

# Somebody Reaches Out.

## Faithful Welcome Focus Groups Report Summary July 2022



*"If a faith community welcomes you, you can progress much faster than if you don't have that support."* (Faithful Welcome Focus Group participant)

*"I think it's [faith community] where you find your peace. Where you integrate and have a place of belonging."* (Faithful Welcome Focus Group participant)

This paper, *Somebody Reaches Out*, presents the findings of a process of engagement with New Scots - asylum seekers and refugees - in Glasgow, and staff and volunteers from faith communities across Scotland working with and alongside them. The title comes from a quote from one volunteer reflecting on the difference made when, *"somebody cares, somebody reaches out, somebody smiles"*. This process took place from February to June 2022.

The main purpose of *Faithful Welcome* is that faith communities actively seek to involve refugees and asylum seekers in community life and play an integral role in supporting two-way integration<sup>1</sup>. The findings provide learning for faith communities and the programme about what a faithful welcome looks like from the perspective of refugees and asylum seekers, and which barriers and challenges faith communities face when seeking to support New Scots.

In total, four separate focus group sessions were held with New Scots and faith groups from different belief communities (more than 50 participants in total), as well as a joint engagement session at a multi-faith gathering in June with 80 participants. Themes emerging from the conversations are presented in this paper, followed by a series of recommendations for faith groups and the Faithful Welcome project moving forward. It should be noted that this engagement was not an academic exercise but a listening process where those with lived experience shared their ideas and concerns to shape the response of faith communities going forward.

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<sup>1</sup> Integration as a dynamic, multifaceted, two-way process underlines the shared responsibility, privilege and joy of both New Scots and receiving communities in playing an equal role in building cohesive, strong, resilient and multi-cultural communities. Two-way integration involves positive change in both individual refugees and asylum seekers and the receiving communities.

## Findings: Asylum Seekers & Refugees

### Experiences of connecting with a local faith community

*“The start of everything was from a faith community.”*

More than 30 New Scots - asylum seekers and refugees - connected to various faith communities in Scotland shared their experiences of engaging with faith communities, and provided an insight into what is important to them when seeking to connect with faith groups and others.

**Finding a faith community:** How people find their way to faith communities is varied and, often, accidental. Word of mouth among New Scots rather than a proactive approach from faith communities appears to be a more common way for people seeking a faith community. The priority for finding a faith community is discovering a place of belonging and connection; where asylum seekers and refugees feel welcomed and at home.

**Welcome and acceptance:** The welcome received from a faith community is intrinsically linked with a feeling of acceptance, belonging and being cared for. It is also connected to tackling isolation and loneliness, providing a place that is regarded as safe, loving and supportive. Where the Home Office and the ‘system’ is referred to as making you feel “inferior” and “alone”, a faith community is a “place of love, support and welcome”.

**Ongoing relationships:** A positive welcome can be the difference between the forming of relationships, support and learning that make a lasting difference, or a negative one that exacerbates the situation for people requiring support at a traumatic and emotionally draining period in their life, damaging expectations of what it means to be a faith community.

*“People talk to you in church.  
Making you feel seen and heard goes a long way.”*

### Hopes and expectations from a faith community

In general, New Scots hoped faith communities would show “patience”, “empathy”, “love” and “understanding” whilst providing practical, emotional and relational support and opportunities for them to contribute and be active members of a community.

One participant described the welcome she received from a faith community as ‘love without limits’.

**Practical support:** Information on accessing services; help setting up home; advice, guidance and local knowledge; and activities, including children’s groups.

**Emotional support:** Through a better understanding of the issues many asylum seekers and refugees are facing, including stress; trauma; loss and bereavement; and depression and anxiety, faith communities would be able to care well and better for refugees and asylum seekers.

**Relational Support:** Opportunities to share and learn from others; build deep and meaningful relationships, opportunities to contribute and volunteer; being part of a faith community gives you the opportunity to reach out and support others. “I’m not going with an expectation, I’m going to give something.”

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*“Faith communities can help give people a sense of belonging and in some cases relieve feelings of desperation”*

## **The Impact of engaging with faith communities**

The role of faith communities in the life of asylum seekers and refugees was described by a participant as, “*A place open to everyone where barriers experienced elsewhere – language, age, working status – are not there*”. Discussions on how faith communities have actively helped people settle into life in Scotland and the impact it makes provided the following themes:

**Practical Support:** Activities; practical connections; women’s support groups; food support; advocacy and involvement in the right to work; writing letters to MPs; accompanying people to court; providing welcome packs with literature and a list of who to call, and the provision of transport.

**Relational Support:** Being a presence, ready to fight for and support people through their struggles is viewed as an incredible strength of faith communities. The importance of relationships for settling into life, along with the unity that togetherness brings. Pastoral care calls; support groups; and the feeling of equality within faith groups are highly valued.

**Community and connections:** Faith communities at their best, it was expressed, can offer a strong community and family away from home. There emerges a real desire for connecting with others and to find a faith community where connection is a priority. Many participants spoke about feelings of loneliness, depression and isolation and the positive impact that a sense of belonging has on these feelings.

*“The Bishop sometimes invited me to their house for dinner. He prayed for me. He became like another family here. I am feeling weak and I just called to ask if there were prayers. I don’t have family here and this felt like family.”*

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## **Challenges and Barriers to engaging with faith communities**

Challenges and barriers expressed to engaging with faith communities shared similarities to barriers experienced in engaging in other areas of community life. These ‘general’ barriers were often financial, logistical or knowledge-based in nature. The challenges that were specific to engaging with faith communities were around cultural differences and a lack of understanding of what faith groups can and cannot provide.

**Financial Challenges:** Transport costs are a significant barrier to both engaging with faith communities and also for other aspects of everyday community engagement. Support with travel, including providing bus fares makes engagement easier and takes away the financial pressure and difficulty around travel. Financial challenges also impact on ability to keep in contact with others including digital inclusion (e.g. insufficient funds for phone top-ups). Some asylum

seekers mentioned that it is difficult to settle in a faith community where the congregation has a culture where financial donations to the faith community are celebrated publicly. Given their extremely limited financial resources because of their asylum-seeking status, an inability to contribute can make them feel excluded or embarrassed.

**Knowledge Barriers:** One significant barrier to engagement is knowing where to go for help and support on various issues. There was confusion and concern raised about the rules in some foodbanks, about needing to be referred by an agency before you would be eligible to access food, or indeed having information available in other languages. There is also a need for clarity about what help can and cannot be provided by which faith communities.

**Location and Travel Challenges:** Experiences of having to walk everywhere until being able to get a bus pass were shared, with a number of asylum seekers and refugees sharing about walking long distances to find a faith community they could connect with. Where a welcome cannot be found in the most local faith community, travel costs need to be incurred to access a faith community further away which has a financial impact.

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### **What New Scots would like to see more of from faith communities**

Asylum seekers and refugees would like to see more proactive steps being taken to support them, along with awareness raising among faith communities on specific issues and opportunities. In addition, practical support is valued as well as the strength of vocal support from faith communities in lobbying.

**Proactive engagement and pastoral care:** It was felt that open days hosted by faith communities where asylum seekers and refugees can share details of what they are struggling with and be met with a proactive response of, “what do you need?”, and “how can we support you?” would be very beneficial. Faith communities willing to welcome refugees and asylum seekers should also make themselves known more actively.

**Lobbying:** Faith communities should increase their collective voice to lobby for change and support for asylum seekers. It was stated that churches, in particular, should be speaking out on issues but also getting involved in legislation. They should be saying more to change policy, as well as walk alongside asylum seekers as personal advocates (e.g. helping understand letters from the Home Office, checking in on how they are getting on with their claim). [NB: providing immigration advice by non-certified people is illegal]

**Awareness raising amongst faith communities:** Increasing awareness of diversity and culture within faith communities was identified as being important, potentially through events of cultural exchange such as asylum seekers cooking for the local community. It is also important for faith communities to understand the barriers, difficulties and trauma experienced by many asylum seekers and refugees.

**Practical support:** Practical responses to meeting needs around travel (bus passes), language (English classes and opportunities for conversational English) and children’s activities to allow respite for parents.

*“Church was where there is peace. Away from the noise of legislation. Sunday is the best day. I just switch off.”*

## Findings: Faith Communities/ Faith-based Projects

### What is the key work already being delivered?

*“We want to do more in the future to meet the needs people have.”*

The commitment and passion to support others was clear as faith communities came together to share about the work they deliver. It currently takes various different forms, depending on the needs identified locally, but includes practical support; befriending and relationship building; and identifying and meeting ad hoc needs.

**Practical support:** Impactful and meaningful practical support by faith communities is being carried out across Scotland. Support takes different forms through formal programmes (e.g. an established ESOL programme run by a faith group in Glasgow) and more informal or ad-hoc support and reacting to needs as they arrive (e.g. personal advocacy, practical help with household items). Overall, there is a feeling that faith communities are picking up on where support is lacking from public and third sector organisations or where ‘official’ support has been ended.

**Befriending and relationship building:** Faith communities are providing a safe and welcoming space to ensure befriending and relationships can develop, as well as more structured opportunities to build friendships (e.g. fun activities, craft courses). Offering an opportunity for people to hear stories and share experiences have also been important. Befriending can only take place due to the levels of volunteering available which have dropped with the pandemic.

**Identifying and meeting needs:** Faith communities are in the unique position of being able to provide initiatives to meet the physical, emotional, social and, at times, financial needs of asylum seekers and refugees, but importantly also the spiritual and religious needs. These needs are identified during the building of personal trusted relationships and support can therefore be person-centered and specific.

### Challenges

There is a sense of togetherness and the joy of learning and sharing together amongst faith communities. With these joys also come significant challenges, often financial or knowledge-based or associated with the pandemic. Challenges include the knowledge of rights and regulations, language and cultural barriers and how to locate asylum seekers and refugees within communities.

**Financial challenges:** There is a recognition by faith communities of the incredible support they have from volunteers but sometimes there is a lack of funds to take work forward. Relying on special donations alone cannot sustain the support long-term. Many asylum seekers also need travel expenses and there is difficulty in providing this for everyone that needs it. This is exacerbated by cost of living pressures which makes it harder for people to donate money or goods, and more people are using food banks, charity shops. Knowing which funding is available and support accessing it would be beneficial.

**Knowledge-based challenges:** Concern exists within some faith communities that they do not understand the rights and entitlements of asylum seekers and refugees, e.g. regulations around work and volunteering. The provision of free training on this was put forward as a way to address this. The relationship between faith communities and other service providers was also raised - faith groups need to know more about what other services offer, and public and third sector agencies need to better understand what is offered at community level. The moving of asylum seekers to different communities by authorities was also a challenge, both in relation to forming relationships but also in maintaining them over time.

**Challenges due to the Covid-19 pandemic and volunteering:** Volunteering has been impacted significantly by Covid-19; getting people to engage post-Covid is a real challenge. People who volunteered before are slow to come back or have re-evaluated and decided to do something else. There is a desire to increase volunteering hours to develop ideas, but also a recognition that support is required to sustain current volunteers.

## What would you like to do to support refugees and asylum seekers but not currently able to?

In discussion, faith groups identified gaps in provision, and things they would like to do but for various reasons aren't able to. Three key themes emerge as to the type of support that faith communities wish to provide which are outlined below.

**Establishing needs and aspirations, and taking action:** Avoiding the duplication of work was seen as a key priority which includes having a greater understanding of what other faith groups and third sector organisations provide. Whilst those involved in work had an understanding what the needs and aspirations of New Scots are, others did not, were unsure how to establish aspirations and were uncertain which are being met and which are not. There are limited resources but a desire and willingness amongst faith communities to support asylum seekers and refugees. Looking to find ways of working collaboratively to offer support is something that people want to develop – a co-ordinated approach is central to this.

**Providing Activities for Wellbeing:** There is a desire amongst faith communities to provide activities that have a positive impact on health and wellbeing, in particular mental health through the provision of social and relational activities. Potential activities discussed included providing free food at a food hub (provided my Muslim women); a trauma counselling service; providing volunteering opportunities for New Scots and English classes.

**Learning and sharing together:** Creating opportunities to learn from other faiths, overcoming prejudices and finding common ground were identified as ways of promoting integration in community. Providing workshops on introducing experiences of engaging with faith communities would be a positive way of bringing people together.

## What are the barriers or challenges to deliver this new work?

Some barriers to delivering the ideas, developing new work or expanding existing work are engagement, effective partnerships, buildings and resources. The main suggestions that would provide help in overcoming these challenges are on developing networks, frequent conversations and events like the focus groups, and creating learning opportunities for faith communities.

**Engagement:** Knowing how to make contact with asylum seekers and refugees; knowing the communities they live in; what to do when asylum seekers move on from communities. Faith groups have to keep asking – who is missing out? Who are the people we never reach? What is a sticky plaster and which support is empowering?

**Buildings:** The spaces some groups have available are not adequate. Comments include: “We want to improve the church building to offer a drop in”; “our barrier is not having our own physical space entirely”; “we don't have our own building so are restricted in the use of the space we have”.

**Effective partnerships:** Churches in rural areas want to be involved but refugees don't live in their local community – are we making enough use of partnerships? (e.g. a rural church connecting with a church in Glasgow, offering financial support to another church to help with bus passes for asylum seekers to access worship services).

**Resources and volunteers:** A difficulty is finding faithful and regular volunteers who will befriend and come alongside people; sometimes it is only a small group in a faith community trying to take things forward which has limitations (see above).

## Conclusion

The commitment and passion to support others and make a meaningful difference was clear amongst faith communities. Faith groups play a vital role in the lives of many refugees and asylum seekers, both in offering a sense of belonging, pastoral care, a family away from family; but also in providing essential services, esp. picking up where mainstream services stop.

This engagement process highlighted that many faith communities already provide the support which New Scots mentioned would make the most difference to them: practical support, including social activities and events; befriending and relationship building and being a community. Faith groups are uniquely placed to offer a sustained commitment to New Scots, and being present in every community have the potential to have a significant impact in the lives of refugees and asylum seekers. At the same time, there are barriers in connecting with faith communities, which highlight the need to help faith communities understand more about the issues and equip some to provide a practical, effective and meaningful welcome. Many have the desire but lack capacity, funding, knowledge or confidence. Furthermore, the focus groups show there is potential to build on what is desired by New Scots and what faith groups are offering. Personal advocacy, for example, requires very little financial resources and no building, and is one thing that was repeatedly mentioned as making a big difference in the lives of asylum seekers. Helping New Scots and faith communities connect productively to share in these conversations would build the vision that sees faith communities in every local community equipped so that every New Scot could find a welcome in a local faith group if they so wished.

In addition to the themes highlighted here, what was very clear is that not only faith communities, but faith itself was a key factor in sustaining people every day, providing hope and comfort in times that feel lonely, isolating, testing and hard. Faith builds resilience and helps in the search for meaning in suffering. Faith communities as places of worship and encountering God are important in the lives of asylum seekers and refugees.

*“The Home Office says ‘no’, you cry the whole night, then you go to church and the word of God encourages. You get comfort from the church.”*

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## Recommendations for faith communities

1. Take up opportunities to engage in awareness raising on issues affecting asylum seekers and refugees in Scotland and how faith communities can provide support; including learning more about their rights and entitlements.
2. Explore developing relationships with refugee-supporting charities who can help identify needs and connect faith groups to refugee communities.
3. Explore how welcoming your faith community actually is to people from other nationalities and backgrounds. Start and continue conversations with New Scots about their aspirations and needs and their perceptions of your faith group.
4. Enhance partnerships among churches and faith communities to deliver work together and increase collective resources and volunteer numbers (e.g. sharing of building space for activities).
5. Explore developing learning relationships between established faith-based projects and faith communities wanting to develop new initiatives.

## Recommendations for supporting organisations

1. Develop a network of sharing, events for sharing of good practice and learning opportunities for faith communities and asylum seekers and refugees.
2. Develop a series of in-depth case studies of individual experiences from the initial engagement with a faith community and impact this has had on them over time over time. Personal case studies would allow other faith communities to understand the principals of integration and have opportunities to learn from others.
3. Ensure a sustained commitment towards supporting faith groups on their journey through a dedicated staff member who can provide advice and support and enable networking opportunities.



## More information on Faithful Welcome

**Faithful Welcome** is a partnership project between [Faith in Community Scotland](#) and [Scottish Faiths Action for Refugees](#). We aim to support Scotland's faith communities to welcome refugees and asylum seekers and enable them to be an integral part of community life.

Faithful Welcome invites people from Scotland's rich diversity of faith traditions to be part of creating a more welcoming and inclusive society for newcomers and play an integral role in supporting two-way integration.

How to link in with **Faithful Welcome**:

- Free workshops and information sessions on refugees, asylum and integration
- One-to-one advice, support and capacity building to help you develop your work
- Networking opportunities and connecting with like-minded people
- Small grants of up to £500 and practical advice

Our vision is that faith groups in every local community actively seek to involve refugees and asylum seekers in community life and welcome them as neighbours and friends. With your help we would like to see refugees and asylum-seekers have strong social connections, leading fulfilling lives and be confident about using their own gifts and skills to contribute to community life, as well as having their needs met.

**Our Project Team would love to hear from you:**

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## Somebody Reaches Out July 2022



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SCOTTISH FAITHS  
ACTION FOR REFUGEES

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TRACKING POVERTY THROUGH FAITH