

Evaluation of Scottish Refugee Council's Family Rights Service (FRS): executive summary

Introduction

This report evaluates the Family Rights Service (FRS), a pilot project launched by the Scottish Refugee Council (SRC) in January 2022 to support 200 asylum-seeking families in Scotland. The FRS employs a case management approach, assigning a Case Manager to each family to provide holistic support throughout the asylum process. The evaluation, conducted by researchers from the University of Stirling and Braw Data Ltd, aimed to assess the effectiveness of the FRS in improving families' experiences of the asylum system, enhancing access to justice, and reducing poverty. The evaluation employed a mixed-methods approach, including focus groups, interviews, WhatsApp diaries, and analysis of client data, to gather insights from families, Case Managers, legal representatives, and other stakeholders.

Key Findings

1. Improved Oversight and Identification of Gaps: The FRS has successfully identified systemic gaps in the asylum system, including communication issues with legal representatives, long waiting times for legal documentation, and often insufficient support from relevant organisations. The case management approach has provided families with a trusted point of contact, enabling them to access comprehensive support and navigate the complexities of the asylum process.

As one family member noted, *"She [the Case Manager] does everything she can for us and the community: Doctor's appointments, food banking, providing theatre tickets for the children, clothing vouchers... More importantly, she listens to our voices. She explains the legal processes. I'm happy."* (Family 5 diary).

2. Capacity Building and Empowerment: Case Managers have played a crucial role in empowering families by improving their understanding of the asylum system and their rights. Families reported feeling more confident and less burdened, thanks to the consistent support and advocacy provided by Case Managers.

One family member shared, *"My Case Manager helped take some stress off me at a time I was really confused and depressed. She started by contacting my social worker to know how they can both work hand in hand to make the journey less stressful."* (Family 2 diary). This empowerment has been critical in helping families navigate the often disempowering asylum system.

3. Enhanced Access to Rights and Support: The FRS has facilitated greater access to rights and support through improved collaboration with legal representatives and other organisations. Case Managers have helped families secure both monetary and non-monetary support, addressing urgent needs such as housing, education, and healthcare.

A Case Manager reflected on their role, stating: *"Education, school enrolments, college enrolments, ESOL classes, health, GP registration, dentist, opticians, physiotherapy..."*

Whatever someone might need your support with. You've got housing, asylum support is a big one... It's very varied but we work with people from very different backgrounds, and cultures, you meet so many families in this job which makes it all worth it." (Case Manager Focus Group 3).

4. Reduction of Trauma through Consistent Support: The FRS has provided a structured and supportive framework that helps mitigate the trauma experienced by asylum-seeking families. Case Managers have been instrumental in offering emotional support, advocating for families, and connecting them with specialist services for complex trauma.

One family member expressed, *"She [the Case Manager] saved me. I wanted to take my life, to kill myself but I messaged her and she helped me and she told me places to go for help. My dear, she is great."* (Family 1 diary). The consistent presence of a Case Manager has been a lifeline for many families, reducing feelings of isolation and providing a sense of security.

5. Faster Response to Poverty-Related Issues: The FRS has enabled early intervention in poverty-related issues, reducing crisis situations. Case Managers have assisted families in accessing emergency funds and other resources, ensuring they are not left destitute.

One family highlighted the financial struggles they faced, stating, *"The money they give us is just enough for our food and that's it... My oldest son, for example, sometimes his friends are inviting him out to an outing so at least I have to give him £20, so if he goes twice a week that's the £40 finished."* (Family Focus Group 1). The FRS has been crucial in addressing these immediate needs, ensuring families are not left in crisis.

Recommendations

1. Internal Management Improvements:

- **Data Management:** Enhance the consistency of recording stakeholder interactions and track the quality of legal interactions to improve service delivery. This will allow the FRS to monitor the effectiveness of legal representation and ensure timely support for families.
- **Face-to-Face Engagement:** Increase in-person interactions between Case Managers and families to build trust and confidence. As one Case Manager noted, *"The relationships are different when you meet them face-to-face... It makes a massive difference even for the clients to do with trust."* (Case Manager Focus Group 2).
- **Inclusion of Lived Experience:** Recruit Case Managers with lived experience of the asylum system to enhance empathy and practical support. This would help build trust and improve communication with families.

2. Policy and Wider Sector Recommendations:

- **Legal Representation:** Ensure consistent access to legal representation for all asylum seekers to improve asylum outcomes. The evaluation found that

unrepresented clients are more likely to be refused asylum, highlighting the need for policy changes to guarantee legal support for all.

- **Mental Health Support:** Integrate comprehensive mental health care into the asylum support system to address the significant mental health challenges faced by families. The FRS has shown that trauma-informed care is essential for the well-being of asylum seekers.
- **Expansion of Case Management:** Expand the FRS model to all asylum seekers in Scotland to provide consistent, trauma-informed support from the point of entry. The evaluation has demonstrated that the benefits of the FRS extend beyond the 200 participating families, and a broader rollout would ensure humane and just conditions for all asylum seekers.

Conclusion

The Family Rights Service is a vital support system for asylum-seeking families in Scotland. By providing consistent, trauma-informed, and person-centred support, the FRS has improved families' understanding of the asylum process, enhanced their access to rights, and reduced the trauma associated with navigating the asylum system – both in terms of the legal process and support. The evaluation underscores the need for the expansion of the FRS model to ensure that all asylum seekers in Scotland receive the support they need to rebuild their lives.

The FRS has demonstrated that a case management approach can significantly improve the asylum experience, foster greater collaboration among support organisations, and facilitate a more just and humane asylum system. The recommendations provided aim to further enhance the effectiveness and reach of the FRS, ensuring that it continues to meet the needs of asylum-seeking families in Scotland. As one Case Manager aptly summarised, *"We are there holding their hand throughout the entire asylum process. Other agencies don't do that. They see you as a friend."* (Case Manager Focus Group 1). This unique role of Case Managers as both advocates and trusted allies has been central to the success of the FRS, and its expansion could more broadly transform the experience of seeking asylum in Scotland.

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