Written evidence submitted by Detention Action / Scottish Detainee Visitor

National Conversation with Migrants
Glasgow Report September 2017

Background

In early 2017, the Home Affairs Select Committee set itself the objective of building greater consensus behind immigration policy. Such a consensus must necessarily include migrants and communities, and address issues of particular concern to them such as enforcement. Experiences of enforcement can affect levels of trust in immigration systems for individuals and their communities. Building consensus between Government, host communities and migrant communities necessarily involves asking migrants their views on immigration policy.

To this end, Detention Action and Scottish Detainee Visitors held panel discussion in Glasgow. On 9 September 2017, people from different migrant communities gave their views on immigration, integration and media representation, and suggestions for future approaches to immigration policy.

Context

Glasgow is the largest city in Scotland, and fifth largest in the United Kingdom by urban area. After decades of decline, Glasgow's population has risen in the last ten years. According to the latest census information, the population of Scotland on census day in 2011 was estimated to be 5,295,403 - the highest ever and a 4.6% rise since 2001.1

Glasgow has the most ethnically diverse population in Scotland. In 2001, 5% of Glasgow’s population were from an ethnic minority. This number rose to 12% in 2011. The number of non-UK born population increased from 6% in 2001 to 12% in 2011. In recent years total net migration into Glasgow has increased, as the number of migrants arriving to Glasgow exceeds the number of people leaving.2

Historically, there were large waves of migration to Scotland from Ireland. In the 1960s and 1970s, the city became home to Pakistani, Indian, Bengali and Chinese communities. In the most recent census, of the population born outside Scotland, 0.7% came from the Republic of Ireland, 3% were from the EU and 8.5% were from outside the EU.3

The Scottish Government does not have devolved power over immigration policy. Since 2000, the UK Government has pursued a ‘dispersal’ policy whereby asylum seekers are moved to different parts of the UK. In early 2017, this Committee published a damning report calling for an overhaul of the current system that branded the quality of housing provision a “disgrace”. Analysis by the Guardian showed more than five times as many destitute asylum seekers live in the poorest parts of the UK as the richest, a policy that the chair of this

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1 Scottish Census 2011 http://www.scotlandscensus.gov.uk/ods-web/area.html
3 http://www.scotlandscensus.gov.uk/ods-web/area.html#!
Committee called a “shambles”. By year end 2016, Glasgow had taken more asylum seekers than any other local authority in the UK.

Dungavel IRC is located about 30 miles south of Glasgow. A former prison, the detention centre has capacity to detain roughly 250 people. In 2016, the Home Office announced plans to close the centre and replace it with a new short-term holding facility. However, Renfrewshire Council refused to grant planning permission to build the new facility, and the Home Office cancelled closure of Dungavel, which remains open. A Chinese man died in Dungavel on 19 September 2017, shortly after the evidence gathering session took place.

Key findings

Views on immigration

Panel members came from different countries and ranged from new arrivals to those who had lived in the UK for more than a decade. Because many of the members had ongoing cases with the Home Office, their anonymity was requested. No one who gave details of their status had leave to remain in the UK. Details of panel members are given as an appendix.

The panel members said that they found the experience of moving to Scotland to be positive overall. Many of the group had experience of living in both England and Scotland and made comparisons. People found that Glaswegians were very welcoming and noted the difference with people south of the border: “People down south mind their own business, they don’t seem to care about other people.” Access to support in Scotland was also highlighted as more positive than in England: “In Scotland, there are many groups for asylum seekers – groups where you can chit chat, be part of community.”

There was agreement from the group, however, that like anywhere, there are “good and bad people”. One man said “There are some people here who think we are here taking their houses, taking their jobs.” There was also acceptance among the group that there was a general lack of understanding from British people of the reality of the asylum system:

“People are good. I’m going to church and people are kind. But in their minds they don’t know the difficulties we face – why we are here, they think we are only here for benefits, that we don’t want to work, we are just avoiding and spending time at home enjoying our lives. But it’s hard for us, if we start to work it would be better. We would be busy. We could think about future and not waste our skills and have a nice life.”

The group spoke about the difficulties they encountered when people learned that they were asylum seekers: “I think we are tolerated rather than accepted in some parts. The law says you can’t say this or that, but if they were allowed to, it would be totally different.” The group said that much of the negativity they encountered was linked to UK immigration policy. One particular concern for people was the Azure card. People found the card problematic as it identifies people as asylum seekers which creates division and led to feelings of “otherness”. Two panel members gave the following examples of discrimination they encountered as a result of the Azure card:

“The other day I did an experiment. I thought, I fancy a bottle of wine. I sent my friend, who is white and Scottish, to the shop with my Azure card. I gave him my pin number, he bought the wine and walked off. The following week I did the same thing, in the same shop. When I
went to pay, just as I present the card the shop assistant asks “Can I have a look at that?” They are actually looking at the colour of your skin. And that’s not right - it’s racial profiling.”

“This type of thing we experience every day. I find it when I take the bus and have to use the Azure card. People just look at you and make fun, sometimes they accuse of us of not paying taxes. The other day a white lady shouted at me on the bus because my child’s buggy was in the way of her child’s wheelchair. She was very angry and shouting, “Why is she in a buggy, she’s a big girl! See these people just come over here and make problems for us.” There was a white man as well, not shouting at me directly, but saying to his partner, “I was waiting for the bus and we can’t find space.” I’ve lost my self-confidence, it’s like the fact that I’m an asylum seeker is written on my face. Every time I take the bus I’m scared.”

The group agreed that Home Office policies had a negative impact on the perception of migrants and asylum seekers. The hostile environment came up a number of times and how it created a feeling of “otherness” that led to insecurity.

Integration

The panel members discussed integration and were aware of the renewed focus on this area as a result of the Casey review and the ongoing APPG on Social Integration. The panel first discussed what integration meant to them. One man said “Integration is the coming together of different people. I learn your values, you learn my values. It’s sharing culture.” According to another man “My understanding of integration is if you’re from the outside you come and become part of that culture. If you’re coming to Scotland you learn about the culture of Scotland and there’s some kind of cohesion you can live together.”

While there was recognition that there was an expectation on people moving to a country to make an effort, the panel agreed that integration is reciprocal: “For me it’s important how people receive you – if the Scottish welcome me, if they stretch their hand, they make me feel comfortable. It’s got to be a two way thing.” One man described how people could recast hostility towards outsiders as a Glaswegian peculiarity: “It should be both ways. I cannot integrate if I’m not allowed to. There’s some pubs I’ve walked into where they look at you and you’ll hear that it’s just a Glasgow thing, that it’s about Celtic or Rangers. But it’s uncomfortable and a lot of people find it difficult, if you’re going to places where you’re not sure whether they will accept you – it’s going to be difficult to integrate.”

One of the key recommendations to promote integration from various inquiries was improving access to English classes. The panel agreed that learning English was important and that language barriers made communication with Scottish people more difficult but said that integration was more than this.

Panel members said that being stigmatised as an asylum seeker could be as big a barrier to integration as the language barrier: “Life is not all about study. People talk to me but as soon as they know I’m asylum seeker, they get away from me. I don’t have any money. How can you go to restaurant, cinema, or even travel? You know, I don’t have rights as a human, I’m aware of this terrible situation. It affects me psychologically.” According to one woman “When people know you are an asylum seeker they treat you differently.” A man agreed
“Even if you make friends, you can’t do anything with them. You’re welcome the first two, three times, but then after that – you become a burden.”

UK Government policies introduced as part of the hostile environment were highlighted as a barrier to integration. Panel members discussed difficulties opening a bank account, restrictions on working and driving and rumours that the new Immigration Bill would give the UK Government the power to close bank accounts of irregular migrants. One woman said “I go to class, learn English, but what for? I can’t work, I can’t do anything. I come home from class I do nothing.” Others agreed that restrictions on working had a big impact: “This is my fourteenth year in the UK. It seems to me I walked into a prison. Since 2003 to now. I’m a professional, a graduate, it kills me. I don’t know why we are treated as if we don’t have brains. We come here because we need protection but we are treated like criminals.” Another man said: “It’s an otherness you feel, being different, on the bus you have another ticket because it’s provided by the Home Office. If you’re at the shops, your card is different. The longer this goes on the stronger the feeling.”

One woman pointed out that integrating is not the highest priority when basic needs such as housing and food were not being met: “Without status or support, you go through hell just finding somewhere to sleep. You go from one food bank to another. I never ate food from a can before. Cold, frozen things, just to survive. I’ve kept quiet until now because I’m angry. I didn’t used to be like this. The Home Office doesn’t listen.”

Some panel members had been subject to the Home Office policy of dispersal and moved away from support networks, which had implications for their integration: “I’ve been here for five years. I did not wish to come here. I have friends in London, not in Glasgow. I was studying as a nurse and enrolled as nurse in London. After two semesters, the Home Office brought me to Glasgow. I was taken to Dungavel detention camp. I claimed asylum. Here you see the good, the bad, the ugly. In Glasgow there are good ones, there are bad ones.”

When asked what could be done to promote integration and community cohesion, the group suggested better Home Office decision-making would help integration. One man said that people were ‘left in limbo for a long time’ and this obviously created problems for communities trying to integrate. The other common suggestion among the panel was that they should be given the right to work. The group pointed out that this would serve to de-stigmatise asylum-seeking, allow people to make a positive contribution, save the government money and promote stronger communities. According to one woman “The best thing to promote integration would be for asylum seekers to do work. It doesn’t affect the asylum process. The government is spending a lot of money, providing benefits and housing, but if people can work they can be part of the community and society. I think this is best to properly integrate with the people.”

**Representation**

When asked about representation in the media the group said that they felt as though negative stories of migrants were more prevalent than positive stories. They discussed the need to highlight the positive contributions migrants made to this country. One man said he thought there was a bias towards negative stories, with much fearmongering: “If a crime is committed
by one asylum seeker among thousands– this one is focussed on and evokes emotions in people. Then on the streets things become more difficult us.”

One woman said that there was a direct link between the way the treatment she would receive and current events, particularly following the terrorist attacks in the UK this year:

“If an attack happens and it receives a lot of media attention, people’s attitude change. I’m Muslim and it affects the way people look at me. I’m scared to wear a scarf – after London and what’s gone on in the past few months. I don’t feel secure when I go out. The media just shows one side. They don’t tell the whole story.”

Others praised the media’s role in exposing poor housing conditions, but whether this had a materially positive impact was debated.

Fair immigration policy
Unanimously the group shared negative experiences of dealing with the Home Office. They described the current immigration system as “cruel”, “slow” and “unfair”. They found communication with the Home Office difficult and a lack of active engagement meant they had little trust in decision-making processes. One woman spoke about how her case was closed while she was detained in Dungavel but nobody informed her. Others expressed little confidence when their case actually came before a decision-maker that the right decision would be made. Others pointed to what they saw as arbitrary decision-making, where their claims were refused but those in similar positions were not.

Reporting to the Home Office was also highlighted as stressful experience, particularly by those who had been detained while reporting or had seen this happen to others. One man explained his experience of reporting:

“Reporting is how they monitor you. I came in 2003, my visa expired in 2006. Since then I’ve been reporting – for eleven years I’ve been reporting every week, fortnight, month, then every three months, then twice per year. Then when I came to Scotland I had to go through the whole thing again weekly, monthly….”

Others spoke of the uncertainty that came from the risk of being detained: “There was a time six months ago when I had no claims with the Home Office and they told me to report. I got everything ready for detention. I had a bag. Gave my keys to a friend. You can imagine how stressful that situation is, you don’t when you’ll be home again.” A woman agreed that “Even now when I get home. As soon as I get outside my door, if there is a letter, I worry about whether the lock been changed.”

Another woman said: “I remember sitting in the chair and it being so hot. I went to report at 9am and they kept me all day there until 5pm. If you want to take me to camp, take me to camp, don’t leave me there all day. The first time they detained me I had nothing. Just like that.” One man described the impact of not knowing whether you would be detained and for how long it might be: “It’s torture. Your body might be there physically but your mind isn’t. When you’re in this position you’re going to be very fearful or you’ll abscond.”

One man explained his impossible situation experienced by many failed asylum seekers – he does not have permission to stay in the UK but cannot go home: “In my country (Zimbabwe)
it’s very clear, people who sought asylum in the UK, we don’t want them back. The UK knows this, they have guidance saying this, but still they try to squeeze me out. What do we do now?” Another man said “In my experience, I’ve been here for two years and haven’t been listened to yet. I was finger printed in Italy. But I know others with the same and some have visas”. A woman described an extreme impact of uncertainty: “My friend from Africa died during the process. She’s been in this country for nearly eight years – with no support. She can’t go home, can’t stay here. It kills.”

Conclusion

Overwhelmingly the group had negative experiences of the Home Office. They had little trust in the decision making process and many had spent years going through the courts to have their claims heard. They found the decision making process arbitrary, pointing to people in similar positions who had their claims accepted when theirs were refused. Panel members discussed the waste of life, talent and skills that came from awaiting a decision, living in “limbo”. One man said: “Give us papers. You’re killing us softly.”

The group expressed dismay at the amount of resources wasted, particularly on long term detention and poor quality housing. Some panel members suffered from mental health issues and discussed the pressure on the NHS caused by making people live uncertain lives: “If they had better systems they would actually save on NHS. Many people have mental health issues because of immigration systems.”

They saw the answer as giving people the right to work and this having both economic benefits to them and the country and social benefits that could improve integration and ease tensions between migrant and non-migrant communities. “It’s better for governments if they just give us leave. Allow us to work. If I can work I’ll pay tax.”

Building a consensual immigration policy must necessarily include addressing both government immigration control objectives and the views of communities where migrants live. The perception that asylum and immigration processes are arbitrary suggests that migrants do not trust or understand Home Office decision-making. This lack of trust is exacerbated by negative experiences of hostile environment policies and enforcement action such as detention. At every step, panel members described the impact of immigration policy on their ability to integrate and play their part in society. They could not see immigration policy as a valid attempt at managing migration, but only as arbitrary and punitive. Building wider consensus on immigration policy amongst migrants and their communities will require new approaches to making policies appear fair and transparent to the people affected.

About

Detention Action is a national charity established in 1993. We defend the rights and improve the welfare of people in detention by combining support for individuals with campaigning for policy change. We work in Harmondsworth and Colnbrook Immigration Removal Centres (IRCs), near Heathrow Airport in London, and the Verne IRC in Portland, Dorset. We also help people held under immigration powers in London prisons.
Scottish Detainee Visitors is an independent charity based in Glasgow that seeks to influence policy on immigration detention and provides support to people detained in Dungavel Immigration Removal Centre, and on release from detention.

09 November 2017
## Appendix: Demographics of citizens panel

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Panel member</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Have you ever been detained?</th>
<th>Do you have leave to remain in the UK?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>35-39</td>
<td>Asian (Pakistani)</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>25-29</td>
<td>Asian (Sri Lankan)</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>40-44</td>
<td>African</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>25-29</td>
<td>Prefer not to say</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>30-34</td>
<td>African</td>
<td>Prefer not to say</td>
<td>Prefer not to say</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>60-64</td>
<td>Multiple (white and black African)</td>
<td>Prefer not to say</td>
<td>Prefer not to say</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>25-29</td>
<td>African</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>55-59</td>
<td>African</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>50-54</td>
<td>African</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
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