



drawing  
together  
project



# **Policy briefing: Wellbeing in the lives of young refugees in Scotland**

**April 2024**

## About this research

The [Drawing Together](#) project explored how 53 young refugees experience integration through rebuilding their everyday lives in Scotland, Finland and Norway. This policy briefing focuses on the findings from Scotland. It provides insights for Scottish policy makers and practitioners to better equip them in promoting the wellbeing of young refugees.

The New Scots Refugee Integration Strategy 2018–2022 is the key policy for refugee integration in Scotland<sup>1</sup>. It sets out how refugees and asylum seekers should be supported to integrate into communities from 'day one' of their arrival, rather than once they have been granted permission to permanently remain in Scotland. The policy takes a reciprocal approach to integration, framed as a 'long-term, two-way' process to create cohesive communities. The strategy outlines some needs of unaccompanied children and young refugees. However this primarily concerns their educational needs.

In Scotland, unaccompanied asylum seeking children are entitled to support by public authorities until they are 26 years old. Their rights are set out in Article 20 and 22 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and expanded on in *General Comment 6*<sup>3</sup>.

Getting It Right for Every Child (GIRFEC) is Scotland's national approach to supporting the wellbeing of all children and young people. It sets a legal definition of wellbeing, comprising eight indicators of wellbeing that give a holistic picture of a child or young person<sup>4</sup>.

The Independent Care Review (2020), which centred on children and young people in need of care and protection, also set out the changes required to better meet the needs and uphold the rights of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and young refugees in Scotland. This includes the realisation of their right to participate in all matters that impact on their lives (UNCRC Article 12), to health (Article 24) and education (Article 28), improved understanding of their religious and cultural needs by those who care for them, access to legal support, advocacy and interpreters, and support to stay connected to their families of origin<sup>5</sup>.

This briefing focuses on the findings from the Drawing Together project which involved 19 refugees (aged 18-28 years) who arrived in Scotland as unaccompanied children, including ten young women and nine young men who were living in urban areas when the research started, and who had lived in Scotland for between two and eleven years. All had received UK settled status.

### Relational wellbeing

The Drawing Together project applies White and Jha's (2020) definition of relational wellbeing to integration for young refugees. This focus is on the ways people maintain, or try to maintain, responsibility for each other's health, happiness and prosperity through acts of caring and sharing<sup>2</sup>. This approach shows how refugee integration can be built around three interlinked dimensions of wellbeing: material wellbeing ('having enough'); relational wellbeing ('being connected'); and subjective wellbeing ('feeling good').

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## Key findings

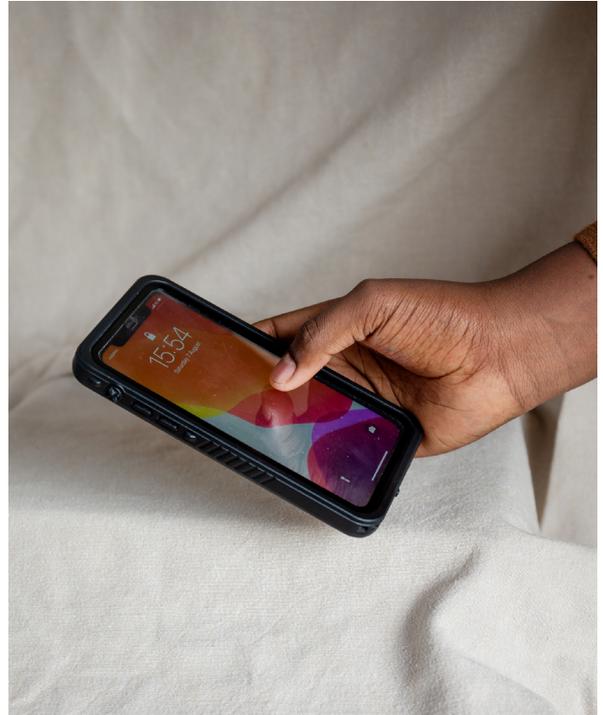
The project's findings are drawn from a series of individual interviews with the young refugees about relational wellbeing in their childhoods, the present and what they anticipate for the future. In addition, interviews took place with the young person and someone who they thought was valuable to their wellbeing. The young refugees constructed relational diagrams (Ecomaps) about the important relationships in their lives,<sup>6</sup> and created artworks showcased in an [art exhibition](#).

## Having enough

Being settled in permanent housing was especially important after experiencing upheavals during the asylum application process. Many participants said their housing was now satisfactory but that they had previously struggled to access suitable, stable housing. Some benefited from continued support by foster carers who provided accommodation, practical advice and care. When the young people moved on to independent living, some carers maintained supportive contact with them even though they were not obliged to do so.

Becoming economically active was essential to young refugees' integration within Scotland. They approached their future with hope and ambition for securing employment, often with a focus on work that would help others and benefit Scotland. Education was also a key foundation for becoming economically active. Most attended college or university and were ambitious about their future careers. They also emphasised the importance of leisure activities, speaking about their enjoyment of the gym, football, cycling, and attending groups that enabled new outdoor experiences. In Scotland, adequate healthcare services were available through the National Health Service (NHS), however participants identified that language barriers often impeded access to and use of these services.

Young refugees often found themselves dealing with many practical responsibilities, such as holding bank accounts, paying bills, and attending appointments. They described their bureaucratic bewilderment while they learned to use systems at a fast pace, whilst learning English at the same time. Meeting visa and other immigration requirements for travel outside the UK were especially difficult to manage. The Scottish Guardianship Service's befriending model, based on companionship with a person who supports the navigation of local spaces such as cinemas, museums or parks, was particularly valued. The young people spoke about day-to-day barriers in accessing their entitlement to free bus travel. Information technology and devices such as mobile phones with sufficient data or credit were important assets that helped them to navigate life. These were particularly important for relational wellbeing, for keeping in contact with their family of origin as well as making use of any translation or journey planning apps.



## Being connected

All the young refugees had arrived in Scotland as unaccompanied children and were assisted by a social worker. Some reflected on the losses of important relationships in their lives. Some spoke about how much they valued their relationship with one consistent social worker who had the capacity to meet their needs - referring to this as a family-like relationship and describing situations when they contacted their social worker for practical support. They said they felt lucky about this relationship, as they knew not all their peers had a consistent social worker.

There were networks of people who supported the young refugees and whom they felt obligations towards. These included legal, social work and non-governmental organisation practitioners, guardians, foster and residential care workers, local communities as well as their families of origin outside the UK. Within their networks, young refugees spoke about giving back to others: they cleaned places of worship, supported newcomers to Scotland, financially provided for family members, worked for charities, and many had future aims to qualify as health and welfare professionals. Peer groups and local faith-based community

of origin groups had a particularly prominent role in the wellbeing of many of the young refugees. They acted as points of connection where they had made friends, increased their confidence, improved their English skills, and enabled them to support and give back to others.

## Feeling good

Subjective wellbeing refers to how people make sense of their experiences. This research focused on four categories of subjective wellbeing: experiences and understanding of their faith, religion and spirituality; self-concept and personality, such as who they are in the world; hopes, fears, aspirations; and a sense of meaning or meaninglessness. The young refugees valued the people who had acted as navigators for them and helped them to feel safe, secure and successful in their day-to-day life, though trust took time to establish. These people included friends, social workers, lawyers, foster carers, residential care staff, host family members, teachers, Guardians, Red Cross Family Tracing Services, and members of voluntary groups and religious communities. The young refugees also referred to acts of kindness by strangers who made them feel welcome and fostered their sense of belonging in Scotland.



The environments the young refugees grew up in, in their countries of origin, were important to their identity and influenced how they experienced their natural and urban environments. They spoke about the importance of being able to spend time outside. Developing their knowledge of places to visit as well as connecting with nature was important to feeling good and forming their identity as Scottish locals. For some of the young people it was also important for their subjective wellbeing to access places of worship. Equally, they valued their religious community's practical and spiritual guidance and financial support.

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## Policy and practice implications

The wellbeing of young refugees is reliant on meeting their material, relational and subjective wellbeing needs, which are inherently connected. However, the Scottish Government's New Scots Refugee Integration Strategy makes limited reference to meeting subjective wellbeing needs in comparison to material and relational wellbeing needs. All wellbeing needs should be met consistently from the time that a young refugee arrives in Scotland as a child through to their early adulthood and beyond. The Scottish approach to integrating refugees from the day they arrive in the country is supportive of this. GIRFEC provides a consistent framework to understanding wellbeing, setting out how wellbeing should encompass all areas of life<sup>7</sup>. More must be done to consider and plan for subjective wellbeing in refugee integration policy, with explicit reference to identifying and meeting wellbeing needs as set out in GIRFEC. Measures to meet the needs of young refugees must be included in policies developed for children and young people, particularly those which focus on transitions from childhood to adulthood.

Young refugees have said that providing reliable and trustworthy relationship-based support is essential to their wellbeing. Development of workforce stability, professional skills, and manageable caseloads are essential components of relationship-based support<sup>8</sup>. In the context of workforce crises in Scotland, providing these is particularly challenging<sup>9</sup>. In the meantime, addressing workforce retention and recruitment must be prioritised by local public authorities to support the relational wellbeing of young refugees.

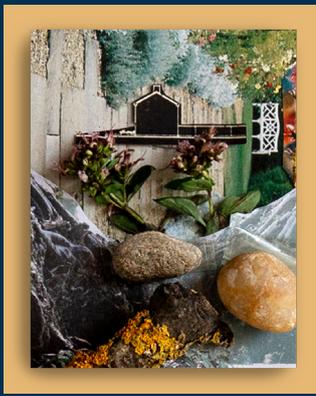
In order to meet the aspirations of the New Scots: Refugee Integration Strategy for young refugees a number of actions are required:

- The Scottish Government should reverse budget cuts to affordable housing to ensure there is adequate good quality housing for all young people, including young refugees<sup>10</sup>.
- The Scottish Government should continue to provide education and training opportunities for young refugees to become economically active.
- The Scottish Government must ensure there is adequate funding for regional NHS Boards to guarantee consistent access to language translation services to support access and provision of healthcare.
- Local public authorities acting as corporate parents should make good on an essential right to the digital inclusion of young refugees by providing a smart phone, adequate data and the skills to use these, integrating this right into pathway planning and support processes.
- The Scottish Guardianship Service provides an effective model of support for young refugees through the provision of skilled navigators of systems and relationship-based practices<sup>11</sup>. Other services that support young refugees should embed these practices into their models.
- This research shows that local peer and faith-based community of origin groups are essential to the wellbeing of young refugees. The role of these groups should be promoted in policy, and their long-term funding sustained by Scottish Government, as recommended by research on implementation of the New Scots Refugee Integration strategy<sup>12</sup>.
- Free bus travel schemes should be aligned with the age range in which young care experienced refugees are supported by their corporate parents, which extends to their 26th birthday.
- The Scottish Government should continue to provide suitable leisure and recreational resources for young refugees, as set out by Article 31 of the UNCRC<sup>13</sup>. This includes the entitlement to access nature, also set out in Scotland's Environment Strategy (2020). These entitlements must be explicitly set out in policy on refugee integration<sup>14</sup>.
- The Scottish Government must ensure there is adequate funding for local public authorities, non-governmental organisations, and community groups to uphold young refugees' rights to culture and religion.

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## References

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Artwork produced by the young refugees as part of the Drawing Together project

## Further information

The Drawing Together project commenced in January 2020, and will end in July 2024. It was an international partnership between Finland, Norway and the United Kingdom. Research and policy support was provided to the UK Team by CELCIS, the Centre for Excellence for Children's Care and Protection, based at the University of Strathclyde.

**Read more about the research:** <https://www.drawingtogetherproject.org/>

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