

Open the Door

Migrants Facing Financial Disadvantage and their Needs for Support

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About Migration Policy Scotland: Migration Policy Scotland offers a home for open dialogue and informed response to migration. We harness insights from lived and learned experience to drive work that is grounded in the realities of migration in Scotland

About abrdn Financial Fairness Trust: abrdn Financial Fairness Trust is an independent charitable foundation supporting strategic work which tackles financial problems and improves living standards. Its focus is improving the lives of people on low-to-middle incomes in the UK.

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Executive Summary

Migration Policy Scotland's research shows that migrants are disadvantaged in relation to each of the main pathways to poverty reduction recognised by Scottish Government and Scotland's wider anti-poverty movement: reducing costs; increasing incomes through employment; and increasing awareness and uptake of social security entitlements. Their needs are too often overlooked or treated as niche and are not well-met by the existing landscape of support and service provision.

Key findings

Migrants are a significant and growing percentage of Scotland's population and workforce with experiences of poverty which are too often overlooked or treated as niche.

- Between 2004 and 2022 Scotland's non-UK born population grew from 3.8% to 10.2%.
- The 2022 Census shows 554,883 non-UK born people living in Scotland, including 209,859 children and young people under the age of 20, and 255,618 people aged 20-35. Within Scotland's working-age minority ethnic population, 77% were born outside of the UK.
- Analysis of labour market outcomes for Scotland's minority ethnic population shows that non-UK people fare worst within that already disadvantaged population. As a substantial section of Scotland's minority ethnic population, migrants are also impacted by poverty rates at more than double the national average, as well as high and rising child poverty.
- The intersection between labour migration and the key drivers of poverty are overlooked in policy solutions and the analysis of poverty in Scotland.

Our research finds clear evidence of hardship, vulnerability to poverty and barriers to increasing incomes through employment or social security in migrant households.

- Migrant households face significant costs not incurred by other low-income households including visa fees, and immigration health surcharge. For a family of four, these can amount to £20,670 in the first four years after arrival. They also incur high costs for housing, utilities, food, childcare and education and can struggle to access affordable credit.
- Migrants face specific barriers in the labour market, including non-recognition of overseas qualifications; undervaluing of work experience and skills development gained outside of the UK; costs of addressing language barriers; discrimination on grounds of race or religion.
- Migrants experience underemployment, precarity and vulnerability to exploitation when they are unable to access jobs that match their skills, qualifications and experience or when their visa conditions restrict the hours and/or sectors in which they can work.
- 2.6 million people in the UK hold visas with a no recourse to public funds (NRPF) condition. In Scotland the NRPF condition applies to almost all migrants who are required to hold a visa. The condition applies to long-term residents and children born in Scotland, as well as more recent arrivals. Some EU citizens with pre-settled status are also excluded from accessing welfare if they are unable to demonstrate a 'right to reside'.
- The Scottish government has introduced mechanisms whereby some benefits and entitlements (for example Best Start Foods) can be claimed by those with NRPF. Others may be provided at the discretion of local authorities. However, the complexity of rules and systems creates uncertainty regarding eligibility compounded by fear, since mistakes can compromise immigration status. This results in people both with and without recourse to public funds missing out on support they could be eligible to claim.

The existing landscape of service provision is not well-suited to meet migrants' needs.

- We found a bifurcated landscape of support and service provision for migrants. On one side are specialist migrant-focused charities and organisations mostly with precarious funding and limited reach into publicly funded or mainstream programmes. On the other are a mix of public and third sector organisations providing employability and income maximisation services, with varied experience of supporting migrants, often with limited awareness of the specific barriers they face and lacking confidence in intercultural communication.
- As a result, migrants are too often passed back and forth between service providers or given incomplete or inaccurate advice.

Recommendations

Improved access to services and support is essential to raise migrant households' capacity to lift themselves away from poverty. This requires the implementation of key principles in poverty reduction and employability such as 'No Wrong Door' and 'Person Centred' approaches to include migrants. We will explore the following key recommendations in our **policy laboratory**.

The Scottish Government should:

- Seek to extend the range of benefits available to those with NRPF such that, for example, those receiving Best Start Foods would also receive Best Start Grants.
- Ensure that clear guidance is available to local authorities and other parties advising migrants or exercising discretion over their right to access benefits.
- Expand commitment 3.4 in the New Scots refugee integration strategy: delivery plan 2024 to 2026 to 'work with Scottish professional bodies to understand and promote recognition pathways for industries and identified sectors' to consider the needs of a wider spectrum of migrants for recognition of qualifications and employability pathways.

Local Authorities should:

- Ensure that frontline staff are provided with clear guidance and training on migrants' entitlements, especially where benefits are available at the discretion of local authorities.
- Facilitate and encourage staff to improve their skills and confidence in intercultural communication.
- Encourage Local Employability Partnerships and Third Sector Interface to consider migrant service user needs in planning and developing their work

Employability and income maximisation services should:

- Form networks that bridge mainstream and migrant-focused services better.
- Design systems for data sharing and more effective referrals.
- Develop strategies and toolkits to support intercultural communication, prioritising and sharing the expertise of migrant-focused organisations.

Employers should:

- Consider possible adjustments whereby international students with permission to work a maximum of 20 hours per week might be offered work patterns to meet that threshold.
- Consider whether they are taking sufficient and equitable account of skills and experience gained outside of the UK in making appointment and promotion decisions.

Our policy laboratory (October 2024-June 2025) will bring together experts by experience and practice on migration and living standards, including local and national government, public and third sector organisations, employers and others, to build ideas into possibilities and advocate for change.

Introduction

This research and policy project looks at financial challenges and precarity experienced by the largest group of working migrants in Scotland: those who have EU settled status or pre-settled status; those on work or study visas and their dependents; and those with Indefinite Leave to Remain (ILR). As a significant and growing percentage of Scotland’s population and workforce their experiences of and vulnerability to poverty demand attention, but are too often overlooked, or treated as niche.

The current economic climate has hit Scottish households hard. The accumulated effects of the Cost-of-Living Crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the Brexit withdrawal agreement have led to experiences of financial hardship across a greater spread of households than ever before. Few have escaped increased financial pressure over the past few years, impacting the living standards of people on low-to-middle incomes. However, migrant households in Scotland face significant costs not incurred by other low-income households, as well as high costs for housing, utilities, food, childcare and education. They have fewer opportunities to offset these by increasing incomes through either earnings or access to social security and can struggle to access affordable credit.

The groups of working migrants in Scotland who are the focus of this study are not generally seen as a priority group for the provision of bespoke services or structured employability support. They are also less well-represented in the policy and academic literature than the most acutely vulnerable populations such as destitute asylum seekers or victims of modern slavery. The issues they face, for example due to their lack of recourse to public funds, have sometimes been treated as ‘niche’.[1]

Migration Policy Scotland (MPS) in partnership with the Grampian Regional Equality Council (GREC), Community Renewal Rom Romeha (CRRR) and Together 4 Better Life (T4BL), has researched the impact of financial disadvantage on low-medium income migrant households in Scotland. Our three partner organisations offer case-work support and a variety of activities to increase employability and maximise incomes.

Our collaborative research explores the additional costs and barriers to financial inclusion faced by migrants, as well the challenges experienced by service delivery and support organisations that seek to assist them.

Migrant status

In statistical measurements and policy terms migrant populations are most commonly defined either by country of birth, or by nationality. Colloquially, the terms “migrant”, “immigrant”, and “foreigner” are used more or less interchangeably.

“Migrant status” (or “immigration status”) usually refers to the type of permission a person without British citizenship has to be in the UK, for example EU settled or pre-settled status, Student, Health and Care Worker, Skilled Worker, Indefinite Leave to Remain, Asylum Seeker, Refugee, Visitor.

Different entry routes and visa types are associated with differentiated rights and entitlements, and these are subject to change. For instance, someone in the UK on a Health and Care Worker visa (and their dependants) has leave to remain in the UK for up to 5 years, but they are not allowed to draw on public funds. Someone who has moved to the UK from an EU country may have settled or pre-settled status, or if they arrived since 2021 hold a visa for work, study or as a family member. These different kinds of status confer different rights and entitlements.

¹ [Understanding Migrant Destitution in the UK: Literature review](#) | COMPAS

Scotland's migrant population has increased in size and diversity over the past 20 years. Between 2004 and 2022 the percentage of Scotland's population born outside of the UK grew from 3.8% to 10.2%.[2] The 2022 Census shows that nearly half of the 554,883 foreign-born people living in Scotland have lived here for over 10 years, that they include 209,859 children and young people under the age of 20, and 255,618 people aged 20-35.[3] Within Scotland's working-age minority ethnic population, 77% were born outside of the UK. [4] Changes to the migration system have shifted the balance of nationalities and the patterns of arrival and staying. As a result, Scotland's migrant population includes people from a wider range of linguistic and cultural backgrounds than ten years ago, coming to an increasing number of destinations within Scotland, with differentiated rights to work and entitlements to welfare support and with different associated needs.

Our research indicates that effective anti-poverty measures need to take better account of the experiences and needs of Scotland's migrants. Anti-poverty targets set by the Scottish government focus on reducing child poverty, tackling in-work poverty and addressing inequalities based on race and ethnicity. Measures to reach these poverty reduction targets are grouped around: helping people into fair, well-paid jobs; supporting people with the cost of living; and increasing awareness and uptake of social security benefits.[5] Yet the urgency to understand specific costs, barriers and exclusions faced by migrants is mainly absent from research and policy thinking on poverty. Meanwhile the existing landscape of advice and support services is poorly suited to meet the needs of this rapidly growing and changing population.

EU settled status and pre-settled status

EU and EFTA citizens who were living in the UK for at least 5 years prior to 31st December 2020 can apply for "settled status". Those who were living in the UK on 31st December 2020 for less than 5 years can apply for "pre-settled status", which can be upgraded to settled status after acquiring 5 years of residency.

Settled status is a form of Indefinite Leave to Remain (ILR). As such, those who hold it have the right to live and work in the UK, to access public funds including healthcare, welfare and pensions, and to vote in Scottish (but not UK general) elections. Pre-settled status is a form of limited leave to remain (LTR), and holders have the right to live and work in the UK, and to access healthcare without paying the immigration health surcharge. However, they must be exercising a qualifying right to reside* in the UK, to have access to welfare benefits.

EU citizens who arrived after 31st December 2020 are generally subject to the same immigration checks as non-EEA citizens.

**For more details on rules governing right to reside see: [Check if you have the right to reside for benefits](#) | [Citizens Advice](#)*

² [Population by Country of Birth and Nationality](#) | National Records of Scotland

³ [Scotland's Census 2022 - Demography and migration](#) | Scotland's Census

⁴ [Analysis of Labour Market Outcomes of Scotland's Minority Ethnic Population](#) | Scottish Government

⁵ [Child poverty - Poverty and social justice](#) | Scottish Government

Ethnic minorities have been designated a category of special attention in policy areas such as the Scottish Government's No One Left Behind employability programme and Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan. This designation is without doubt justified given research findings that Scotland's ethnic minority population experiences poverty rates at more than double the national average as well as high and rising rates of child poverty.[6]

As a substantial section of Scotland's minority ethnic population, migrants are also impacted by such concerning poverty rates. Moreover, Scottish Government analysis of labour market outcomes for Scotland's minority ethnic population shows that people born outside of the UK fair worst within that already disadvantaged group.[7] Increased attention needs to be paid to the nuances and differences in experiences between minority ethnic British citizens and those subject to immigration controls and restrictions. Despite the Scottish Government definition of 'ethnic minorities' as including all people whose self-defined ethnicity is not 'White Scottish/British', much of the research evidence on ethnic minority experiences excludes 'white other' categories. Where this is the case, the experiences of significant groups within Scotland's migrant populations, such as Polish or Roma people, are overlooked.

Scottish government policies and wider anti-poverty work recognise that multiple factors affect employability or increase risks of falling into poverty (such as having a disability or living in a single parent household). To date, there has been relatively little attention paid to the cross-cutting impacts of migrant status in Scotland on poverty and financial struggle. Our work in this area provides important insight into how vulnerability to poverty for migrants is linked to their differing rights and entitlements, access to support services and fair employment, as well as the practical aspects of moving to a new country

of residence. Intersections with other aspects of migrants' lives and identities also affect the extent and nature of their vulnerability to poverty and the possible remedies available to them. We include evidence of intersections between gender, parenthood, rurality, racialisation, nationality and visa status.

At the end of this report, we outline three key areas for change, where practical or policy interventions could contribute to reducing financial disadvantage and improving the lives and futures of Scotland's migrant populations. This is the starting point for a Policy Laboratory in the next phase of our project. This will entail a deliberative process to explore and design initiatives to improve migrants' access to effective support and advice, reduce migrant households' costs and remove barriers to increasing incomes.

⁶ [Ethnicity, Poverty and the data in Scotland](#) | Joseph Rowntree Foundation

⁷ [Analysis of Labour Market Outcomes of Scotland's Minority Ethnic Population](#) | Scottish Government

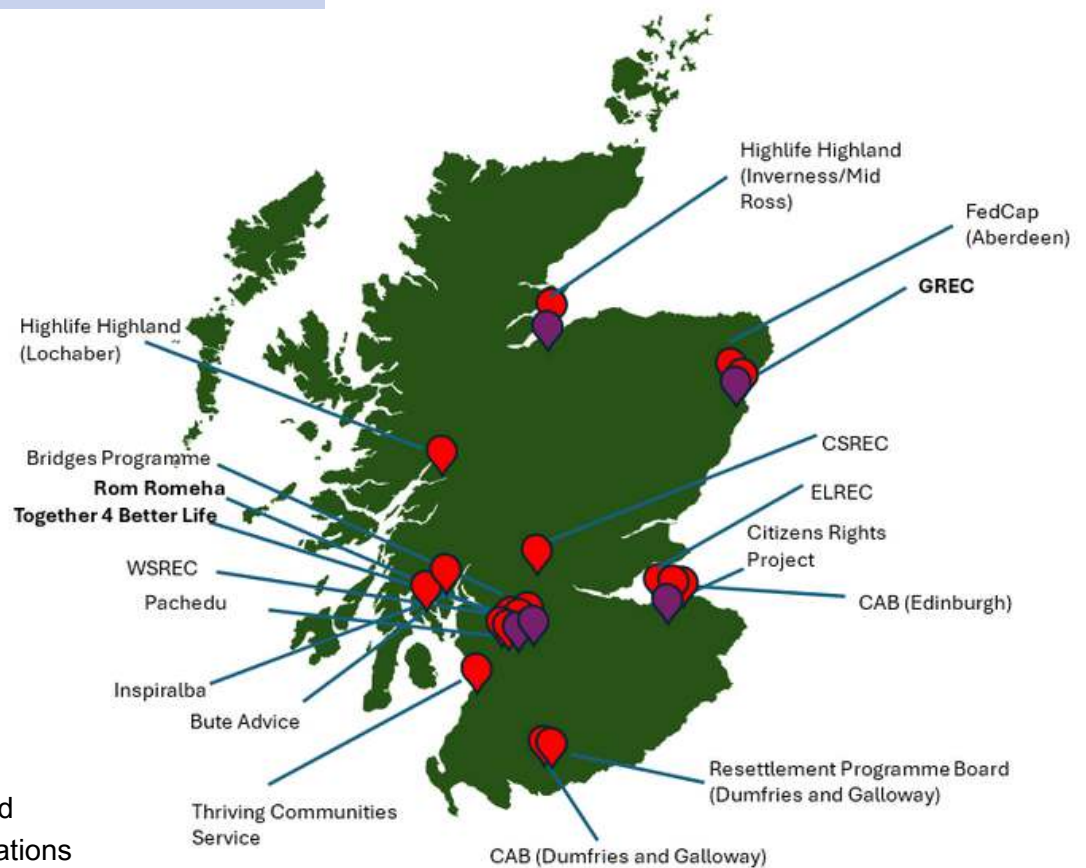
Gathering the Evidence

Over the course of five months, February – June 2024, MPS and our three partner organisations gathered insight and evidence from people with lived experience of migration, financial disadvantage and provision of support and services to increase employability and income maximisation.

We ran a series of insight groups and deeper interviews with migrants who have or are currently experiencing financial challenges, including two focus groups with migrants not currently receiving support from any organisation. We reviewed the casework of our partner organisations through a survey of frontline staff and conducted interviews with other migrant-focused and mainstream advice and support organisations across Scotland.

All participants, both service users and service providers, were invited to offer their recommendations about how to improve advice and support, and for policy changes that might ease their challenges. These have informed the suggested areas for change, highlighted in the executive summary and explained in further detail at the end of this report.[8]

Mapping our Research



18 Organisations

- A mix of mainstream and migrant-focused organisations
- 14 case work questionnaires
- 15 interviews

60 Migrants experiencing financial disadvantage

- 10 Insight Groups with service users
- 2 Focus Groups with unsupported migrants
- 9 deeper interviews

Key

- Bold labels: partner organisations
- Red markers: participating organisations
- Purple markers: locations of migrant participants

⁸ For a more detailed outline of methods, see [Appendix](#).

Findings

Migrant Experiences of Financial Disadvantage

Migrants incur additional costs that do not apply to others and face specific barriers to increasing household incomes whether through work or access to welfare. We found strong evidence that migrant households are particularly likely to struggle to reduce some costs when facing challenges of soaring price rises. Our evidence shows that migrant households in Scotland face many of the same issues as other Scottish households struggling with rising costs of living. Difficulties and anxieties about how to stretch household budgets to meet ever higher costs for rent, food and utilities are not unique, but the ability to adjust costs is distinctively different.

Additional costs

Migrants face substantial costs linked to the migration system itself, which are not incurred by other Scottish households. Visa fees and the Immigration Health Surcharge must be paid for all family members, including children, putting significant financial pressure on households. Costs vary depending on visa type and length of stay and can be increased suddenly and well beyond inflation by changes to government policy. Complicated application and renewal processes mean that families often incur administrative costs for travel, appointments, biometric data, and solicitor's fees as well as the actual fees.

International student fees are also costly both for those coming to study in Scotland and for migrant households with children reaching university age within 3 years of arrival.^[9] Student participants described these costs as an investment for higher earnings in future, albeit one which they were increasingly unsure would pay off.

Living in a different country from family and friends makes the costs of maintaining ties higher and limited budgets may mean cutting back on more regular visits. Unexpected costs linked for example to attend weddings, funerals or care for loved ones during times of illness can lead to difficult choices and debts.

Immigration fees

Immigration fees vary depending on visa type and household size, and include initial visa application fees, fees to extend visas (usually every 2.5 years), and an annual Immigration Health Surcharge for every household member.* Fees for settlement and citizenship applications come later in the migration process and incur some of the highest fees.

Fees are set by the UK government. Over the last 20 years they have increased substantially and the rationale for their collection changed. Until 2003, fees covered administrative costs associated with processing applications. Since 2004, the Home Office has set fees higher, using additional revenue to subsidise the UK's wider immigration system and other spending. The most recent increase in October 2023 saw: the cost of a skilled worker visa increase 15% to £719, the cost of a family visa rise 20% to £1846 and a student visa 35% to £490. Fees for settlement and citizenship applications rose 20% to £2885 and £1500.

The immigration health surcharge was introduced in 2015, with the rate set according to the estimated average cost of providing NHS services to migrants. In October 2023 it was increased by 66% to £1035 per year (£776 for children or students). It should be noted however that working migrants also pay for the NHS in the same way as UK citizens: through their taxes – migrants who are net fiscal contributors to the UK's public finances pay twice.

Source: [Q&A: Immigration fees in the UK](#) | Migration Observatory. A full list of fees and charges can be found at [Home Office immigration and nationality fees](#)

* Those on Health and Social Care visas are exempt from paying the health surcharge.

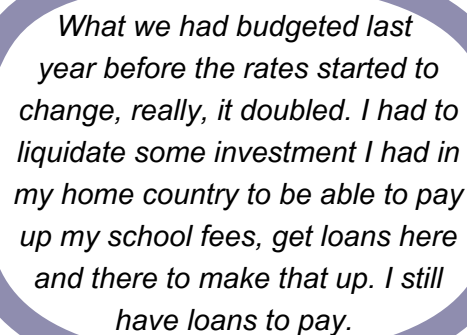
⁹ Exemptions have been made for asylum seekers, refugees and people fleeing conflict in Ukraine, all of whom are eligible for home fees from arrival. [Residence conditions for non-EEA nationals](#) | SAAS

Households struggle to meet these multiple costs of immigration and often cut back on other essential spending to do so. Even so, fluctuating exchange rates and other unpredicted changes can upset the delicate balance of such calculations leading to debts.

Higher Costs

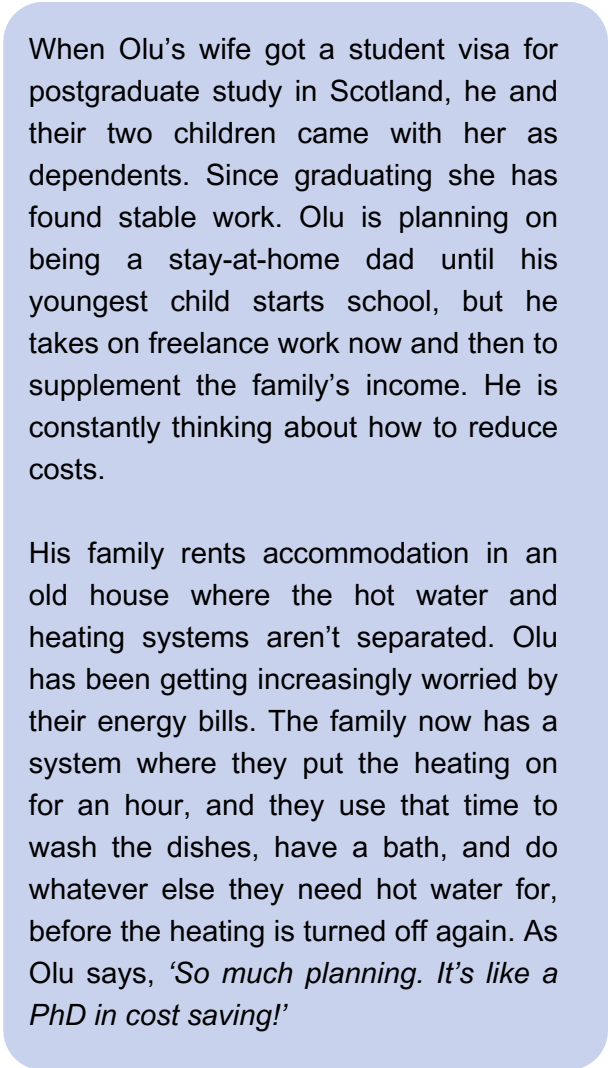
The cost of **housing**, specifically the lack of alternatives to high-cost, low-quality private rentals was mentioned in every interview and focus group. Local authority housing is only available to those migrants who are entitled to access public funds: those with EU settled status or indefinite leave to remain, those fleeing war in Ukraine and those who have had an NRPF condition lifted.^[10] Scottish housing associations do offer social housing more widely, including to those with no recourse to public funds. However, in practice, waiting lists are long regardless of the provider. Available social housing is often located away from jobs, services and wider migrant communities, and may be poorly suited to family size. With fewer options, migrants can be more vulnerable to exploitation by landlords requesting unreasonably high deposits and above average rents for poor quality and badly maintained housing.

Both migrants and frontline staff reported that high deposits, sometimes as much as six months' rent in advance, are routinely demanded from migrant tenants. Their lack of a UK credit history is cited as grounds for this. Migrants are frequently charged above-average rents for poor-quality housing. Case workers noted that migrant service users were fearful of reporting issues or pursuing claims against unscrupulous landlords. We heard accounts of people having received incorrect advice about their eligibility to apply for social housing, or their rights as tenants.



What we had budgeted last year before the rates started to change, really, it doubled. I had to liquidate some investment I had in my home country to be able to pay up my school fees, get loans here and there to make that up. I still have loans to pay.

In rural locations, older housing stock, lack of social housing options and distance from jobs and services all increase housing costs. Support workers in parts of rural Scotland told us that a lack of local contacts and social connections can make it harder for newcomers to access decent and affordable housing as well as jobs and that this compounds financial pressures and exclusions.



When Olu's wife got a student visa for postgraduate study in Scotland, he and their two children came with her as dependents. Since graduating she has found stable work. Olu is planning on being a stay-at-home dad until his youngest child starts school, but he takes on freelance work now and then to supplement the family's income. He is constantly thinking about how to reduce costs.

His family rents accommodation in an old house where the hot water and heating systems aren't separated. Olu has been getting increasingly worried by their energy bills. The family now has a system where they put the heating on for an hour, and they use that time to wash the dishes, have a bath, and do whatever else they need hot water for, before the heating is turned off again. As Olu says, *'So much planning. It's like a PhD in cost saving!'*

¹⁰ For a more detailed discussion of the NRPF condition and its implications see p15.

High **energy costs**, unpredictable increases and a complicated and changing landscape of suppliers present challenges for many households. But these are compounded for people who have moved to Scotland more recently. One support organisation reported that migrant clients had been excluded from cheaper direct debit payment schemes because of a lack of UK credit history. Both support organisations and migrants explained that unfamiliarity with the system, including the complexities of tariffs and understanding how and when to switch between providers, as well as stark differences to the ways in which utility costs are managed in their countries of origin cause difficulties. Where rented accommodation includes less economic heating systems or meters this increases costs in ways that tenants cannot control.

Participants recalled the shock of having to monitor and restrict heating, especially over a first Scottish winter in poorly insulated or drafty accommodation. Migrant participants discussed cutting back on energy usage through turning off heating and other appliances. This increased risks of mould and damp, especially for those in already low-quality housing, as highlighted by the conversation below, between two focus group participants

I know a family that tries to conserve energy by switching off the fridge after sunset, turning off the lights to save on electricity costs, and shutting off the water boiler to reduce expenses.

People may rely just on essential heating and even when they are at home before bedtime, they try to conserve heat by not opening windows because cold air will come in if they do. Not opening windows can lead to environmental problems like room humidity. So, solving one problem may create another.

Cutting grocery bills can also be difficult, especially when culturally appropriate food or toiletries are not available in cheaper outlets, or from local stores, meaning that households incur higher travel costs. This issue was raised by two support organisation in rural areas. All the support organisations involved in the research spoke of migrant service users frequently turning to foodbanks to help keep costs down. However, four organisations, all of them located in areas with higher densities of migrant residents, mentioned that even in these locations, foodbanks often do not have products or ingredients which migrant households require to meet cultural, religious or ethnic needs

There's a lot of people, for example, people that come from the Middle East and are maybe students or struggling or whatever on family visas, working visas. If their salaries don't meet what the cost of living is here, they can't even access the food banks and things for food because [what they have] is maybe pea and ham soup and things like that. They can't eat that. It's a choice of staying hungry or going against what your religious values are.

One organisation had become involved in a fair share scheme with a supermarket to collect culturally appropriate food themselves to redistribute amongst service users. Another had done awareness raising work with a local foodbank to increase the availability of culturally appropriate food and hygiene products.

Some costs are both hard to meet and have knock-on effects on employability. **Transport costs** are challenging, especially in Scotland's rural areas, where access to a private vehicle is often a prerequisite for employment.

The cost of converting a non-UK driving license can be prohibitively high. However, insurance premiums for non-UK licence holders are higher still. For those reliant on public transport, travel costs for work or even to get to foodbanks or cheaper shops can be difficult to meet. Participants told us that they try to do everything in one day so that they can save on a single day ticket rather than travel several times.

Kemi is studying for a postgraduate degree and came to Scotland with her husband and three children. They use foodbanks quite often but Kemi says that you have to weigh up the cost of travel against the savings: *'Because if you see foodbank at times, if you need to still take bus to go and come, at times it might not be worth it.'*

When Kemi's daughter needed a coat, she found one second-hand online at a price she could afford. However, she would need to take a bus to reach the seller. Kemi already planned to visit a foodbank that week, but it was located in a different area and she wanted to avoid taking multiple bus journeys. In the end, she found a jacket close to the foodbank so that she could buy a coat for her daughter and visit the foodbank at the same time using a single day ticket.

Childcare costs cause problems too, especially where women are looking to return to work, or seeking to increase their earnings. Migrant participants pointed out that they lack a local extended family network which could provide flexible informal care. This makes things particularly difficult and costly for those with irregular work patterns due to changing shifts or agency work, as nurseries require regular payment. Yet this kind of working arrangement is prevalent in many of the sectors of the Scottish labour market where migrants are more likely to be employed, such as hospitality, construction, health and social care.[11]

If you are working like a variable shift, it's impossible to get childcare. I'll be like, okay, this week I'm working Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, next week I might be working Thursday, Friday. I'll just be paying for five days a week just for my kids to be coming into school for three days.

¹¹ See for example [Workers' Experiences of Low-Paid Work: A Snapshot of the Hospitality Industry](#), for insight into low-paid work in this sector, which had the highest rate (29%) of zero hours contracts of any UK industry in January – March 2023. In 2021-22, non-UK nationals made up 15% of the workforce in accommodation and food services in Scotland. Source: [Working-age EU and non-EU nationals in Scotland areas by industry groups and economic activity reasons](#) | Office for National Statistics

Barriers to increasing incomes through work

Helping people into fair, well-paid jobs is a central driver of poverty reduction. Government-funded employability policies embedded in the No One Left Behind strategy^[12] embrace a person-centred approach to support for employability, including an emphasis on personal and career development. There is an emphasis on the importance of effective collaboration between third, public and private sectors to provide this support.

Our participants told us about migrant households' options and experiences of attempting to increase incomes through work. All agreed that this was a preferred route to lifting households out of poverty. It was clear however that migrants face multiple barriers, particularly when it comes to accessing 'good jobs' - seen as those with higher salaries and prospects of career development.

Migrants who have arrived on routes other than skilled worker visas, where jobs are more tightly matched to salary and skills thresholds, commonly experience issues with **underemployment**.^[13] In other words, they are employed in jobs which do not meet their levels of qualification or previous work experience, where salaries are lower and prospects for promotion fewer, or where they are not able to work as many hours a week as they would like. This has been an issue for many EU citizens who moved to Scotland in the period between 2004 and the ending of free movement in December 2020. Migrant participants reported continuing difficulties for those who now have settled status. People who have arrived as dependents of workers or students, those who have received leave to remain following an asylum claim and even those who have completed their studies at UK universities and progressed to graduate visas, often find that they are unable to access professional jobs and salaries despite having relevant skills and qualifications. For those who are racialised on the grounds of skin colour, attire or accent, experiences of discrimination create further barriers.

Non-recognition of qualifications and the costs involved in converting these create barriers to employability. Even where people have 'invested' in new qualifications they often face a requirement to show that they have work experience in the UK. Some participants had taken up lower paid work in related

professional fields to gain experience but struggled to gain promotion. Others had been advised to gain experience through volunteering but explained that they could not afford to prioritise this over finding a job that would pay 'at least something' to contribute to household earnings.

Aisha moved to Scotland with her husband and son to study for a postgraduate degree, which she passed with distinction. She now holds a graduate visa. Despite 18 years of work experience in her home country as well as her new master's degree, she has struggled to find a job. She has had to accept low-waged work in order to support her family. She hopes that gaining work experience and references within Scotland will help in future but is hugely frustrated. She fears that her skills are wasted and becoming outdated. As an African woman who wears a hijab, she has experienced racism and Islamophobia in Scotland and this also plays a part in her experiences of seeking work. She says, "*I have gone to university here in the UK, and myself and others we make distinctions. Why don't you look beyond our colour, like you said, hijab, look beyond our accent or whatever, and then tap into the intelligence that we have? Give us that opportunity, because whatever we do, we're doing it here. I'm not going to take what I do back to Nigeria.*"

¹² [No One Left Behind: employability strategic plan 2024 to 2027](#) | Scottish Government

¹³ [How Fair is North East Scotland? Integration & Community Cohesion in Aberdeen City, Aberdeenshire and Moray](#) |

Hope is a paediatrician who also lectures on paediatric medicine in her home country. She moved to the UK from West Africa as a dependent to her husband who has a work visa. She knew she would have to register with the General Medical Council in order to convert her qualifications and experience, but financial circumstances have forced her to accept a minimum-wage job as a care worker in the meantime. Hope is desperate to resume her medical career, but the cost of taking her assessment exams is over £1,000, plus £300 to take the OET (Occupational English Test) exam. Her family's financial circumstances make it difficult to save. She is doing her best to put money on one side, but she also has to pay the Immigrant Health Surcharge and her visa reapplication fees. The prospect of being able to afford to take her exams keeps receding. Hope is concerned that the longer she waits, the more likely it is her knowledge and skills become outdated. She fears that if she stays in Scotland she will never be able to practice medicine again.

The **cost of addressing language barriers**, including requirements to prove knowledge of specialist vocabulary as well as issues with confidence in spoken and written communication, also creates difficulties. Where individual or household budgets are stretched to the limit finding time for language classes or paying for language certificates is challenging.

Experiences of under-employment, deskilling and **precarious employment**, including working long hours in low-paid jobs, often with zero hours contracts or with cash-in-hand arrangements, create a vicious circle, reducing employability over the longer term. All of the frontline workers who took part in this research reported seeing migrant service users trapped in over-work, taking up multiple jobs and juggling work and care responsibilities.

Overwork has negative repercussions for people's confidence, self-esteem, mental and physical health. It can also impact negatively on language learning, further reducing opportunities to change jobs or develop a career.[14]

People who become trapped in low paid work, especially where they also have lower levels of qualification or less confident English language skills, are more vulnerable to **labour exploitation**. This was most frequently and forcefully raised by Roma participants and those who support them but was also of concern for other groups.

Alin is a young Roma man who grew up and finished secondary school in Scotland. He had hoped to go to college, but has had to find work instead in order to support his family. At the Job Centre, he felt pressured to take any job, although he wanted something with prospects for advancement. He asked an advisor about a career path in hospitality, and the advisor asked to see his hands to see if he was telling the truth about his previous kitchen experience.

Alin doesn't know what to do. He doesn't want to end up like his dad, working in a car wash with a contract for 24 hours a week at minimum wage, but in fact working 48 hours without being compensated for the extra hours. His dad says *'You have to be grateful for whatever God gives you. Whatever you are given, you should accept it'*. He is grateful that life in Scotland is better than it was in Romania: *'In our country it is very difficult, especially if you do not have any school or anything, you cannot get a job, you cannot do anything. So, it is better in this country than it is in ours, and more or less, you live a better life here for the children and for the family'*. Alin doesn't disagree with his Dad, but hopes that he will have a different experience of the Scottish workforce.

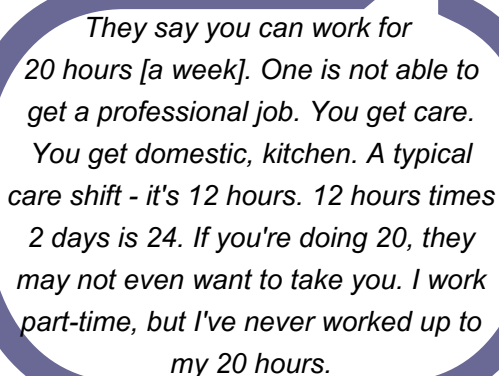
¹⁴ [Perspectives: Fit for purpose? Insights on the present and future of ESOL and migration in Scotland](#) | Migration Policy Scotland

People struggle to avoid or escape exploitation because they don't know their rights or entitlements. This is exacerbated by lack of confidence or trust in mechanisms to enforce their rights. Some people knowingly enter or accept exploitative situations because they feel it is the only way to keep a job or to earn additional income.

Some migrants' **employment options are restricted by visa conditions** and this may also increase their vulnerability to labour exploitation,[15] reduce their employment options or limit their earning power.

People on **health and social care visas** must be sponsored by a licenced employer in that sector. They are permitted to take on additional work, but only up to 20 hours a week and only in eligible skilled worker occupations. This means that people cannot easily take up more readily available part-time work if their employer sponsor fails to provide them with sufficient hours or wages.

International students are not allowed to work more than 20 hours per week, nor are they entitled to employability support or advice from government-funded programmes. We heard repeatedly from students and their partners about how hard it is to find a well-paid job within this restriction and that student families struggle to cover essential costs. This puts children in such households at heightened risk of poverty.



They say you can work for 20 hours [a week]. One is not able to get a professional job. You get care. You get domestic, kitchen. A typical care shift - it's 12 hours. 12 hours times 2 days is 24. If you're doing 20, they may not even want to take you. I work part-time, but I've never worked up to my 20 hours.

Partners and spouses with dependent visas are permitted to work without restrictions. However, they too can face multiple barriers, especially to more highly paid jobs. These include non-recognition of qualifications or of previous work experience outside of the UK, limited English language skills, lack of self-confidence or knowledge of the UK labour market. As noted above, second earners, most often women, also struggle to balance their earning power with the cost of childcare.

Many of the difficulties and barriers to employment outlined here are compounded in **rural areas** due to tighter and less varied labour markets and the nature and location of available jobs. Migrants living in such areas often came to Scotland from EU countries during the period of free movement when they were able to take up work in low paid jobs in hospitality, agriculture, manufacturing or care work. Some now have settled status and are able to claim in-work benefits, others may have pre-settled status or family visas. More recently they have been joined by migrants from other parts of the world on health and social care visas and seasonal worker visas created in part to fill labour market gaps created by the closing of arrangements for freedom of movement within the EU. Finding work that can be taken up without access to private transport can be very hard in many rural areas of Scotland. Childcare options are fewer and can be even more costly. For those in the rural seasonal economy the need to earn enough in high season to cover costs in low season creates additional pressures.

¹⁵ [Research by the Work Rights Centre](#) finds that people with employer-sponsored visas are vulnerable to exploitation, due to the short time frame, high cost, and administrative difficulty of changing jobs, as well as lack of enforcement of labour rights.

Barriers to increasing incomes through access to social security

Increasing awareness and uptake of social security benefits can improve the lives of low-income families and reduce child poverty.[16] This pathway is clearly restricted for the majority of migrants as their right of stay is subject to a no recourse to public funds (NRPF) condition. However, this restriction does not apply to all migrants, nor to all types of assistance, and can be lifted in some circumstances.

Systems and policies governing both immigration status and welfare are complex and have changed frequently in recent years. We found evidence that frontline support workers and advisors, as well as migrant households, face considerable difficulty to unpick these dual system complexities. This can lead to incorrect advice and reluctance to claim entitlements. The cumbersome nature of regulations and processes for assessing eligibility and making claims create delays and bottlenecks making it harder still for households to manage their finely balanced budgets.

No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) visa condition

The NRPF condition applies to almost all migrants whose residence in Scotland requires them to hold a visa. Although not directly applied as a visa condition to EU Citizens with pre-settled status, the concept still prevents them from claiming support unless they are able to prove that they are exercising a qualifying 'right to reside'. NRPF impacts on children who may have been born in Scotland or lived here their entire lives, as well as those more recently arrived, as their parents may be subject to NRPF and children cannot claim benefits in their own right.

Most EU citizens with status under the EUSS scheme, Ukrainians, and people who have been granted indefinite leave to remain are not subject to NRPF. Some people with limited leave to remain can request the Home Office to lift the NRPF condition from their visa through a process known as "change of conditions." This only applies to a limited group of visas and only where people can prove imminent or actual deprivation, exceptional financial circumstances or that a child's essential needs cannot be met. At the end of 2022, there were about 2.6 million people across the UK who held a visa with an NRPF condition. No breakdown is available for the number of people affected in Scotland, apart from asylum seekers, as the other, much more numerous groups affected are not obliged to register their place of residence and are able to move within the UK.

Under the NRPF condition, visa holders are not allowed to access public funds, including healthcare, welfare benefits, or housing assistance.* Any breach of this condition could result in the visa being revoked and the person being required to leave the UK.

The Scottish Welfare Fund is also designated as public funds, meaning that those with NRPF are excluded from benefits made from it. Benefits such as the Scottish Child Payment or Best Start Grant are also 'passported' through receipt of other public funds, primarily Universal Credit, thereby effectively excluding those with an NRPF condition regardless of the funding designation. In a few instances, for example Best Start Foods, Scottish Government has made special arrangements to make benefits available to the those with NRPF.

Sources: [Deprivation and the no recourse to public funds \(NRPF\) condition](#) | Migration Observatory

* For a full list of benefits defined as public funds for immigration purposes see [Public funds - GOV.UK](#).

¹⁶ [Child poverty - Poverty and social justice](#) | Scottish Government

The **consequences of NRPF** have been most widely discussed in campaigns focused on destitution and experiences of the most vulnerable groups of migrants and asylum seekers. Less attention has been paid to the much larger number of low-medium income migrant households also excluded from access to publicly funded assistance. Our findings highlight the ways in which these exclusions increase financial insecurity and heighten the risk of child poverty in this wider migrant population.[17]

Many migrant households depend on low-paid, irregular or precarious employment and are struggling to meet the rising costs of living. They may manage to cope as long as their finely-balanced finances remain stable. Yet their exclusion from access to publicly funded benefits including Universal Credit, Child Benefit, Scottish Child Payment, winter heating payments and many others, means that they **cannot access the safety nets or supplementary incomes available to other low-income families.**

We spoke to care workers and NHS bank nurses, construction workers with agency contracts, international students working in retail and hospitality whose uncertain wages made household financial security tenuous at best. For many such households, **foodbanks, charities and local authority crisis payments** are the only safety net where things go wrong.

Our migrant participants were often unsure of their entitlements, in some cases believing charitable support and foodbanks to be part of NRPF exclusions. During focus groups they shared information and experiences – sometimes contradictory – concerning eligibility to apply for social housing through Scottish housing associations, children's rights to free school meals, school uniform grants, and other benefits.

Agnieszka and her husband moved to Scotland three years ago on Health and Care Worker visas, which come with an NRPF condition. They found employment in minimum-wage jobs and were managing comfortably. When Agnieszka became pregnant and was unable to work for health reasons however, the couple quickly fell into crisis. They prioritised paying rent and were left struggling to buy food, but they were terrified to use a food bank in case it violated their NRPF condition and they would have their visas revoked. Agnieszka spent hours searching for a food bank that wasn't publicly funded.

Eventually, they contacted an advice organisation who confirmed that although the couple were not entitled to draw benefits, food banks are not classed as public funds and using them would not violate their visa conditions. Given the couple's lack of recourse to welfare benefits, the organisation arranged for them to use a food bank on a long-term basis until Agnieszka was able to work again.

The complexity of welfare entitlements, the control of funds and payments by different levels of government and the nature of cross referrals between public agencies and charitable organisations create uncertainty about eligibility even where NRPF rules do not apply. Fear that making a claim or using a service for which they might be ineligible could compromise their migrant status add to difficulties in accessing those forms of support for which some migrant households are eligible.

¹⁷ See also [Understanding Migrant Destitution in the UK: Research Findings](#) | COMPAS

In Scotland, special arrangements have been made so that Best Start Foods can be claimed by people who are subject to NRPF, but associated Best Start Grants are public funds and cannot be claimed by those without recourse to public funds. School clothing grants and free school meals for older children, as well as help during school holidays are provided through local authorities. Whilst these are not designated as publicly funded benefits, applications for these forms of assistance are most straight forward where households are in receipt of universal credit or other publicly funded benefits. Migrant households must contact their local authority to make a discretionary claim.

Uncertainty amongst mainstream support services and local authorities over what people are entitled to and how they can access support can lead to **claims being delayed or wrongly rejected** either through poor knowledge or discrimination. We heard reports of families with children being refused emergency homelessness support which they should have been entitled to and third sector migrant organisations having to act as an emergency backstop to prevent rough sleeping.

When migrants who turn to mainstream services or local authorities for assistance receive poor or contradictory advice, refusals and experiences of discrimination this leads to a **loss of trust and disincentive to engage in future**.

We were surprised by the number of people we found continuing to rely mainly or exclusively on third sector migrant-focused support organisations after 5-10 years living in Scotland, and in some cases even after gaining UK citizenship. This **lack of contact with mainstream support services**, as well as a lack of awareness from within mainstream services of migrants' needs and entitlements can mean that problems go unnoticed until a crisis has developed.

Financial exclusion and access to affordable credit

Beyond access to social security benefits, managing budgets is made harder by a **lack of financial inclusion**. Migrants face 'hard' exclusions when their lack of credit history, length of residence at a UK address, or irregular incomes make it difficult to access a full range of UK banking services. They also experience more informal exclusion through difficulties understanding and navigating financial systems due to language barriers, lack of information and digital exclusion.

Such financial exclusions, in addition to the absence of public safety nets, bring increased hardship and heightened risk of debt, including public sector debt, for example due to late council tax payments. Difficulties accessing banking loans, overdrafts or debt management services, leave migrants vulnerable to unregulated or informal lending schemes. Households managing reasonably well on medium or low incomes can be rapidly pushed into crisis when things go wrong, or simply when circumstances change.

The unfamiliarity and complexity of multiple systems can lead to higher costs and difficulties with debt. Understanding when and how to pay bills for council tax, utilities or rent, and what happens if payments fall into **arrears** can be stressful.^[18] Households may incur fines for late payments or miss out on reduced costs because a lack of UK credit history or banking services prevents access to cheaper, more easily managed direct payments.

Whilst studying and with a student visa, Aisha was only permitted to work for up to 20 hours per week. Her husband found work with a construction agency on a series of temporary contracts, but sometimes went as long as month between contracts. Thrown back entirely on income from Aisha's part-time work, the family were left with less than £200 for the month after paying their rent. They had to rely almost entirely on foodbanks and missed a monthly utility payment, incurring a fine for late payment.

Aisha says, "It was so stressful. It put a strain on my life and my marriage at that point. When my husband was out of the job, that was really terrible for me. That month, last year, yes, I could only pay rent then. Like I said, food was from foodbanks. I was jumping from one foodbank to the other".

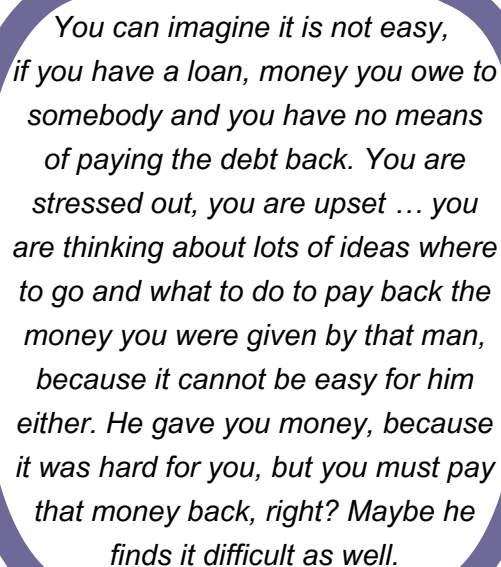
The increasing trend towards **digitised communications and systems**, including universal credit journals, e-visas, and utilities bills can make this harder still. Frontline support staff told us that migrant service users often rely on a mobile phone as their only source of internet connection and are effectively cut off if these are lost, broken or run out of credit. Where systems expect standard documents and forms of identity, any misunderstanding or difficulty providing one part of this trail can lead to payments stopping almost immediately, triggering financial crisis, especially in households with children.

We've had a case recently where an African family, their benefit was stopped. It was purely because of her residency status. She didn't understand what she had to do. It's not easy to attach documents and attach evidence onto the journal because it doesn't allow you for that option. You can't go in and say certain things like, "I'm waiting for this application". Unfortunately, they don't take that into account, and they will just close the account until you appeal it otherwise, which can take weeks and sometimes months.

¹⁸ See [In the Public Interest](#) | Money and Mental Health Policy Institute for discussion of punishing debt collection and enforcement practices for public sector debt.

In situations where benefit payments or earnings are interrupted, or when faced with unexpected costs, a broken fridge for example, or a wedding or funeral in their countries of origin, households struggle to access additional funds. Some of our participants had been able to organise crisis payments from local authorities, had arranged advances from employers or through universal credit payments to cover unexpected costs. Few had access to overdrafts or bank loans and people were more likely to rely on informal loans. These bring other sorts of indebtedness with potential social as well as economic consequences.

Migrant participants were reluctant to discuss informal loans other than those they might receive from family or friends. Support staff however, expressed concern about the risk of spiralling debts and vulnerability to high-interest loans from informal credit services offering unregulated lending and sometimes using coercion to enforce repayments.



You can imagine it is not easy, if you have a loan, money you owe to somebody and you have no means of paying the debt back. You are stressed out, you are upset ... you are thinking about lots of ideas where to go and what to do to pay back the money you were given by that man, because it cannot be easy for him either. He gave you money, because it was hard for you, but you must pay that money back, right? Maybe he finds it difficult as well.

Living without a safety net – impacts of financial disadvantage

The testimonies which we gathered from both frontline support staff and from those with lived experience of migration and financial disadvantage paint a clear picture of households just about managing to get by but with very little scope to absorb financial shocks and with few possible safety nets when circumstances change.

This is not to say that migrant households do not themselves develop strategies to try to overcome financial disadvantage. We heard of many ways in which households strive to increase incomes and reduce costs. Unfortunately, many of these strategies also bring other unplanned, and potentially negative impacts. People with lived experience were concerned about impacts for family relationships, health and well-being. They were also deeply concerned by the impacts on children. Parents spoke of the emotional toll of seeing their children go without and their fears that in the longer term, experiences of childhood poverty and disadvantage would hamper their children’s educational and career potential as well as their sense of belonging in Scotland.

Families face many severe consequences. Firstly, the family may disintegrate. Secondly, the head of the family may not have enough time to spend with his children or take them on holidays. It's possible for families to fall apart under such circumstances.

We eat less food and not good food, so that we can make our money last every month. That is the only way. If you eat every day good and expensive stuff, you cannot live in this country.

Strategies

Working multiple (precarious) jobs

Cutting back on food (for adults) and turning off heating

Cutting out 'luxuries' (gym, Netflix/sky, going out, trips home)

Increased borrowing

Potential negative/unplanned impacts

➔ Increased risks of exploitation,
➔ Exhaustion and ill-health,
➔ Damage to family relationships

➔ Impacts on health and well-being
➔ Risk of damp and mould

➔ Increased social isolation, lost opportunities for language learning, impacts on mental health

➔ Increased debts to service

Sometimes the challenges we face is not what we anticipated when we were coming here. It can be a huge shock on us especially when you have children involved and you cannot believe that you are having them go through such hardship. Sometimes it could drive down to isolation and at the end of the day you end up being depressed.

Academic achievement is tied to happiness. A happy child will perform better academically compared to a child facing challenges and struggling to meet their basic needs. Our children interact with Scottish or other people in the same school. The child may feel inadequate compared to others. We have to provide their needs, otherwise they may suffer a lot.

Where and How Can Services and Support Make a Difference?

Access to suitable and effective support and advice can make a crucial difference to households facing financial disadvantage. In our research, we found that organisations supporting migrant households in Scotland fall broadly into two main categories: those set up specifically to support migrants, many of them led and staffed by migrants; and mainstream services, both statutory and third sector, whose purpose is to support a broader population and with very varied experience of supporting migrants.

Both migrant-focused and mainstream organisations offer a range of programmes and initiatives designed to improve employability, income maximisation and financial inclusion. Many such programmes recognise the need for person-centred and user-led support and aim to assist people with complex circumstances. However, resources are tight, capacity overstretched and organisations are struggling to reach everyone that needs support. We found evidence of very uneven access to services for migrants depending on location, migrant status and other characteristics.

The landscape of support and services for migrants

Migrant-focused organisations have a specific focus on, and provide services directly targeting and tailored to, the needs of migrants. Some have a remit to support a particular sub-group, based for example on nationality or visa type, others are working with migrant populations more broadly. **Most are third sector organisations and many are precariously funded.**

They provide support and services that are **culturally aware**, often prioritising access to support in **migrant-community languages**. Some offer a range of services and activities, others have a more specific focus on language learning or employability. Most have very limited resource or capacity to employ specialist advisors. These organisations are **much less present in areas where migrant populations are newer, fewer and more dispersed.**

Mainstream organisations provide services to a broader client base, which is often geographically defined. These are both **publicly funded and third sector organisations**. Most offer services and advice with a specific remit e.g. employability, income maximisation, rights. Some employ specialist staff and have direct access to and authority to deliver publicly funded resource.

Many take a **person-centred approach** to service design and delivery. This recognises the need for tailored support to deal with multiple barriers and complex needs. However, **migrants often represent a small, and sometimes invisible, group of service users**. Understanding of the specific barriers migrants face, knowledge of their entitlements, and confidence in providing support are very varied across organisations.

English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) services offer a migrant-focused service focused on a particular need and specialist tuition. Services are offered by both third sector and local authority providers as well as Further Education colleges.

Many ESOL providers have expanded their remit to provide wider support and advice on employability, income maximisation and access to support services. For some, such as High Life Highland, this has been formalised with the development of a learning support hub where staff offer one-to-one advice and support to learners, including signposting and referrals to other services.

All the organisations we spoke with are working **at or beyond capacity** and many frontline workers reported feeling **overstretched and overwhelmed**. This inevitably makes it harder to support needs and meet challenges that are new or unfamiliar. It creates competition for resource and undermines opportunities for networking, training and capacity building, as well as leaving little if any breathing space for reflection, co-operation or wider policy influencing.

Support organisations and services, both mainstream and migrant-focused, as well as the populations they support, have been hit by **multiple upheavals over the past 3-5 years**. Many organisations described having to deal with an increase in demand for their services and service users presenting with more acute needs as a result of the Covid pandemic and Cost-of-Living Crisis. Staff are stressed and overstretched, particularly so where they are either insufficiently informed or qualified to help with service users' needs, or where

organisations do not have sufficient resource to meet demand. Changes to welfare rules and systems, for example the digitisation of Universal Credit, as well as changing migration policies and patterns have created additional strains on capacity. Organisations are struggling to keep abreast of the complex ways in which systems and entitlements intersect and to train and support staff.

For migrant-focused organisations in particular, newer and more diverse migrant populations with a greater variety of needs and differing entitlements have led to increased demand on their services. Meanwhile, the impacts of Covid and cost of living crisis on their service users has meant pivoting towards crisis support activities and away from work on community building, integration and empowerment. Resource has been allocated instead to projects more narrowly focused on employability, income maximisation and crisis support.

Migrant-focused Organisations	Mainstream services and support
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mainly third sector (charities and not-for-profit) • Offer a broad range of services and activities tailored to meet needs of migrant clients <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Some focus on specific nationalities, visa types or language groups, ◦ Others on geographical locations within Scotland • Group events and activities serve as a gateway to 1-to-1 case work and tailored support. • Often provide signposting and (accompanied) referrals to more specialised (mainstream) services. • Usually well networked with other migrant-focused and third sector organisations. • Less well networked with public sector/mainstream services 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Both third sector and statutory • Specialise in specific areas of advice and services (e.g. Employability / Income maximisation) • Person-centred, holistic approach • Able to tap into mainstream resources and schemes and to provide some financial support themselves. • Offer signposting and referrals e.g. between employability, income maximisation, energy advice. • Well networked with other mainstream support services and organisations • Much less well networked with migrant-focused organisations • Service design and frontline staff show very varied levels of understanding and experience of migrant needs and constraints.

Both third sector and statutory services are shaped and constrained by **shifting funding and policy agendas**. Funding uncertainties make it difficult to plan or to provide consistent support and lead to **fragmentation and competition** between organisations. Insufficient and untimely funding causes backlogs and delays, which in turn create more acute needs amongst service users.

We're seeing a lot of people complaining about not having enough food or not having enough kinds of food that they want to eat. ... people that come to our workshops, a lot of them might not have breakfast because they'd rather feed their children than have something for themselves.

Identifying needs for support and services

Our findings show a lot of agreement between migrants and frontline staff about migrant households' needs for support and the strengths and shortcomings of currently available services.

All were agreed on the need for **tailored services and one-to-one support** to help migrants navigate the complicated and unfamiliar landscape of public agencies, institutions and third sector organisations; to understand their entitlements and rights as tenants, workers and residents; and to orient themselves in the Scottish job market.

There was a strong feeling amongst migrant participants that they need **better and clearer information**, especially in the early stages of arrival to a new country or place. But there was also strong agreement from both migrants and frontline workers that **providing information and signposting to existing services is not enough**. Even when information is available in other languages, migrants may need support and assistance to understand where and how to access this. Leaflets or websites in migrant languages which direct to services where frontline staff are unable to provide assistance in those language can simply lead to frustrations on both sides.

Frontline staff and others involved in co-ordinating service provision told us that **mainstream income maximisation and financial inclusion services struggle to understand the additional barriers and challenges which migrants face**. It has become particularly difficult to stay on top of current rules over the past 3-5 years due to frequent and multiple changes to both welfare and immigration systems.

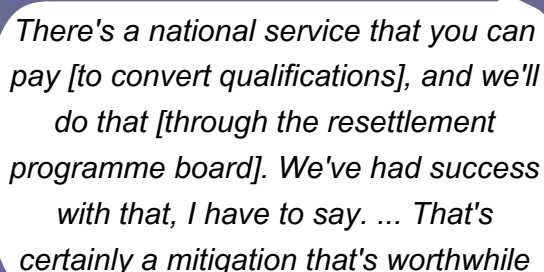
As explained earlier in this report, immigration rule changes and the creation of new routes and conditions of stay mean that different groups of migrants have different entitlements depending on their migrant status, country of origin, length of stay, employment and family status. Organisations working with EU citizens for example, told us about complications and confusion within and between households where eligibility for benefits and access to public funds differs depending on migrant status and date of arrival.

When you urgently need something and you don't know about that, you are lost You are lost, despite you speak the language.

Migrant-focused organisations often provide their own employability support and services. These include language classes, one-to-one or group coaching for job-search and interview skills, as well as support to build confidence and improve mental health and well-being. This work is often **precariously funded and separate from mainstream employability services**, which more often have direct links to employers, including opportunities for training, apprenticeships, internships and recruitment.

Migrants face specific barriers to employability, particularly around recognition of non-UK qualifications and the need to improve (and prove) English language skills. The importance of **support to overcome these barriers has been recognised in tailored programmes for specific groups**, for example through the STEP employment programme for Ukrainians or in the activities of local authority resettlement programme boards.

The **cost of converting professional qualifications or gaining certificates in language proficiency** has been covered in some of these bespoke schemes but is not available to other groups of migrants or through mainstream employability services.



There's a national service that you can pay [to convert qualifications], and we'll do that [through the resettlement programme board]. We've had success with that, I have to say. ... That's certainly a mitigation that's worthwhile

Meanwhile provision of English language learning (ESOL) classes is fragmented. Different types of provision (formal classes, conversations cafes, online or face-to-face provision) for learners at different levels (beginners, intermediate, advanced) and with emphasis on different outcomes (everyday English, employability, formal qualifications) are unevenly available depending on location, ability to pay, and in some instances eligibility by migrant status or nationality. Almost all forms of provision are suffering under cuts in funding.[19]

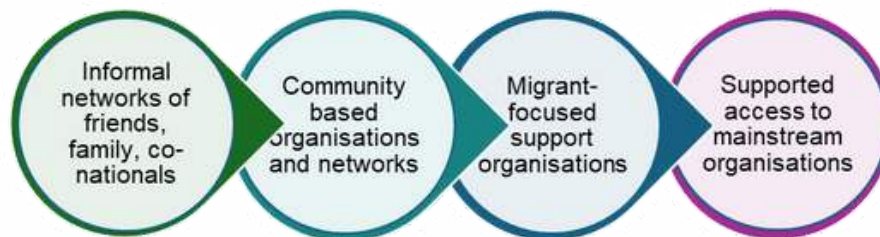
Tailored support for migrants should include **awareness of cultural difference and training for intercultural communication.** Access to interpreting and translation, and services in migrants' own languages are invaluable. However, as migrant populations grow and diversify across Scotland the challenge of providing services in all the right languages in all areas becomes increasingly complex. Separate provision may create competition for resources between groups and risks entrenching inequalities in the longer term.

Many frontline staff with whom we spoke have migrant backgrounds themselves and some speak several languages. They reported also supporting service users with whom they did not share a language and had often become the 'go to person' for migrant clients. They told us that a relaxed attitude to linguistic and cultural differences, a willingness to take time, to communicate using body language, and translation apps were crucial to providing support. Improving the spread of such competencies within mainstream services is crucial to overcoming the barriers and disadvantages which migrants currently face.

¹⁹ Perspectives: Fit for purpose? Insights on the present and future of ESOL and migration in Scotland | Migration Policy Scotland

Finding and accessing support and services

Knowing where to turn for help and support can be a significant challenge for migrant households. We asked our migrant participants where they would go for support or advice or simply for information when facing financial difficulties or seeking help with employability. In group discussion with migrants, both those currently accessing services and those who were not, the first port of call to be mentioned was other migrants with longer experience of life in Scotland, especially co-nationals. This was often presented as the entry point to a chain of access: to wider community, to more-or-less formal networks, to migrant-focused support organisations, and via these to mainstream support.



In reality, there are often difficulties, blockages and inequalities in this pathway to support. Even where it is successful it can be a very long, tiring and drawn-out journey to support especially for those with more acute needs. The absence of a system for maintaining reliable networks or making referrals between migrant-focused and mainstream organisations makes this step in the chain particularly challenging.

Informal networks can offer trusted, culturally aware and migration-experienced information. However, this is not always accurate or up to date and fellow migrants may be unaware of nuanced differences between their own experience, needs and entitlements and those of others. Access to informal networks is also uneven: **age, gender, social status, ethnic and linguistic differences all create, sometimes subtle, barriers and exclusions.**

Furthermore, networks and communities are unevenly available geographically across Scotland, and much less so to migrants from less well-represented nationalities. Areas with fewer and more dispersed migrant populations have fewer migrant-focused support organisations. Mainstream services in these locations have less experience of supporting migrant service users. This makes it **particularly difficult for people living outside of bigger towns and cities to access support or advice that they need.**

We found examples of mainstream organisations in areas with very limited migrant support infrastructure thinking creatively about how to reach and support local migrant populations. Frontline workers described the advantage of good networks between local services and agencies, but also the challenge of building their own knowledgebase.

There's no list anywhere. I'm just finding my way around and when I hear of something making a note, that will suit that learner or that would suit that learner. We do work quite a lot with the Highland Third Sector Interface. They have some funding to help with refugees, really, not other migrants. There's funding out there for the refugee programs, but not for the other communities.

We found evidence of both mainstream and migrant-focused organisations struggling to meet demand. There were difficulties in matching available support to migrants who don't fit into programmes funded only for

specific groups, for example where language or employability programmes have been funded through bespoke schemes for Ukrainians or other refugee resettlement schemes.

Dual systems or joined-up services and support

Against this difficult backdrop it is clear that many organisations are working hard to provide support to migrant service users. Whilst there is potential for migrant-focused and mainstream organisations to complement each other in a joined up landscape of services and support, there is also a significant risk of siloed working and a revolving door of ineffectual signposting. This can lead to migrants becoming stuck in a dual system of poorly connected services where neither migrant specific nor mainstream services are able to address their needs properly.

No single organisation can cover all the needs of its service users. This is widely recognised in the design of policies and support for vulnerable populations where the 'no wrong door' principle^[20] has been developed to ensure that people are able to access appropriate guidance and advice from multiple entry points. Effective support for migrants and their households also requires a diverse landscape of services and a well-functioning system of signposting and referrals.

All of the organisations involved in this study use signposting and referrals. There is strong consensus however, that simply signposting to other organisations or providing printed or web-based advice materials is not sufficient, especially where people are facing more acute or complex issues and constraints.

Warm handovers and accompanied referrals are common, especially from the side of migrant-focused organisations who frequently set up appointments and offer personal introductions to services where they have good contacts and experiences. Where possible, case workers accompany service users or community members to appointments and offer follow-up support to help them to

understand guidance and navigate formal processes and to ensure that they have been properly advised. This need for accompanied appointments can be about a need for language support, but is also about familiarity, trust and building confidence. It is time-consuming, resource-heavy work however, and adds considerably to the burden on third-sector migrant organisations' limited capacity.

There is also a danger that organisations develop their own relatively closed networks where personal trust between frontline staff, previous positive experience or physical proximity determines access. While personal trust is commendable, such networks are also inherently more incidental and fragile due to their reliance on personal relationships.

Our office is right next to the Job Centre. Just because of that physical location, we work very closely together. Clients can easily go from one to the other. I very often take [my clients] because there's the language issue as well. Again, the Job Centre is not necessarily very used to dealing with foreign clients. Yes, they will call language line. That doesn't solve all the communication issues. Very often I take my clients there ... and we'll solve the problem on the spot.

²⁰ [No Wrong Door](#) | Glasgow Council for the Voluntary Sector

The migrant-focused organisations in this study most frequently refer to Citizens Advice bureaux, foodbanks, and sometimes to local authority services or other advice services where they have good working relationships. But this leaves out a range of other significant sources of mainstream support and advice.

Mainstream services appear to be more closely networked with each other and more likely to be able to refer to services providing energy advice, to local authority services and to other mainstream employability or income maximisation programmes.

Both migrant participants and frontline staff warned that **referrals can become a revolving door** where migrants are pushed back and forth between services. This compounds a loss of confidence and trust in the willingness or ability of support services and staff to understand their needs or to offer effective remedies.

Frontline staff who had been involved in more **structured partnership working** described this very positively. For some this had come through co-ordinated support for specific groups through resettlement programmes or the homes for Ukraine scheme. For others it was based on locally-developed creative solutions and networks to forge links and pool resources. These experiences have built a resource of social capital between support organisations and knowledge of co-ordination mechanisms that may be particularly valuable in understanding how to support other groups of migrants.

What next? Areas for change and a process to make it happen

The evidence presented here shows clearly that migrant households face considerable financial disadvantages, and barriers to overcoming these. These challenges are insufficiently seen or understood in anti-poverty policy measures and interventions. While a great many services and support organisations are working exceptionally hard to support service users, including migrants, the current landscape of provision is not working well to meet migrants' needs.

In closing, we outline three key areas for change. This is the starting point for the next phase of our project – a **policy laboratory**, which includes a deliberative process to explore and design initiatives that can improve migrants' access to effective support and advice, reduce migrant households' costs and remove barriers to increasing incomes.

Open doors and more joined-up provision

At present migrants are too often stuck in a dual system of support. In opposition to a 'no wrong door' principle they experience a revolving door of referrals to services either insufficiently aware of their needs or insufficiently empowered and resourced to meet them. Networks and processes to overcome this, such as the practice of warm handovers, are inconsistent and over-reliant on personal relationships and serendipitous connections. A better and more coherent system of networks between organisations and across sectors is required. There is also a need for more consistent and clearer mechanisms to share service-user information and access guidance on entitlements and avenues to assistance.

During the policy laboratory we will work with local authorities, service providers and support organisations to:

- Form networks that bridge mainstream and migrant-focused services better.
- Design systems for data sharing and more effective referrals.
- Encourage Local Employability Partnerships and Third Sector Interface financial inclusion and employability officers to consider migrant service user needs in planning and developing their work.

A person-centred approach for migrants too

Too often language and cultural differences are seen as barriers which can only be overcome through provision of separate 'specialist' services for migrants. As migrant populations grow, diversify and move into different geographical areas, this becomes increasingly difficult to resource or manage. A person-centred approach to employability and income-maximisation is embraced by many mainstream services and initiatives. More thought needs to be given to how staff training and support could increase confidence in intercultural communication and improve knowledge of the specific barriers migrants encounter so that this principle would encompass the needs of migrants also.

During the policy laboratory we will work with local authorities, service providers and support organisations to:

- Develop strategies and toolkits to support intercultural communication, prioritising and sharing the expertise of migrant-focused organisations.
- Facilitate and encourage staff to improve their skills and confidence in intercultural communication.
- Ensure that frontline staff are provided with clear guidance and training on migrants' entitlements.

A dynamic ecosystem of support

Migrant populations change, as do economic, social and political dynamics impacting on the support needs of the wider population. Whilst specific changes may be sudden or unexpected, the prospect of change itself is not. In recent years, Scotland has built up considerable knowledge and experience in providing assistance to new populations. Some of this has been specific to particular areas of the country, some to specific movements of people. We know more than we did before, both about what works well and what does not. There is more we could learn from other countries and places and now is a good moment to ensure that this learning is not lost. The legacies of resettlement boards, bespoke schemes for Syrians, Ukrainians or Hong Kongers provide opportunities to consider what can be transferred or adapted to support better service provision and meet the needs of other groups.

This is a longer-term vision which will require resource and political commitment to develop. In the short to medium term the policy laboratory will explore recommendations to Scottish government, local authorities and employers to raise migrant households' capacity to lift themselves away from poverty.

The policy laboratory

Through this project we are trialling an innovative approach to driving change in policymaking and practice by mobilising the knowledge of multiple stakeholders in a process of learning and solution-focused dialogue.

Between October 2024 and June 2025, we will host a policy laboratory to bring together experts by experience and practice on migration and living standards, including local and national government, public and third sector support organisations, employers and others. Sharing the findings and evidence from our research is a starting point for discussing feasible, fundable and effective solutions.

We are eager to receive suggestions of additional conversation partners. A key concern is to bring together those with access to levers of power, responsibility and resource to make changes. Participants should have access to or knowledge of structures, initiatives and funding mechanisms which could feed into this process, which will build ideas into possibilities and advocate for change. **If you have suggestions or experience that could help – don't hesitate to get in touch!**

Our recommendations include the following:

Scottish government should:

- Seek to extend the range of benefits available to those with NRPF such that, for example, those receiving Best Start Foods would also receive Best Start Grants.
- Ensure that clear guidance is available to local authorities and other parties advising migrants or exercising discretion over their right to access benefits.
- Expand its commitment in the [New Scots refugee integration strategy: delivery plan](#) to 'work with Scottish professional bodies to understand and promote recognition pathways for industries and identified sectors' to consider the needs of a wider spectrum of migrants for recognition of qualifications and employability pathways.

Employers should:

- Consider possible adjustments whereby international students with permission to work a maximum of 20 hours per week might be offered work patterns to meet that threshold.
- Consider whether they are taking sufficient and equitable account of skills and experience gained outside of the UK in making appointment and promotion decisions

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List of participating organisations

Bute Advice

The Bridges Programmes

Central Scotland Regional Equality Council (CSREC)

Citizens Advice Scotland

Citizens Rights Project

Community Renewal Rom Romeha*

Dumfries & Galloway Resettlement Project Board

Edinburgh & Lothians Regional Equality Council (ELREC)

FedCap

Grampian Regional Equality Council (GREC)*

High Life Highland

Inspiralba

Pachedu

Thriving Communities Service, South Ayrshire

Together for Better Life*

West of Scotland Regional Equality Council (WSREC)

*Participating organisations listed in bold type are our project partners

Appendix - Methodology

We gathered insight from people with lived experience of migration, financial disadvantage and provision of support and services to increase employability and income maximisation. Our research took place between February – June 2024. The evidence we gathered has helped us to understand better the difficulties migrant households face and the ways they deal with them. It has also allowed us to build a clearer picture of the kinds of support and advice services available to migrants, how they work and the challenges they face.

Drawing on our three partner organisations' experience of providing services and support, we co-designed a questionnaire to gather detailed insight from their case work. The questionnaire asked frontline staff about the size and profile of their caseload, the most common and/or acute issues faced by their clients. It also asked them to reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of support and advice services, and mechanisms for referrals currently available. We also gathered insight into the impacts of the cost-of-living crisis, COVID-19 and changes in the migration system over the past 3-5 years.

Similar issues were explored through interviews with 15 other organisations providing a mix of employability and financial inclusion services. These included both organisations set up specifically to support migrant populations and others delivering mainstream services.

60 people with lived experience of migration and financial disadvantage took part in the research through insight groups, focus groups and deeper one-to-one interviews. These group and individual conversations explored experiences of financial disadvantage, the activities and strategies migrant households have developed to maximise incomes and manage expenditure, their needs for support and guidance and whether they have been able to access services to match these needs.

All of our participants drew on their lived and learned experience, wider social and community connections and insights from frontline work. They shared their views on how

existing support and advice could be improved and on how policy interventions might mitigate issues that they face. These have informed the suggested areas for change, highlighted in the executive summary and explained in further detail at the end of this report.

Who did we speak to?

We started from our existing networks and those of our partners to invite people to take part in the research. From there we engaged in snowball sampling to recruit further participants. As can be seen on the map on p7, the organisations we spoke to were located across a broad geographical spread of Scotland, featuring both rural and urban areas and incorporating a mix of locations with high diversity and areas with historically low levels of migration.

Our 60 migrant participants brought insights and perspectives from a wide variety of migrant backgrounds and experiences. Below we have included some charts that point to the breadth of experience and knowledge brought by the people who contributed to this research.

Thanks to the significant efforts they put into recruitment, our partners achieved a good balance of genders, ages and nationalities across the insight groups. To recruit participants who were not currently receiving support for the focus groups, we created a graphic that was shared widely through our own personal and professional networks and cascaded from there. This resulted in a similarly wide spread, although slightly more skewed towards women and those with African ethnicity.

The research is qualitative, and as such it is not representative nor intended to be so, and we acknowledge the limitations of our data. We recruited migrants with lived experience primarily through our partner organisations and this has inevitably shaped the profile of those we spoke to: for instance, we spoke to a large number of EU citizens, mainly from Slovakia and Romania, because one of our partners works with Roma communities. In terms of other limitations, as is often the case in qualitative research, we spoke to more women than men. The focus groups and insight groups were inevitably clustered around the locations of our partners (i.e. Glasgow and Aberdeen) but for MPS' focus groups we were also able to recruit people located across the central belt and Highlands.

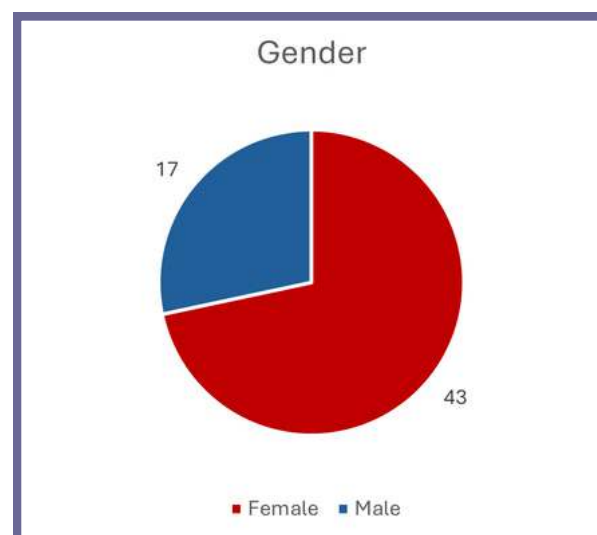
As noted below, the largest group of participants were in part-time employment. Certainly some participants, in particular international students, were automatically constrained in the number of hours they were able to work. Nevertheless, part-time work occurred among nearly every migrant status, including those who are legally allowed to work for longer than 20 hours a week: although this suggests that underemployment is at least a partial contributor to the high number of participants in part-time work, it is beyond our scope to state this with any certainty based on these figures.

The people we spoke with have a wide range of experiences, resulting in a rich set of data. Across all migrant participants 42 (70%) had children, including 3 single parents. Ages ranged from 18 to 60+. Length of stay in the UK ranged from 8 months to 51 years, with a mean length of residence in Scotland of 9 years. A striking number (13) were UK citizens, suggesting that the effects of financial disadvantage caused by migrant status are felt long after migrant status is no longer an issue.

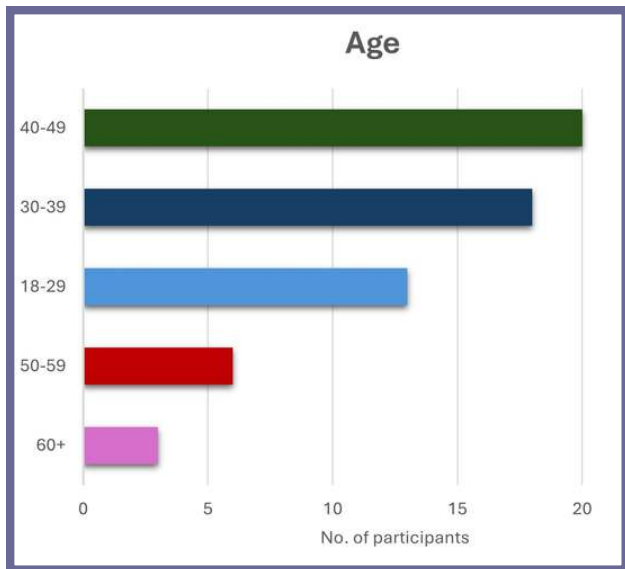
Levels of education varied from no formal education to postgraduate level but generally skewed high (including 7 who were currently postgraduate students). Of those who were employed, a selection of the sectors people were employed in include health and social care, hospitality, retail, education, administration and personal services.

For a further breakdown of age, gender, ethnicity, employment status, migrant status and family status, please see the charts below and on the following pages.

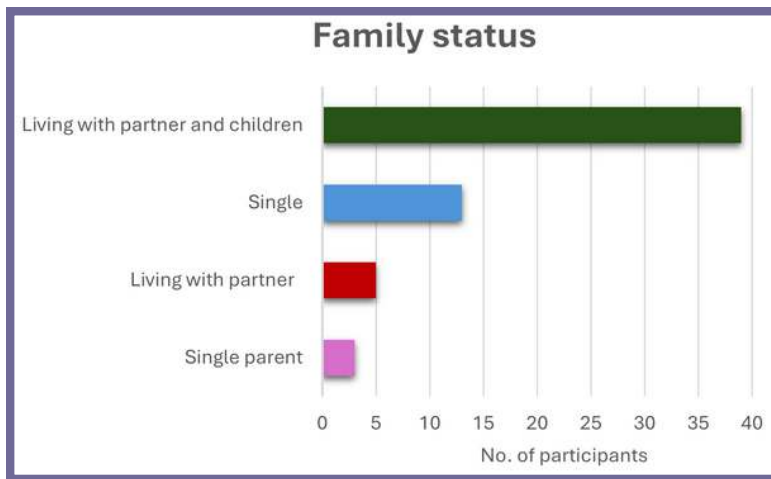
Participants Biographical Characteristics



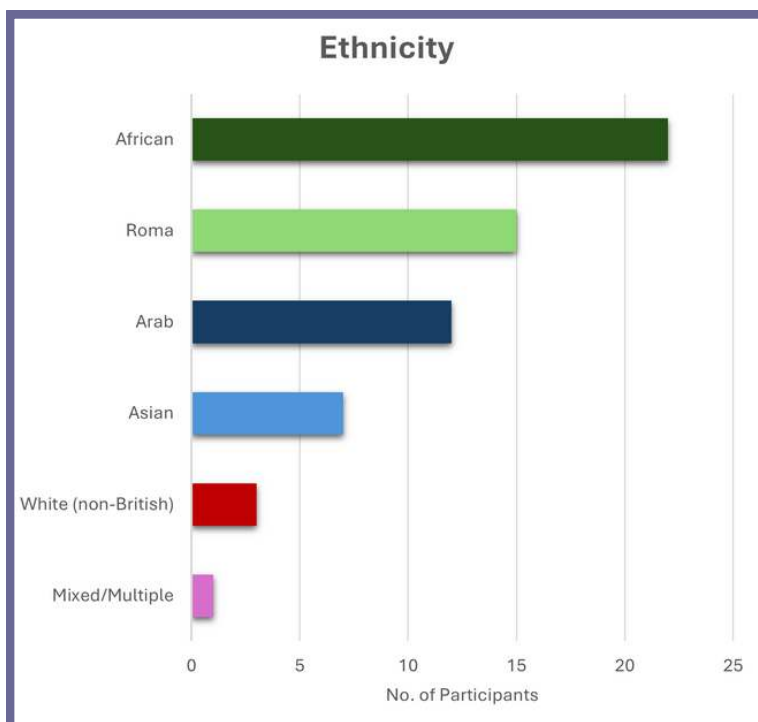
We spoke to significantly more women than men (72% to 28%, respectively). While this will have influenced our findings, this reflects some service providers' experiences that women are more likely to engage with them than men. It is also a common occurrence in qualitative research.



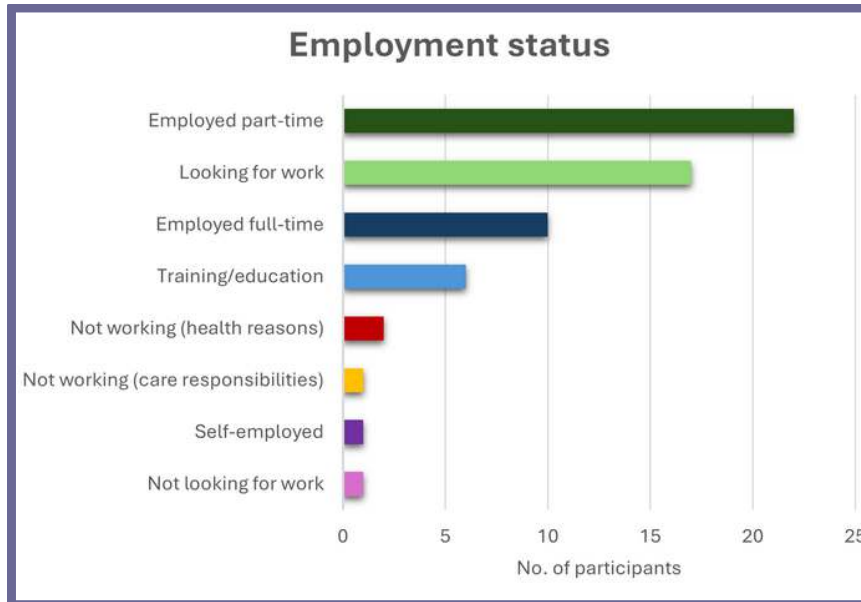
In terms of age, we reached a broad spread of participants. Most (63%) were aged between 30 and 49 years old. We also spoke to 13 (22%) individuals aged between 18-29, and 9 (15%) who were either over 50 years old.



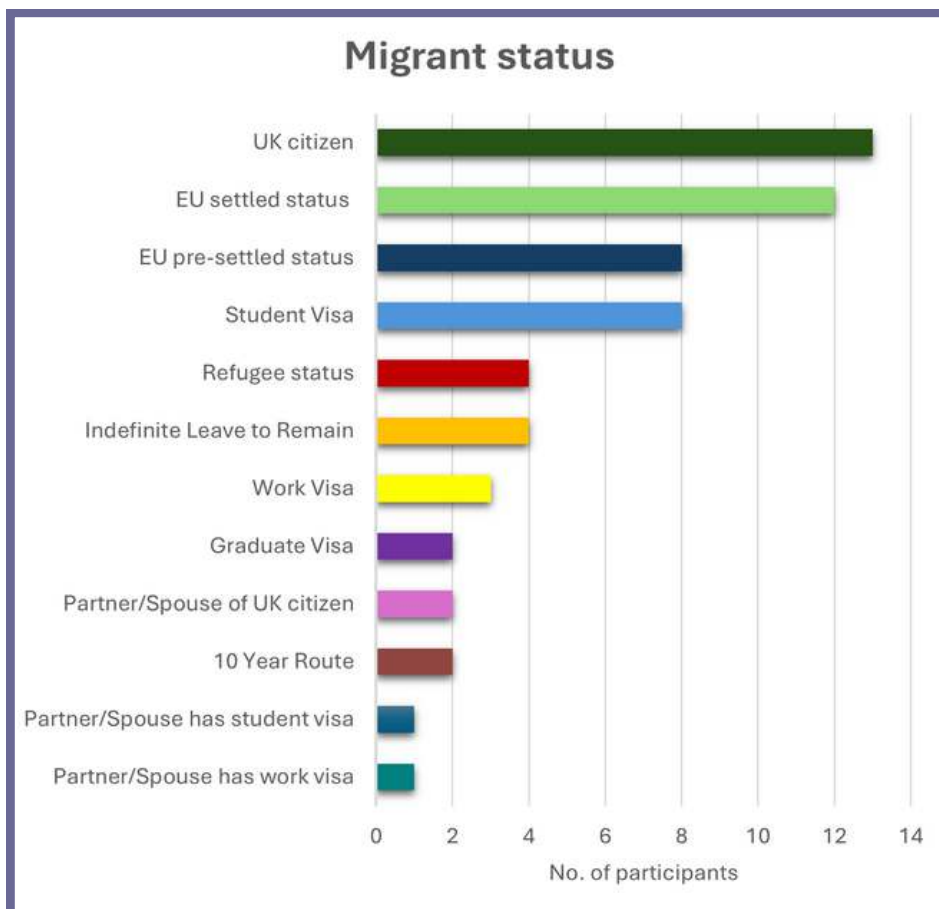
A majority (42 participants or 70%) were parents with children living with them in Scotland, including 3 single parents. 13 participants (22%) were single without children, and 5 participants (8%) lived with a partner but without children. None of our participants had children living separately from them, either in Scotland or in their countries of residence.



Our participants included a wide range of ethnicities and nationalities. Among those with African ethnicity, we spoke with participants from Nigeria, Cameroon, Malawi, and Algeria. Arab participants came from Sudan, Egypt, Algeria and Syria. Asian participants came to the UK from India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Malaysia, Indonesia, Ireland, and Saudi Arabia. Other countries of origin represented in the research include Iran, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Romania, Mexico, Poland, and Spain.



The majority of our participants (33 or 55%) were in work, but two-thirds of that group (22 or 37% of total) were in part-time employment. Of those who were not working, 17 (28%) were actively looking for work, 6 (10%) were in training or education, 3 (5%) were unable to work due to health problems or caring responsibilities, and 1 person was not looking for work.



We were surprised to find a significant number of UK citizens amongst our participants (13 or 22%). This was followed by EU settled status (12 or 20%) and pre-settled status (8 or 13%). 5 participants in total (8%) were on either a work or study visa, and the remaining participants were on a 10-year route, had refugee status, or Indefinite Leave to Remain.