

BRIEF SUMMARY

# Integration of Refugees: Opportunities for Improvement



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# Brief summary of the main conclusions

## Chapter 1

The first section of the report evaluates the status of refugees in Iceland today and explores their opinions on the services offered to them.

The Social Science Research Institute conducted a survey among refugees who received the right to reside in Iceland in the period 2004-2015. The target population for the survey comprised 255 individuals aged 18 or older.

- A glance at the target population immediately reveals information that could be used in policy making. Firstly, the population is young. Refugees who have been granted Icelandic residence permits in the last 12 years are almost all under 50 and therefore the oldest age bracket appearing in the report is 46 and older.
  - Secondly, the refugees almost all live in the south west of Iceland. Only around a fifth live outside the capital area, most of whom are in Reykjanes or Akranes.
  - Thirdly, the majority of the refugees, around 72%, have been granted Icelandic residence permits following an asylum application and therefore came to Iceland on their own initiative rather than as part of a refugee quota.
  - When preparing the survey it proved difficult to find data on the number of refugees who have been granted residence permits in the relevant period. Statistical information on refugees in Iceland could therefore be better managed with the aim of better understanding their potential needs.
  - The results of the survey itself unfortunately are not terribly significant as an indication of the status and wellbeing of refugees in Iceland due to a poor response rate. Despite the use of varied methods of data collection, the response rate was only 15%. The primary reason for this appears to be that refugees were wary of responding to the survey out of fear that their answers could be passed on to other parties or used against them. These results should only be viewed as a clue to the reality of the situation and must not be used to generalise about the refugee population as a whole.
- It is, however, worth highlighting a few interesting conclusions. The questions on the kinds of services offered to refugees after being granted Icelandic residence permits revealed a difference between quota refugees and those granted residence permits following an asylum application.
- Asked what services they had received after being granted an Icelandic residence permit, 88% of quota refugees mentioned accommodation, compared to just 32% of those who came on their own initiative, a significant difference.
  - There was also a significant difference regarding whether respondents had received assistance from a support family assigned by the Red Cross; 88% of quota refugees had been assigned a support family, compared to 18% of those who came on their own initiative.
  - The questions on trust in the various institutions involved in refugee matters revealed that the majority of respondents were not aware of the Multicultural and Information Centre. Of the institutions included in the questions, the Red Cross was the most trusted, with 67% of respondents having high or very high levels of trust in it. Around 50% had high or very high levels of trust in the Directorate of Immigration and the Police. Just over 30% had high or very high levels of trust in Social Services.
  - Three quarters of respondents live in rented accommodation. Half of respondents are on the public rental market and 27% in rented accommodation provided by the relevant municipality.
  - Only 16% reported that their financial situation was good or very good. 70% of respondents had a monthly income of ISK 300,000 or less before tax.
  - 42% of respondents were in paid employment, 18% were students, 13% job-seekers and 21% were unable to work. The majority of those in employment, 69%, worked in service, care, or sales positions. Two thirds

of these people were somewhat, very or completely satisfied with their work.

- Respondents were not greatly worried about losing their jobs (72% had little or no worry of this) and all of those who were unemployed believed that it was likely or very likely that they would find work. The majority of those able to work, 70%, were interested in starting their own business.
- Around half of respondents said that they understood and spoke Icelandic very or quite well. All respondents, however, were interested in learning the language better. The answers to the questions on services needed and the use of education as well as the comments at the end of the survey indicate that proficiency in Icelandic was connected to most other factors in integration and that many respondents believed more instruction in Icelandic was needed.
- Questions about refugees' experience of prejudice revealed that the primary contexts for prejudice and discrimination were hiring (46%), at work (47%), in education (43%) and in public (43%).
- Despite this, 73% of respondents reported that they were somewhat or very happy and the majority of respondents, 83%, said that Iceland was the place they most wanted to live.

The Social Science Research Institute also conducted focus group research amongst refugees in Iceland in order to discuss their experiences and views of the services they had been provided since coming to Iceland. This led to many interesting suggestions for potential improvements, the most significant of which follow below.

- Participants agreed that proficiency in Icelandic was the key to Icelandic society. Participants pointed out that there was not enough instruction in Icelandic and that lessons were not sufficiently tailored to individual needs.
- Participants believed that there should be better access to important information and pointed out that refugees should be included in the process of organising support services and the provision of information.

- Participants in the focus groups reported that they were unsure which support services they had a right to and that there was little consistency in services provided. They believed that greater collaboration was required between the institutions involved in refugee services.
- They pointed out that it was important to provide equal access to support families and assistance with finding accommodation.
- Participants unanimously agreed that academic and career counselling services needed to be expanded significantly. They agreed that personal integration plans should be created for each individual refugee.

## Chapter 2

The second chapter comprises analysis of interviews conducted with eight individuals who work in the day-to-day integration of refugees. Analysis is split into six themes, including a comparison of the refugee services available in Iceland compared to Sweden, Norway and Denmark. Below is a summary of the primary conclusions.

### Long-term strategy and organisation

- The interviewees emphasised that a long-term strategy for refugee affairs was required. The objectives of integration should be clearer and more systematic and the division of responsibilities between institutions should be better defined.
- The comparative section reveals that Sweden, Norway and Denmark have specific laws on integration stipulating the rights and responsibilities of refugees and the role of public institutions in integration. There are no such laws in Iceland.

### Human resources and communication of information

- Three important areas for improvement were identified: the loss of specialist knowledge due to a lack of long-term strategy; the flow of information and knowledge between institutions, and general public education in order to combat prejudice against refugees, asylum seekers and immigrants.

### Employment and education opportunities

- It was pointed out that the Directorate of Labour should be more involved in the integration process and more specific measures developed to help refugees get onto the job market. It is also important to make it easier for refugees to have their education evaluated here in Iceland.
- If we look at Sweden, Norway and Denmark, we can see that many more measures have been developed there to help people get onto the job market than in Iceland; these countries also have much more experience of receiving refugees than Iceland. The comparative countries emphasise work-related language courses and diverse labour initiatives which are incorporated into personal integration plans.

### Interpreting services

- The interviewees considered that good interpreting services were the main prerequi-

site for good refugee services. It was pointed out that these are lacking in Iceland, both with regards to interpreter education and the use of interpreting at public institutions.

- In Norway and Sweden, interpreting services are managed more systematically than in Denmark and Iceland – the state manages the education of interpreters and maintains a register of qualified interpreters for state employees to refer to.

### Accommodation

- The interviewees agreed that the fact that refugees did not receive the same services with regards to accommodation created inequality; services differ depending on whether an individual is a quota refugee or came to Iceland to apply for asylum. Services should be organised such that everyone is offered the same kind of assistance in finding accommodation and furnishings.
- In all the comparative countries there is a specific system whereby one institution is responsible for assigning accommodation to refugees who have been granted a residence permit, whether they be quota refugees or those who came on their own initiative.

### Equality

- The interviewees all believed that refugee services must be reviewed with the aim of levelling the playing field and preventing the two-tier system that has emerged for the two groups. Having different guidelines for these two groups simply causes difficulties in providing services.
- It was suggested that the current system be amended and emphasis placed on creating a single system for everyone that would allow services to be tailored to the individual, depending on how much help each person requires to integrate into Icelandic society.

## Chapter 3

The third chapter of the report looks at the division of responsibilities between ministries and institutions with regards to refugee and immigrant affairs, as well as proposed amendments with the aim of creating more consistent and efficient government.

- Although the affairs of foreigners and immigrants overlap, they are legally divided into two categories (foreigners and immigrants, the latter of which includes refugees resident in Iceland) or even three, if the right to work is considered to be a separate category. These groups are primarily managed by two government ministries, with more ministries involved.
- Political matters regarding foreigners have been divided between government ministries in a similar way over the years.
- The Ministry of the Interior is responsible for the entry of foreigners into the country, permission to enter the country and the right to reside, including evaluating whether people who come to Iceland to seek asylum are refugees.
- The Ministry of Welfare is responsible for social matters once foreigners have been granted an Icelandic residence permit – this applies equally to immigrants and refugees, who after a certain point become immigrants.
- The responsibilities of the ministries are therefore related and overlap temporarily, since the Ministry of the Interior is responsible for those asylum seekers who have come to Iceland to apply for international protection. These responsibilities includes providing accommodation, social assistance and access to healthcare, as well as other services while their applications are being processed.
- The proposals presented here do not go so far as to suggest that all responsibilities regarding foreigners should be assigned to one ministry, as is the case in some of our neighbouring countries, but it was suggested that attempts should be made to simplify the matter as far as possible. Here, the primary considerations should be factors such as quality, security and long-term strategic planning in immigrant affairs.
- The proposals presented here assume that the Directorate of Immigration in its current form would be discontinued. It was suggested that the collaborative framework should be reorganised, assuming the involvement of a few ministries, state institutions and municipalities, as well as services provided by organisations. The leading institutions would be the Ministry of Welfare and the Ministry of the Interior, in an organised collaborative framework that has been termed ‘joined-up government’. With this collaboration between key ministries, a single institution would be formed responsible for providing information, processing applications and organising and coordinating all services for foreigners, immigrants, asylum seekers and refugees in one place, i.e. a ‘one-stop shop’.



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