



Scottish Refugee Council  
Paristamen CIO Large Grants programme 2020  
Final project report, August 2021

<b>Project title</b>	Speaking up for refugee rights
<b>Project aim</b>	Ensuring a strong and influential voice on refugee rights in public debates and media coverage in volatile and unpredictable times.
<b>Project award</b>	£14,000 entirely to support new media post

### **Project context**

Scottish Refugee Council's vision is for a Scotland where men, women and children are protected, find safety and support, have their human rights and dignity respected and are able to achieve their full potential.

After more than three decades working alongside people seeking refugee protection, we believe that the UK's asylum system needs radical reform in order to achieve these outcomes.

The current political context and the immigration reform agenda pursued by the Home Office is extremely concerning with regard to refugee rights. At Scottish Refugee Council and within the refugee support sector more broadly, we are being called on to fight against the erosion of existing refugee rights in the UK, including the core principle of the right to enter to the country in order to seek protection, while simultaneously advocating for an extension of rights on behalf of communities' needs within the context of an asylum system that was already failing those communities. This includes advocacy around the right to work for people seeking asylum, continuity and extension of the vulnerable persons' resettlement scheme and an improved family reunion policy.

### **Theory of change**

We believe the media has an important role to play in shaping the public narrative and influencing policy around refugee rights. As such, one component of our theory of change includes maintaining a strong, clear, consistent and informed voice across media coverage to speak in support of people seeking protection in Scotland. It is crucial at this point in time that any proposed roll-back of rights is resisted and critically dismantled within the public narrative and that a counter narrative and a vision of a more fair and humane asylum system are given air time.

Our award from Paristamen funded a new media officer post with an exclusive remit to focus on our media work on refugee rights.

A second element of our theory of change includes building a movement of positive support for people seeking protection (outwith the narrative framework of rights and politics). It is important that this is maintained and circulated in parallel with the more directly rights-related media work. It has been a challenge for us to maintain that important complementary strand of work while our limited media resources were focused on fighting to maintain and extend refugee rights. An additional outcome of the Paristamen-funded role is that it allows us for the first time to run these two distinct strands of work in tandem.

## **What we did : January – July 2021**

### **January 2021**

Our Paristamen-funded media officer took up post 25 January, in lockdown conditions, and undertook a rapid and intensive induction.

### **February 2021**

The media officer immediately began working with journalists, providing background info, fact checking and drafting statements and comments, on issues including the right to work for people in the asylum system and calls for an extension of UK resettlement schemes.

### **March 2021**

A major focus this month was responding to media coverage of Home Office proposals to develop plans to process asylum claims off-shore, posing a grave threat to the right to seek asylum in-country and the right to dignified treatment within the asylum system. The media officer worked with a number of journalists on this, providing background info, fact checking and drafting statements and comments:

Another key focus this month was the right to safe, secure accommodation. The media officer supported two broadcast journalists reporting on this issue and provided information, commentary and contacts.

Throughout March the media officer worked on a multimedia campaign to secure support for refugee rights from prospective Holyrood candidates. The campaign asked candidates to publicly pledge to speak up for and protect refugee rights throughout their next term in parliament if elected. This is critical to maintain positive support for refugees within the Scottish parliament, particularly in light of a quarter of existing MSPs standing down. We were pleased that the leaders of all five of Scotland's major political parties signed up to this pledge, along with approximately 50 individual candidates. <https://www.scottishrefugeecouncil.org.uk/why-were-asking-holyrood-candidates-to-take-the-welcomepledge/>

The media officer also worked on supporting refugee voices to be included in the media release launching the Scottish Government and COSLA's Ending Destitution Together Strategy. We believe forced destitution is a serious human rights issue which forces people to exist without shelter or the means to feed or otherwise support themselves. It is an extremely hostile and degrading policy which a significant number

of refugees in Scotland are subject to and one that we continue to campaign to reverse.

### **April 2021**

Work on all of the above areas of refugee rights continued in April, including further focus on the Holyrood pledge and voting rights. While we welcomed and celebrated the historic extension of the franchise to people with refugee status, we continued to push for this to be extended to people in the asylum system who are resident in Scotland.

April also saw the launch of the UK Government's consultation on its proposed Nationality and Borders Bill. The proposals in the Bill undermine the internationally upheld right to seek asylum in a third country by criminalising people who arrive in the UK via 'irregular routes'. The majority of people who seek asylum in the UK arrive here via such routes. When fleeing conflict zones or state sponsored persecution, there is little opportunity to obtain official travel documents or visa. We, along with refugee agencies and rights campaigners across the UK, are gravely concerned about the proposals which, in our view, constitute the most serious attack on refugee rights in the UK in decades. In response, the media officer worked hard to prepare our public messaging and campaigning responses to the proposals.

We wrote a letter to Boris Johnson, PM setting out our opposition to the proposals and in particular our concern about the consultation process. (Our formal submission setting out our concerns in full was also submitted as part of the consultation.) The letter to the PM was co-signed by 75+ Scottish civil society organisations and was coordinated by the media officer

- <https://www.scottishrefugeecouncil.org.uk/a-letter-from-scotland-to-the-prime-minister-on-the-new-plan-for-immigration/>
- <https://www.scottishrefugeecouncil.org.uk/working-for-change/policy-campaigns/newplanforimmigration/>

### **May 2021**

We continued to challenge the regressive proposals within the Nationality and Borders Bill. We worked with colleagues from refugee agencies across the UK to design and launch a rapid campaign to protect the rights at risk (#TogetherWithRefugees).

We were also able to respond to the spontaneous demonstration in Pollokshields in response to an attempted Home Office forced removal in the community. We used the moment to push for a more humane and dignified process for people facing removal. The media officer worked on a volume of press and comms around this, a sample is below:

### **June 2021**

In June, with our partner agencies, we launched the #TogetherWithRefugees campaign and marked World Refugee Day.

On the anniversary of the death of an asylum seeker in a Glasgow hotel, we renewed our calls for a meaningful enquiry into the use of hotel rooms as accommodation for vulnerable individuals.

## **July 2021**

In July we carried on challenging the UK Gov's proposed asylum reforms, using the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the UN Refugee Convention as a salient reminder of significance of the right to seek protection in a third country. And we continued to use media interventions to campaign for the right to safe, secure accommodation.

Alongside this we worked with colleagues in refugee agencies across the UK to plan the next stages of our campaigning work, in particular in opposition to the Borders Bill, when parliament returns after the summer recess.

## **Next steps**

We will carry on our work in support of refugee rights, building on all the media interventions made this year. Each time we are able to contribute to a media story around refugee and asylum issues, we are contributing a strong voice in support of refugee rights and helping to shape and influence the ongoing public conversations about refugee issues. We have contributed to and initiated a huge volume of such work over the last six months, thanks to our Paristamen grant. We will continue to build on this work, focusing for the rest of the year in particular on maintaining asylum rights in the face of the Borders Bill.