



A MIGRANT'S GUIDE TO SCOTLAND

*Your Human Rights
in a different country*

Foreword

The Human Rights Consortium Scotland (HRCS) believes Scotland must continue to champion migrants' human rights and ensure migrants know their rights.

This resource was created to empower migrants to understand their rights and respect the rights of others.

HRCS' Migrants Participation Project was funded by Paul Hamlyn Foundation and delivered in partnership with Migrant Voice. It provided interactive spaces to explore human rights, culture, belonging, and access to services. Participants shared stories and reflected on themes including gender, family, intersectionality, civic participation, and mental wellbeing. Their insights directly shape this resource, ensuring it is practical, inclusive, and grounded in lived experience.

Acknowledgements

The workshops were led by our Human Rights Participation Officers, Doro Richter, Roza Salih, and Esraa Husain, alongside our Director, Charlie McMillan with wellbeing support from Thierry Fotso and documentation by Javad Daraei.

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Introduction

Migrants' Human Rights in Scotland

Scotland is home to people from all over the world. Some have come to work, to study, to join family, or to build a new life. They may also have arrived seeking safety from war, persecution, poverty, or environmental crisis. Migrants are part of Scotland's vibrant communities. At the heart of this resource is a statement of solidarity that holds a powerful principle: everyone has human rights.



In Scotland, human rights are protected through a combination of UK law, international agreements, and devolved Scottish law and policy. Understanding what these rights are and how they apply in practice is essential for migrants' survival and integration. Migrants may face many barriers, including language differences, unfamiliar systems, limited access to services, and, in some cases, fear or uncertainty about their legal status.

There are ongoing debates in Scotland and the UK about immigration policy, access to public funds by migrants, and the treatment of people seeking asylum. By learning about migrants' human rights, we strengthen our shared commitment to dignity, respect, equality, and justice for everyone who calls Scotland home.

The following pages explain key rights such as the right to dignity, healthcare, housing, education, work, and protection from discrimination. In addition, three short storylines translate abstract legal protections into tangible and culturally grounded experiences. We also provide a map highlighting the rich geography of Scotland and the main ways in which migrants arrive.

At the heart of this resource is a statement of solidarity that holds a powerful principle: everyone has human rights.

Terminology

Language shapes how we understand people's lives and experiences. Words like migrant, refugee, and asylum seeker are often used interchangeably in public debate, but they have specific meanings in international law and policy. In this booklet, we use these terms carefully and respectfully.

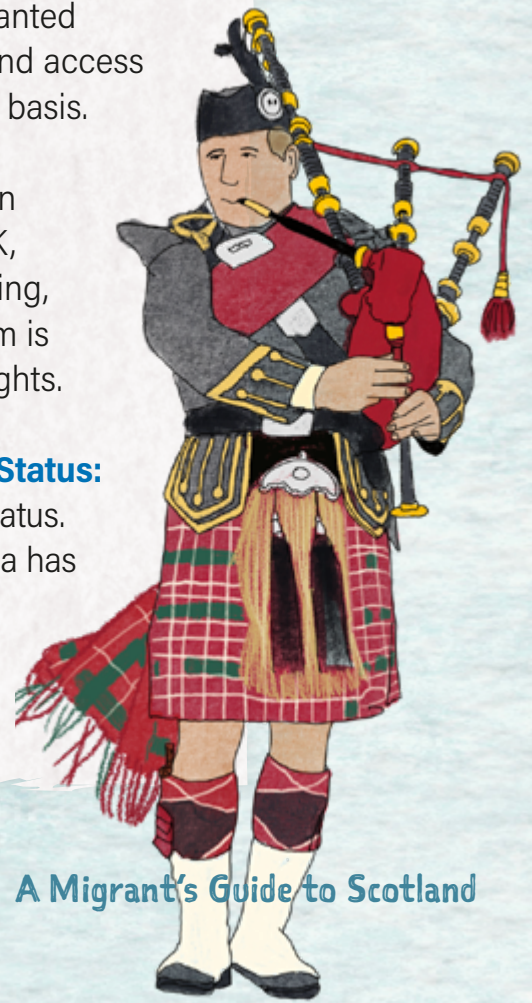
Migrant: we follow the definition used by the United Nations. A migrant is any person who moves away from their usual place of residence, whether within a country or across an international border, temporarily or permanently, and for any of a variety of reasons.

Refugee: someone who has been forced to flee their country because of a well-founded fear of persecution based on race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership of a particular social group, and who cannot safely return.

Humanitarian Protection: someone who does not meet the legal definition of a refugee but would face serious harm if returned to their country. This can include risks such as the death penalty, torture, inhuman or degrading treatment, or serious threat to life due to violence in situations of conflict. People granted humanitarian protection in the UK are allowed to stay and access similar rights to refugees, though under a different legal basis.

Asylum Seeker: someone who has asked for protection but is still waiting for a decision on their claim. In the UK, asylum seekers are subject to specific rules about housing, financial support, and the right to work. While their claim is being processed, they still retain fundamental human rights.

Undocumented Migrants and People with Insecure Status: people living in Scotland without a secure immigration status. This may happen for many reasons. For example, their visa has expired, an asylum claim has been refused, or a person's circumstances have changed. Others may have temporary leave to remain, with conditions attached.



The Legal and Human Rights Framework in Scotland



In Scotland, immigration is controlled by the UK Government, but essential services like health, housing, and education are 'devolved' to the Scottish Parliament, Scottish Government and local councils.

The foundation of modern human rights law lies in international agreements developed after the Second World War. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) sets out basic rights and freedoms that belong to everyone, everywhere. These include, for example, the right to life, dignity, education, work, housing, healthcare, and protection from discrimination.

Although the Declaration itself is not legally binding, it has shaped many binding treaties. Among the most relevant are:

- The European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR)
- The 1951 UN Refugee Convention
- The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR)
- The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)

The UK has signed and ratified these treaties, meaning it has committed to respecting and protecting the rights they contain.

The UK Human Rights Act 1998: brings the rights contained in the European Convention on Human Rights into UK law. This means that public authorities including the Home Office, local councils, NHS services, police and courts, must act in ways that are compatible with rights set out in the Convention. These rights apply to citizens, migrants, asylum seekers, refugees, and people without secure immigration status.

The 1951 Refugee Convention provides specific protection for people who meet the legal definition of a refugee. It establishes the principle of 'non-refoulement', meaning a person must not be returned to a country where they face persecution. The Convention also outlines rights related to access to courts, education, employment, and public funds for recognised refugees. In the UK, refugee status determination is managed by the Home Office.

The UK Equality Act 2010 protects people from discrimination in many areas of public life, including employment, education, housing, and access to services. The Act protects individuals from discrimination based on specific 'protected characteristics':

- Race (which includes nationality and ethnic or national origins)
- Religion or belief
- Sex
- Disability (physical or mental)
- Age
- Sexual orientation
- Gender reassignment
- Pregnancy and maternity
- Marriage and civil partnership



Scotland: Place, People and a History of Movement

Scotland is in Europe with a proud history of its own. It sits in the northern part of the United Kingdom and is bordered by England to the south, with the Atlantic Ocean and North Sea surrounding it otherwise.. Beyond the mainland lie more than 700 islands.



Scotland's national symbols include the unicorn, Scotland's official national animal, and the Saltire, the blue-and-white flag. Celts, Picts, Anglo-Saxons and even Vikings have historically contributed to the Scottish culture. Culture is not fixed, and it continues to evolve, shaped by the people who live here.

Migration and displacement are not new to Scotland. Voluntary and forced movements of people have shaped Scotland for centuries. For example, the Highland Clearances, which took place in the 18th and 19th centuries, where Highland and Southern Uplands communities were forcibly displaced from their land to make way for large-scale sheep farming; many emigrated to countries such as Canada, the United States, Australia, and New Zealand.

Irish communities arrived in large numbers during the Great Hunger, and Jewish communities have been part of Scotland's population for centuries. Later movements including displacement linked to colonialism, with people arriving from all over the world, have all helped shape modern Scotland with their languages, skills and stories.



Languages and Voices

English is the main language spoken in Scotland, but we also have our own linguistic traditions. Scots is a language variety with different regional forms. In the northeast, you may hear Doric, a distinctive dialect of Scots. In parts of the Highlands and Islands, Scottish Gaelic continues to be spoken and taught, with road signs displayed bilingually. Scotland today is multilingual and includes those whose first language is Polish, Urdu, Arabic, Mandarin, Spanish, and more.



The Legacies of Empire: Colonialism, Slavery, and Global Connections

Scotland's history of movement is also connected to the history of empire, colonialism, and transatlantic slavery. Since the 18th Century, Scotland was part of the British Empire. Scottish people were involved in imperial expansion across the Caribbean, North America, Africa, and Asia. Scottish cities including Glasgow, 'the Second City of Empire', grew wealthy in part through trade in goods such as tobacco, sugar, and cotton, industries that relied heavily on enslaved African labour. The wealth generated through slavery and colonial exploitation shaped economic development across Scotland.

Colonialism also reshaped global borders and economies. Some of the countries from which people now migrate to Scotland were once colonised or economically exploited under imperial systems. The legacies of empire and slavery remain visible in city architecture, museum collections, street and place names, and economic institutions.

Human rights frameworks emerged, in part, as a global response to histories of colonial violence and exploitation. Recognising these connections helps create space for more informed and intersectional conversations about rights and belonging in Scotland today.



Storylines of Migrations in Scotland

1. Finding accommodation and going to school

Migration, for many parents, is experienced through school bags, bus routes, rent payments, and bedtime routines. This storyline follows a parent and child in their early months of settling in Scotland.

When they first arrive, the family moves into temporary accommodation. There is uncertainty about how long they will be allowed to stay. The parents spend hours on the phone, trying to understand housing options, deposits and guarantors. Under human rights law, everyone has the right to respect for their private and family life. In Scotland, housing and homelessness support are 'devolved' responsibilities, meaning local authorities have duties to assist people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.

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Yet access can feel complicated. Application forms may be long. Letters may arrive in unfamiliar language. Income requirements may exclude families on low wages or those with no access to public funds. For families with disabled members, accessibility to services and support adds another layer of complexity.

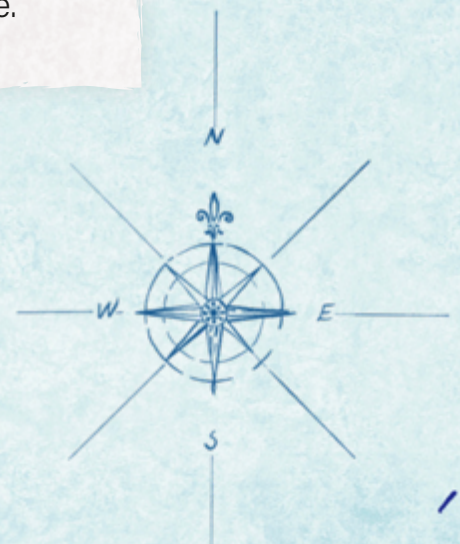
Starting school brings both excitement and worry for the children and parents. Will the teacher understand my accent? Will other children be kind? What if forms are filled in incorrectly?

In Scotland, every child has the right to education, no matter their or their parents' immigration status. Local authorities must provide primary and secondary education, often with language or disability support when required.

Families may also face practical concerns, like sourcing school uniforms or transport. Over time, the parent learns how to register with a GP, borrows a dictionary from the library, and begins connecting with others through conversations in playgrounds and at community events. Economic, social and cultural rights are lived in these everyday moments, protecting family life, cultural identity, language, beliefs and participation in community life.

This family's story reflects ordinary experiences that many migrant families experience. Rights are not always denied outright; sometimes they are delayed, conditional, or difficult to navigate.

Economic, social and cultural rights are lived in these everyday moments, protecting family life, cultural identity, language, beliefs and participation in community life.



ANTIC
LEAN

ORKNEY ISLANDS

JOHN O' GROATS

SHETLAND

LEWIS AND HARRIS

SKYE

MORAY

INVERNESS

Loch Ness

ABERDEEN

TOBERMORY

GLENCOE

ISLE OF MULL

Loch Lomond

PERTH

STIRLING

DUNDEE

ST. ANDREWS

NORTH
SEA



FALKIRK

EDINBURGH

GLASGOW

ISLE OF FARRAN

AYR

MELROSE

DUMFRIES

IRISH
SEA



Storylines of Migrations in Scotland

2. A long wait for a resolution

One migrant's journey begins long before their arrival in Scotland. Conflict closes schools and disrupts daily life; environmental hardship brings failed crops and scarce water. Leaving happens in stages, when staying is no longer possible. This person arrives in Scotland with both relief and disorientation. An asylum claim is made, and their life becomes structured around waiting for accommodation, interviews and a decision. Early housing offered to them is often temporary, with limited privacy and unpredictable moves at short notice.

Human rights law protects the right to life and the right to freedom from torture and inhuman or degrading treatment. Seeking asylum is a legal right under international law. Overcrowded housing, prolonged uncertainty, or lack of information can affect migrants' mental health and wellbeing. For someone who has already experienced trauma, instability can be triggering.

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Access to healthcare is an early priority for this person. Registering with a GP may need interpreter support, and trauma can appear through sleeplessness, anxiety, or withdrawal. In Scotland, care must be provided based on medical need, reflecting the right to essential healthcare and the protection of life and dignity.

Months or years later, an immigration interview assesses whether the person qualifies as a refugee. They must recount painful memories, dates, names, and events, often under stress and fear of disbelief. While many live in the community, detention is still possible. The right to liberty and security protects everyone against arbitrary detention, which must always follow lawful procedures.

Without the right to work, this person's financial hardship grows, increasing their vulnerability to exploitation or unsafe housing. There is a lot of misinformation and rumours when seeking immigration advice, and it is crucial to find a UK registered practitioner or company, as international qualifications may not be recognised in the UK. Human rights law protects everyone from slavery, servitude, and forced labour, regardless of their immigration status. Risks may be heightened for women, LGBTIQ+ individuals, disabled migrants, and those facing racism or xenophobia.

Knowing how to prepare for an interview, challenge a decision, access trauma counselling, or report unsafe conditions can make a big difference. Solidarity networks turn isolation into connection. Eventually, a letter arrives: for this person, refugee status brings the right to remain, work, and rebuild; for others, refusal brings the threat of removal, though appeal rights and legal processes may continue.

“The right to liberty and security protects against arbitrary detention, which must always follow lawful procedures.”



Storylines of Migrations in Scotland

3. The freedom to express yourself

Identity is shaped by experiences and relationships. This story follows a queer immigrant of colour with an invisible disability, whose sexuality, gender identity, ethnicity, and migration status affect how they are seen in public, healthcare, and workplaces.

They experience pain, fatigue, and dizziness, but when seeking care, their symptoms are dismissed as 'stress' and follow-up is delayed, leaving them feeling unseen. At work, they face microaggressions, pressured to 'represent' their community, highlighting how discrimination affects their safety, opportunities, and the ability to access work that matches their skills.

One evening, they attend a community event hosted by a migrant-led LGBTIQ+ group. The room is full of people who share similar stories. For the first time in months, they feel their whole identity is welcome.

Freedom of expression and freedom of thought, conscience, and religion are rights that protect the ability to speak, believe, and live openly.

Many migrants may have fled countries where identity itself was criminalised or punished. In this space, cultural expression becomes a form of healing. The person learns that rights are strengthened when they are supported by community, by policy, and by everyday actions.



Key Human Rights in Scotland that are featured in the storylines:

1. Right to Dignity and Respect

Everyone has the right to be treated with dignity, regardless of immigration status. This includes protection from degrading treatment and respect for personal identity.

3. Right to Education

Children in Scotland have the right to attend school and access learning support, regardless of their immigration status.

5. Right to Healthcare

Access to essential healthcare must be based on medical need, not immigration status.

7. Right to Liberty and Security

People must not be detained without lawful justification and must be protected from unlawful detention.

9. Right to Freedom of Expression and Thought

People have the right to speak, believe, practice religion, and express identity without fear.

2. Right to Private and Family Life

Families have the right to live together, care for one another, and enjoy private life without unnecessary interference.

4. Right to Housing and Safe Living Conditions

Everyone has the right to live in safe, stable housing with access to basic necessities.

6. Right to Freedom from Torture and Inhuman Treatment

No one should be subjected to violence, torture, or cruel treatment — including within immigration processes.

8. Right to Freedom from Slavery and Forced Labour

Forced labour and exploitation are illegal, and protection applies to all people regardless of status.

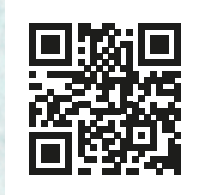
10. Protection from Discrimination

No one should be treated unfairly based on race, nationality, religion, disability, gender, sexuality, or immigration status.

Support Services

Housing and Homelessness Support

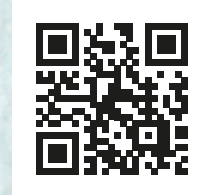
Citizens Advice
Scotland



Shelter
Scotland



Positive Action
in Housing



Scottish Refugee
Council



Simon Community
Scotland



Safe in
Scotland

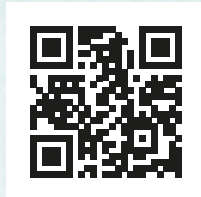


Health and Wellbeing

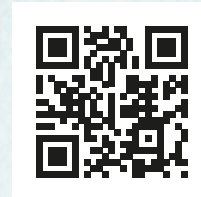
LGBT Health
and Wellbeing



LEAP Sports
Scotland



Exhale
Group



Inclusion
Scotland



Disability Beyond
Borders



Waverley
Care



Legal Advice and Immigration Support

[Migrant Voice](#)



[Citizens Rights Project](#)



[Central Scotland Regional Equality Council](#)



[JustRight Scotland](#)



[The Unity Centre](#)



[No Recourse North East](#)



Education and Family Support

[The Welcoming](#)



[Moray Support for Migrants & Refugees](#)



[Forth Valley Welcome](#)



[Barnardo's Scotland Welcome Service](#)



[Community InfoSource](#)



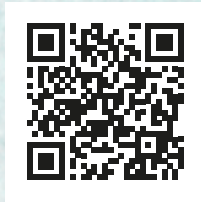
[Education Scotland](#)



Support Services

Support for Survivors of Violence or Exploitation

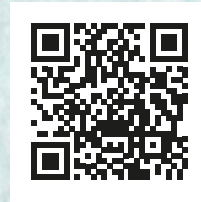
[Refugee Sanctuary
Scotland](#)



[Survivors of Human
Trafficking in Scotland](#)



[Trafficking Awareness
Raising Alliance](#)



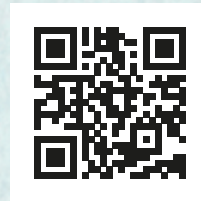
[Shakti
Women's Aid](#)



[Migrant
Help](#)



[Victim Support
Scotland](#)

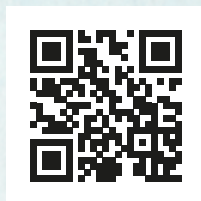


Community and Cultural Spaces

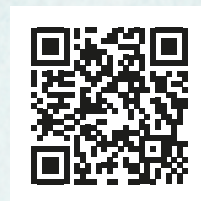
[Maryhill Integration
Network](#)



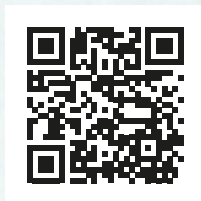
[Aberdeen Multicultural
Centre](#)



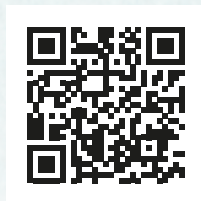
[Scottish Intercultural
Association](#)



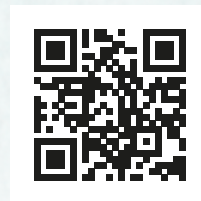
[MILK
Community](#)



[Refuweege](#)

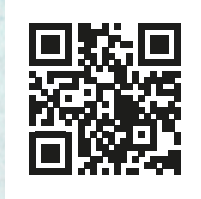


[Central and West
Integration Network](#)

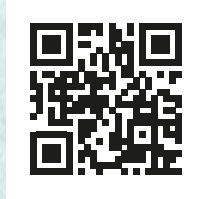


Advocacy, Policy and Research

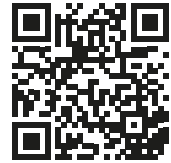
[Coalition for Racial
Equality and Rights](#)



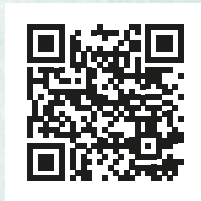
[Grampian Regional
Equality Council](#)



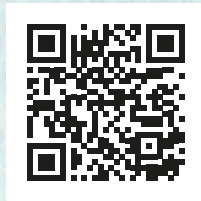
[Glasgow Refugee, Asylum
and Migration Network](#)



[Govan Community
Project](#)



[Migration Policy
Scotland](#)



[BEMIS
Scotland](#)



Welfare and Employment

[Skills Development
Scotland](#)



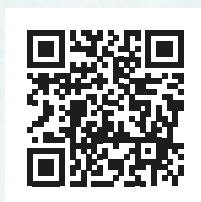
[Social Security
Scotland](#)



[The Wise
Group](#)



[Career Ready
Scotland](#)



[Aberdeen
Foyer](#)



[Bridges
Programmes](#)





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