Asylum and refugee accommodation governance in Scotland

Key findings and recommendations

Executive Summary

In Scotland, as in the rest of the UK, there exists a two-tier system for the accommodation of displaced migrants: those who are accommodated as part of the Dispersal Scheme, and those who are part of the Vulnerable Person Resettlement Scheme (VPRS). The accommodation provision available through the Dispersal Scheme has created competing and complex governance interests. This is exacerbated where the devolved settlement interacts with reserved welfare restrictions and immigration rules.

In the Dispersal model of asylum accommodation, periods of transition or change place asylum seekers in vulnerable positions. This is due not only to operational or planning issues, but also to inconsistences found in the Dispersal governance model as a whole.

GLIMER draws on rigorous, qualitative research with stakeholders in Scotland to (1) compare accommodation governance approaches of Dispersal and the VPRS, (2) chart how their approaches impact displaced people's accommodation experiences, and (3) assess the capacity of local and devolved stakeholders to shape, adapt or intervene in issues related to housing.[1]

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It finds that prevailing Dispersal governance models (1) create systemic complexity that adversely effects asylum accommodation provision, (2) simultaneously pressurise and disenfranchise service providers at local level, and (3) create hierarchies of engagement and representation that inhibits successful multilevel governance. In contrast, the increased autonomy of local government allowed by the VPRS has resulted in a balance between the provision of shelter for refugees and community planning needs. In order to ensure a more successful integration of displaced persons, asylum accommodation arrangements should therefore move towards the model offered to refugees through the resettlement pathway.

1: Meer, N., Peace, T. and Hill, E. (2019) *Integration Governance in Scotland.* GLIMER WP3 Report: University of Edinburgh.

Context

In recent years, the governance systems through which displaced people are accommodated have undergone significant change. These changes have applied to both the Dispersal Scheme (which in Scotland relates only to Glasgow) and the Resettlement Scheme (UK wide).

Dispersal

There has been a move away from accommodation provision led by the public and third sector to private contractors (in Scotland, Serco), which are operationally responsible for asylum accommodation until the point of decision. Post decision, local government is responsible for housing for new refugees with recourse to public funds. Emergency housing for asylum seekers and refugees with no recourse to public funds falls primarily to the third sector.

The arrangements that facilitate this system are not simple. The system requires a range of stakeholders with different (sometimes competing) priorities, budgets and competences to work together. It also requires them to negotiate a particularly complex environment, between reserved and devolved powers, welfare entitlements and immigration rules.

Dispersal accommodation provision under the Commercial and Operating Managers Procuring Asylum Support (COMPASS) contract has been critiqued for its housing standards, poor maintenance and service provision by private contractors, peripheral locations with poor connections as well as gendered vulnerabilities.

Resettlement

Accommodation is provided across all 32 local authorities in Scotland, expanding the geography of refugee housing beyond Glasgow. It differs significantly from Dispersal as local authorities are tasked with mobilising the accommodation options they see fit. These options include using existing social housing stock through Registered Social Landlords or renting on the private market through, Private Sector Leasing schemes.

There has been a focus on the regenerative potential of incoming refugee populations for (a) housing stock and (b) areas experiencing patterns of depopulation. Resettlement provides a better housing experience for both displaced people and local stakeholders. Indeed, resettlement accommodation governance offers potential solutions to housing issues caused by Dispersal governance. Scottish local authorities may be persuaded to take part in the dispersal scheme but only if this reflects the Resettlement model (including the financial incentives and autonomy to choose which accommodation is appropriate).

GLIMER is informed by a combination of rigorous policy analysis, qualitative research with multi-party stakeholders, and secondary analysis.

This policy brief is especially reliant on ethnographic fieldwork and in-depth semi-structured interviews with 30 stakeholders from devolved and local government, the third sector and community groups.

We studied several local authorities including Glasgow City Council, Argyll and Bute Council, Inverclyde Council, Aberdeenshire Council and City of Edinburgh Council.

Findings

Urban planning and community development

The COMPASS contract transferred responsibility for housing provision from Glasgow City Council to private contractor, Serco. This means that Serco now has influence over (a) the type of housing and (b) the location of housing in which asylum seekers are accommodated.

As the COMPASS contract emphasises cost-saving measures, Serco have sought low cost accommodation, resulting in a push towards the periphery of Glasgow and lower quality housing stock – both of which adversely impact asylum seekers. It also changes the social and built geographies of the city.

Glasgow City Council has minimal scope to plan for or act on these impacts. This loss of control over the location and housing in which asylum seekers are accommodated is therefore not just a transferral of responsibility from one organisation (Glasgow City Council) to another (Serco); rather, it represents a loss of policy control, which has implications for urban planning and community development in Glasgow beyond the implementation of Dispersal.

In contrast, the VPRS allows local authorities to select refugees on the basis of existing housing and resources within the local area, identify locations and communities which have sufficient space, access and resources, as well as areas and housing stock in need of 'regeneration'.

Though refugee resettlement was something with which local authorities in many remote and rural locations may have been unfamiliar, the provision of housing for people in need – and mobilisation of resources and services that this entails – was something in which they had considerable expertise.

By allowing room for autonomy of localised accommodation governance, Resettlement capitalised upon this knowledge and expertise. It also allowed for refugee resettlement to be embedded within community planning competences, achieving a balance between the material provision of accommodation for dispersed people and existing local housing and socioeconomic priorities.

> " I don't know why they [Home Office] asked us for our input as if they were listening cause they weren't.
>
> **Local government stakeholder**

Transitions

Another feature of 'decentered' accommodation governance is the dispersal of accommodation provision across multiple stakeholders. This has meant that at points of transition in the Dispersal accommodation system – for example, during the 'Move On' Period – service provision relies upon coordination between many different service providers, including: (1) inter-governmental coordination (2) multi-level coordination (3) coordination between the private, public and third sectors (4) coordination between local government and housing association representatives (5) coordination between the refugee individual and all these organisations.

If coordination between stakeholders breaks down, there is a strong likelihood that a refugee will end up facing a (temporary) homelessness situation. It is also likely that, though the process involves a number of stakeholders, responsibility for homelessness situations will be situated at local level, either with the public or third sector.

Conclusions

- Dispersal governance (1) creates systemic complexity that adversely effects asylum accommodation provision, (2) simultaneously pressurises and disenfranchises service providers at local level, and (3) creates hierarchies of engagement and representation that inhibits successful multilevel governance.

- Resettlement, on the other hand, offers alternatives in the greater autonomy that it provides local authorities. It provides space for local actors to mobilise local knowledge that (1) answers the needs of refugees (2) answers the needs of existing communities and (3) is place and location specific.

- But the resettlement model is not a panacea and multi-agency networks may actually offer an alternative to a centralised governance model. There is potential for the development of multilateral rather than multilevel forms of governance to establish alternate 'centres' of government.

- GLIMER participants noted that though third sector organisations in Glasgow provide crucial frontline support to those who fell between statutory gaps, dialogue with government was limited. Scope for intervention with central government was seen as particularly limited.

Recommendations

- Integrated accommodation solutions are required, in which the needs of asylum seekers and refugees are considered within mainstream housing policy by local and devolved government. This is not possible under the current arrangements.

- The dispersal scheme should be extended to other local authorities across Scotland but must adapt from the current arrangements in place for the COMPASS contract. Following the resettlement model, local authorities need to be given the autonomy to decide on accommodation options that suit the local area.

- Scottish local authorities should be supported to continue to receive resettled refugees beyond 2020 if they wish to do so. Adequate financial arrangements must be maintained in order to make such a system financially viable.

- Glasgow City Council should facilitate the development of networks with third sector organisations outwith the usual partnerships.

- Serco, and the new provider the Mears Group, should be encouraged to work closer with Glasgow City council and relevant third sector organisations in order to reduce the number of people evicted from dispersal accommodation following a refusal.