

# Empowering Scotland's Newly Enfranchised Refugee Communities

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## Project Evaluation

scottish  
refugee  
council





# Executive Summary

The Right to Vote campaign was successful on multiple levels, leaving many New Scots and other advocates jubilant about what had been achieved. This success importantly translated into different avenues of empowerment based on whether individuals were involved in achieving the right to vote, in actually voting in the May 2021 Scottish Parliament elections, or whether they were just informed that the right to vote now existed. It showed the strength of refugee-led campaigns and the importance of supporting strong grassroots organisations and networks, which are primed to mobilise at short notice in support of marginalised community's rights.

There is no way to know what percentage of New Scots voted in the 2021 elections because the statistics on voter registration and turnout are not disaggregated by immigration status, and so the success of the voting campaign cannot be evaluated from a quantitative perspective. Focusing on statistics would also obscure important qualitative indicators of success, such as New Scots' proximate and longer-term experiences of empowerment and inclusion.

It is critical not to hold New Scots to higher voting standards than the broader population. Based on the turnout within the general population in the 2021 Scottish Parliament Election, we should not expect all New Scots to vote just because they now can. Similarly, understandings of what the parties stand for and how the voting system works vary enormously within the general population. A similar variation in levels of political literacy and interest should be expected within refugee populations, who should be reassured that they do not have to feel fully informed before they too exercise their right to vote.

The Covid-19 pandemic unsurprisingly had wide-ranging impacts on the success of the latter stages of this campaign. Most notably, New Scots and the organisations working with them were focused on more acute issues, such as access to employment and housing in the context of the Covid-19 furlough schemes and redundancies. The whole election period was also more subdued as politicians could not campaign with the same approaches or capacities as in previous years. This caused some New Scots to query why voter registration and education remained such a priority issue for organisations working with refugees in the context of more immediate threats to their health and well-being.

Alongside widespread positive feedback about SRC's live online sessions around voter registration and political education, New Scots and those working with them provided ways to develop and extend the programme in the future. Their suggestions included: providing information on the political system more gradually so as not to overwhelm voters; developing resources that can inform New Scots about what the political parties stand for so that they can exercise a meaningful choice at the ballots; addressing voter's concerns about why they had been given the right to vote and why this issue had received so much attention; and ensuring that the political education campaigns reached more, and more diverse, communities of New Scots.

Successful lessons learned from this campaign can be integrated into other areas of SRC's work and campaigning. These lessons include: the value of hybrid approaches to political education that blend online and in-person sessions; the success of multi-agency, ambitious advocacy campaigns that buttress grassroots community and activist networks; and the sharing of best and innovative practice across the different organisations that partner with SRC both to avoid the duplication of common activities (e.g. translating resources) and because of the wealth of creative solutions being implemented at the local level.

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# Policy and Programme Context

# 1





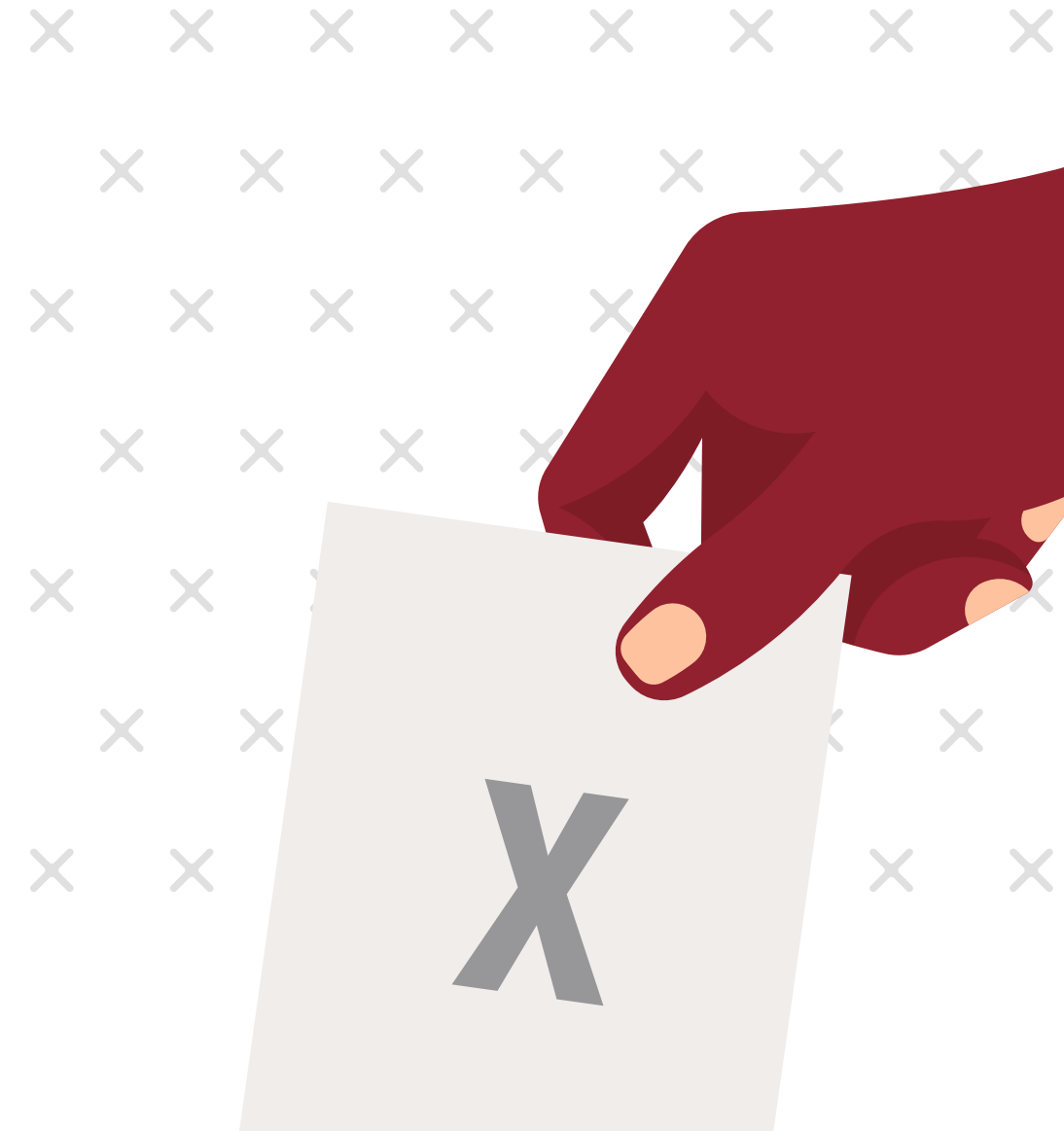
# Policy and Programme Context

On 20 February 2020, a multi-stakeholder campaign led by refugee advocates helped to ensure that the right to vote was extended to New Scots in Scotland through the passing of the Scottish Elections (Franchise and Representation) Act 2020.<sup>1</sup> This Act<sup>2</sup> extended voting rights for the first time to non-UK citizens with leave to remain, including all those granted refugee status, and those with pre-settled status. The passing of the bill was hailed as a crucial piece of legislation by New Scots and other campaigners who noted that it marked a radical shift in policies towards supporting refugees' civil and political rights beyond what is offered in many other European countries. In the context of an increasingly hostile position towards refugees in Westminster, as seen throughout the recent history of the Nationality and Borders Bill,<sup>3</sup> refugee advocacy organisations across Scotland also saw the Scottish Elections (Franchise and Representation) Act 2020 as an opportunity to promote a welcoming and inclusive environment for refugees and asylum-seekers. In part, this aimed to show what impacts a more humane and respectful response could have on people's well-being and long-term success in a country that will ultimately become their home.

Notably, however, while the initial proposal had also aimed to secure the right to vote for asylum seekers in Scotland, this amendment was rejected at the Parliamentary vote in February 2020. MSPs claimed that this was currently unpracticable for reasons including the additional work it would cause for electoral registration officers at a time when they were already extending the franchise to foreign nationals and prisoners, and concerns about how to maintain accurate voter registers for asylum-seekers whose eligibility to vote could change on multiple occasions if their asylum claims were rejected and appealed.<sup>4</sup> There is nonetheless continuing support from New Scots, refugee-led organisations and service providers for re-invigorating the campaign to extend the franchise to asylum seekers. As multiple New Scots interviewed for this report stated, integration needs to be a process that foregrounds mutual respect and recognition from the start, and that gives all people the right to vote for the systems that impact their lives:

***“The ‘New Scots’ strategy talks about integration from day 1 for asylum seekers when they arrive in Scotland, and I can’t imagine how you can talk about integration but you don’t give these people the rights. What does integration mean? It means that people feel that they are part of this country and society, but they won’t feel like that without equal rights. It doesn’t matter which country you’re from, or your status, you need to make people feel equal from the start.”*** (Munira,<sup>5</sup> Female New Scot/Employee at a Refugee Support Organisation)

***“(Asylum seekers) can change things for the better. They can stand for elections<sup>6</sup> and they can be elected and they can come forward and share ideas and, you know, they can give a different perspective. So it’s very important that they should have the right to vote. It’s a basic right like the right to work.”*** (Naghma, Afghan Female New Scot)



- 1 'Right to vote extended', Scottish Government, 20th February 2020, Available at: <https://www.gov.scot/news/right-to-vote-extended/>
- 2 [Scottish Elections \(Franchise and Representation\) Bill: What does the Bill look like ahead of stage 3? – SPICe Spotlight | Solas air SPICe \(spice-spotlight.scot\)](#) and the legislation itself is at [Scottish Elections \(Franchise and Representation\) Act 2020 \(legislation.gov.uk\)](#)
- 3 'Nationality and Borders Bill', Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/the-nationality-and-borders-bill>
- 4 For examples of the debates in the Scottish Parliament about extending the franchise to asylum-seekers, see Parliamentary Proceedings from 20th February 2020. Available at: <https://www.theyworkforyou.com/sp/?id=2020-02-20.38.0>
- 5 All the names of the New Scots who were interviewed have been replaced with pseudonyms, and their nationality/country of origin has been excluded if this would threaten their anonymity.
- 6 The eligibility of asylum seekers to stand for elections was also debated in Scottish Parliament on the 20th February 2020. For the discussion, see: <https://www.theyworkforyou.com/sp/?id=2020-02-20.38.0>



Following the successful campaign to secure refugees the right to vote, the Scottish Refugee Council then applied to the [UK Democracy Fund](#), a pooled fund established and operated by the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust, for funding to deliver a campaign of political education and voter registration for refugees who arrived in Scotland through any route, all of whom were given the right to vote through the 2020 Act. This stemmed from a recognition that the franchise in and of itself is not enough without being translated into voter registration and political socialisation. Funding received through the UK Democracy Fund then enabled SRC to hire a Policy Officer to work specifically on these goals between November 2020 and the Scottish Parliament Election in May 2021.

Between November 2020 and February 2021, the Policy Officer worked with a counterpart at the Electoral Commission (EC) to design materials that could be used to inform New Scots about the Scottish political system and how to vote. Their content and delivery was informed by six Focus Group Discussions (FGD) convened by SRC in November and December 2020. The FGD's involved asking New Scots who were recruited through the Maryhill Integration Network (MIN) and Voices Network to reflect on the resources they wanted. SRC then shared key findings and recommendations from these with the EC, including the importance of having all resources translated into a list of 10 key languages and the development of tools that built trust in the political system. These resources were then officially launched in February 2021 in an event held by SRC and the EC, and supported by the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA) and various refugee groups.

Between February 2021 and the May elections, the Policy Officer worked with the SRC Communities and Communications teams and the Regional Integration Coordinators to disseminate these materials through online platforms (social media, Govanhill Magazine, etc.) and delivered online workshops through various Local Authority resettlement programmes and community groups on political literacy and voter registration. Seventeen of these voter information sessions were held with a total of 150 attendees, sometimes in conjunction with other organisations, including the Scottish Parliament and the EC, and they covered the basics of how to vote and Scotland's political landscape.<sup>7</sup> They were intended to make New Scots feel practically and politically prepared for voting in May.

A further two sessions that specifically focused on political education were also held during this period; one was for refugees across Scotland, and the other was for members of the Maryhill Integration Network. Over 70 New Scots attended across the two events where the topics covered included: what the Scottish Parliament does; what matters are reserved and devolved; the role of MSPs; the different political parties; and the two votes and additional member system. A Committee Clerk who was involved in the 2020 Act also attended both sessions to discuss why the Scottish Government had wanted to extend voting rights to refugees, as well as to affirm that the Act had received cross-party support.

<sup>7</sup> In more detail, they covered: who can vote; why voting is important; what the Scottish Parliament does; registering to vote; different ways to vote; what happens on election day; some political education; and information on Covid-19 measures at polling stations. Electronic resources on this were then distributed to attendees after the sessions. SRC offered language interpretation for all sessions, and provided some sessions in Arabic, Vietnamese and Kurdish (Sorani) to particular community groups through the Scottish Guardianship Service.





The final part of the 'Empowering Scotland's Newly Enfranchised Refugee Communities' programme is this report, which was commissioned by the Scottish Refugee Council in July 2021 to assess and evaluate how their activities contributed to the enfranchisement of refugee voters in Scotland in the lead up to and during the 2021 Scottish Parliament Elections. They wished to evaluate the impact of the franchise extension and the campaign to achieve it, and to advocate for best practice in voter registration and political education going forward based on the reception of their activities between November 2020 and May 2021.

### Impacts of Covid-19

Covid-19 impacted upon the period of voter registration and political literacy campaigning, as well as the May 2021 elections, in multiple ways. Practically, for example, it affected SRC's initial plans for in-person sessions with refugee communities across Scotland and various councils noted below expected attendance for the online sessions as New Scots weathered the social, economic and personal impacts of lockdowns.

It also, as discussed in further detail below, meant that communities and politicians were busy dealing with the social, health and economic impacts of Covid-19 and thus had less time and capacity for mobilising around the 2021 Scottish Parliament Elections. As a staff member at SRC admitted:

***"I feel like maybe it wasn't a priority – for disenfranchised and marginalised communities during a pandemic, voting wasn't necessarily their priority. There was so much else going on."***

This may also have contributed to some of the reflections shared below from News Scots who questioned the appropriateness of focusing on voting and the elections during a period of such massive upheaval. The plan and funding for this project was nonetheless secured prior to the spread of Covid-19, when the policy and political landscape looked very different, and the campaign had to continue despite the change in circumstances in order to precede the May 2021 elections.

Throughout this report are therefore references to the impact of Covid-19 on specific practices and project goals. Undoubtedly, however, its impacts on this process will be broader and more diffuse than we can necessarily capture, or even discern, at this point in time.

An illustration of a woman's profile in shades of orange and brown, with her hair styled in a bun. A pink speech bubble points to her mouth, containing the text: "VOTING WASN'T NECESSARILY THEIR PRIORITY. THERE WAS SO MUCH ELSE GOING ON." The background features a grid of light grey 'x' marks.

**VOTING WASN'T  
NECESSARILY THEIR  
PRIORITY. THERE WAS SO  
MUCH ELSE GOING ON.**



# Methodology

# 2

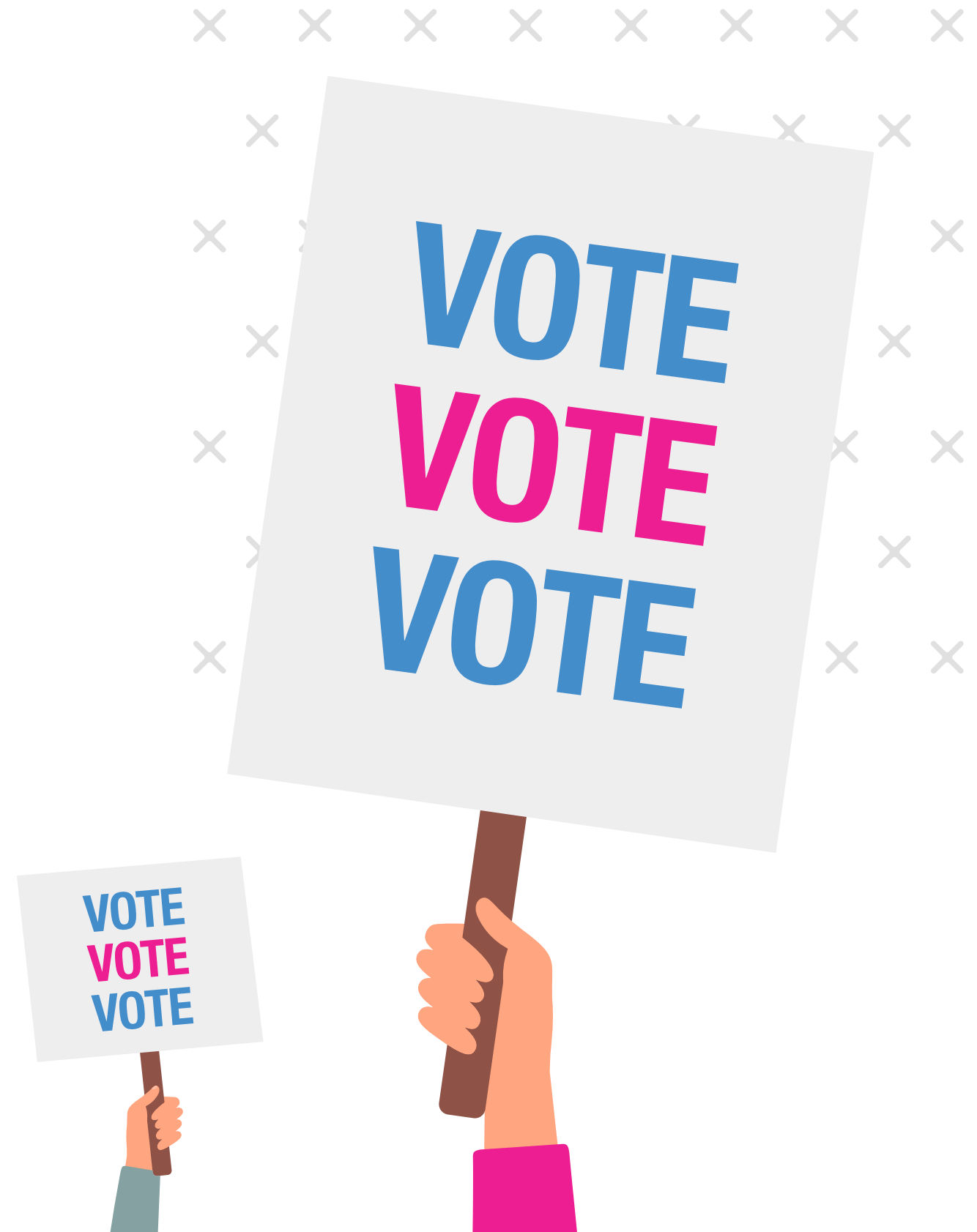


# Methodology

This report evaluates the following questions with respect to the 'Empowering Scotland's Newly Enfranchised Refugee Communities' programme, which was run by SRC in the lead up to the May 2021 Scottish election:

1. What were refugees' perspectives and experiences of the May 2021 elections and the preceding campaigning period? And how did these experiences vary between those who participated in political education programmes and those who did not?
2. What were the experiences of refugees who did vote for the first time in the May 2021 Scottish elections? What recommendations would they give to extend political education and voter registration to other New Scots?
3. To what extent did New Scots' experiences of these initiatives align with Scottish Refugee Council campaign goals and against the policy proposals of extending the franchise in Scotland and the UK?
4. How could the political education programmes, particularly key political literacy activities, be strengthened and expanded?
5. What key messages and styles of campaigning could be used to enhance advocacy campaigns to extend the franchise at both a UK level and to people in the asylum system in Scotland?

These questions are addressed below through qualitative data obtained through semi-structured interviews and evaluation reports from local authorities and organisations providing support to refugees that worked with SRC throughout the programme's implementation. Interview participants were recruited through SRC's networks and the researchers' own connections with refugee communities in Scotland. 15 of the 29 participants were staff and volunteers from various governmental and non-governmental organisations including, among others, local government civil servants, ESL teachers, SRC staff, and Saheliya and Maryhill Integration Network (MIN) volunteers. 14 interviews were conducted with New Scots from various countries, including Syria, Afghanistan, Iran, Sudan, Eritrea and Ethiopia. The data from the semi-structured interviews was analysed alongside policy documents and the campaign and evaluation reports. The researchers then arrived at the themes below through an inductive approach to qualitative data analysis.



Despite attempts to obtain statistics on the number of New Scots who registered to vote in the lead-up to the 2021 elections, no data disaggregated in this way seems to exist or be publicly available. Electoral registers specify whether someone is a qualifying foreign national but not whether or not they are a New Scot. Data from the Cabinet Office on registrations by nationality in the spring of 2021, however, suggests that after American nationals, the second largest group of registrations came from Syrians and the fourth from Turkish nationals, though the data does not include the immigration status of these individuals to determine whether they are refugees.<sup>8</sup>

The focus on qualitative data nonetheless also stems from a recognition that evaluating voter registration through numerical, quantitative proxies would obscure important experiences of political enfranchisement that may not, at least yet, translate into either voter registration or voting. Many individuals find themselves as refugees precisely because of long-term systematic exclusion from political systems and thus may never have had the opportunity to vote in elections, if elections even existed in their countries of origin. The development of an individual's political literacy and sense of political empowerment may therefore be a gradual process that is transformative and impactful without having quantifiable outcomes.

None of this research was conducted in a face-to-face setting given increasing levels of Covid-19 in Autumn 2021, and due to the lower vaccination rates among those from minoritised and lower socio-economic demographic groups within the United Kingdom.<sup>9</sup> Given increased familiarity with video conferencing platforms, particularly among migrant communities who are used to communicating with family through these mediums, all data was collected online or over the phone. This means that those who are not connected to networks through either of these mediums are not directly represented in this report, though many of the individuals interviewed for this evaluation also shared the experiences of individuals around them or in their networks.

The interviews conducted with ESL teachers, charity workers and community outreach volunteers directly involved in service provision to New Scots were crucial in mitigating some of the above-mentioned gaps. The perspectives on voter patterns gained from ESL teachers, however, may be biased because New Scots auto-enrolled in more entry-level English classes may in turn feel less confident navigating the voting process and deciding who to vote for.

The executive summary and recommendations sections of this report were shared with 14 New Scot participants (a combination of those who were and were not interviewed for the first stage of data collection for this report) for the purpose of gathering feedback. The researchers conducted one-to-one feedback sessions with 11 participants who needed our assistance to understand and interpret the findings of the report. The feedback sessions were used to identify and mitigate potential biases and misunderstandings, and to ensure that this constituency felt like their views were being accurately represented and voiced.



8 This data was also obtained by a Civil Servant with access to these statistics but has not been independently verified.

9 ONS (2021) 'Coronavirus (COVID-19) Latest Insights: Vaccines', 16th September, Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/conditionsanddiseases/articles/coronaviruscovid19latestinsights/vaccines>



# Successes

3





# Successes

This section details the main ways in which New Scots and those working with them considered this advocacy and educational programme to have been particularly successful in terms of design and/or orchestration. The main strengths were identified as being in: establishing a sense of political empowerment among New Scots; building on strong advocacy and support networks through dedicated campaign staff and resources; and creating an archive of key materials that could be used by other campaign groups and organisations running political education activities and lobbying for the franchise to be extended to refugees and asylum seekers.

## Establishing a sense of political empowerment

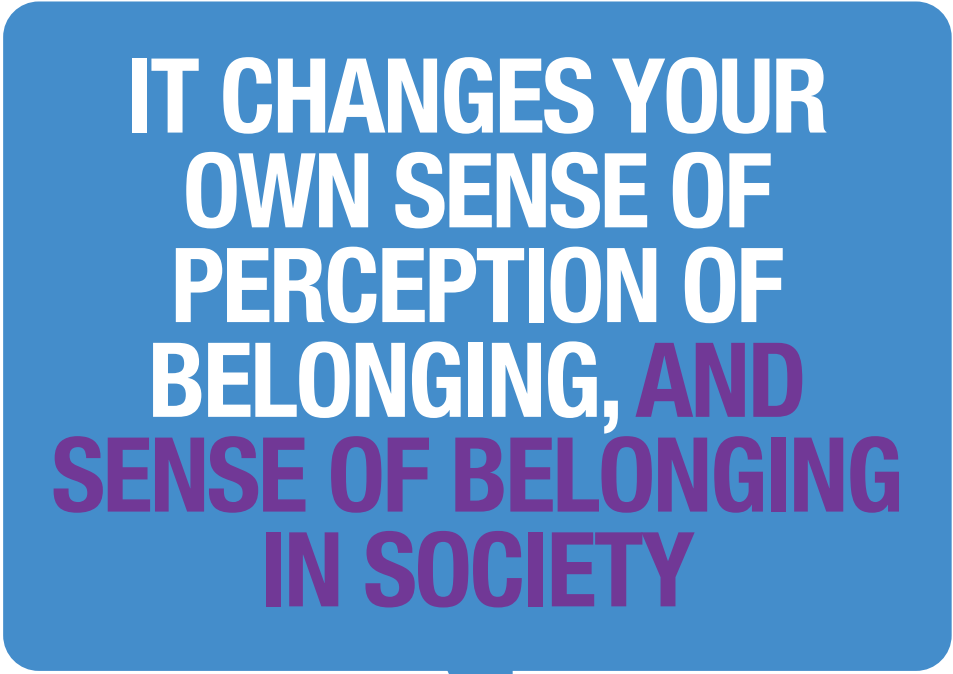
Both the outcomes and the process of the New Scot's Enfranchisement campaign, for the most part, positively impacted individual's perception of themselves and their sense of integration in Scotland. In discussing what having the right to vote meant for them and other New Scots, individuals spoke of feeling empowered, included and respected through this opportunity to have their voices heard, and of how critical this right is to the integration process:

*"It changes your own sense of perception of belonging, and sense of belonging in society. For people like me, who are aware of the politics of everything around us, it's a radical shift. I can now vote and change policies that directly affect me. I can now tell people that we need to vote if we want to change the hostile environment so that's a power directly delegated to me even if it's less effective, it's still a power. I talk a lot about restorative integration, I mean even before you're asking refugees to integrate, you have to restore their own rights and dignities first. I see a broken link between the state and the incoming individual... The vote is trying to give people the link between the incoming individual and the state – that's a really good start and a radical shift in the government's approach, and it's important for restoring that link."*

**(Wolde, Eritrean New Scot)**

*"The voting bill didn't affect me but I am delighted that it has been passed. It has given all of my friends from different parts of the world, given them that right, that freedom that they so desire to feel included into the Scottish society. So for me, it was profound elation to have them get that because it can be quite daunting to see that some people have the right to vote and some people who have been working tirelessly just have to sit on the outside."*

**(Gabi, Commonwealth citizen/refugee)**



**IT CHANGES YOUR  
OWN SENSE OF  
PERCEPTION OF  
BELONGING, AND  
SENSE OF BELONGING  
IN SOCIETY**



*“We discuss about this issue, not like it’s the most important issue but like it is our right to vote and voice our opinions and our realities of life in this country. We are always under pressure to become more and more fluent in silence and more suited to invisibility, but we also, gradually, learn to resist this. So, I think the decision to allow refugees to vote was a historical decision. I think there are only a few countries in the world that just give refugees the right to vote. You know, we are not just victims. We are doctors, nurses and they need us for pandemics at least. It’s good to give these people citizenship. It is even more important to allow vulnerable refugees to voice their concerns about the services they receive or the services they should get access to and also, maybe, the way they get these services.”*

**(Adnan, Afghan New Scot)**

Different types of empowerment were also registered at different stages of the Right to Vote campaign: during the campaign to change the legislation; during the political literacy and registration phase; and on the day of voting itself. This shows the value of SRC’s support to the process, as well as the outcomes, of the Campaign.

The campaigning period preceding the change in legislation was seen as empowering by those who had been involved in it, particularly because it was a participatory effort led by refugees. This allowed these New Scots to foreground their experiences and meaningfully exercise their voices, and to see their power to change the status quo in Scotland. They nonetheless also acknowledged the important role played by SRC and other organisations in buttressing their efforts and amplifying their voices:

*“You don’t have any chance to change things, especially when you don’t have the right to vote...I really appreciate the Scottish Refugee Council for providing a platform for people to speak about their rights. That’s all we need: a foundation and the right to speak.”*

**(Naghma, Female New Scot)**

The act of registering to vote was another point at which New Scots felt the impact of the legislative change. As one ESL tutor recalled:

*“Someone (an ESL student) said to me: ‘Today I am proud of myself. More than ever during these few years! I felt more confident than ever before that Scotland has accepted me as a citizen to be influential in the future plans.’”*

I FELT MORE  
CONFIDENT THAN  
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SCOTLAND HAS  
ACCEPTED ME  
AS A CITIZEN



When May 2021 came round, New Scots and organisations working with them shared powerful testimonies about the excitement and significance that actually voting in the Scottish Parliament elections then held for this newly enfranchised community:

***“It’s a beautiful moment for me to vote for the first time in my life.” (Meron, Eritrean New Scot)***

***“A lot of voters really enjoyed the experience – queueing at 7 in the morning, (with) such an amazing feeling to vote for the first time in this new country.” (Community worker)***

***“Syrians were desperate to vote. I imagine any resettled Syrians were desperate to vote. People were so excited because 1) it allowed them to acknowledge being Scottish so they felt affiliated. They want to be known as Scottish, and not Syrian, so it recognised them and then 2) because of the regime in Syria, where things were so manipulated and there was so much election fraud, and the Kurdish Syrians weren’t given the right to vote. Those two things had a big impact on them being so excited to vote.”***

**(Resettlement Coordinator, Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (SVPRS))**

Even amongst those who said they did not vote on the day (due to childcare issues, concerns about Covid-19, etc.), there was an appreciation that they at least could. It signified a form of inclusion and recognition, and an invitation to engage with politics, even if people did not feel knowledgeable enough or ready to vote. One New Scot, originally from Ethiopia, who had not managed to vote because her childminder had fallen through nonetheless expressed her gratitude for the opportunity to at some point be able to vote:

***“I can only say it’s an excellent opportunity for refugees. And I want to say thank you for the people who worked on the campaign. I don’t know who they are but I really appreciate them.”***

The same relief at being recognised as a political subject and Scottish citizen was noted by those working with New Scots:

***“I think being able to give people a choice is so empowering. There were a couple of people in particular who had quite low self-esteem, who’ve been living here for quite a while. One woman who’s been here for, I think, four and a half years - you know, she was so disenfranchised and her self-esteem was so low, and then something like this has just affirmed to her that she belongs, that she’s welcome, that she is part of this community in this country. I don’t think you can underestimate the significance of the right to vote.”***

**(Support worker for refugees)**



**IT'S A BEAUTIFUL  
MOMENT FOR ME TO  
VOTE FOR THE FIRST  
TIME IN MY LIFE**



## Building on strong networks through dedicated campaign staff and materials

Individuals from across SRC and its partner organisations saw the structure of this campaign as a successful model to replicate for future community engagement activities, with strong partnerships and the coordinated division of labour proving critical to the success of the different stages of this campaign. As one individual from SRC stated, ***“it was very much successful because of the communities that we worked with, with us in a more facilitator role.”***

One New Scot who was involved in the campaign, including through travelling to the Scottish Parliament to speak directly to politicians about the legislative change, said that a real strength of this campaign was that refugees and refugee-led organisations were able to represent themselves directly, with critical support from SRC to strengthen their platform and expand their reach. She said that from the inception of the campaign, SRC made sure that they were provided with all the key details about the strategy and prepared them for various lobbying events, such as coaching them on how they might answer the various questions that MSPs were likely to ask during advocacy events in the Scottish Parliament. This helped them feel able to campaign in highly effective and professional ways, which will assist them going forward too.

Here, the strength of existing networks and advocates was key, particularly in Glasgow where long-term grass-roots networking and engagement has resulted in a vibrant, proud and primed community of activists and campaigners. Saheliya, Voices Network and the Maryhill Integration Network provided critical expertise and energy, as well as support to media trained New Scots to spearhead the campaign to change the legislation. SRC then used its networks to amplify their voices and targeted its activities towards complementing and extending the reach of these individuals and their groups' activities.

The voter registration and education process was then undoubtedly enhanced by having a dedicated staff member within SRC to network with partner organisations and coordinate activities within and outside of the organisation. When issues cropped up, SRC's dedicated Policy Officer could immediately look for ways to trouble shoot them. As an example, the Policy Officer was able to team up with local Electoral Registration Officers to provide individualised assistance directly to those refugees who wished to register but could not navigate the procedures themselves. The Policy Officer's partnership with a participation officer from the Electoral Commission (EC), who had specific expertise in engaging newly enfranchised communities, then assisted with the development and subsequent distribution of resources for the political literacy and registration campaigns.



**IT WAS VERY MUCH  
SUCCESSFUL BECAUSE  
OF THE COMMUNITIES  
THAT WE WORKED WITH**

SRC's strong relationship with COSLA and the network of local Refugee Resettlement Officers working on the SVPRS assisted them to get information to and register Syrian refugees in ways that it was harder to do with New Scots who had not arrived through a dedicated programme. It was largely local authority staff who coordinated the information sessions held by the SRC Policy Officer and who publicised these to Syrian refugees in their areas, thus providing a bridge between these actors in a way that was absolutely critical to the provision and impact of SRC's activities. Without local authority support, SRC would have had to reach these communities directly, which – as seen with other nationality groups (see below) - would likely have been far more time and resource intensive and thus potentially less successful.

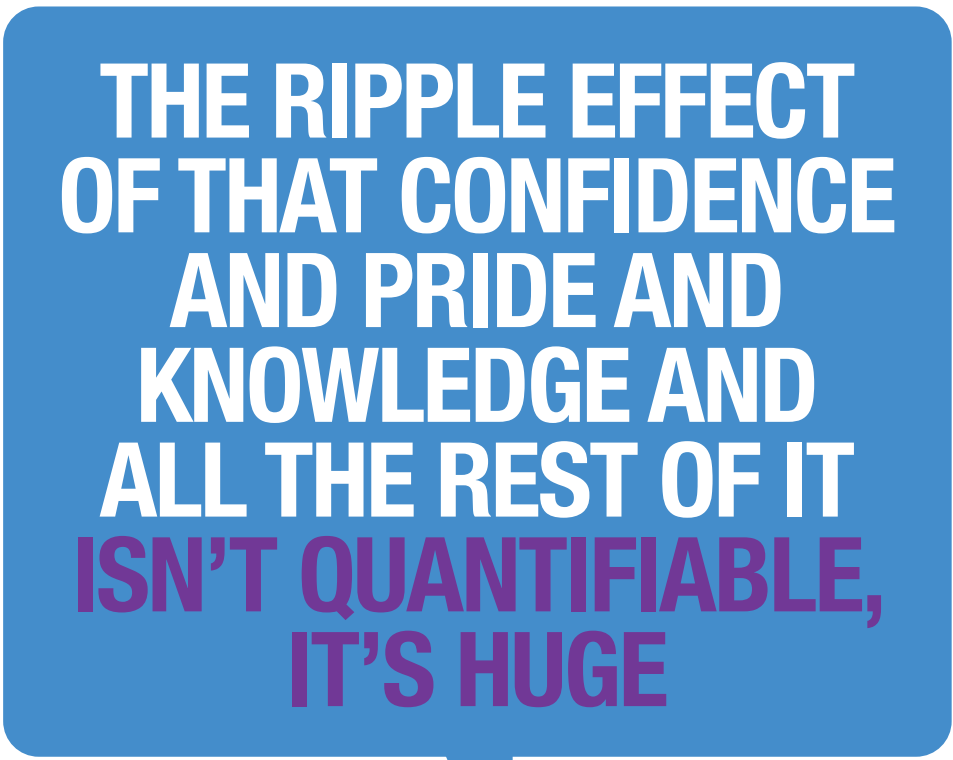
Videos and infographics on social media did nonetheless provide one channel through which to reach populations who were not organised into community groups. Several New Scots we spoke with had seen a video produced by SRC, Voices Network, Saheliya and MIN on social media, which alerted them to fact that they could now vote, and this video was praised for being easily shareable by New Scots and others working with them, such as ESL teachers and Resettlement officers. Even if it did not contain detailed information to enable the recipients to register or decide who to vote for (see below), it provided an engaging and easily shareable resource that could be used as a reminder and encouragement to register and vote.

### Creating an archive of key resources

For organisations assisting refugees in Scotland, the campaign was a rare example of extending refugees' rights as opposed to just preventing them from being eroded further. This successful example of refugee and community-led change has appeared to have strengthened important partnerships and galvanised a renewed commitment towards pushing the boundaries of policy and legislation. Reflecting on this success, one staff member at SRC stated that it was:

***“Such an antidote to everything else going on and for it to be something that you could see its practical impacts, and the fact it had affected real change, was huge. The ripple effect of that confidence and pride and knowledge and all the rest of it isn't quantifiable, it's huge.”***

To achieve this, a large amount of both advocacy-oriented and educational materials were produced. These can now form a critical resource for other campaigns hoping to expand the franchise to refugees and asylum seekers in other jurisdictions. Where possible, these materials should therefore be made publicly available for other movements/groups that are wondering how to design and structure similar campaigns.



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The voter registration and political education materials should continue to be hosted online, as numerous organisations and individuals said that they had used these to run their own events without direct SRC or EC involvement. They had either found these resources online through the New Scots Connect platform, the YourVoteMatters website or on SRC’s website, or received them via COSLA, which had made sure that local councils knew about the range of resources available. One volunteer who had run sessions mainly for Iranian refugees in Glasgow praised them for being **“informative without ever being too much information”**, and as constituting a really accessible resource for sending around on social media applications.

It is less clear how to translate the live political education sessions into a format that can be used by other groups, despite large amounts of positive feedback for this part of the campaign. Much of this feedback focused on their engaging delivery and praised SRC’s willingness to respond positively to last minute requests for sessions. Many organisations also appreciated that they provided an accessible and consolidated entry point for learning about Scotland’s political system, and a guide for activities that could be used to facilitate political literacy sessions by those with less specialist knowledge in these areas.





# Areas for Development

# 4





# Areas for Development

Alongside the overarching positive dimensions of this programme discussed above, the following areas repeatedly came up in discussions with New Scots, local authorities and organisations providing services to this constituency as dimensions of the campaign that could be improved, extended or further developed.

## Developing interest and engagement incrementally

Whether or not people vote clearly depends on much more than just their legal ability to do so. 63.5% of eligible Scottish residents voted in the 2021 Scottish Parliament Elections. This constituted the highest voter turnout on record and yet is less than two out of three registered voters. New Scots should not therefore be held to higher standards than other Scottish nationals, in terms of voter turnout or political knowledge. This is not least because political socialisation and enfranchisement are gradual processes, not simply one-off events that culminate in the casting of one's ballot.

While one of the major strengths of this project was therefore having a dedicated individual within SRC to connect the different actors involved in the political education and voter registration campaigns, this post was only operational for the six months prior to the May 2021 Scottish Parliamentary Elections. New Scots and those working with them fed back that this ended up condensing or truncating processes that would benefit from development over much longer time frames, resources and capacity permitting. Some suggested that individuals were overwhelmed with a large amount of material on voter registration and the Scottish political systems without having sufficient time to digest it. For many Syrians in particular, this information was also being received during an already intense period of adjusting to life in Scotland.

The need for political socialisation to be operationalised as an incremental process that is fostered over time through supportive and diverse channels was widely held by refugees and service providers alike:

***“The right to vote is absorbed through the days you live here – understanding the history, understanding what’s behind the political speech and what they’re saying. That isn’t going to be gained like a flashlight – now you have the right to vote, go and know what to do. During Brexit, people who have lived their whole life here didn’t know about what to do.”***  
**(Mohamad, Syrian New Scot)**

**THE RIGHT TO VOTE  
IS ABSORBED THROUGH  
THE DAYS YOU LIVE HERE –  
UNDERSTANDING THE HISTORY,  
UNDERSTANDING WHAT’S  
BEHIND THE POLITICAL SPEECH  
AND WHAT THEY’RE SAYING**



***“These things need time, you cannot just rush people to understand the dynamics in a few weeks so that they can be counted in the voting. Political education has to be a culture, a long-term strategy. Not a one-off event or a temporary need.” (Abdul, Sudanese New Scot)***

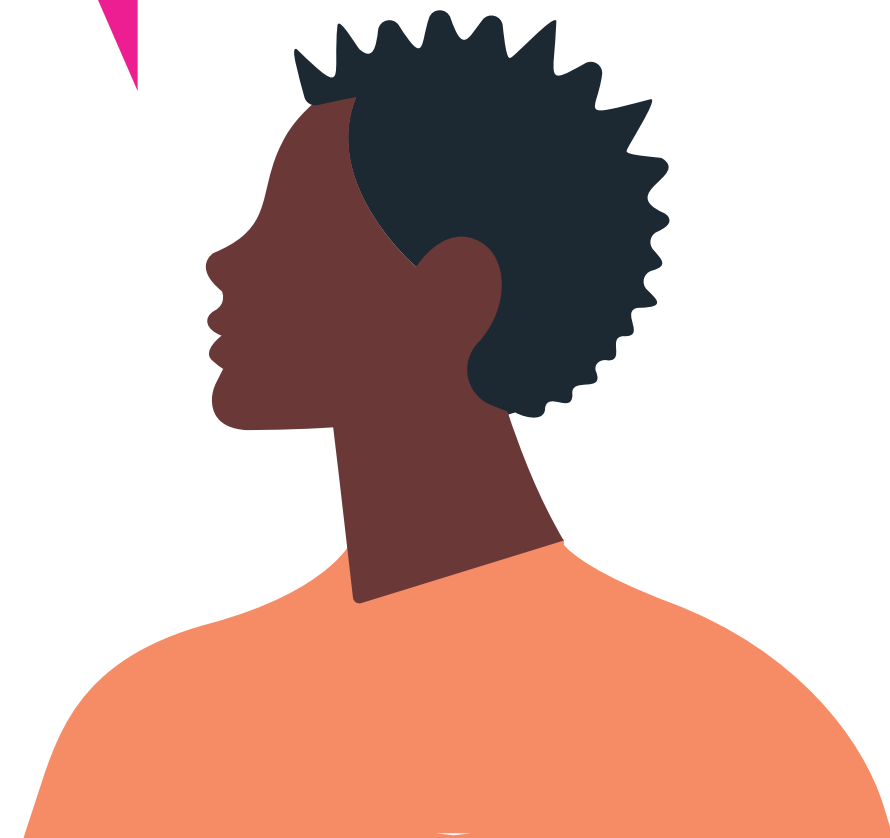
Several individuals suggested that political socialisation should start at the point of refugees’ arrival and be approached in the same way as learning English i.e. through long-term and sustained discussion with experts. They argued that because political education helps to recalibrate people’s relationship to governments and state institutions, and thus is key to people’s long-term sense of security and belonging, it should be seen as a foundational component of any integration process:

***‘The political education should be part of the government’s integration strategy to help people understand the whole system, how it works and what kind of political system it is, what the parties do, what they stand for and... that kind of information should be part of the integration strategy...I think it has to be part of the orientation system when refugees first come here... The political education has to be part of that, not a single thing that comes when the elections are about start.’ (Rawaa, Syrian New Scot)***

The need for the process to be incremental and sustained also arose from a recognition that some New Scots with refugee backgrounds may have never been able to vote having come from countries without any elections, let alone free and fair ones. For others, voting can carry memories of violence and persecution and they may have spent their lives fearing and actively avoiding any elections or political processes. Experiences of marginalisation and institutionalised discrimination since arriving in the UK may then have done little to rebuild trust in political parties or state institutions. When asked whether many individuals from within his network had voted, one New Scot reflected on the lasting impacts of these negative and wide-ranging associations, in turn hinting at the patient work that will have to be done to over-ride these negative connotations:

***“I think in the last election, we failed to get refugees to vote because we have not shaken the fear of the notion of government. I mean I realized that there’s a lack of knowledge and awareness about the political life in the UK because we all came from different backgrounds. Lots of people think everyone knows about democracy and the right to vote, or even who to elect, who to support, who not to elect. This is not true. People come from places of dictatorship and they never, never, get the chance to break the fear of governments. Like, you know the Westminster government is not any different in the refugees’ eyes to their governments? They are being treated badly here so it’s difficult for the refugees to overcome fear of the government. For example, people think if I was found campaigning against the government, the police will arrest me. There is a total lack of awareness and political literacy.” (Adnan, Afghan New Scot)***

**POLITICAL EDUCATION  
HAS TO BE A CULTURE,  
A LONG-TERM STRATEGY.  
NOT A ONE-OFF EVENT  
OR A TEMPORARY NEED**





For many refugees then, it is inappropriate to assume that they will have an innate belief in the power and importance of voting. Having the right to vote for them is relatively meaningless without an accompanying discussion about what that actually means in a democratic context like Scotland. This highlights the need to continue political literacy campaigns that start from first principles in terms of why exercising the right to vote matters. Two New Scots summed this up as follows:

***“We need to remind people that this isn’t like the politics I left back in my country – it’s a democratic election and who wins, takes the office. We need to say that people’s voice matters – somebody won’t seize power and kill people. This is where SRC comes into play, having these discussions with them. It’s about giving reassurance about the process and confidence”***

**(Gabi, Commonwealth Citizen/New Scot)**

***“It’s a question of trust – that has to do with how you explain that to them, and what’s in it for them. Don’t tell them you have the right to vote – people have been rightless for generations, they need to understand instead what right it is and how it affects your life as a social and political being.”*** (Wolde, Eritrean New Scot)

Relatedly, it was widely noted that it would take time for new voters to decide what issues matter to them, and thus what policies they would be looking to the different political parties to promote. New Scots wanted to understand the country’s current political situation in order to figure out what their priorities for voting might be, and also to absorb and adjust to a very new political landscape:

***“Others might struggle for politics to resonate with them. We are all looking for different things. And for those who don’t have anything immediately resonate with them, it’s harder to find your political niche. If you come from a place where women have no rights, how are you going to understand what people are talking about? What is your perception going to be when you see a woman as a party leader? What questions are going through your mind? Who is a legitimate leader to you?”*** (Gabi, Commonwealth Citizen/New Scot)

Part of political socialisation, and the key to feeling politically enfranchised, is also feeling listened to. The ‘bucket model’ of education, which in this example would correspond to technical information being simply transferred to newly enfranchised communities, does little to build trust and confidence in political institutions or any sense of their accountability. New Scots stated that they wanted more opportunities to share their experiences and grievances, and for those in power to listen to them, not simply talk at them. As one Sudanese refugee said: ***“They just came to me as if they were educators, we don’t want to always be on the receiving end, we know something, we have something to tell them and to request ourselves.”*** Providing more space and time for listening and discussion within the political education campaigns may have provided more of a model for what accountable and engaged political systems look like, as well as more open and inclusive societies.

**IT’S A QUESTION  
OF TRUST – THAT HAS TO  
DO WITH HOW YOU EXPLAIN  
THAT TO THEM, AND WHAT’S  
IN IT FOR THEM**



Much of people's political education also comes via informal sources, through impromptu conversations with family, friends and colleagues. Newly arrived refugees do not necessarily have the same access to these intergenerational and community-based sources of knowledge without family connections, confidence in English and well-developed social networks. Without this context, however, and without the social capital needed to access new sources of knowledge and information, it is hard for people to develop views and opinions on who to vote for. This was even harder during Covid-19 when community groups and gatherings were cancelled.

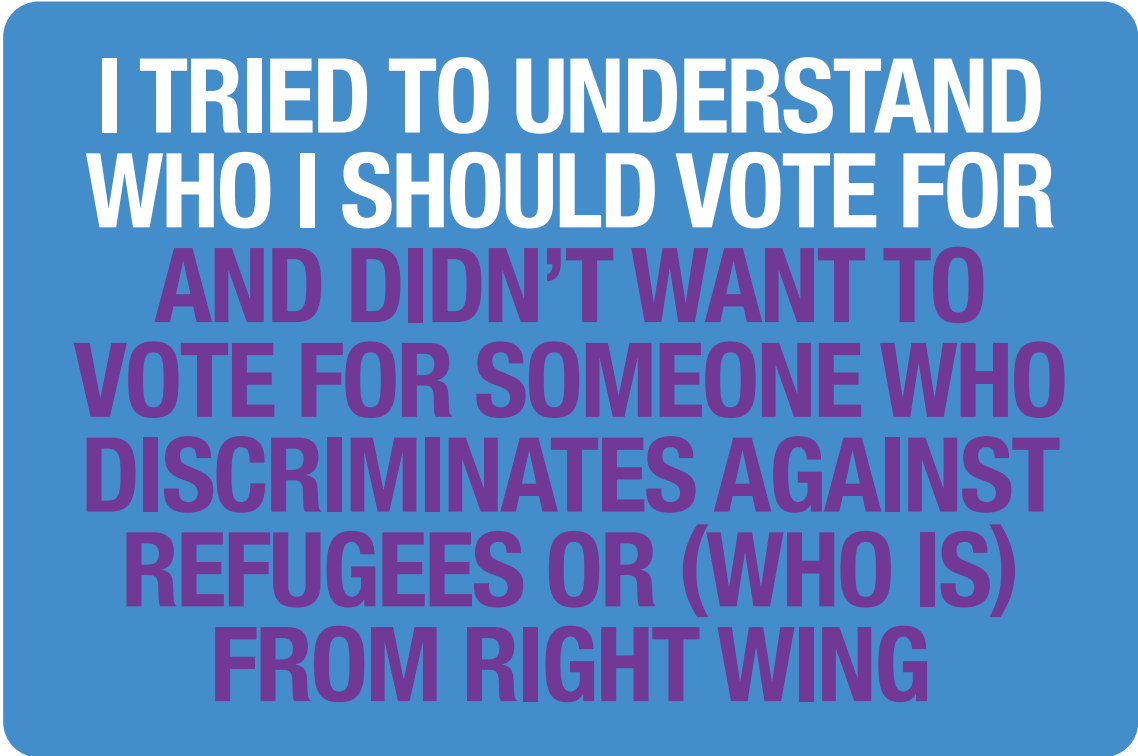
New Scots should nonetheless be reassured that they do not need to understand everything fully before they cast their vote. As one ESL teacher commented: ***"I really don't completely understand the party politics, you know. How can we expect refugees to understand it? That's my feeling."*** To assuage the negative pressure that some refugees spoke of in terms of feeling that they should vote even if they did not yet feel empowered enough to do so, New Scots should be reassured that alongside it not being mandatory to vote, they also do not need to hold themselves to a higher standard of political literacy than other Scots.

The Electoral Commission is keen to develop better longer-term strategies for building political literacy among New Scots and developing their trust in Scotland's political institutions. Moving forward, they constitute a willing partner for SRC to develop a programme that can utilise existing resources, which have tended to target one-off events such as voter registration and voter turnout on election days, while expanding activities that prioritise less tangible outcomes, such as building trust and confidence in the democratic process more generally.

### Providing the political knowledge needed to empower voters

The dominant criticism of the political education campaign was that it did not provide New Scots with sufficient information to decide who to vote for. Many New Scots therefore felt unable or unwilling to vote without possessing enough knowledge to exercise a meaningful and informed choice. They did not want to accidentally vote for a party that was against refugees but deciphering who stood for what – and on what side of the spectrum – without more support and digestible, translated knowledge was too challenging. As the following quote highlights, without this support, some individuals were left feeling confused and anxious:

***"I tried to understand who I should vote for and didn't want to vote for someone who discriminates against refugees or (who is) from the right wing. I have no idea what the right wing and left wing is, for example, until I found out all the information myself."***  
**(Amira, Syrian New Scot)**



**I TRIED TO UNDERSTAND  
WHO I SHOULD VOTE FOR  
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VOTE FOR SOMEONE WHO  
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REFUGEES OR (WHO IS)  
FROM RIGHT WING**





Organisations working with New Scots also spoke at length about the challenges of being asked for that information and not having the tools, capacity or mandate to provide it. They questioned what the purpose of this campaign was if a party-political education was not one of its central aims. They explained how certain individuals ended up feeling disempowered and guilty after having been given the right to vote only to find that they then did not know how to use it:

*“You gave them the right but you gave them nothing else, you didn’t give them the ability to vote. You give them a place to write but you don’t give them the pen – you haven’t given them the tools.”* (Refugee Resettlement Officer)

*“We said you need to go and find that information for yourself but as non-English natives, without that language, the information wasn’t readily available in Arabic for them...Even those who knew English – it wasn’t like the hierarchy of needs was met yet. They aren’t part of a community yet so they don’t know how politics affects them. They said that they didn’t vote in Syria so why would they vote here, they asked? But we were trying to show them the value of being a voter and that their voice matters, but without knowledge of what parties stand for, they’re not going to know – they aren’t going to do that work without manifestos translated. They say that they want the party that will help us the most, and I said I can’t tell you this is the party to vote for – we were put in a hard position, and politicians didn’t help.”*

(Refugee Resettlement Officer)

*“None of the organisations wanted to touch any of what the parties stood for...Lots of New Scots were asking who they should vote for and I felt it was unfair to leave them in a vacuum of what parties did, what they stood for, who they might vote for. You have to give them at least something to go on in terms of how to figure out who to vote for.”*

(Employee, Refugee Support Organisation)

*“If people are registered and they don’t go to vote, what does that mean? Who benefits from it? It’s the worst of everything to focus on how something looks rather than how it will benefit the refugees. A lot of money and effort has gone into getting people registered to vote, but we have to question where is the value in that? You have to show the reasons for doing such a thing. If it’s not followed through with information and education, what is it? I was trying to sell it to the refugees, saying your vote does matter and your voice is heard, but they said what voice? What are we supposed to be saying? And we would say it’s your individual right to be involved if you wish...Honestly, I understand that it’s good to tell people that they have a right to vote and that their voice will be considered in the voting process and that it matters, but... without enough information, it doesn’t mean anything. There’s different things going on – you get people fired up to vote, and then there’s no follow through. It’s very disheartening. What’s the point in changing the law when there’s no knowledge behind it and no information?”*

(Refugee Resettlement Officer)

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Without this understanding of the political parties and their policies, New Scots and those working with them therefore almost universally spoke of some individuals feeling demotivated and anxious to both register and vote. As one New Scot stated, ***“I needed to know more about the politics and politicians of this country and how these might impact me before I decided to participate in their politics.”***

This is clearly related to the charity and electoral law rules,<sup>10</sup> which affected the tone and language that could be used in the resources discussed in this report as the EC and SRC needed to remain neutral parties to the elections. This resulted in them having to avoid particular topics, to avoid a celebratory tone in their communications, and to use technical language rather than quotes from affected communities. A lack of explanation and clarity around these rules, however, created some frustration amongst members of the initial FGDs who felt that their recommendations for the content and design of resources had not been taken up.


### Engaging the political parties

There was widespread disappointment among refugees, local authorities and organisations working to support New Scots about the lack of outreach by the political parties to this newly enfranchised constituency, despite efforts by them and SRC to engage politicians. Invites to the political parties to attend hustings and other information events went unanswered, as did requests for translated party materials. SRC had reached out to all the political parties in early January to invite them to participate in the political education campaigns, including through providing materials on party policies that SRC offered to translate and disseminate, but only two parties replied. SRC then had to drop this part of the information campaign because they could not only represent two of the campaigning parties. As one Refugee Resettlement Officer stated, this only compounded the issue of a lack of accessible resources for helping refugees to decide which party to vote for:

***“The political education part should have been handled by the parties. It’s not up to someone else to do that for parties – parties should be taking responsibility for this. They need to reach out and find a way, if they’re keen on getting these votes, to reach these people on their terms – to access them through language and really engage them and make them feel valued, and not just a number and not just during the campaign period.”***

The campaign period and activities may have been delayed and subdued because of Covid-19, but New Scots and civil society organisations working with them queried why certain political parties had publicly supported New Scots getting the vote only to then remain largely silent on this issue during the elections themselves. A few parties drew attention to the New Scots’ vote in the few days preceding the May 2021 election, presumably in a last-minute attempt to win over the new voters, but this was widely criticised as being too late, particularly because voter registration had closed weeks before this and because the resources they were promoting were all in English.

<sup>10</sup> [Shaping the future – can charities campaign on political issues? | Brodies LLP](#)



**THE POLITICAL EDUCATION  
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The period of time during which SRC had a staff member specifically devoted to voter registration and political literacy also entirely overlapped with the period of election campaigning. While this could have been an advantage had the political parties engaged with New Scots voters, it left SRC having to promote registration during a period when political messages becoming less nuanced and detailed in favour of pithy soundbites that made it harder for new voters to understand and engage with the political parties. It also perpetuated a sense of politics as being a combative rather than accessible space for New Scots, further highlighting the need for political socialisation to constitute an ongoing process that is not exclusively pursued during an election period or oriented towards casting your vote.

### Improving the clarity and detail of resources

Although the resources produced by the EC and SRC were widely used and praised for providing excellent introductions to Scotland's political system, many interviewees commented that they were not quite detailed enough to enable refugees to action their content independently. New Scots and local councils, for example, received several reminders that New Scots should register to vote and about what the deadline for that was, but the communications on this did not provide enough information in accessible languages for many refugees to register by themselves. Local councils therefore had to register refugees one by one, or to translate the registration forms for their clients so that they could attempt to do it themselves. They therefore requested practical step-by-step guides, translated into several key languages, on the processes that enable and accompany voting.

Some of the facilitators tasked with teaching from those resources were also themselves unable to vote or admitted having limited knowledge about the voting process in Scotland. They therefore stressed that it should not be assumed that those using the SRC/EC resources would themselves possess the knowledge to fill in any gaps around the political parties or Scotland/the UK's political system. Further contextual notes and crib sheets would be much appreciated in future versions of these resources.

Relatedly, there was feedback from local authorities, CSOs and refugees themselves that certain resources could have been made clearer or more explicit. One example of this was that many New Scots were concerned about whether voting would affect their immigration status, or whether voting for particular parties would jeopardise their security, most likely due to negative experiences of voting in their countries of origin. The Frequently Asked Questions resources produced by the SRC and the EC, however, did not explicitly cover this topic of how voting would affect people's refugee status but instead raised the question of 'Is my vote kept secret?'. Certain organisations felt that this was a missed opportunity to provide concrete reassurance to New Scots about their situation.



## Addressing mistrust and scepticism directly

Amongst those we interviewed, there was a sizeable minority of those from refugee-led organisations and local authorities, as well as New Scots, who were less celebratory about the right to vote. Across these groups, people were sceptical about why the legislation had been passed, and this scepticism had come to undermine their enthusiasm about the fact that the law had changed and their resultant desire to actually vote. This primarily related to people's suspicion that refugees had been granted the right to vote to bolster the constituency who would vote for the Scottish Nationalist Party and for Scottish Independence in any referendum:

*“You know, there are elections in Sudan as well but I never voted. I did not see any value in voting. Nothing changes, they're about solidifying the status of the status quo... The Scottish election was not any different. It was about the SNP trying to win the majority for independence. So, why would I vote for another Brexit-like chaos? We have seen how migrants were vilified in the Brexit and another Scottish referendum would not be any different in my opinion.”* (Ali, Sudanese New Scot)

*“Discussions about the elections were really dominated by discussions about Independence and people felt like that was why they wanted our votes... I don't think it's a genuine response to refugees' needs – it wasn't in the best interests of the refugees then. I would rather campaign against challenges asylum seekers were facing. Like being moved from accommodation to hotels to military barracks, etc.”* (Wolde, Eritrean New Scot)

One New Scot who decided not to vote shared that *“I'm happy having the right to vote but I don't want to be used or taken advantage of.”* This sentiment was not helped by the fact that some individuals and organisations felt under-informed about why New Scots had been given the right to vote and about what all the political parties stood for. Without a comprehensive education campaign to explain the Scottish political system and its parties, some New Scots, local authority representatives and members of other community organisations interviewed, perceived that New Scots were being corralled into voting for the SNP. Without passing a judgement on whether voting for that party was or was not a good thing, there was a widespread concern that certain new voters' sense that they were being enfranchised solely to bolster SNP's constituency politicised the process in a way that was alienating and disempowering.

DISCUSSIONS ABOUT THE  
ELECTIONS WERE REALLY  
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AND PEOPLE FELT LIKE THAT  
WAS WHY THEY WANTED  
OUR VOTES...





This led to questions, and some critical responses, about why the right to vote had been prioritised by refugee advocates and advocacy groups over other arguably more pressing issues. They noted that New Scots were being celebrated as political actors and interviewed in the media about how the new voting act positively affected their lives while in reality many of their other rights continue to feel quite precarious. As one person with a refugee background who was homeless stated, **“why do our stories (of voting) matter when we do not matter?”** Several New Scots expressed a concern that giving refugees the right to vote in Scotland served to boost national pride without materially impacting or improving their lives. The UK asylum system indeed denies many social and economic rights that are pivotal to dignity. These include the denial of the right to work, the provision of financial support well below the social security minimum and, for those who would be destitute, no choice of where and with whom they are accommodated. In that context, some New Scots interviewed for this report stressed that their priorities for campaigns might have lain elsewhere. For example:

**“I first knew about this campaign for enfranchisement of refugees when I was working with Eritrean refugees who had no public recourse to public funds remarks in their biometric cards and they told me that SRC was encouraging them to vote when they had no home to stay in, when they had no support for them... They weren't interested in elections – “we don't care about elections, what does it do to our no public recourse, would it change that? Would it change our access to services?” they asked. People who were interested in the voting campaign were better off and in safer housing situations and their income, maybe it doesn't come from employment that was threatened by covid. That's how I felt at the beginning – how are SRC talking about this when so many refugees are dealing with so much that's more pressing? Those were my initial reflections when I heard about it... It's a really positive thing when you see the long-term implications but in the short term, the challenges we were facing made it less relevant at that time. But it was relevant with people who were better off at that time. They found it important to hear those sorts of things.”** (Wolde, Eritrean New Scot)

**“It's very prestigious that SRC got them the vote, and they could vote, which is a noble goal and I'm with you but there's some kind of basics and fundamentals that we should establish before that stage. We should give them the full opportunity to learn English and understand the language – they don't do enough on that, they don't improve the housing conditions, they don't improve work opportunities for people. They didn't engage with that hierarchy of needs – that wouldn't fit on the headlines. They don't advocate for ESOL lessons as a full-time student, but this would be more useful for individuals. This is more useful than the right to vote.”** (Mohamad, Syrian New Scot)

**“To be honest, I did not care. I was a bit stressed about my own situation. I know elections are important but not that important when you're dealing with lots of other basic stuff...I think it's a good thing. It gives us a political recognition but I don't think it will change our lives.”** (Eden, Eritrean New Scot)



**I KNOW ELECTIONS ARE IMPORTANT BUT NOT THAT IMPORTANT WHEN YOU'RE DEALING WITH LOTS OF OTHER BASIC STUFF...**

The issue here then is that while gaining the right to vote is largely seen as a positive thing by New Scots, as discussed above, this right has been extended at a time when refugees and asylum-seekers feel economically, politically and socially marginalized by a series of other policies that also require fundamental reform.

When the interviewee in the final quote was asked why she did not think that voting would change anything, she stated that it is the Home Office that has the most impact on their lives; without being able to vote to change that, they would not see improvements to their situation. She noted, for example, that:

***“First, the government has to be willing to change things and that’s missing. Second, the government has to listen to all people, not just privileged citizens. Third, the government has to stop its toxic narratives and allow people to speak for themselves. Fourth, the government has to change its immigration laws. There are a million things the government can do but none of them are popular at the moment.”***

A few New Scots also mentioned the contradiction between being given the right to vote by the Scottish Government while, in their eyes, being systematically marginalised by Westminster. They suggested that a key part of elections is to build trust among voters and a sense of political accountability but that with a government as hostile towards refugees as the one currently in Westminster, refugees know that nobody really wants to hear their voices. One ESL teacher noted a similar despondency among her class, who thought that it was all a talking shop. Refugees, like many citizens, she said, thought ***“that it’s not going to change your life tomorrow, but that’s a problem with a voting system, isn’t it?”***

This concern about priorities was shared by many of those working with New Scots. While this was not a criticism of the aims and goals of the campaign in general, and was partially due to the emergence of unforeseen challenges due to Covid-19, those working with recently arrived Syrians in particular felt like voting was not yet a priority for these individuals. This affected Syrian’s desire to engage with the political education campaigns and to exercise their right to vote. One council employee stated:

***“There was a lot of “we’re not at that stage” –“we’re still trying to learn English”, and things like “we don’t really know anything and I’m not really interested in politics”. A lot just said politics isn’t really important – it’s the hierarchy of needs, and when they aren’t settled and they don’t have jobs, it’s the hierarchy of needs. There’s a lot of that.”***



**THE GOVERNMENT HAS TO  
STOP ITS TOXIC NARRATIVES  
AND ALLOW PEOPLE TO SPEAK  
FOR THEMSELVES**



## Reaching more, and more diverse, communities of New Scots

For various reasons, it was widely noted that different communities of New Scots showed differing levels of engagement with the right to vote. Several New Scots and local authorities raised concerns about the gendered nature of attendance at the political education sessions and on the day of voting itself. While the voting campaign was spearheaded by female refugee activists, several local authorities had only heard about male refugees voting. Other local authorities pre-empted this by making a concerted effort to support female refugees to vote because they had previously observed that female refugees faced greater barriers to engaging with opportunities.

SRC reached certain nationality groups, such as Kurdish Iranian and Vietnamese young people, to run information sessions on the right to vote, but other groups were much harder to engage despite offers by the organisation to provide translated sessions. Most of SRC's sessions were facilitated through local authorities, which were praised by SRC for organising communities to attend online sessions but which was said to be quite narrow as a pathway for engaging with New Scots in general, particularly in terms of engaging community groups beyond more recent Syrian arrivals.

There was indeed a sense amongst both New Scots and organisations working with them that efforts to register and sensitise refugees were primarily directed at Syrians due to the better organised and better funded resettlement pathways that supported their entry to the UK. This reflects a general difference in the UK between the levels of support provided to refugees who are resettled here compared to those who are recognised through the asylum system, with individuals arriving through the former channel having access to better funded and better organised services including dedicated support from Local Authorities. COSLA, for example, ensured that all those working on the SVPRS knew about the right to vote, and actively encouraged local resettlement officers to support the registration and voting of Syrian refugees. SRC's efforts to engage the Syrian population were thus likely more successful than their efforts to reach other groups that have less access to institutionalised and state-funded support networks. This discrepancy in the support provided to different nationality groups and its possible impacts was noted by New Scots and those working with them:

*“We were all recruited to support Syrians who came under the Vulnerable Persons Scheme so when we meet every 3 months, the focus is on Syrians who came under this scheme but nobody else. So I think there is some inconsistency – Syrian refugees, I sometimes feel like, it's sometimes unfair, even in my area...Syrians get a lot of services and they're very well informed but there are refugees in the same area who I've never heard about. I've only heard about them when they've written negative comments on social media, and then I contacted them. Sometimes it's inconsistent – Syrian refugees who came under this scheme were well informed but there were many others who weren't informed.”*

**(Refugee Resettlement Officer, SVPRS)**



In order to expand the reach of the political education sessions, several individuals, including New Scots and members of refugee support organisations, suggested that it would be more reliable and engaging in the future if, rather than the political education sessions being run through an Arabic or Farsi interpreter, they could be delivered by trained individuals from those language communities (noting too that it would be better to have the Arabic translators always translate to Modern Standard Arabic rather than Syrian Arabic, because this is easier for all Arabic speakers to understand). They noted that going through an interpreter presented another barrier to participation and open discussion, whereas community members could help instil trust in the political systems within Scotland. Unfortunately, these points were anticipated by SRC in its initial plans for the political education campaigns, and they had intended to work with community representatives for all the reasons specified here, but they did not have the time or resources in the context of Covid-19 to provide effective training during the short window of this project.

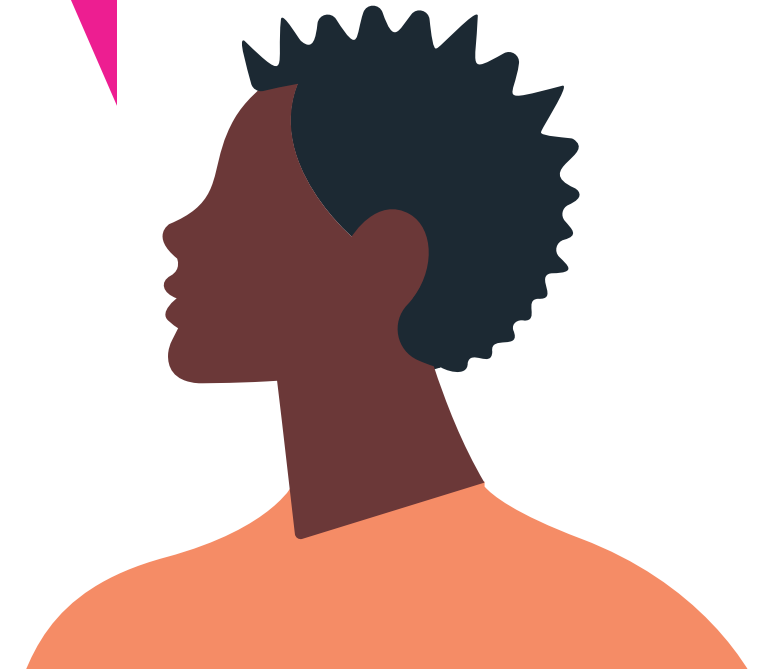
Gabi, a New Scot based in Glasgow, highlighted that community members were much better placed to explain the complexity of Scotland's political landscape using vocabularies and examples that people could understand and relate to, and to facilitate dialogues in which people could ask questions and reflect on the options. When asked whether he knew people who had voted, one New Scot referred to the fact that people might not have voted because they struggled to connect with how politics had been explained to them:

***“I doubt they would vote even if it was next month. Their entrenched differences on what the vote means and how they might change things, and their histories of political education (which aren't addressed by existing campaign slogans), make it hard for them to envisage voting. All of the political campaigning has to resonate with people's understandings of politics and resonate with the environments and conditions within which they live – it has to be about integration and the asylum system, and it has to help them by being situated in their lives. I felt like the campaign was completely decontextualized.” (Wolde, Eritrean New Scot)***

His solution was to change how sessions were organised and who was charged with delivering them:

***“The person delivering that message is really important...If the community is inviting you to come and they're organising all the events, they feel that it's for them and it's their campaign. But if you come from a charity and invite people to your events, and you ask them to share their stories of why they voted, it can feel quite extractive – it can replicate some of those alienating dynamics of extractive engagement. Charities need to understand how those community members operate...you need to approach Afghans, Iraqis, etc. in a way that gives them ownership of these campaigns – if you believe their voices count, you should give them ownership over these campaigns.” (Wolde, Eritrean New Scot)***

**CAMPAIGNING HAS TO  
RESONATE WITH PEOPLE'S  
UNDERSTANDINGS OF  
POLITICS AND RESONATE  
WITH THE ENVIRONMENTS  
AND CONDITIONS WITHIN  
WHICH THEY LIVE**



The words of one employee at SRC further capture the importance of supporting those with lived experience of displacement to do that political education work:

***“People with lived experience explain things better, in culturally relevant ways. They kind of know a lot about voting systems, about democracy, about devolved powers, about the NHS, about our education system, all these kind of fundamental things and probably more than any other group they’re directly impacted.”***

It was also universally recognised that making the resources available in more languages would expand their reach and impact in the future. Because participants in the FGDs convened by SRC had emphasised the need to translate resources into a larger number of key languages, there was some confusion as to why this had not happened during this campaign. Once again, time and resources appear to have been at the root of this. By the time it became clear that the original resources designed by SRC and the EC would not be made available in more languages, it was too late to rectify this. Similarly, by the time that the short educational video with MIN, Saheliya and Voices Network was completed in March, there was not time to add subtitles in multiple languages.

The availability of existing resources in more languages, and the development of more detailed resources in other languages, would also have taken the responsibility off local authorities and civil society organisations to translate and develop these themselves. Local organisations expressed some frustration about public sector organisations producing materials and then expecting community-based actors to elaborate, translate and publicise them. Providing (or even creating a platform to share: see below) simpler, translated resources would be one way to support local and refugee-led organisations to prioritise discussion-based, rather than administrative, tasks. As one actor involved in the creation of the resources for the May election even said: ***“It’s not enough to just create resources for people to use if there’s not capacity there for people to use them.”***

**PEOPLE WITH LIVED EXPERIENCE EXPLAIN THINGS BETTER, IN CULTURALLY RELEVANT WAYS**





# Transferable Lessons

# 5





# Transferable Lessons

Many of the lessons learned during both the campaign to extend the franchise and the education phase of SRC's work may be usefully integrated into SRC's ongoing activities and future advocacy efforts.

**These include:**

## Invest in grassroots community and activist networks

The success of this advocacy campaign lay in, as one SRC staff member put it, *“a perfect storm of things coming together.”* The substrates for this perfect storm, however, are the result of sustained and patient network building among grassroots organisations, particularly in Glasgow. When the campaign was officially launched, a strong, vocal and informed network of organisations could therefore be easily mobilised to buttress the call for change. When journalists would get in touch with SRC or other organisations to ask about the voting campaign, for example, these grassroots organisations would immediately be able to put them in touch with New Scots to discuss what the right to vote would mean for them in their own words.

Support for these networks needs to be sustained but also expanded: smaller community groups for less represented nationalities (Somalis, Sudanese, Vietnamese, Eritreans, etc.) should be assisted with media training so that they can feel more confident in representing their needs in the future, and in initiating campaigns that centre their experiences and priorities.

## Utilise hybrid models of campaigning/education

While some respondents definitely noted the absence of in-person sessions in a negative way, particularly due to unequal access to digital tools and internet resources, the move to online sessions created opportunities as well as challenges. It enabled smaller organisations in more remote locations to get workshops by SRC and for New Scots with strong enough digital literacy skills to join sessions without needing to pay for travel expenses or childcare to join. One employee of a civil society organisation in Glasgow detailed the further benefits:

*“We’ve really seen over this last 18 months the power of being able to do things online. So many of our guests who would really struggle coming to face-to-face appointments are much more comfortable being on a screen but able to have their camera off, being able to be maybe...culturally less formal than British culture, you know.”*



**WE’VE REALLY SEEN  
OVER THIS LAST 18  
MONTHS THE POWER  
OF BEING ABLE TO DO  
THINGS ONLINE**

In-person sessions do nonetheless provide opportunities for networking and different types of discussion, which could complement the online sensitisation. Participatory in-person sessions can be particularly useful for gauging people's grasp of a topic. One Resettlement Officer, for example, recounted how they had attended an information session about the Scottish Parliament and how to vote with New Scots and at the end one attendee had asked 'How do I get a car?', showing that they had not understood either the content or purpose of the session. Those working with New Scots also observed that individuals tend to be more open with their experiences and anxieties around voting during one-to-one in-person meetings, rather than in open zoom meetings. They suggested that alongside being better for those individuals, thoughts shared in face-to-face discussions might also inform more relevant and better targeted educational resources. Online and in-person sessions thus have complementary purposes.

### Focus on sub-national political processes

Parliamentary elections and the campaigns that precede them can seem abstract and confusing even to the most experienced and knowledgeable voters. Some local councils have thus focused on building trust between New Scots and political institutions at a more local and visible scale to show that politics is not just about elections but about action, which individuals can themselves get involved and invested in. As one local council employee said, it is really important that New Scots can see that ***“politicians aren't just there for your vote, but they're there to represent you.”*** Initiatives in this vein have included meetings between refugees and local councillors so that New Scots can see how elected officials operate, and encouraging New Scots to participate in Parent Teacher Associations in order to be involved in decisions that affect them and their families. As one ESOL teacher said: ***“that local level is a start and it's stuff that's happening now.”***

SRC already works with refugee communities across Scotland via its New Scots Connect Platform and through its Refugee Integration Coordinators in different areas of the country. Additionally, SRC is running a Leadership programme with those with a refugee background with Glasgow city council and Social Enterprise Academy, with possible access to Napier University business degree programmes. Such initiatives should be supported and expanded.

### Share programme ideas from partner organisations

Several organisations and local authorities have developed their own approaches to voter registration, political literacy education and relationship building in response to the needs of their local New Scots communities. These can provide blueprints for other local authorities and NGOs/CSOs for their own programmes, or be directly shared to avoid the costly duplication of efforts. Groups and authorities based outside of Glasgow noted that because they have both less experience in receiving refugees and fewer opportunities to network with other, more experienced organisations, they would particularly benefit from enhanced sharing of these best practices and ideas.





Resources and ideas shared with the researchers by local authorities and NGOs/CSOs included:

- One route through which to build community trust in political institutions is to ask those who have already participated in elections to speak with other New Scots about their experiences. In the lead-up to the Holyrood elections, New Scots in Ellen who had voted in the by-election some months earlier spoke to other new or unregistered families about registering to vote and casting their ballots. New Scots' experiences of voting in Ellen were also fed into the development of national campaign resources, showing the knowledge that is out there to draw upon for the further refinement of political materials.
- New Scots spoke of feeling intimidated by the generic voter registration letter that warns of fines for those who do not register to vote. For some, this tarnished their whole view of the electoral process by inflecting it with a threatening and coercive tone. It was also confusing for those who had previously been told to ignore it because refugees could not vote, and who were now being told that they needed to respond. Some local councils pre-empted this by warning refugees that the registration letters would be arriving and that they would be available to support them in filling it out.
- Since the legislation changed, one local council has started registering Syrian arrivals to vote at the same time as they complete their other induction activities i.e. at the same time as being registered at the GP, etc. They have found this far less labour intensive than arranging special voter registration sessions with refugees and translators at a later date.
- One local Council has developed a web platform that provides step-by-step instructions for Syrians on how to fill out various forms themselves, including the voter registration form. For those with stronger English and IT Skills, this is designed to build confidence, skills and independence.
- One small charity got a local University student studying Politics and International Conflict to distil the policies of the five main parties (not the manifestos because the charity felt like these were mainly rhetoric and lacked substance) into a presentation and then asked an Arabic teacher to translate those in a live Q&A session to their Syrian clients. Many of the organisation's volunteers were being asked by Syrians about who they should vote for and the session was thus a way to take the pressure off individual volunteers by meeting that demand for knowledge.
- ESOL classes were used by some local authorities as a space to discuss voter registration and Scotland's political system. One ESOL organiser said they intended to simulate a polling station during ESOL classes in the lead up to the next election to develop learner's confidence in entering this space and their understanding of what the specific terminology means.



## Strengthen and nuance media coverage

When the voting bill passed, it was important for those involved in it to present both a successful picture of the preceding campaign, and particularly the fact that it was led by refugees, and to draw attention to the fact that asylum seekers were still excluded from the franchise. In support of the first goal, refugee support organisations and New Scots had hoped to use this opportunity to provide a more nuanced perspective on refugees in Scotland by spotlighting their political identities within a positive, empowering and hopeful 'success story'. Individuals involved in engaging the media during this period were nonetheless disappointed that more of the media coverage than they had hoped for reverted to the usual tropes of 'good refugees' as grateful victims and thus did less to move the dial in terms of representation.

This highlights the need to continue sensitising the media about the negative repercussions of perpetuating victim-and vulnerability-centred stories of refugeehood.

## Make resources more modular

Every group of refugees has slightly different needs, goals and starting points, as does every organisation and group working with them. The resources and educational sessions produced by SRC were generally considered to be extremely helpful and informative but, as with any programme with a diverse audience, there was feedback about which sections were more useful/relevant/detailed/etc. than others. Some groups wanted more detail on the registration process, for example, while others felt that this was not needed at all.

There was therefore a call for more modular resources to be made available so that local authorities and refugee community groups could design bespoke sessions from a 'menu' of different topics. This will be even more relevant in the future as those refugees who arrived before the May elections will likely now be registered and thus not require any of the registration-oriented resources that those who arrived after May will still need. Those who have already lived through one election cycle may instead be looking for more detailed information about how the voting and party systems work, and/or have more time to engage with the details and history of the Scottish Parliament and devolution.



# Key Policy Recommendations

# 6





# Key Policy Recommendations

As with any project, there were calls for more resources and time to be invested in the 'Empowering Scotland's Newly Enfranchised Refugee Communities' programme, particularly to expand the resources available and to enable the training of community members to do the political education work themselves. It is worth noting, however, that most organisations recognised that the responsibility for the political education campaigns and voter registration, including the creation of resources to support this, should not be seen as solely SRC's moving forward. They noted the inevitable limitations on SRC's capacity and the need to hold political parties to account for also contributing resources. They also saw the need to decentralise this process through engaging a broader range of stakeholders, including more community groups, which might be better placed to deliver political education sessions in language that resonates strongly with new voters.

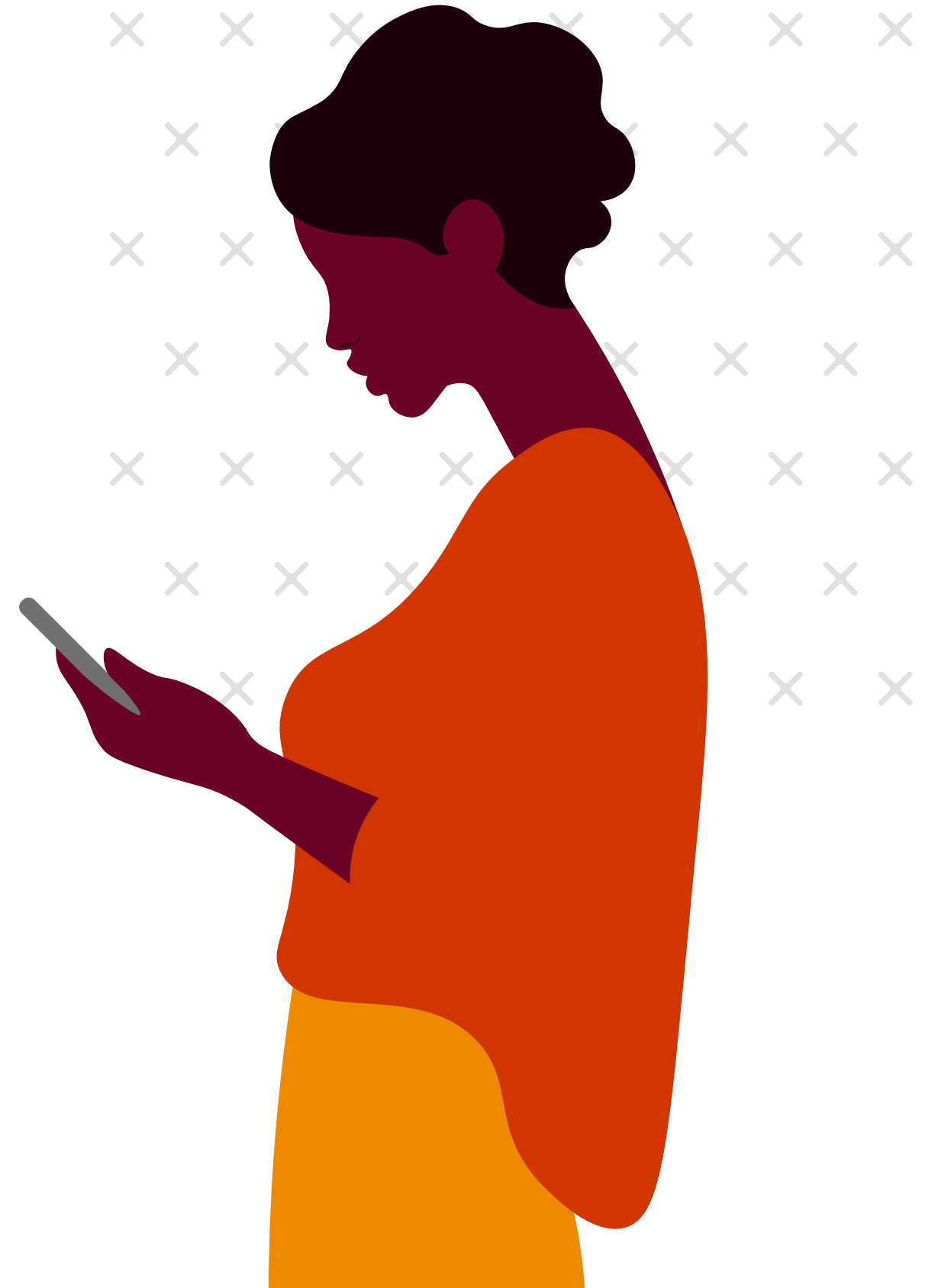
The following key recommendations were also raised during this evaluation process:

## **Include actions on the right to vote and political education in the successor plan to the New Scots Refugee Integration Strategy 2018-2022**

### **Reinvigorate the New Scots 'Advisory Group' at SRC to ensure meaningful consultation and feedback on new programme priorities and resources**

- This is particularly important for ensuring numerically smaller nationalities of New Scots feel listened to and represented by policy makers
- This group should consider including 'naturalised' New Scots to learn from their experiences of integration, and to ensure that programmes are also designed to support any of their continuing needs, such as the fact that many will also be voting for the first time upon being naturalised

New recommendation: Those responsible for electoral registration and promoting greater awareness and use of the right to vote in Scottish parliament and local government elections should develop partnerships with front-line services that work directly with refugees, to engender greater knowledge and informed decisions about using this right. Key services will include the Scottish refugee integration service for all newly recognised refugees, as well as the Scottish guardianship service that provides independent advocacy for unaccompanied children, including those recognised by the UK as refugees.



### Partner with organisations that can provide the political context to voting

- Civil society organisations and political parties should be encouraged and supported to provide the more detailed resources on the individual political parties, given continuing limitations on SRC's ability, as a registered charity that is required to remain independent of party politics, to do so.<sup>11</sup> With more time and resources, however, SRC could be supported to produce a separate educational resource on 'Deciding who to vote for'. This open access resource for 'new' and 'naturalised' New Scots could take voters through a series of questions that would help them decide what issues are most important to them, and very basic and balanced information on each of the main parties
- SRC and the EC can then develop resources to support New Scots to acquire the knowledge, tools and confidence to evaluate who they want to vote for. This would support independent and autonomous decision-making

### Start mobilising for the 2022 Council Elections now

- The Electoral Commission is keen to develop a package of support for newly enfranchised New Scots ahead of the 2022 Council Elections. This package of support should be available in a greater number of translated languages. It may be harder to capitalise on this partnership now that SRC does not have a dedicated member of staff to coordinate activities, but priority should be given to developing resources that encourage autonomous and community-led learning (to support continued engagement despite limited institutional capacity to run sessions).



<sup>11</sup> [v14\\_faqs-charities-and-campaigning-on-political-issues.pdf \(oscr.org.uk\)](https://www.oscr.org.uk/v14_faqs-charities-and-campaigning-on-political-issues.pdf)



### Re-invigorate the campaign to extend the franchise to asylum seekers in Scotland

- As with the 2020 voting campaign, refugees and asylum seekers should be supported to spearhead this initiative themselves as and when it feels appropriate, noting different policy priorities in the ongoing context of the Covid-19 pandemic
- Support for this initiative should be provided through a multi-agency approach, recognising the strengths and limitations of each group involved, and conversations should be transparent about what is happening, why, and who can get involved
- The groundwork has already been laid for this campaign to restart. The successful campaign for refugees' enfranchisement has again shown SRC the merits of articulating an agenda for change that goes beyond what they consider to be immediately achievable. As one SRC staff member reflected on this point, being more transparent about long-term advocacy goals means that nobody is surprised when you start pushing for the next change because the direction of travel has been clear from the start.

### Lobby to extend the 'Right To Vote' campaign to all four nations of the UK before the next General Election

- Opposition parties could be lobbied to table an amendment to the Elections Bill in the UK Parliament to extend refugees' right to vote to other parts of the UK. Even if this may not initially get the support needed to pass, it would initiate discussions about the future possibility while raising any points of resistance, which could then be systematically worked on through targeted advocacy campaigns
- Targeted public information and consultation activities with refugee groups, local service providers and grassroots community initiatives will be important for grounding this 'Right To Vote' campaign in the experience of refugees
- A multi-agency approach to campaigning will be essential for mobilising support and resources, and empowering refugees and people seeking asylum to spearhead this campaign



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Scottish Refugee Council is an independent charity dedicated to providing advice and information to people seeking sanctuary in Scotland.

We have been campaigning for refugee rights since 1985.

**Scottish Refugee Council**

Portland House  
17 Renfield Street  
Glasgow G2 5AH

Tel: 0141 248 9799

Fax: 0141 243 2499

Email: [info@scottishrefugeecouncil.org.uk](mailto:info@scottishrefugeecouncil.org.uk)

Visit: [www.scottishrefugeecouncil.org.uk](http://www.scottishrefugeecouncil.org.uk)



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