can offer, and the capacity they can work with us. It would be helpful in that (homeless) situation to know what we can draw on, what actions we can take'...

Significant measures had been taken to prevent rooflessness among individuals who were living in GASSP accommodation when NASS support came to an end by enabling them to sign up to temporary occupancy agreements while they are awaiting an offer of permanent accommodation. However, interviews with refugees revealed that this process is not often fully understood, with some noting that they had little choice in this regard:

'She (worker in statutory agency) just told me that I must sign an occupancy agreement or I would have to stay with friends, in a hostel or even sleep on the road.'

Complaints of racial harassment while leaving in temporary accommodation were also common, but this did not appear to be always understood by workers.

'She said you people are just like children – you always want that ice-cream.'

Interviews with other individuals revealed that such lack of understanding and respect when they presented as homeless was not rare. This raises a number of issues. Firstly, it is difficult to eliminate the possibility of negative preconceptions on the part of at least some homelessness caseworkers relating to either homeless people, refugees or both, which may influence their interactions with this client group. Secondly, as with other minority ethnic groups, fear or actual experience of racial harassment appear to be a significant factor which influences refugees' housing decision-making processes (Netto et al, 2001). Thirdly, homelessness officers' ability to make Section 5 referrals which will meet refugees' preferences for housing in the context of the limited supply of good quality accommodation in the social rented sector in Glasgow is, as might be anticipated, severely constrained

Indeed, refugee accounts revealed that many felt forced to accept the offers of permanent accommodation made to them due to the length of time they had already spent in temporary accommodation, the uncertainty of when another offer might be made and the lack of certainty over whether a future offer would be more desirable. Yet another factor which pressured individuals into accepting offers of permanent accommodation which they did not feel were suitable was experience of racial harassment in their current accommodation. This included experience of verbal or physical abuse and perceived danger to life while living in hostels and multi-storeyed and other forms of temporary accommodation. For others, lack of fluency in English hindered their efforts to find accommodation.

(Agency) gave me addresses and telephone numbers, then they said I had enough English to contact housing associations but I didn't. It stopped me from finding suitable housing.

Thus, refugees had limited scope for expressing their identity through their housing choices. Despite this, individual accounts revealed considerable self-determination and -reliance in persisting with the choices that were available to them:

'I feel like I have been left to get on with things. I have to do everything myself. I've got tired waiting for things, but it's made me stronger'.

'I did a lot myself. I used to go to housing associations twice a week, as I was desperate to get a house...I made seven to eight applications to different housing associations.'

Interviews with housing providers confirmed that although the numbers of asylum-seekers receiving positive decisions with leave to remain had fallen significantly in recent years, significant challenges remained in accommodating refugee needs and preferences. These were considered within the context of competing demands for the stock available such as the ongoing clearance programme, other Section 5 referrals and in the case of some RSLs, allocation of a proportion of properties to other defined client groups. Concerns about accommodating refugees were reported to have decreased dramatically since the arrival of asylum-seekers in the early stages of the dispersal programme when they faced considerable hostility from other tenants (Barclay et al, 2003). This was attributed to increased understanding that refugees were not privileged in any way. These findings reveal the impact of external perceptions of this group on their opportunities for accommodation.

Refugees' needs and preferences for housing

Data on the extent to which refugees were able to exert choice in their housing options in Glasgow provide us with important information on the nature of social rented housing in the city, what was viewed as immediately important to this group of individuals and their future aspirations. Individuals were asked to assess whether finding accommodation relating to affordability, in the areas they preferred, in good condition and of appropriate size had been 'a major problem,' 'a minor problem' or not applicable.

Affordability of housing

On the basis of quantitative data in Figure 2, affordability does not appear to be problematic. However, closer probing revealed that many individuals were currently in receipt of housing benefit, including those who were currently preparing for employment by taking up educational or training courses and language classes. Those who wished to work immediately and would be likely to lose housing benefit if they did so reported that it would be a 'major problem' to find affordable accommodation and seek employment. Thus, refugees' access to housing was closely related to their employment status, with individuals being forced to choose between being unemployed or accommodated in affordable housing. Since typically, individual housing circumstances are closely linked to employment status, and nature of employment, disincentives to employment severely constrain housing choices and the extent to which refugees can express their identity through either their accommodation or employment.

Racial harassment and area preferences

Area preferences among refugees were in many ways indistinct from the majority population including access to health care facilities, schools, transport links and places of work. However, in other respects, awareness of the potential for hostility due to their visible identity associated with their skin colour, strongly impacted on area preferences:

'Young children are not kind to other people...maybe because we are black people. The children are afraid to go out.'

'I am very, very concerned about safe area...very important to me because ...Glasgow does not like some minority groups.'

'Security is the main issue. If there is a bad attitude towards foreigners I don't want to stay there.'

Indeed, fear or actual experience of harassment was the main reason underlying the finding, shown in Figure 3, that more than half of those interviewed (54%) considered that finding accommodation in their area of choice was 'a major problem.' Although housing providers are aware of the need to effectively tackle racial incidents, and protocols have been developed to tackle this within a framework for tackling anti-social behaviour, there still appear to be serious gaps between policy and practice.

It is worth noting that both refugees and service providers shared the view that the presence of others from the same or other minority ethnic groups acted as a buffer to racial harassment:

It's good to know which areas are multicultural rather than being in areas where there is only one culture.(refugee)

Established links with community groups were also reported to be helpful in supporting refugees and other minority ethnic communities. However, at least one refugee expressed the view that there might be advantages in not living in an ethnically-mixed area:

'Don't assume that people want to stay close to people of their own culture. It's better to mix and integrate. You learn English quicker and that is a key in the beginning'.

When faced with the lack of availability of housing in ethnically mixed areas, service providers were confronted with a dilemma. In order to resolve this issue, one service provider took into account other factors such as the extent to which individuals were isolated, existence of appropriate services in the area, and access to sources of informal support:

'[Housing estate] is an area where there is low BME concentration...we don't want to isolate people,... but what if that is what is available?... It's really just a question of what support is there. Are they isolated? Do they know other people in their community? Do they have services about? Have they got services they are tied into? I find that if people do have support and other ties to a particular area, then normally it will be successful'

These findings on preferred areas for housing provide a clear insight into what is a priority for many refugees, namely, safety from racial harassment. This indicates that considerable work remains to be undertaken in terms of educating local communities on the nature of forced migration. It also illuminates the factors that are considered to contribute to resilience to racial harassment, providing some support for the adage of 'safety in numbers', and the importance of embedding individuals within the wider community. Significantly, evidence that not all individuals wish to stay with other refugees or individuals from the same ethnic group, may indicate variation in readiness to integrate, including acquiring the local language.

Condition of accommodation

As Figure 4 shows, 13% of the individuals interviewed reported that finding accommodation of the appropriate condition was 'a major problem' while 54% considered this to be 'a minor problem.' The absence of furniture ('no carpets, nothing at all') was a major problem that many individuals had to deal with. Other problems cited here included dampness, poor décor, faulty plumbing systems, lack of electrical supply and broken windows. Evidence of subjectivity can be found in the account of an individual who reported that the condition of the accommodation was 'no problem,' but who had changed carpets and wall coverings, indicating significant dissatisfaction. Constraints faced by housing providers included the majority of homeless lets in multi-storeyed accommodation which was of variable quality and structure. The poor condition of some of the housing occupied by refugee tenants may be reflective of that experienced by other tenants of social housing. However, it is worth noting that this client group may have fewer informal sources of support to draw upon, for example, in furnishing a flat.

Size of accommodation

As Figure 5 shows, size of the accommodation was a 'major problem' for a third of the individuals interviewed. Apart from the general shortage of larger sized accommodation in Glasgow, this highlights the difficulties of homelessness assessments which are based on the current size of the household, and do not take account of refugees who have exercised their right to family reunion. The finding that the sharing of a room by a twenty year old and ten year old sibling was viewed by a parent as only 'a minor problem' illustrates the subjectivity of assessments of appropriately sized accommodation. Service providers' attempts to accommodate larger households included splitting families into two houses or continuing to hold them in temporary accommodation. The lack of availability of appropriately sized accommodation in Glasgow thus places constraints in the extent to which refugees who have been forced to separate from their families can live comfortably with them.

Ethnic monitoring

Ethnic monitoring of applications for RSL housing and lets was extremely variable, with GHA being the exception in publicising the profile of housing applicants in terms of type and size of accommodation preferred on a regular basis. However, it is not possible to discern the position of refugees from such data. For example, it is not possible to ascertain the proportion of refugees who applied for accommodation out of the total number of applicants or the proportion of refugee tenants out of the total number of tenants. The invisibility of refugees in these this data is of concern given the difficulties experienced by this client group in finding permanent accommodation and their potential vulnerability once they settle into the accommodation. However, low numbers of people from BME communities among the lets of individual RSLs would indicate either low or no refugee tenants, while high numbers of people from these communities indicate that refugee households may also be represented. This provides further support for the regular ethnic monitoring of both applications and lets, as has long been lobbied for by commentators of minority ethnic housing (Blackaby and Chahal, 2001; Netto et al, 2006).

Tenant participation

Since housing providers have no mechanisms for identifying and communicating with refugee tenants and are not clear of the proportion of their tenants who are refugees, there are real difficulties in terms of encouraging tenant participation. Targeted measures to encourage refugee representation on management committees and ensure their active involvement in the running of RSLs, for instance through pro-active publicising of vacancies among refugee communities, appear to be exceptional. Thus, the extent to which refugees can actively participate in the housing agenda, and highlight specific issues and concerns is limited.

Future stay in Glasgow

As **Table** shows, just above two thirds of the individuals interviewed reported that they were 'very likely' to stay in Glasgow 'a year from now'. Positive comments about the city included favourable comparisons with London:

'I like Glasgow, a big city, but overall people are helpful and they accept foreigners.'

'After 6 years I think I was born in Glasgow. Glasgow is my city, the city I belong to. Places, friends, I think I belong here.'

These views indicate a close relationship between the positive perceptions of others, and of connectedness to place and a wider community. Other comments indicate the association of the city with positive changes in personal circumstances

'When I got refugee status, I was suffering, I hate myself...In Glasgow, my life has changed, I go to college, church, I am very happy.'

Conversely, negative perceptions of individuals, which are most obviously manifested in the form of racial harassment act as 'push' factors, motivating individuals to seek alternative accommodation in other cities. For some individuals, other cities such as London, offered proximity to relatives and friends, which was especially important for those who were experiencing social isolation or racial harassment.

'We are happy to look outside Glasgow – especially to avoid the children being harassed. We may try London, we think it might be easier there.'

In some cases, lack of social networks was exacerbated by ill health, which limited opportunities for interaction. A small minority had not ruled out the possibility that they might return to their country of origin in the future, when it was safe to do so.

Discussion

The major contribution of this paper lies in the theoretical insights offered in examining the close relationship between identity construction and negotiation and refugees' experiences in gaining permanent accommodation. The rich qualitative data gathered through the research process evidences multiple layers of identity that are ascribed to this group of individuals and the impact of these identities on their efforts to find accommodation. Firstly, the sudden transition from asylum-seeker to refugee identity and the imperative to find independent accommodation leave individuals little time to acquire an understanding of their rights and entitlements to support, thus hindering their efforts in this direction. Secondly, interview accounts illustrate that soon after they have acquired refugee status, many individuals are forced to take on the additional identity of being 'homeless', to optimise their chances of finding accommodation. The data suggests that the rights of homeless individuals too are often not fully understood and that being homeless is unfavourably construed by at least some individuals. Negative perceptions are likely to be reinforced by lack of respect in interactions with service providers and the poor condition of much of accommodation available to homeless individuals, supporting other studies on the stigmatized nature of homelessness. Added to this, interview data illuminate individuals' perceptions of how they are viewed by others, 'as black people,' 'foreigners' and 'minority groups.' That these labels are seen as pejorative is clearly supported by a widespread fear of racial harassment, which impacts on preferred areas for

accommodation. Despite this, individuals demonstrate determined and persistent efforts to negotiate their way through the system. Refugees' pathways to housing can thus be seen to be mediated by legislative definitions of this group of people as refugees and homeless people, by individuals' growing understanding of the rights which accompany these definitions, the perceptions of others and their own self-identification.

Given the lack of ethnically disaggregated data available, it is difficult to disentangle the influence of the constrained nature of the social rented sector in the city from the identity/identities of this client group on the allocations process. This hinders analysis of the extent to which the representation of these individuals in social housing is reflective of their distribution in the wider population, or whether discriminatory attitudes and processes come into play in housing allocation processes. Further, there is a paradox between the lack of visibility of this group of individuals in statistical terms and the visible identity of some individuals as belonging to a minority group by virtue of their skin colour, and consequentially vulnerable to racial harassment. Once they have moved into permanent accommodation, the difficulty of distinguishing refugees from other BME tenants acts as a constraint against any efforts that housing providers are likely to take in easing the settling in process. Their lack of visibility as refugees is also likely to act as a barrier to any specific efforts to involve members of this group in the decision-making processes of the organisation. However, lack of refugee representation on boards or management committees may also be explained by other work which has suggested that political actions by public bodies and individuals are influenced by perceptions of which identities are worth expressing and affirming (Netto, 2006). Negative perceptions relating to refugees as suggested by accounts of racial harassment may impact on organisational willingness to involve them in public roles.

The study also illustrates how the housing options that are available to refugees impact on other areas of their life, notably opportunities to seek employment and the opportunity to live comfortably with family members. Those who wished to work immediately and would be likely to lose housing benefit if they did so have to effectively choose between being unemployed or accommodated in affordable housing. This disincentive to employment denies financial independence and the self-fulfilment associated with this to many skilled individuals, illustrating the often inextricable link between housing and employment at the individual level (Clapham, 2005). Homelessness assessments that focus only on individuals presenting as homeless and the lack of accommodation for families with more than two children combine to place barriers for individuals who wish to exercise their right to family reunion. This illustrates the close relationship between how refugees who have been separated from their families are viewed, and their opportunities for gaining appropriately sized accommodation once they have acquired refugee status, with current allocation processes appearing to impede family reunification. Arguments highlighting the importance of taking a twin approach on both individual and household pathways that take into account the forming, splitting and re-forming of households over time and space (Clapham, 2005) are relevant here.

More positively, the data suggests that gaining a home is closely associated with other positive changes such as undertaking further education or training and preparing for

employment. This indicates the importance of permanent accommodation in allowing refugees the opportunity to eventually gain financial independence and self-esteem, key elements of positive self-identification for many individuals. Despite numerous reports of racial harassment, it is encouraging to note that once settled into permanent accommodation, some individuals succeed in forming social links and acquiring a sense of belonging to the city, supporting the key role of housing in the integration process. This would suggest a transition from refugee identity to a growing sense of belonging to a community or communities of individuals. Alternatively, it would suggest that some individuals manage to overcome or transcend any negative connotations associated with their refugee identity once they have settled in their own homes, and acquired some measure of stability. Interview data evidence the claim that those who identify with the city and its people have feelings of attachment which extend beyond the home to its physical and social environment. This reinforces the importance of not only the physical condition of the home and the neighbourhood but also the potential contribution of both to the acquisition of social capital and connectedness to the wider community. For others, family and friends in other parts of the UK were an attraction, especially when confronted with racial hostility. This supports other work on racial harassment (Netto and Macewen, 1998) which has shown that moving to a residence in another area is a common response to the problem. In terms of identity formation, such moves may also be viewed as a means of engendering a sense of togetherness with others who share similar origins or lifestyles. This may be perceived as particularly important given their circumstances of forced migration and severance of links with family and social networks in their countries of origin.

Finally, this empirically grounded study of refugees' construction and negotiation of identity as they negotiate their way through the housing system cannot be divorced from wider discourses and public policy on multiculturalism, immigration and citizenship, community cohesion, the residualisation of the welfare state, and cutbacks in the support provided to asylum-seekers and refugees. There is a need for awareness that reporting by the popular press on 'bogus asylum-seekers,' 'illegal immigrants' and welfare dependency are likely to engender and reinforce negative stereotyping, including among well-intentioned housing practitioners. Also of relevance to the treatment of refugees in the housing system are the threats posed to the labour market by demographic trends in Scotland and ongoing claims for independence, which may pave the way for more favourable treatment of skilled and educated new arrivals. The pathways framework shows the significant role that housing outcomes play in continuing to shape individual identities through preparation for employment, reunion with families and integration (or not) within the wider community. However, it also goes further in highlighting not only housing outcomes, but how interactions within the housing system are actually experienced by individuals seeking accommodation. This includes individual perceptions of how they are viewed by others and interpretations of what this means in terms of future courses of action, including whether they choose to stay or move on.

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Figure 1 Type of permanent accommodation

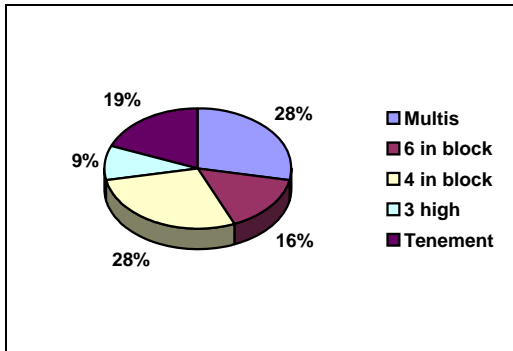


Figure 2 Finding affordable accommodation

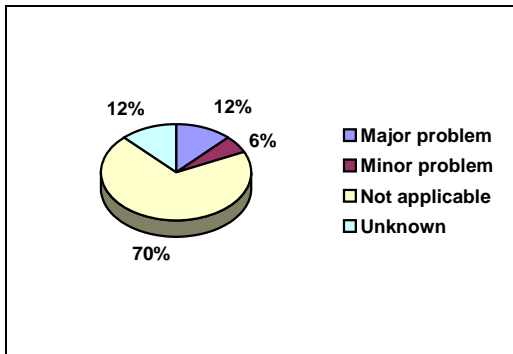


Figure 3 Finding accommodation in area of choice

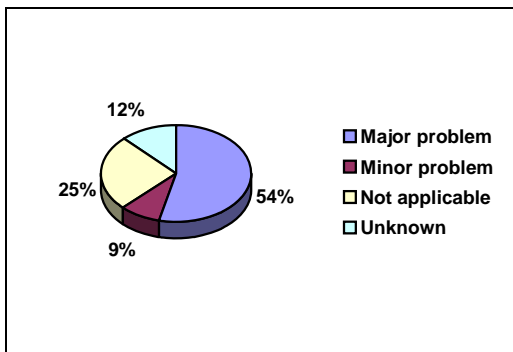


Figure 4 Finding accommodation in appropriate condition

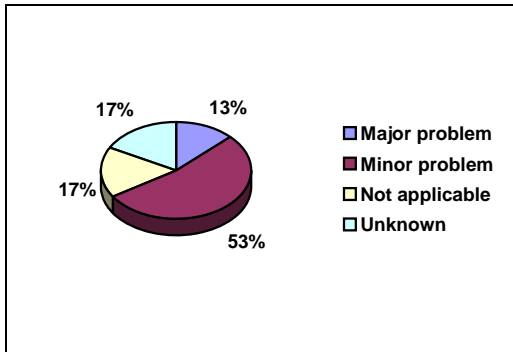


Figure 5 Finding accommodation of adequate size

