OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee

Tuesday 2 May 2023

Session 6

The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Tuesday 2 May 2023

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EQUALITIES, HUMAN RIGHTS AND CIVIL JUSTICE COMMITTEE
10th Meeting 2023, Session 6

CONVENER

*Kaukab Stewart (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
*Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con)
*Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
*Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
*Paul O'Kane (West Scotland) (Lab)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Pinar Aksu (Maryhill Integration Network)
Selina Hales (Refuweegee)
Nick Hobbs (Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland)
María José Pavez (Grampian Regional Equality Council)
Savan Qadir (Refugees for Justice)
Dr Sarah Stewart (Friends of Scottish Settlers)

LOCATION

The James Clerk Maxwell Room (CR4)

Scottish Parliament

Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee

Tuesday 2 May 2023

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:48]

Decision on Taking Business in Private

The Convener (Kaukab Stewart): Good morning, and welcome to the 10th meeting in 2023 of the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee in session 6. We have no apologies this morning.

A new member is joining our committee today. I warmly welcome Paul O'Kane, who is replacing Pam Duncan-Glancy as our Labour member. I thank Pam for her valuable contribution to the committee's work during this parliamentary session, and I am sure that all members will join me in wishing her all the best in her new role.

Our first agenda item is to decide whether to take in private agenda item 3, under which the committee will consider the evidence that it will hear today. Do members agree to take agenda item 3 in private?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Asylum Seekers in Scotland

09:48

The Convener: Under agenda item 2, we will hear from stakeholders who support asylum seekers in Scotland. We will hear from Pinar Aksu, human rights and advocacy co-ordinator, Maryhill Integration Network; Selina Hales, founder and director of Refuweegee; Nick Hobbs, head of advice and investigations, Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland; María José Pavez, policy officer, Grampian Regional Equality Council; Savan Qadir, project manager, Refugees for Justice; and Dr Sarah Stewart, volunteer and partnership manager, Friends of Scottish Settlers. You are all very welcome to the meeting.

I refer members to papers 1 and 2. After our panel members have given short opening statements, we will move to questions. We will start with Pinar Aksu.

Pinar Aksu (Maryhill Integration Network): Good morning. As the convener mentioned, I am human rights and advocacy co-ordinator at Maryhill Integration Network, which is based in the north side of Glasgow. Since 2001, we have worked with the local community to provide direct support and activities to welcome people into our communities, especially people who are seeking asylum, refugees and migrants.

I am delighted to be here. Sitting behind me is Herberth, who is a MIN voices group volunteer.

We would be interested in discussing in particular how the use of hotel accommodation across the country is impacting on integration and welcoming people, and how that is changing the landscape of our provision. With that use comes issues around accessing education and free transport and impacts on mental health, especially with people not knowing the timescales for how long they will be in the asylum process and staying in hotel accommodation.

We are delighted to be here, and I look forward to answering questions.

Selina Hales (Refuweegee): Hello, everybody. I am the founder and chief executive of the Refuweegee charity in Glasgow. We set up in late 2015 to welcome forcibly displaced people to Glasgow and Scotland, and we have become a critical support provider for refugee communities. We regularly see more than 300 visitors in our city centre offices—people who are seeking dignity and basic support with, for example, food, toiletries, clothing, language and companionship.

We are not currently funded by the Government or local authorities to deliver any of the services that we offer. I say that not as a criticism of

funding strategies, but to emphasise that communities can see what policy makers in the Home Office appear not to see. We currently offer travel support, English classes, creative clubs, bespoke food support that is designed around whether the family or individual has access to a kitchen, and art therapy for traumatised children. We do that because communities make that possible with their donations and their understanding of need. Communities recognise what Governments do not.

The poverty and trauma that are caused and exacerbated by our asylum and refugee systems are inhumane. They are undignified and—most important for today's discussion—unnecessary.

The current systems are failing people spectacularly. The Illegal Migration Bill will increase that failure to a point that I and nobody else in the sector thought possible in this country.

Members can take tangible actions to change that. I am here today to share stories about those failing systems that my team and I hear daily. You can define that as evidence, but I will politely refuse to use that language, because it further dehumanises the people who have lived experience and trauma as a result of our failures to act.

We have to stop shying away from what is happening. We are witnessing not only law breaking but systemic racism and white supremacy at its finest. I will not be complicit by refusing to call it what it is.

Nick Hobbs (Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland): Good morning. I am head of advice and investigations at the office of the Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland. As most of you probably know, our statutory function is to promote and safeguard the human rights of all children in Scotland up to the age of 18, and up to 21 if they are care experienced.

I am looking forward to discussing some of our work. Recently, that has been focused on the Illegal Migration Bill. We have described that as "a direct assault" on the concept of human rights, and especially on the notion of universality—the idea that we all have human rights by virtue of being human. The harm that the bill will cause to children and young people both directly and indirectly in the context of a system that is already harmful is really hard to overstate.

The first children's commissioner, Kathleen Marshall, used to say that there are reserved issues, but no reserved children. The bill and the decisions that are made in the wider immigration system impact on children's rights to education, physical and mental health, development, and safety and protection from harm. Those are all devolved areas. That means that we need to urgently consider how the Scottish Government and Scottish public authorities can use the powers that they have to reduce the harm that will be caused by the bill. There are things that can be done. There are steps that can be taken to mitigate some of the bill's cruelty. I look forward to having the opportunity to discuss those with the committee.

María José Pavez (Grampian Regional Equality Council): Good morning. I am a policy officer at Grampian Regional Equality Council, which is a charity based in Aberdeen that works to advance equality and tackle discrimination.

Since the arrival of people seeking asylum to a hotel in Aberdeen in 2021, we have worked in co-ordination with No Recourse North East Partnership and Aberdeen's third and public sectors. We have collaborated to address people's needs and to build up a more appropriate infrastructure to do that. All of that is in a very challenging context, as the arrival of people seeking asylum occurred before the full dispersal policy was even announced. Therefore, there was no time to prepare, and there were very limited resources and a very limited capacity to respond to that.

With the widening of dispersal in Scotland, we have seen that the asylum system is completely inadequate at different levels. The lack of appropriate resources for localities and the concentration on private contractors are not conducive to a quick and meaningful local response. The long time taken to issue decisions on asylum claims and the use of hotels affect people's mental health and negatively impact their chances of integrating into the local community.

The specific issues that particularly concern us include access to immigration advice. In the north-east of Scotland, and basically outside the central belt, we do not have solicitors to provide that service with legal aid. People have seen access to a solicitor delayed and, of course, it is far from ideal to have all the preparation meetings on cell phones and online. Travelling could be an option, but that is not really feasible because people are entitled to only £9 a week.

We have seen a lack of sufficient English for speakers of other languages provision, with a particular gap for absolute beginners or people who need literacy support. Therefore, we are not able to teach people how to read and write. There is also no provision in place to prevent destitution for people with refugee asylum claims and exhausted appeal rights.

Those are only some of the issues that affect people on the ground. Unfortunately, even though we have the new Scots integration strategy and

the preventing destitution strategy, implementation is far from where it should be for people who are seeking asylum.

When the Illegal Migration Bill is passed, it will make matters worse at all levels. It will mean the end of the asylum system, and it will push people into even more vulnerable situations, including the shadow economy, exploitation and trafficking.

Access to immigration advice is a key concern, as people have only a few days to build up a strong case to challenge removal from the United Kingdom. Imagine that situation for someone in a hotel in Aberdeen or a rural hotel in Aberdeenshire or the Highlands with a broken phone and perhaps without a SIM card—we have seen that—and without organisations to offer support within walking distance.

We believe that a more strategic and overarching response is needed in Scotland—a response that considers the consequences of the Illegal Migration Bill and enables integration as much as possible, especially in areas in which we can and should be doing more on access to immigration advice, education, English or literacy provision, mental health support, support for victims of trafficking, and travelling across the country. That all presents special opportunities for Scotland to do more, to do what is right, and to show our commitment to upholding human rights and international law.

Savan Qadir (Refugees for Justice): Good morning, everyone. I am a project manager at Refugees for Justice. Refugees for Justice was established after the Park Inn incident on 26 June 2020. Since then, we have campaigned to say that the use of hotels is dangerous and harmful to people who live in them. That use has also proven to be very expensive, and hotels are not places that people should be living in. That will undermine the whole principle of integration, especially the new Scots integration strategy.

I would like to talk about two things, one of which is the Illegal Migration Bill. We believe that that bill is an act of vandalism of every principle of the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and the values that we, as a community, hold dear. The bill is deeply misguided and ignores the roots of people seeking refuge in the first place. They are fleeing from persecution, or they might come for family reunion or because of language ties or a colonial relationship.

The Illegal Migration Bill is designed only to serve one party's political agenda. There is no evidence that it will work any better than the recent, nasty Nationality and Borders Act 2022. It also shows that the UK Government's intention is not to deal with the real issues in the broken asylum system but, instead, to abolish it all. That is just like a parent whose child asks them to teach them how to ride a bike but who, instead, sells the bike so that they no longer have to deal with the challenges that come with parenting.

Private companies such as the Mears Group are making huge profits. They are paid by us—the taxpayers—to run what we believe to be an inadequate public service. Let us not forget that looking after the most vulnerable, often traumatised, individuals is a massive task. Those services must be run by public bodies such as local authorities, and we should be learning from schemes such as the Ukrainian scheme and the Syrian resettlement scheme, in which local authorities were directly funded by the UK Government.

I look forward to questions from the committee and to discussing all of those things.

10:00

Dr Sarah Stewart (Friends of Scottish Settlers): I am the volunteer and partnership manager for Friends of Scottish Settlers, or FOSS. We are a small charity in Falkirk that is trying to implement the new Scots strategy—basically, it is about integration from day 1. We are a befriending charity that began when Syrian families started coming in 2016. However, since October 2021, most of our resources have gone to supporting men in an asylum hotel in Falkirk to address the massive gaps in their support.

We are a tiny organisation, and we are trying to get movement on certain aspects such as ESOL, particularly for beginners, and transport. Falkirk does not have the asylum support ecology of Glasgow, for instance, or bigger cities. The guys might have more access to ESOL in Glasgow, but we can provide only a small thing. We have volunteers who do one day a week. We have been trying to work with the local college, but the provision is patchy and applies only to some people. We cannot get absolute beginners into anything.

We want to do more befriending, but we find ourselves having to advocate for very basic support. We have been able to go a long way in Glasgow, for instance, but we are starting from square 1 and it has taken over a year to build local relationships to get people into spaces where they can integrate. That does happen, and it happens successfully, but it takes a lot of footwork, and we really do not have the resources to do the best that we could in the area.

The Convener: Thank you. Once again, I welcome everyone. It was interesting to hear the variety of issues that you have mentioned. I hope that my colleagues and I will be able to get further information and delve a bit deeper into those.

I will start. I have a special interest in this whole topic, but I would like to start on the issue of children. Last week, we heard evidence regarding the use of hotels. My colleagues will ask about that more widely, but I want to concentrate on the experience of children in particular. I would like an illustration of what it is like for a child of an asylum seeker. It would be good to hear, on the record, what that experience is like and about the effect on the child, the family, their mental health and their access to services. We have heard that a hotel is being used especially for housing unaccompanied children so, if you have more information on that, it would be important to hear it.

I will start off with Pinar Aksu and then bring in Nick Hobbs. I am sure that Selina Hales will have something to say. For anyone else on the panel, if something is not mentioned, feel free to alert me to that.

Pinar Aksu: We have people who have been in the asylum process for many years. We have the newly arrived people, who are being put into hotel accommodation throughout the country, but we also have people in the asylum system who, in some cases, have been waiting more than five or even 10 years. As you can imagine, the unknown has a huge impact on them in building their life and their future, and it has an impact on their mental health.

For example, during the pandemic, we were all stuck in our houses for a few months, and we could see how that impacted on us, but we are talking about people being in the system for years and not being able to do anything. For the children of people who are seeking asylum, there is a huge barrier, especially when children reach the age when they could attend college or university. As we know, once they reach that age, children of asylum seekers cannot attend full-time courses at colleges and they cannot go to university, because they will be treated as international students. We have people in the asylum process who cannot go to university. When their children reach the age of 16, 17 or 18, they apply to university but are refused, because they are not citizens and they are treated as international students, so they are expected to pay the fee of an international student.

Some universities provide scholarships, but we are talking about five to 10 scholarships per university, which is not enough. There is competition in applying for the scholarships to go to university. That is a huge barrier, because it prevents people from furthering their life by accessing education. We think that that is a violation of someone's right to go to university and access education.

We were involved with a case with Andy Sirel and JustRight Scotland for one of our members, who was a migrant. As well as that case, we are campaigning for the Scottish Government and UK Government to extend the right for people to access universities. The situation is having a huge impact. People are forced to study part-time courses at college level but, at the end of the day, they are studying courses that they might not be able to use. Another issue in Scotland is that people cannot go to college to study full-time courses; they are allowed to study only part-time courses, which we find troubling.

For people who are in hotel accommodation, it is not even an option to apply to college. We have heard of cases—I am sure that other witnesses will mention similar cases—of people applying to colleges but being told that there is no capacity. Also, there are instances where, because hotel accommodation is meant to be initial temporary accommodation for up to six months, some colleges do not accept asylum seekers, because they say there is no point in starting education when they might be moved. However, people are stuck in hotels for more than six months—in some cases, it is more than one year—so they are left in limbo and do not have the right to access education.

As I mentioned, the impact on mental health is incredible. I see members that I met five years ago and, when I look at them now compared to when I first met them, I can see the difference. They have pretty much just given up on life, because they do not know when they will hear from the Home Office. They are worried about the impact of the new Illegal Migration Bill, which we call a refugee ban, because it will directly ban people from having any sort of right to seek asylum in our country. People are scared of how that will impact on them. They will be stuck in the system for many years not knowing what will happen to them. That is a huge concern for us.

We also have young people and children who want to access different services. For example, we had one case where the child of an asylum seeker was playing cricket for Scotland. They needed to attend a game, but there was a fee attached to the game and they needed to buy new kit, materials and items. That is not possible for an asylum seeker who is being given £45 per week in asylum support. People are then dependent on charities, but charities are at capacity and cannot provide all the support that is needed. That child was not participating equally and did not have the opportunities that every other child would have in this country.

We have had cases where a child who was coming to our service asked their mum, "Mum, why are you not working? Why can we not go to the cinema? Why can I not buy that item?" It is simple questions like that. Because people are not

allowed to work, they are dependent on asylum support and charities. I am thinking of the impact that that has on a child's wellbeing and their mental health. The situation is going to create a society where children are left behind, are forced to experience such poverty at a young age and, I would say, are discriminated against at a young age.

The Convener: It is very distressing to hear that. To summarise quickly, in your opinion, the right to education is not being fulfilled, there is no right to work and there is no access to money, because of the £45 limit. The impact on mental health is long and traumatic, which is very distressing to hear.

I will bring in Nick Hobbs. I am sure that you can add to Pinar Aksu's powerful testimony, Nick.

Nick Hobbs: What Pinar said reflects a lot of what we have seen through our work. It is worth starting with a really clear statement that no child should be living in a hotel under any circumstances, regardless of their legal status, who has legal responsibility for their care or where they come from. A hotel is not an appropriate environment for a child to live in. That is really important.

I will reflect on two groups. One is unaccompanied asylum seeking children. Through the Scottish Refugee Council, we have been doing some work with a group called Young People's Voices on the experience of being in hotel accommodation. We have serious concerns about child protection and safeguarding risks—which we have raised with the Scottish Government's child protection team—the risk of exposure to alcohol and drugs, and the risk of violence, criminality and exploitation.

As Andy Sirel pointed out in the evidence session last week, it is not just the Home Office that uses hotels now. Unfortunately, they are being used by local authorities in Scotland, which is really concerning. That speaks to broader issues about how our systems are functioning, about a chronic shortage of resources and about the extent to which we in Scotland are keeping the Promise in relation to these children. They are looked after and have legal status—the Scottish ministers have corporate parenting responsibilities towards them, and local authorities have corporate parenting duties towards them. We are not fulfilling those duties if we are accommodating them in hotels.

The second group that we are particularly concerned about are mothers and babies or mothers and very young children. Members will probably be familiar with the report that we laid in Parliament last year on the so-called mother and baby unit that was being run in Glasgow by Mears. That was not a hotel, but it shared many of the issues that appear in hotel accommodation to do with living in institutional-type accommodation. Mothers raised issues with us about food and nutrition, safety, physical and mental health, children's development and the ability of children to access education and engage in play and leisure. Those are all significant and interconnected children's rights issues.

We have visited one of the hotels—I will not name it, because we need to be very sensitive about doing that—where mothers and babies are being accommodated. Again, exactly the same issues came out. Such environments create and exacerbate trauma and they exacerbate health issues, particularly mental health issues. We are concerned about children aged zero to two. The environment is not just impacting on an individual; it is impacting on an individual and their relationship with their child, as well as directly and indirectly on that child.

We know the connection between maternal health and infant health, and the importance of the first two years in a child's development. Those environments have profoundly negative impacts and consequences for all those things. Some of the most difficult conversations that we had during the visits was when talking to women with relatively new-born children—children in the first few months of life. In that circumstance, even in the best of environments and with all the support that you could wish for around you, it can be easy to find yourself in a situation where you feel that you are failing as a parent because your child is not eating or is not sleeping properly, or you are worried about their developmental milestones.

In talking to mothers in that hotel and the unit, what became clear was the extent to which they felt that they were failing, although that was not through anything that they had done but was because of decisions made by the state. We talked to women who said, "I'm not able to go down to lunch or to dinner at the times they are being served, because I have a small child. My baby doesn't care when lunch is being served—they need what they need when they need it, and I have time when it happens." They were struggling to breastfeed, and were experiencing that as their failure of parenting. Of course, it is not their failure; it is the failure of the state to support them. It is the failure of the state to value them and their children as human beings, to value the relationship between mother and child and to put in place what is needed to protect it.

Those are the two groups that I am particularly concerned about. I am happy to talk more about them.

10:15

Selina Hales: I support what Nick Hobbs and Pinar Aksu have said. Day to day, my team and I see that the people living in the hotels are seeking safe spaces in which to exist. No one who, for example, is pregnant and has a two-year-old child should have to exist in a single hotel room for six months, but that is what we see day in, day out. We did not expect that space would be one of the most important things that Refuweegee provides. We are living under a system in which providing space is an act of dignity. That is horrifying. We should all be ashamed of that.

I will give some real-life examples. Someone on our advisory board spent eight months in one of the worst hotels in Glasgow with her two young children. As if that experience was not poor enough and a failure in itself, while in that hotel, her children became unwell because the food lacked nutrition. Instead of a review taking place into whether people were getting their five a day or any fresh food—packed lunches were provided every day for six months—her children were given medication. We drugged the children instead of looking at the problem. That is absolute failure.

Alongside that, Refuweegee has experienced both housing officers and hotel staff refusing to let charities engage with individuals who are housed in hotels. That is the biggest problem because, without organisations such as Maryhill Integration Network, Refuweegee and FOSS—without those connections within communities—mental health issues, isolation and depression develop. That is when everybody suffers.

One day, the same mum with her two children in the hotel had a knock at her door. A charity was offering support, but she had not called that charity and had not asked it to be there. The following day, two police officers came to her door because hotel staff had reported that she had had unauthorised visitors in the hotel. She described her children hiding behind the bed, sobbing, because they thought that their mummy was going to get taken away by the police officers. I can hardly keep it together when repeating that story, and I have said it out loud three times now. That is a huge failure. We need the situation to be remedied now.

We are in control of so many elements, such as the proper training of housing officers and hotel staff. If I had applied for a job in hospitality and ended up being a detention officer, I certainly might have concerns about that. Every individual who is part of that system is in an unsafe environment, and we need that to change.

The Convener: Thank you. You talked about the spaces. In my constituency, I have personal experience of there being no communal area where mothers can meet up with other mothers with children. How common is it that children do not have any areas where they can get together with other kids? I am, of course, referring to the right to play as well as the right to family time. Are there any remedies for that?

Nick Hobbs: I am sure that my colleagues will have much more to add, but I can speak about our experience of going into a couple of these places. In the mother and baby unit, there was no common space and the rooms were tiny. That was one of the big issues. There was no space for the natural developmental process that you would expect a child to follow—for example, there was no space to put them on the floor so that they could learn how to roll over and pull themselves up on things, and there was no space for them to learn how to walk or toddle—so that had a really negative impact on their development. The same is true in a number of the hotel rooms that we have seen.

Even when there is common space, it is very limited in what it can be used for. In the hotel that I am thinking of, there was one common space for the whole hotel, which housed not only women and children of a wide variety of ages but single adults. People have very different needs for such spaces. Children in particular need a space that feels like theirs and in which they feel safe. There should be the room for them to run about, and things should be set up in a way that allows them to do that safely. Such spaces simply did not exist in the places that we visited.

Pinar Aksu: I see two elements to this. We have a women's group, for example, and women are invited to come to that space and join in activities. We also provide a crèche so that children have that space. That is great when people are living in communities; the issue is when women with children are living in hotel accommodation with no spaces. It is very difficult for them to go to an integration network or a community space. They might need to walk or to take a bus, and that involves a lot of expense. As we know, an all-day bus ticket in Glasgow is now £5.40, so travelling somewhere would mean that their weekly allowance would go from £45 to £40. That has an impact on parents, especially women, coming to premises.

However, the moment that we normalise hotel accommodation by creating spaces between hotel accommodation, there will be a big problem for us. Why? That would give Mears a reason to normalise the use of hotels in the long term. We do not want that—we do not want people to stay in hotel accommodation for years and years. We want people to go back to living in the community. Before the pandemic, people were given houses in communities. They were then able to go to

different networks and to colleges or other education spaces. The moment that we normalise and expand the use of hotel accommodation, there will be a problem, because that will give a reason to ensure that somebody stays in a hotel for a very long time. We strongly oppose that, because we believe that people belong in communities, not in hotel accommodation.

The Convener: Thank you.

Selina Hales: Can I come in very briefly?

The Convener: Hang on. I am conscious that I have taken up a lot of time so, if you do not mind, I will move on and bring in Maggie Chapman. You will get an opportunity to make the points that you want to make later.

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): Good morning. I thank the witnesses for joining us. I share their fury and rage about what is happening—in relation to both the Illegal Migration Bill and the constant undermining of human beings.

I take Selina Hales's point about the language that we use very much to heart. When we are functioning in a system that is so dehumanising and marginalising, everything that we say and do matters.

I often ask about the use of institutional accommodation, because that is what we are talking about when we talk about hotels. Pinar Aksu talked about the normalisation of not having community. That is, in essence, what we are doing. I want to explore a few issues, particularly issues around who gets access. Selina Hales spoke about charities not being let in. I know that she wants to come back in, and I am sure that she will be able to later.

First, though, I want to ask María José Pavez about her work with the Grampian Regional Equality Council. I am aware of issues at a particular hotel in Aberdeen, which I will not name. People from the local community wanted to go in—indeed, they were going in—to provide help and support, to befriend the asylum seekers and to just be human beings, but they were banned from the hotel. In your view, how widespread an issue is that? Given the control that Mears has over access, how can we unpick the situation to allow the community in, even if we cannot build the proper community that we want?

María José Pavez: I am mindful that there have been a few concerns about safeguarding from Mears. That is why there have been some issues. I do not know specifically what happened, but I know that you raised the issue last week, too, so I can look into it, find out more information and get back to you.

It is very important that we have access to the hotels. At the same time, that access is important because it allows us to raise awareness of the other services and organisations in the community so that people can go to them, too. That gives people agency and the capacity to choose which organisations to go to. It is key that, when we go into the hotels at the beginning, we raise awareness of the various services that are available and say that people are welcome to go out into the community to those organisations. For example, GREC provides support with casework, language and integration—there is a language cafe every week. It is very important that, when providing those services, we do not bring them all to the hotels, because that is not conducive to integration.

Maggie Chapman: I take the point that was made earlier about some things being easier in some parts of the country than in others. From the conversations that you have, what particular challenges are there in Aberdeen in relation to the ecology of support organisations? You specifically mentioned issues with accessing legal support, but are there other challenges that we need to address?

María José Pavez: Yes. Lack of resources leads to us not having the capacity to address the situation. For months, we struggled to even get the right clothing for people and to get phones and SIM cards for them. Unfortunately, we often have to rely on volunteers, but we cannot build a system that relies solely on volunteers. They need to be part of the system. In that regard, we need a whole-system approach. However, as was mentioned last week, there is a lack of funding for the third sector and for the public sector. The local response is therefore not all encompassing, and we struggle with the basics.

Maggie Chapman: My next question is for Savan Qadir. We talk about the importance of integration, and I agree with Pinar Aksu's point that integration cannot happen if we essentially lock people up in hotels for months on end. In your experience, what capacity has there been to have community discussions that are not forced and controlled but take place in safe spaces where people can come together in a way that allows local residents to engage and work with those who are in hotels? Is that something that you see happening? Does it happen well in some places? Does it happen at all in others?

Savan Qadir: It is important to mention the point that Pinar Aksu raised: the normalisation of hotel accommodation is something that we need to be very cautious about. As soon as we start providing those services that are the responsibility of Mears and the Home Office and covering those

gaps for them, they will be in a comfort zone and will start expanding the service.

On your point about community engagement and previous points about engaging with Mears and trying to build those connections so that we can help asylum seekers and refugees living in hotels, I have made an attempt to get access and to try to help people to integrate and find services. Unfortunately, the communication breaks down at some point. It looks like they have some criteria for organisations to come forward to provide those services.

I am interested in community organising. I am an activist. If I engage with asylum seekers, the first thing that I do is talk to them about how they can resist the system, because what is going wrong in the hotels is the system. The short term support is important, but we need to change the system. That is perhaps why they do not like us to be engaged so much.

In terms of safe spaces, in Refugees for Justice we bring in those people—I want to mention that I have Siraj with me; I forgot to mention that he is here. He is one of the heroes in the Park Inn incident. What happened after that incident demonstrates what is wrong. The Home Office, Mears and the local authorities should have all learned from it that the use of hotels is wrong and we should stop it. Instead they started to expand them. There were only few hotels in Glasgow, but they have expanded them all around Glasgow and across Scotland. That shows a lack of care for human suffering.

If you take the Park Inn incident as an example—I may be moving a bit further away from the question that you asked—and think about what we should have learned and how we should have acted, you will soon realise that they do not care about integration and that there is no infrastructure to integrate asylum seekers and refugees in communities. There is no funding or resources for organisations to do that job properly. As Maria José Pavez said, there is no organisation there.

I engaged with an MSP. He said, “My community never had asylum seekers. Could you please come and describe it? What would it look like to be an asylum seeker seeking asylum? Because I am sure the community will freak out”. That is how much infrastructure there is in place to welcome refugees and help them to integrate.

10:30

Maggie Chapman: I want to explore that point a little further. Mears has the Home Office contract to run the hotels. I am thinking back to one scheme that I am familiar with, which is the Syrian refugee resettlement programme that started in 2015 and involved what seemed to be an attempt at genuine partnership working between local authorities, the national health service and the third sector, certainly in some parts of Scotland. Do you think that one of the fundamental problems with the situation that we have at the moment is services being contracted out to a private company that has no interest and no need to properly engage with local authorities, the charity sector or with other support organisations? Is that one of the structural systemic issues that you were talking about?

Savan Qadir: Absolutely. Private companies go where the money takes them and they are not interested in learning about or caring about human suffering. This is a vital service. We are talking about the most vulnerable people coming here, often with trauma experience. We cannot give that service to a private company that only has the intention of making a profit. There are other ways that we can provide the service, such as by funding third sector organisations that can find housing, which has been done in Germany. I am currently looking at the Leverkusen study that is addressing how the Government, the health board and other parties got involved together with the third sector—in exactly the way you said—and provided housing and services. I found that to be very adequate and to be working very well.

We have to stop privatising services that are connected to human beings. You can privatise services that involve machines, but when it comes to human beings we have to be very careful, because profit is the only goal for private companies.

Pinar Aksu: In terms of community engagement, when I came to the committee on 7 February, I mentioned the increase in racism and discrimination that the policy will cause in our communities, and I briefly highlighted my concern in relation to Erskine. That was an example where there was a lack of engagement with the communities by the local authority that controls the area where the hotel accommodation is being built. The locals were not informed. That is what is happening in terms of engagement with the locals. I appreciate that my point was taken seriously. However, hotels are still opening in areas without a lack of engagement with the local community.

One of the biggest problems arises when there is no infrastructure built. For example, say there will be a hotel built right next to the Scottish Parliament. If the Scottish Parliament is not involved in the process of the hotel being opened and used, and no one has engaged to say what people are coming into the hotel, the Scottish Parliament will want to know what to do. That is where engagement with the locals comes into play, and space needs to be created for that.

When a hotel is used to house refugees and asylum seekers in Scotland, we have the power to ensure that local areas are informed about what is happening. We can have training or information sessions with the locals to inform them about what is happening in their community. That is something that we can easily do.

On privatisation, the hotels are making millions from temporarily hosting people. If that profit was to be used in the local community, it would benefit the local community, it would benefit the people who are being housed and it would benefit the various services that that money would go back into. The millions of pounds of profit that is being made by hotels is outrageous.

Before the Park Inn incident, Glasgow was the only dispersal city. However, after that, Glasgow City Council made the decision to not be the dispersal city. That opened the door for hotels to be used across the country. My question is whether, as part of this discussion and the inquiry, Glasgow City Council will be contacted with an eye to restarting the conversation about it being the dispersal city again.

Maggie Chapman: I have other questions, but I am conscious of time.

Selina Hales: I would just like to add that what is important with regard to everything that Pinar Aksu has said is that we have seen it done differently. This does not mean that hotel use is correct in any way, and we still dispute its use entirely, but the system for Ukrainians is different; the hotels that are used are different; and the education around the use of those hotels and the education within our schools—about the war in Ukraine, about the children joining their classrooms and so on—has been different. Every single part of it has been different, and those refugees have been welcomed. As I say, we have already seen it happen. It is possible.

The Convener: Thanks. We will come back to the Ukrainian scheme and look at that in more detail later on.

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): I have a question on a couple of issues that Savan Qadir and Pinar Aksu have raised about the local authorities. Why do you think that the local authorities have not taken on board the criticisms of the current hotel provision and are going down that route? You also mentioned the idea of the third sector moving into this space. However, we already know that 10,000 children in Scotland live in temporary accommodation, so how would you suggest that that be done differently?

Savan Qadir: The suggestion about the local authority getting involved was built on the previous experience that we had with the Syrian resettlement scheme and other schemes, and also by looking schemes in Berlin, Finland and other countries that involve the local authority in every move—in promoting integration, but also in looking after asylum seekers and refugees. That has successfully been done in other countries, and I think that that is the model that we need to explore.

Colleagues might know more than me about this but, at the moment, there is a problem with funding. Whenever we engage with a local authority to ask them for something, they say, “The Home Office is not providing us any funding for this service. We are already stretched”. They say that the service that they already provide is more than they expected to do. In one engagement we had with local authority, we suggested exploring a model in which the Home Office provides the council with money directly that the council can use to build infrastructure, including housing and other support provisions. That is an issue because, at the moment, Mears is not contributing a penny to schools, the NHS and other services; it is just sitting down making profit, and it expects councils to fill those gaps for them. The model that we propose might not be the silver bullet to fix everything overnight, but we have to explore that model as a long-term solution. If we do not, we will be in limbo, with private companies making profits and not caring about human beings, and people will suffer and never integrate into society.

Rachael Hamilton: Have you come across examples of refugees returning to their home countries because of a lack of services, whether it is education, transport, housing or health services?

Savan Qadir: I have not come across people going back home for those reasons, because people are fleeing from war and persecution, so the decision is between death or life. I do not think that people will be running away from a lack of services, but I would say that the minimum standard is for any human being to have access to healthcare, education and other essential services.

Rachael Hamilton: Does anyone else have views?

Selina Hales: I can speak to helping one of our volunteers yesterday complete their application for voluntary return because the asylum system is taking so long. She has been separated for a long time from her other two children who are back home. She cannot start family reunification until her status has been awarded but she has no idea when that will happen. She has now been here for two years and she is broken—completely and utterly broken by our system. She is returning to a different part of her homeland to hopefully find her

children and be reunited, because she cannot deal with the heartbreak and isolation.

Yes, we are seeing people forced into situations where, if their country is a safer place to return back to, they are returning. We certainly see it with the Ukrainian system as well, with people moving back and forth.

Rachael Hamilton: I raised that issue last week, in relation to the pause in the supersponsor scheme and Ukrainian families having to relocate to parts of Scotland, which causes another upheaval for them and for their children's education.

Pinar Aksu, I picked up on some of the points that you made about doing things differently and using local authorities. Would you recommend that local authorities take a different stance? How can they when there is such a housing shortage?

Pinar Aksu: I think that we need to remind ourselves that people were in communities before the pandemic. There is a strategy by Mears and the Home Office to distract from the hostile environment that they have created over the years by placing people into hotels. We need to remember that everything to do with welcoming people and integration services worked when people were in normal accommodation, although, obviously, there were some gaps. We do not actually need to explore new options. We know that it worked for many years. It worked from the early 2000s, when people arrived from different countries such as Kosovo, Iraq and Afghanistan. We welcomed people. The structure is there and is working. The difference now is the strategy by the Home Office. It is using hotels and hotels are profiting from the policy. It is underfunding local authorities in order to create a hostile environment and create division in our communities. That is exactly what we are seeing.

On how things could work in the long term, like I said, the process has worked previously and we do not need to reinvent the wheel. We just need to acknowledge the fact that there is a shortage of housing and that that is not anything to do with people who are seeking asylum and refuge. There is a problem for the country—we have a housing crisis—but that is not the fault of refugees. The housing crisis is a fact and it needs to be addressed, but it should not be blamed on people who are seeking asylum and refuge.

On people returning, that is what the Home Office wanted to achieve by creating an environment where people are not welcomed and, unfortunately, see themselves returning rather than living in limbo for many years in a place where they cannot build their life.

We are talking about around 5,000 people who are seeking asylum and refuge in Scotland; we are not talking about hundreds of thousands or millions of people. When people flee from persecution, they go to neighbouring countries such as Turkey, Jordan, Pakistan and Lebanon. Those are the countries that people go to, and which take millions of people. If we cannot build infrastructure to welcome around 5,000 people, then we need to seriously question ourselves. What kind of a country are we creating, if we cannot even build infrastructure to welcome that small amount of people who are in need of safety and protection? In this country, we have a serious issue around human rights and our obligation to international protection.

Rachael Hamilton: Can I ask my last question, on the English language, convener?

The Convener: As long as it is very short, because I want to move on.

Rachael Hamilton: A number of members of the panel have mentioned the gaps around ESOL provision. Each of you is trying to integrate people in the community and the country by giving people the tools to communicate. What more can we do in Scotland to ensure that people have that provision?

10:45

Dr Stewart: I want to mention the difference that we have seen between working with the council—with people who have representation with the council, have an officer or who have someone within whose remit this is—and working with the guys in the hotel, where it is easy for people to fall off the list of priorities. We are constantly having to remind people that they are there.

On ESOL, the council will do what it can. It might be able to fit a few people in one class or other, but we have 50 people in one hotel, for instance. We have been working with the college. We talked to our MSP and there was some funding available but that stops in June and is for only 16 of the guys. There are ESOL resources and things that can be set up for people, but also there is extra provision.

One of the guys got into an ESOL course. There was a long waiting list but he got in there. It is not like he is not allowed to take a course, but he had to wait for months and he is surrounded by Ukrainians. However, none of the other guys have access to that; there is no space for those guys on that course. We are able to negotiate those wee things and get someone to fit into this place or that place. We have a transport scheme that we can use to try to get people into ESOL classes in other cities, but, again, that has a limit on it. We and the Central Scotland Regional Equality Council are doing a huge amount of work to shoehorn people into these things that are covering gaps.

As we said before, it would be good if there were a person whose responsibility this was. However, people are always being shunted around the place—they are told to talk to one person or another on the council to see if they can get put into something. That is not a strategy. I cannot emphasise enough how unfair that is on local people to have to try to patch together an ESOL strategy. We are the people who are going to the hotels, standing in front of someone and saying, "We are trying our best and we just cannot".

María José Pavez: It also does not help that Scotland does not have an ESOL strategy anymore. Now it is integrated into the adult learning strategy. Often, things do not fall into the remit of the council or the college. For example, provision for people with recourse to public funds does not fall into anyone's remit, and, in relation to beginners and literacy provision, there is nothing for people with an RPF. We are not talking big numbers, either, but there is no funding in place, and because it is not clearly stated and there is no guidance on ESOL, no one takes responsibility for it.

Nick Hobbs: I will be quick because I am conscious of time. This is one area where I think that the Scottish Government could do something. The issues that have been raised with us are about young people who do not need ESOL provision but are being forced to do it because that is the only educational opportunity that is available to them. The Government has just finished a consultation on access to education regulations. One of the things that it could do with that is open up further and higher education to the young people who do not need the ESOL provision, which would then, in turn, free up ESOL provision for those who need it.

The Convener: Thanks for that. We move to Karen Adam.

Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): Thank you, convener, and good morning, panellists. Thank you so much for your contributions so far, which align with what I will ask about. I want to focus on solutions. Asylum and immigration policy is a reserved matter, but there are things that we can do within our devolved competence at the Scottish Parliament. Although we are fiscally constrained in many ways, there are things that we can do. What are your feelings about the new Scots strategy and the ending destitution together strategy? What is going well? What is not going so well?

Pinar Aksu: We find that the new Scots strategy is a great tool for us in ending destitution, and I am sure that it is a great tool for many other organisations across Scotland who are starting to provide help for people. However, it is not a legally binding document. We find that it is a strategy that we follow. As you mentioned, there are areas covered by the strategy in which Scotland has power to make changes. Housing, education and transport are devolved matters.

One of the biggest campaigns that we are working on at the moment—together with some of the people on this panel—is on free bus travel. As part of the campaign, we are asking for people who are in the asylum process to have free bus travel across Scotland. As was said earlier, it would make life a little easier for people who are living in such horrific conditions. It would give the opportunity to travel to people who are living in Aberdeen, Falkirk or Edinburgh and who are trying to access their legal rights and the right to have representation. It would provide them with the opportunity to travel to different services or college or simply to go to a more populated area to meet friends.

We are aware that a pilot is being done at the moment, but the evidence is already there. There is evidence from Sarah Stewart of FOSS and María José Pavez that the need is immediate. We raised the issue nearly two years ago now, and it is within the power of the Scottish Government. There have been discussions about it at the cross-party group on migration—Maryhill Integration Network is the secretariat for the CPG. There were discussions on how it could be done and the impact that it might have on people and their asylum support. Great legal advice has been taken and explored by JustRight Scotland, as well as other groups.

We feel that, in cases in which people are put into hotel accommodation in rooms that have been described by our members as their cells, it would literally save lives. They would be able to move out of the hotel, meet their friends and at least create a normal environment for themselves.

Another area to highlight is access to education, which Nick Hobbs has already mentioned. We participated in the Scottish Government's consultation and said that extending the right to education to people who are seeking asylum would, again, save lives. We have members who were lucky enough to receive a University of Glasgow scholarship, and they are now studying for their masters. However, when their education finishes, what will happen to them if they are not able to work? If they want to further their education, there will be another barrier in that.

We would be interested to see the outcomes of the Scottish Government's consultation and see whether there is acknowledgement of extending the right to education to people who are seeking asylum.

Savan Qadir: The new strategy is a great thing. I looked at the "New Scots Refugee Integration Strategy", and it is one of the most detailed integration strategies in the world. There are so many nice things about it; however, although it says how we should be, it does not say how we should do it or what steps are needed to get there. It would be useful to have guidance on that.

When we as an organisation operate, it is not clear to us what responsibility the Scottish Government has, so the Scottish Government could provide guidance for local authorities and us in the third sector to tell us what provisions the Scottish Government has on refugee and asylum seekers rights.

Bus passes are essential—there should be no question about it. Someone called me and said, "I have been going out every day in the morning for almost six months. I do the same road and go back. I have no purpose in living. I do not know why I wake up, because I am in limbo for six months and I do not know how many more months I will be there". He said, "I do not feel like I have a purposeful life", which I can totally understand. I have been in the system for six years, so I know how it feels.

The bus pass could take the burden of pain away if it meant that people could manage to travel somewhere just to meet somebody. It is a very easy thing that the Scottish Government could do; I do not think that it even needs to think about it.

Another thing about the new Scots integration strategy is that human rights are at the heart of every approach that is taken, although there is the barrier of reserved and devolved matters overlapping. The strategy says what the situation should be, but it does not outline how we should get there.

We should think about having a strategy that is doable. That will be easier to legislate for, too, as in Finland. Finland has an act on the promotion of immigrant integration, under which all departments are involved in promoting integration. We should have a doable strategy that outlines exactly what the Scottish Government can do, and the Government should legislate on it so that every part of the Government is responsible for promoting integration.

The Convener: A lot of hands have gone up.

María José Pavez: I wanted to briefly share that we implemented a free bus pass scheme in Aberdeen for six months last year. We approached FirstBus and explained the situation of people seeking asylum in Aberdeen. With us, FirstBus implemented a scheme for six months that gave access to local bus passes to 100 people. That lasted from June to November. In December, we gathered the feedback of users through a focus group and a survey. We have that available and will share it with the committee so that you can consider it. The Scottish Government could definitely work on that, and it would partially address the issue around immigration advice, because people would be able to travel to the central belt to access advice.

Nick Hobbs: I will be as quick as I can. To build on the point that Savan Qadir made, I do not always see the connection between the principles that are set out in the strategy and practice. I will give you a couple of quick examples.

When public authorities are consulted by the Home Office and Mears on accommodation provision, it seems, from what we have seen, that they respond on the basis of impact on service delivery and not through a human rights lens. They are not thinking about the impact on the human rights of the children who will be placed in the accommodation, about what they know about the area or about what they can bring to the decision-making process. It is fair to say that those public authorities do not have the power to prevent it, but they do have the power to make an argument around it, and that is not happening consistently enough.

The second point is around no recourse to public funds and the implementation gap that we see. There is now a clear understanding at senior level in local authorities that there are duties on Scottish public bodies in this respect, particularly around article 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights to protect children from the impacts of destitution. However, we still see people being turned away from support at the front line—again, colleagues will talk about that in much more detail.

The most important thing that we could do around the new Scots strategy is to bolster it by incorporating the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and other human rights treaties directly into domestic law, which would provide a legal framework within which the principles of the strategy can be applied.

Dr Stewart: The new Scots strategy has been hugely important to our organisation. It has been a wonderful guide, but, to echo what other speakers have said, the situation is profoundly different if you are trying to implement it in a place other than Glasgow or Edinburgh. If people are able to move, they do a lot of integration work on their own. However, if they do not have that agency, it falls on others, and they are made even more vulnerable.

We recently got funding to run a train scheme so that people can go to Edinburgh or Glasgow twice a week. Within the first week, people have been visiting other communities. The Eritreans get

to go to the Eritrean church in Glasgow, because we cannot cater for that in Falkirk. I cannot emphasise enough how big a difference that makes in what we are able to do with the local community; it enables them to do those activities and to be able to choose. I hate the idea that we are all that they have—that is not fair on them or on us.

Karen Adam: I was going to ask about free bus travel and the positive impacts that that could have on people, but you have clearly stated your point on that matter, which is noted.

11:00

Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con): Good morning, panel, and thank you so much for your opening statements.

Much of last week's discussion was on illegal trafficking and exploitation, which have been mentioned today, too. My question is in two parts. First, what role does Police Scotland play alongside the third sector? Secondly, since Police Scotland began 10 years ago, 140 police stations and a lot of community policing have been cut. What impact has that had on reducing community tensions as well as rooting out illegal trafficking and slavery?

Pinar Aksu: Thank you for the questions. Our engagement with local police officers tends to happen when they come along and discuss the services that they provide; we build that connection to ensure that if people encounter any instances or cases of hate crime or racism, they feel comfortable about knowing where their local police station is and about going and reporting what has happened. The service cuts are unfortunate, but the fact is that under the current Government's budget, cuts are being implemented across the country to our different services.

As for doors being opened to the trafficking that you have mentioned and, indeed, all sorts of inhumane practices, one of the things that we will see with the new Illegal Migration Bill is the creation of detention centres in our cities and communities. Hotel accommodation will be turned into community detention centres; the people there will not be able to return to their country of origin, and they will not be given status, either.

All of these hotels that are being built at the moment could, potentially, turn into community detention centres, leaving people in places where they might be trafficked or exploited in horrendous conditions. That is our biggest worry, and it will happen in Scotland; it will happen in Glasgow, Edinburgh, Aberdeen, Dundee and the various cities where there is hotel accommodation.

This is one of the biggest impacts that we will see, with people being trafficked or exploited. If the Illegal Migration Bill, as it is called, is passed, it will potentially lead to the creation of community detention centres, which will have a huge impact on people who are already in a difficult position and system.

Pam Gosal: Perhaps I can come back to the question. Are you saying that community policing and police services are adequate for what you need at the moment?

Pinar Aksu: I am not sure that I am in the best position to comment on that. I might pass it on to somebody else.

Pam Gosal: Does anyone else want to comment?

Savan Qadir: I agree with what Pinar Aksu has said, but I note that, in your question, you talked about community tension. How did that tension start? It started from the top, with the Home Secretary's language; it started with "invaders" and went on from there. If we did not have that type of language, we probably would not need more officers to deal with the tension that comes with it.

The UK Home Office is creating this environment in which communities are being set against each other. This is the bigger problem that we have; if we had a compassionate system and if moderate language were used, I would probably say that we have enough police. We do not need more police. I think that what we need is more moderate, compassionate language.

Selina Hales: Your question is best put to the Trafficking Awareness Raising Alliance, which works with victims of trafficking and modern-day slavery. If you have an opportunity to invite TARA to feed in, you should do so, because the organisations here today might not be best placed to answer the question.

That said, I can talk specifically about how such engagement can work by highlighting a case that we dealt with last year at Refuweegee. A woman presented to us whom we suspected was a victim of trafficking; we were told that, for her and her six-year child to access housing support for that night, she had to present to a police station. It was not an appropriate response, but it was the only response that we got from social work services.

Regardless of whether the police services are enough or whatever, the issue is how the organisations work together and communicate. I felt that I was in the middle of a funding bun fight over who was going to pay for the woman's accommodation for that night. Even when I presented them with the fact that the mother and child had spent their first night in Glasgow on the

street, I was still told by social work that she had to present at the police station. When I said that, for a number of reasons, it was not appropriate for the woman to present at the police station, I was told that that was the only response.

This is not about the number of officers; it is about the communication between services putting the human—the child—at the centre. I would not want to present to a police station in Glasgow on a Friday night with my six-year-old child, and I cannot imagine how that felt for a woman with very limited English who had just escaped from an incredibly difficult situation.

Nick Hobbs: To answer a slightly different part of your question, I genuinely think that one of the most extraordinary parts of the Illegal Migration Bill is the extent to which it gold plates the business model for human trafficking. If you do not protect victims, you are not going to convict traffickers, and it makes the job of the police much, much harder. Moreover, the age assessment provisions mean that there is a real risk of misidentifying child victims as adults and thereby removing them even further from the protections in the human trafficking system.

Indeed, the bill creates not only the risk of our not prosecuting the criminals but the risk of our prosecuting the victims—the people who have been exploited—instead by making them subject to arrest, detention, charge and prosecution, in violation of Scotland's obligations under the non-punishment principle. Something that we will be discussing with the Lord Advocate when we meet her next week is our real concern with regard to the Scottish criminal justice system's response to this bill. After all, it will need to respond to the bill, because it is going to make our ability to meet our international obligations much, much harder.

Pam Gosal: Convener, can I ask my second question now or do you want me to come back to it?

The Convener: If we have time, you can come back to it. Is that okay? I just want to bring in Paul O'Kane, if that is all right.

Paul O'Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): I am very grateful, convener.

Good morning, panel. We have already touched on a number of areas that I am interested in, particularly the provision of ESOL and other services, so, if it is all right with you, convener, I will ask about the Ukrainian scheme, which has already been referred to this morning. There is a degree of learning to be taken from that; some of it has been positive, but we are also seeing some challenges in that space at the moment.

My question is quite a broad one. What positive learning can be taken from the scheme? Selina Hales, given that you started to touch on issues such as the welcome and the integration model, do you want to start?

Selina Hales: The positives that we have witnessed include what happens when there is education in the early stages. That is not simply down to communities; it is down to our media, too.

We were all made immediately aware of war breaking out in Ukraine. We had information; we had knowledge. There were Ukrainian flags up in the windows of houses, and children were being taught about it in schools. It is the clearest example of what happens when we have open conversations about a situation prior to people's arrival.

That is perhaps where my positivity stops, because what we then witnessed was the clearest example of racism that I have ever seen in this country. Previously, we had been told that such a response was not possible; indeed, all of us in this sector had been told for years that it was not possible to deal with that volume of arrivals with such rapidity, to give the right to work and so on. We had been told that all the elements of that scheme were not possible, and I will not let it go unsaid that that is anything other than evidence of systemic racism at the core of some of our decision making. It is horrifying and needs to be dealt with.

I would love a similar scheme to be rolled out. There are elements of the current scheme that I would consider safe passage, and I would love it if they were widened to include other areas. I say that as someone who has had to sit in their office and explain to multiple people why they are not entitled to the same things. All it comes down to is the country that those people are from—and, funnily enough, in every single one of those countries, the people are black or brown. That is not good enough.

Pinar Aksu: I strongly agree with that. Under the model in the Illegal Migration Bill, there will be a two-tier system of deserving and undeserving refugees—in other words, those who deserve protection and those who do not. That is what we have witnessed.

In the Syrian and Ukrainian resettlement programmes, the approach has been completely different with regard to rights. If you are in the asylum process, you are given asylum support; you do not have the right to work; and you have no access to public funds. There are recent cases of people being put into hotel accommodation. Ukrainian refugees have been given completely different rights; they have the right to work and the right to access public funds. That raises serious questions whether someone's country of origin

plays a part with regard to the rights that they are given.

As I have mentioned, we have had members who were confused about the fact that they had been in the system for many years and had still not heard from the Home Office about their applications. We are talking about countries where there are on-going wars, such as Iraq, Yemen and Iran. As I have said, those people have been in the system for many years, and they were asking not only why they had not heard anything but why there was a scheme in which other people were being given immediate rights. At the end of the day, though, the people in that scheme are running away from persecution and war, too, and it is not their fault that we have a system that divides people into two tiers—the deserving and the undeserving, the legal and the illegal.

We need to highlight strongly the fact that, although there have been some positives to take from the Ukrainian programme—for example, the way in which people and communities have opened their doors and welcomed those refugees has been amazing—there are still these other people who have been in the system for many years. Look at what is happening in Sudan at the moment. Many in our communities who have been in the asylum process for many years have families in Sudan, but they are not able to bring them here, because they are still in that process. How much more evidence does the Home Office need to see that there is a war going on and that these people deserve the right to seek asylum? I think, too, that we should not shy away from saying that this is systemic racism in this country.

Savan Qadir: Let us not forget that the Ukrainian refugees are not privileged; how the system is working for them is how it should work for all and it is the model that we should explore. This should not be seen as a case of privileged refugees and others; this is exactly how such a scheme should be. I have to say that I do not understand why there is no Sudanese scheme, given the on-going war in Sudan.

I agree with everyone else, but I just wanted to say that the Ukrainians are not privileged, because how they are being assisted is exactly how we should assist everyone.

Selina Hales: I want to add an important point. Although the Ukrainian resettlement scheme is, when compared with the asylum system, by far an improvement, it is still far from perfect. For example, you have already heard about the issues with access to ESOL. What is the point of giving somebody the right to work if they cannot learn the language? Thousands of Ukrainian individuals in Glasgow are looking for ESOL support at the moment; they are desperate to contribute to their communities, just like anyone else whom I have ever met in the asylum system or with status.

Although the system might look good on paper, people have leave to remain for only two years, in which time they have to learn the language and find a job. They cannot get into the housing system; because they are here for only two years, no one will give them a mortgage and they find themselves trapped in a rental scheme. In turn, how do they prove that they can rent a home if they do not have a job and a deposit? So many elements of the scheme look good but are not really good in principle. Without proper funding for ESOL, travel and all the other services that the third sector is picking up at the moment, you are not going to get people contributing to communities, because they will not have the language to be able to do so.

11:15

So, there are elements of the scheme that need to be worked on and developed, but there are some definite positives, too. The fact that a single language is spoken across the Ukrainian communities assists communication, and that has meant that they get access to services more quickly than any other group that I have seen arrive. For example, if we provide a mobile phone to someone staying on the cruise ship on the Clyde, they go back to the ship and join the WhatsApp group and, all of a sudden, 1,200 people who all speak the same language know that they can come to Refuweegee to get a phone.

We cannot respond to that volume of need, so services on the ground have had to adjust in order to provide that support. Indeed, we have had to hierarchy support in a way that we have never wanted to do, but you have to recognise that some people are getting universal credit, while others are on £8 a week on a hotel budget; some have arrived with belongings and some without. There are so many differentiating factors, and that makes things very complex.

Paul O'Kane: Those comments are helpful, as some of those issues are common. There has been a pause in the supersponsor scheme in relation to the supply of housing and longer-term accommodation, and a conversation is taking place about using modular accommodation, which is concerning.

We have already heard about the broader challenge that exists, which is not the fault of the refugees who come to this country. Are you concerned about the idea of using modular accommodation? What else do you think needs to be done in the Ukraine scheme, as well as more broadly, to deal with some of those issues?

Selina Hales: Will you please clarify what you mean by "modular accommodation"?

Paul O'Kane: The idea of using longer-term Ukrainian resettlement funding for modular or prefab housing has been discussed, but it has been suggested that such housing could, in a sense, become camps, if I can use that expression, which I think we would all be quite uncomfortable with. Are you concerned that, if proper resourcing is not provided and we do not take a long-term look at the issue, we will end up in that scenario?

Selina Hales: Absolutely. While it is easy to say this on reflection, for me the fact that we spent £39 million on a cruise ship on the Clyde for six months is utterly horrifying. If that figure were invested in housing systems in Scotland, it would be transformative. Whether we are talking about prefabs or accommodation that would feel like a camp environment, it would be far superior to a cabin on the lower decks of a cruise ship.

However, it is easy to say that in hindsight. Such reflections are easy to make. A huge number of people arrived very quickly and we needed to respond very quickly, but the arrangement was not as temporary as it should have been. Yes, that investment is needed. No, we should not be making a comparison with the accommodation as it stands—cruise ship cabins and hotel rooms. We need to aim higher, for sure, but I am not averse to the use of prefab, quick-build housing, because that would provide a dignity that so many of the people I work with do not have and do not get. I think that that would be an improvement.

Pinar Aksu: We see those sorts of solutions in refugee camps when there has been a mass migration of millions of people. Those camps are meant to be temporary. If that is the solution that is being offered in this country, we need to seriously reflect on our international obligation to provide protection.

There is a huge amount of profit being made here. We have mentioned Mears using hotels and temporary accommodation. We need to talk about who is making what profit and how much of that profit is being directly invested back into the community.

We will have migration throughout history. We might be talking about migration in 2023, but the issue of migration is not going to end in five or 10 years. We need to go back to the long-term practices of welcoming people into our communities and creating spaces for the long term. Before the pandemic, we had accommodation to house people.

Mention has been made of the language that has been imposed on us—the language of an "invasion" involving "millions". We do not have millions coming to this country; we perhaps have thousands. We have always had migration. The issue is how we treat people and create long-term, sustainable, welcoming spaces.

Selina Hales: To be clear, geographically, I could not be more against the use of that sort of housing to house only one specific group of people. If we are talking about increasing housing, it should be housing for all, rather than asylum-specific accommodation, because then it becomes a camp.

Paul O'Kane: That is the concern that has been discussed. To go back to what you said previously, the issue is about how, universally, we create a situation in which people can access services that are well equipped. I represent West Scotland, so I had experience of the situation in Erskine. This is about how we bring people along with us and create a fully integrated community, rather than something on the margins of the community.

The Convener: We will go to Fulton MacGregor after we have heard from Sarah Stewart.

Dr Stewart: I want to make one more point, following on from what Selina Hales said about how people are perceived. No person I have ever talked to at the asylum hotel begrudges Ukrainians the support that they have received, because they know what it is like.

However, there is an issue around education. We have talked to members of the public who think that other asylum seekers are receiving the same thing but are simply not taking advantage of it. A distinction needs to be made, because there are members of the public who think, "Well, surely they're getting X, Y and Z, because I've got a Ukrainian at my house who is getting X, Y and Z."

As Savan Qadir said, there needs to be a guide for local authorities. As I said before, it is important that there is a person within the local authority whose remit it is to ensure that Ukrainians are not siloed with one another. We also have cases where people at the hotel have received their status but are excluded from the hubs that Ukrainians can go to, because they do not understand that, once they have received their status, they have the same rights as people who have come from Ukraine to sign up for things. That is simply down to a lack of education. It is not malicious.

The public have welcomed Ukrainians, but they are not getting the same signals for other nationalities. Therefore, they think that something must be amiss, and that those people have probably been offered something but are not taking it up because they are different. That is 100 per cent not the case, so there is an education issue, and work needs to be done with local

authorities that are struggling to respond to something that they have not had to respond to before.

There is a lot of good learning to be taken from the Ukraine scheme, but there needs to be recognition in the public consciousness that there are also other, much smaller groups of equally deserving people, some of whom even have the same legal entitlements as people from Ukraine but are less able to get them.

Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): Good morning. I thank members of the panel for what has been—like last week's session—another powerful session. Thank you all for coming here to advocate for the most vulnerable in our society and doing so in such an impassioned way.

By this stage, a lot of the issues have already been discussed. We have already touched on the Illegal Migration Bill; most of you will be aware that there was a debate about it in the chamber last week, in which many of us took part. It is an abhorrent piece of legislation, as I think our witnesses all recognise. As a committee, it has been put to us that a broader humanitarian strategy that incorporated strategies that are already in place might be a better way to address and mitigate any consequences of the Illegal Migration Bill.

I wonder whether anyone would like to comment on that. Given the number of people on the panel, I am happy to pass back to the convener to see who wants to come in.

The Convener: María José Pavez, would you like to take that one?

María José Pavez: Yes. Thinking about what we were just talking about, any consideration of housing needs to involve long-term, sustainable and local housing, because the Illegal Migration Bill will not deter people from coming. We need to be prepared for the long term and we need a humanitarian strategy. The subdivision in the different schemes prevents the new Scots integration strategy from being implemented as it should be. If that is not working, we need to think about an overarching, all-encompassing strategy that includes a humanitarian response for people seeking asylum.

Nick Hobbs: I agree with María José Pavez, although I think that there is a need for a twin-track approach. There needs to be a consideration of strategies and of what vehicle we should use to get to where we need to go, but some of what we face is more urgent than that. Strategies take time to do even when Governments rush them through—they need to consult and put the work in—but some of the stuff that we need to address is more urgent. I would be worried about putting all our eggs in the strategy basket and not dealing with the stuff that we need to look at immediately.

Savan Qadir: I agree with María José Pavez and Nick Hobbs. I just want to make two quick points. Two things need our immediate attention. There will be a large number of undocumented migrants after the Illegal Migration Bill is passed, because people will simply not claim asylum if they know that they will be deported. We need to find a way to support them in destitution. In addition, failed asylum seekers will be detained after 28 days and will, most likely, not be deported to anywhere. The Rwanda deal is in fantasy land. It is not going to happen.

After that, those people will come back into the community, but in a state in which they will not be eligible for any support or to have their claim processed. Therefore, I think that we should focus on what support we can provide in Scotland for people who find themselves in such a situation, to prevent destitution and not put them in a position in which it will be easy for people to exploit them, which is already happening right now.

There are two or three things that we need to think about: how to make sure that people are not exploited; how to provide support so that they do not become destitute; and how we can find a way to support undocumented migrants, of whom there will be a large number in the coming months and years.

Pinar Aksu: Echoing what has already been said, it is vital that there is a humanitarian response that is in line with international protection and international law, which should focus especially on the Human Rights Act 1998 and our human rights obligations as a country.

As for what we can do in Scotland, the Scottish Government needs to send a much stronger message of opposition to the Illegal Migration Bill, which should focus on the consequences that it will have for us as a society. The more division the bill creates in the community, the more discrimination people will experience.

The discussions about the Illegal Migration Bill remind me of a TV series called "Years and Years", where there was community detention and refugee camps in communities. That is what we are living through now. We are forced to have a response strategy for legislation and laws that are passed at Westminster. We need to oppose the bill with as strong a message as possible, to say that such legislation should not exist in our society and that people in Scotland are against it, and to use the powers of the Scottish Parliament and the Scottish Government to ease the lives of people seeking asylum by working on the campaigns that I mentioned earlier.

María José Pavez: Incorporation of the UNCRC has been mentioned as an added layer of protection. I also want to raise the point that the Scottish Government has committed to sending a new human rights bill to Parliament. That could also add an extra layer of protection for human rights in Scotland.

Fulton MacGregor: Pinar Aksu and María José Pavez covered my next and final question, which is to ask what the panel thinks the Scottish Government and local authorities could do more of, within their powers. Could the Scottish Government and local authorities do more to mitigate the bill and the situation generally?

11:30

The Convener: A few suggestions have been made already. This is an opportunity to bring any additional suggestions to us.

Selina Hales: For me, it centres around education. If everybody around the room agrees that the Illegal Migration Bill is abhorrent and horrendous, it is our responsibility to make sure that other people know the detail. From the Scottish Parliament and local authority perspectives, that is about education going all the way through our communities.

I emphasised that the reason why the response to the Ukraine situation was so different was that everybody was aware of what was happening. There was understanding and education from very early on about what was going on in Ukraine. We need to do the same with the bill; we need schools to be talking about it and we need youth groups to be talking about it. We need, ultimately, for people to get as angry as we all are, so that action is taken. Anger creates action; we in our sector can turn that anger into real and positive work across communities. It is about all of us taking responsibility to educate those who might not be aware of what the bill will mean for individuals.

Pinar Aksu: Thank you for the question. I think we are talking about two strategies. First, yes—we should strongly oppose the Illegal Migration Bill, which could be called the refugee ban bill, and we should talk about the consequences that it would have for our society through violation of human rights.

Secondly, on how we welcome people, there must be resources for temporary mechanisms for people—especially those who are in hotel accommodation, but also for organisations that have been doing this work for many years. There must be further investment in those organisations so that they can create safe spaces and continue that work.

One thing that the Maryhill Integration Network has developed is our migration education resource, which is accessible to every teacher and educator in Scotland. We are trying to push that through working with the Educational Institute of Scotland to ensure that everyone is using the resources as a way of talking about why people move and why there are violations of human rights.

To answer your question, I say yes—we need to use the power that we have in Scotland to strongly oppose the bill and to continue to create welcoming spaces while acknowledging that there is huge pressure on the third sector.

Another thing that I would like to touch on in particular concerns the bus pass campaign, and third-sector organisations, if they had funding, providing people with some form of voucher for travel expenses. If we were to provide free travel for people in Scotland, that would cut the burden on organisations. We need to budget for travel expenses and additional expenses that come along for people who are travelling. We need to consider the benefits that it would have for the third sector and for the people themselves if we were to extend free bus passes.

Savan Qadir: Access to legal services is very important, especially outside Glasgow, where it is quite a challenge to find immigration advice. Resources for legal aid and legal services should be ring fenced for people who are seeking sanctuary in Scotland, especially people outside Glasgow.

The Convener: Pam Gosal, do you want to come back in? I am sorry—I should have checked whether Fulton MacGregor is done. Yes, he is.

I will let Nick Hobbs in first, then Pam Gosal will ask her supplementary.

Nick Hobbs: I have already had the opportunity to mention a number of items on my shopping list, so I will restrict myself to the ones that I have not spoken about yet, except for incorporation of the UNCRC, because that is the one that sets the context for everything else.

The Scottish Government needs to consider the clash that is being created here between obligations under domestic law that is being created by Westminster and its international treaty obligation. There is a pressing need for the Government to take legal advice on that point.

I would like to see a commitment from Scottish local authorities not to use or rely on the Home Office age assessment process unless they are expressly required to do so by law.

We should be looking at the extent to which we can, by using planning legislation, limit, restrict,

delay or disrupt the placement of detention facilities in Scotland.

We need to look at the funding of critical third sector organisations. The guardianship service is particularly prominent in my mind, but we need to do that for all the organisations that are represented by colleagues around the table.

Rachael Hamilton: I am not clear, convener. I would like to press Nick Hobbs on the UNCRC stuff and embedding children's rights in Scots law. You mentioned a new Scottish strategy of incorporating the UNCRC. Are you asking the Government to publish a timetable?

Nick Hobbs: Yes.

Rachael Hamilton: Thank you.

Pam Gosal: I have a quick question. You have raised a lot of things that the Scottish Government can do. I want to talk about access to healthcare.

Back in January, the Scottish Parliament was made aware of a case of a 22-year-old refugee who flew back to a war zone to see a doctor rather than wait for treatment in Scotland on the NHS. Would you agree that more needs to be done by the Scottish Government about access to services, especially health services? Educational services were also mentioned earlier, and you also touched on mental health. What can the Scottish Government do?

Pinar Aksu: I am happy to come in on that.

Regarding access to health care and services, we have had cases of huge barriers, including to travel, for people in the asylum process who need to visit a hospital. I think that there is some compensation available for people who visit a hospital; they can reclaim part of the fee from the NHS. However, there are barriers in relation to people not being sure how that process works.

Cuts to the NHS are a wider issue that needs to be discussed; maybe more evidence could come from talking to other authorities. However, that all comes down to the ongoing privatisation of the NHS, which is very unfortunate and is being imposed on us by the current UK Government. That needs to be highlighted by other organisations as well, but it is a problem for us.

On accessing healthcare, some people do not know that they have the right to register with a general practitioner. We have seen that. People in hotel accommodation do not know that they have the right to register and to be seen by a doctor. We could do something about that in Scotland, by providing information about the rights that people have in Scotland even when they are asylum seekers or refugees. That is an area that could be developed.

Selina Hales: I would echo what Pinar Aksu said. We saw within the hotels that were specifically for Ukrainians that provision was brought in not just to provide healthcare but to provide education about what healthcare people have the right to access. We have seen things being done differently and working well.

We cannot, however, shy away from the issue of systemic racism in Scotland and across the UK within our healthcare system. I am sorry that I have forgotten the exact statistic, but we know that black women are four times more likely to die in childbirth than white women. That is something that we all need to do something about. Obviously, that affects our asylum-seeker and refugee communities.

I have witnessed what I am going to politely call clumsiness within our healthcare system in the handling of people who have English as a second language. Provision leaves a lot to be desired. I have witnessed paramedics lifting a Muslim woman's top to put cardio pads on her without any conversation having happened beforehand.

Those are the kinds of things that we need to tackle. For me, it comes back to education.

Pam Gosal: You have mentioned racism. We need to know the causes. You also mentioned the language barrier, which is not only a barrier to integration and getting about but is a factor in accessing healthcare. It is so important. People come from various backgrounds and religions and we must be very careful not to offend—I fully agree with you—by lifting somebody's top and so on, so we should be looking at language.

I have mentioned at an earlier committee meeting that we should not be delivering ESOL only through the usual sources but through community sources, including mosques, gurdwaras, synagogues and so on, and other places where people go to study. Is that something that you are in favour of?

Selina Hales: Absolutely.

The Convener: I think Savan Qadir wants to come in quickly.

Savan Qadir: I will be very quick. I agree that there is a big issue in relation to mental health—a broader issue across the UK that we need to think about. Asylum seekers and refugees have different needs but they still have to go through the same route as everybody else, which does not recognise that asylum seekers are coming from traumatising backgrounds, that they are fleeing war and persecution, and that they are in the most immediate need.

What happened in the Park Inn incident was due to lack of support for the person involved. The Scottish Government can recognise that asylum

seekers and refugees have special needs and that there needs to be a special route for them, especially to mental healthcare. I agree with Pinar Aksu about funding cuts and privatisation breaking down the NHS and bringing it to its knees.

The Convener: We are coming to the end of our evidence session. We have heard lots of important and very powerful testimony. I have one question to ask at the end and I will ask if anybody wishes to make a closing statement; you will have time to do that.

This is a big question, but I wonder whether you could answer it briefly. Feel free to do so in one word or a sentence. We have heard a lot about people slipping through the system and about the areas that are devolved to Scotland. Of course, the main thing is that immigration is not devolved; it is a reserved matter. I would be interested to hear—a yes or a no would be fine—whether you think that it would be better if immigration policy were to be devolved to Scotland.

Pinar Aksu: I would say yes, absolutely If we had that opportunity, we could create a better welcome and create a system that was based on humanitarian protection based on human rights and international obligations. We would be in favour of devolution of immigration policy.

Selina Hales: Yes. It is not a very high bar, and I am confident that Scotland could do it better.

Nick Hobbs: I think there are a number of areas where we need to be looking at a Scotland-specific model, including identification of traffickers. I am not going to express a view on the constitutional aspect, but we need a system that is compliant with human rights, which is what we do not have at the moment.

María José Pavez: Based on the reality that we have at the moment; Scotland needs to do whatever is in our reach to make sure of that we uphold human rights as being for everyone in Scotland.

Savan Qadir: Yes, absolutely. It would be a good way to test what the Scottish Government is saying; the only way to do it is to have that power and to have our own immigration policy. That is a dream for me.

Dr Stewart: Yes.

11:45

The Convener: Thank you for your responses. If you would like to make a closing statement or mention anything that you have not covered so far, you have an opportunity to do that now.

Pinar Aksu: It is really important for the committee, as part of its inquiry, to directly engage with people with lived experience. I would be happy to have a further discussion about that.

I have a statement to read, which was created by our members at the MIN voices group, which was formed by people who are in the asylum process. It says:

"Dear members of the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee, thank you for creating this space for such an important topic. As members of the MIN voices group, we have drafted the following statement explaining what we are experiencing. We hope you listen to our voices.

Delay of decision, right to work, right to education, right to children's benefit, right to a lawyer. Staying in limbo, not being a citizen until papers are received, not being able to participate in real integration activities. Our mental health and wellbeing. We are isolated, we are missing our families. Not improving the level of living, not improving the skills and qualifications we have. All the time of stress and pressure, anxiety and depression. Higher demand for support from and for the charities. Limited access to ESOL classes and community centres. Time for waiting—months and years. Public resources—not enough, not having access to it. Delays in second interview.

Asylum support is simply not enough to survive; not being able to register for healthcare; restricted access to college; no access to university funding. The impact this is having for us, you may ask—frustrating, dehumanising, time-wasting. When is my leave to remain given? More financial support is needed in transition from the asylum system to when receiving your status. Then when we are refused, the worry of being deported. MPs are trying to contact Home Office for our delays, but the Home Office are giving the same answers for everyone. Three months for a reply. Three months for a reply.

How can we live and survive in the same society with the unprecedented soaring cost of living when we are limited with rights. This is not being treated equally. Cut out the boundaries and let us live as you in the same country and in the same place with a human-centred system. Thank you."

I end my contribution with that.

Selina Hales: I have nothing to add that the MIN voices group has not put more eloquently than I can in the statement that we have just heard.

I echo Pinar Aksu's request that the voices of those with lived experience of the system be heard. We can certainly support that as well, as we have an advisory board at Refuweegee that is entirely refugee led. Please use that if it would be helpful.

Nick Hobbs: I totally agree about the importance of the Parliament hearing the voices of those who are actually experiencing the system, including children and young people. I recognise that that is not always easy or straightforward. It might require parliamentarians to adapt systems that they might be quite comfortable with and move to something that may feel uncomfortable in order to make sure that children and young people can have their voices heard, but it is really

important, so I hope that the committee will consider that.

We have not really talked about the fact that the way that the system works is based on the idea of deterrence—the idea that you can deter people from seeking refuge and asylum. The Home Office's own research says that you cannot and that it does not work, but that is what has underpinned the operation of the system for a decade or so, or maybe longer. It does not work, because it is never going to work. Every time the Government doubles down and spends more and more money, it is reinforcing failure. It is like trying to fix a broken window by lobbing bigger and bigger rocks at it.

We are now in a position in Scotland where we are having to urgently consider how we can try to mitigate that and to what extent we can deal with the damage that has been caused by that broken window. I hope that we have been able to provide you with some constructive and positive examples of what could be done in Scotland to try to make things a little bit better.

María José Pavez: I completely agree. Of course we need to hear from people with lived experience of seeing asylum, so I second that.

Nick Hobbs mentioned something else that it is important to reiterate. There are specific areas where devolved powers allow the Scottish Government and the Scottish Parliament to be more proactive and creative—they include education, transport, healthcare and the other areas that we have covered during the session. That can be done in the shorter term. In parallel with that, we need to get to work at a more strategic and overarching level and consider the humanitarian response that we need in Scotland for the long term.

I will submit additional written evidence so that the committee can consider that as well.

Savan Qadir: I agree with everything that has been said. I will mention something that I forgot to say earlier. Those people who get their status get 28 days to move from their hotel and go to a different place, but we need to consider what is happening. I have Siraj with me and I have his permission to use his name. He was in the Park Inn incident. He now has status, but he is going to be moved back to the hotel. We need to think about not retraumatising people who have experienced such things. As brave as Siraj is, I think that it will be very difficult for him to go back to the same place. The Mears Group is putting him and many others back into the hotel, which is almost like starting again at the very beginning.

I am deeply disappointed by the Illegal Migration Bill, not just because of the substance or what it contains, but because the rights of migrants will be taken away by the hands of those who have benefited, and whose families have benefited, from the system. That is very disappointing. It is as if your parents were firefighters but you became an arsonist.

Dr Stewart: I thank Pinar Aksu for reading the statement by the MIN voices network.

I want to reinforce a few things. The first is the importance of free travel. Without that, what new Scots can do is extremely limited. More attention needs to be given to how the strategy works in places such as Falkirk. For instance, we have a case where someone got a Sanctuary scholarship but he was unable to take it up because he did not live in Glasgow.

Free travel can also mitigate the Mears Group moving people from hotel to hotel. For example, it means that people can continue with classes if they are moved a bit further away. At the moment, there is always uncertainty, but free travel can address that. It would also help us to work together with other organisations in Glasgow and to improve what we can offer people locally—not just people in the asylum system, but all our communities, because these people are a part of those communities. We need more attention and guidance on how this works for places such as ours.

We have talked about the NHS. People struggle to get healthcare providers to use interpreters, which might be something that they are not accustomed to doing. Budgets are affected as well, for instance when organisations need to get things translated and that has not happened before. That is not their fault. It is just that new things are coming up that people are unaccustomed to handling. Glasgow has 20 years of experience and it has built up provisions that have become normal. I have spoken about the importance of things being someone's responsibility. We need to ensure that people are okay at the local authority level, but also at the Scottish Government level, so that these cases do not fall on us to deal with.

There is loads of good will in local communities. We have seen that with Ukraine, but we need to unleash that. We want to get back to doing mostly befriending. There are huge things that we can do when we are not stretched so much and are not having to try to provide the very basic things. It is hard to do befriending when people do not have shoes and there is no ESOL provision. We would like to supplement those services and not be the primary provider.

We know that, if people move to another hotel, they will not get the same things. We need to have things standardised. We have talked about language. It is all there in the new Scots strategy,

but we have to take into account the different difficulties that are faced by communities that are not in the big cities.

The Convener: As we move towards the conclusion of our formal business this morning, I thank all our witnesses and also our two visitors from our very rich, vibrant and resilient asylum seeker and refugee communities. We have heard some of your voices through our panel.

I say to the panel that we have heard your suggestions that we engage directly with those with lived experience and, as the convener, I confirm that it is absolutely my intention that we will do so. The clerks will see you directly after the meeting and discuss your assisting us so that we can do that in the best possible way and hear directly from our communities of asylum seekers and refugees and their families.

I thank you again for your contributions.

11:56

Meeting continued in private until 12:17.

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