# Highland communities welcome refugees amid mounting housing crisis



In recent months, discussions surrounding the influx of migrants into the UK have intensified, revealing a deeply divided public opinion. Throughout various regions, particularly in provincial towns, large hotels are increasingly being transformed into temporary accommodation for individuals fleeing war-torn nations such as Afghanistan, Iran, and Pakistan. This arrangement has sparked complaints among locals regarding anti-social behaviour and the strain on public services, with many expressing frustration at feeling sidelined by government efforts to address these issues.

Despite significant pushback against migrant influxes in various parts of Britain, remote towns in the Scottish Highlands have displayed a markedly different attitude. Here, communities have not only welcomed migrants but specifically stated their desire for more refugees to settle in their towns. Since 2016, these expansive, sparsely populated areas—home to approximately 235,000 residents—have opened their doors to hundreds of refugee families and unaccompanied children from Syria, Afghanistan, and Ukraine.

Interestingly, the infusion of migrants has led to the blossoming of cultural diversity, evidenced by the emergence of Syrian food trucks and Turkish barbers in picturesque towns like Dingwall and Inverness. The locals’ acceptance is underscored by a prevailing sentiment that Highland communities are “more welcoming than down South,” highlighting a distinct cultural attitude towards newcomers.

However, the region faces a challenging contemporaneous issue: a severe housing crisis that is complicating the landscape for both locals and newcomers alike. Highland Council recently reported an urgent need for an additional 24,000 homes over the next decade. This escalation in housing demand is largely driven by projected job growth in areas like the new Inverness and Cromarty Firth Green Freeport. Current construction rates signal that it could take over two decades to meet this demand, necessitating an extraordinary investment of £2.8 billion to expedite housing developments.

The ramifications of the housing crisis extend beyond mere statistics; they permeate the daily lives of local inhabitants. In Dingwall, a town of just 5,500 residents, the available housing is reportedly so limited that many locals are left waiting in vain for social housing to become available. There have been reports of locals expressing concern about the speed at which refugees are housed compared to residents who have lived there for generations. This sentiment was echoed by Peter Phelps and Thomas Grant, long-time residents of Alness, a town also grappling with high levels of deprivation and a pressing need for affordable housing.

Community-friendly initiatives have nonetheless sprung up in response to the challenges posed by both migration and housing scarcity. Local charity shops, such as Blythswood, have actively engaged refugees in volunteer work, facilitating their integration and promoting a sense of belonging. Joanne O'Brian, who manages one such charity shop, noted the importance of allowing newcomers to develop skills and contribute positively to society rather than being viewed merely as an additive.

The recent proposal by the Highland Council to apply for "sanctuary status," which would acknowledge its efforts to welcome and integrate refugees, was met with mixed feelings. While many praised the council's ongoing work, some councillors deemed the recognition unnecessary, fearing it could create a sense of alienation among locals. Councillor Duncan McDonald suggested instead that support for refugees should persist in a manner that values quiet, meaningful action over public acknowledgment.

The sense of community in the Highlands is often highlighted by anecdotes of kindness and support. Residents like Shona Street and Shona Maclaren, who run Sheila's Community Café, have harnessed a community-centric approach to embrace the cultural diversity that newcomers bring, from offering vegetarian options suitable for various dietary needs to providing safe spaces for women.

Despite these positive narratives, tension persists. Local sentiments voiced by some residents resonate with a broader caution—a desire to prioritise needs for locals amidst the stresses of a housing crisis. Diane Jeffrey, a taxi driver in Alness, pointed out that while she appreciates the integration efforts, the local community also requires fundamental support that should not be overshadowed by the influx of refugees. Calls for more substantial investment in local housing, rather than short-term oversights, echo throughout the Highland region as the public grapples with these complex, intertwining issues.

Ultimately, as Highland communities continue welcoming refugees, the interplay of cultural integration and local housing demands underscores a poignant and pressing challenge—one that necessitates a careful balancing act between compassion for newcomers and ensuring that the rights and needs of long-standing residents are not neglected.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14744701/The-ultra-woke-remote-Highlands-towns-want-migrants-despite-fighting-housing-crisis.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cv2g498zp33o> - Highland Council has announced a need for an additional 24,000 homes over the next decade to address a longstanding shortage of affordable housing. This initiative aims to accommodate the expected 8,400 jobs created by the new Inverness and Cromarty Firth Green Freeport. The council highlighted that, at the current construction rate, it would take over 20 years to meet this demand, necessitating an extra £2.8 billion investment to expedite the housing programme.
3. <https://www.heraldscotland.com/business_hq/23342555.highlands-islands-housing-crisis-hampering-economic-growth/> - The Highlands and Islands are facing a housing crisis that is hindering economic growth. Soaring house prices and an increase in buy-to-let holiday homes are driving workers away. The salmon farming industry, vital to the local economy, is struggling to recruit and retain staff due to the lack of affordable housing. Experts warn that urgent action is needed to address the housing shortage to prevent further economic decline in these regions.
4. <https://www.northern-times.co.uk/news/watch-lack-of-affordable-housing-in-the-highlands-adding-to-374141/> - Care providers in the Highlands are facing a staffing crisis exacerbated by a lack of affordable housing. Approximately 120 vacancies exist across 46 independent care homes in the region. The shortage of suitable accommodation is a significant barrier to attracting skilled workers, leading to creative solutions like building staff accommodation pods and exploring room-matching online platforms to address the issue.
5. <https://www.pressandjournal.co.uk/fp/news/highlands-islands/6485009/airbnb-highlands-flats-to-rent-msps-debate/> - The proliferation of Airbnb properties in the Highlands is contributing to the region's housing crisis. With only 23 properties available for rent across the entire region, the dominance of short-term lets is reducing the availability of long-term housing. Local MSPs and residents advocate for stricter regulations and control zones to manage the high concentration of short-term lets and alleviate the housing shortage.
6. <https://www.gbnews.com/news/scotland-highland-housing-crisis-young-people> - The Highlands and Islands are experiencing a housing crisis that threatens rural communities with depopulation. The Scottish Government declared a national housing emergency in May 2024, highlighting the urgent need for affordable housing. In Inverness, the capital of the Highlands, only seven properties were available for rent at the time, underscoring the severity of the housing shortage and its impact on local communities.
7. <https://www.heraldscotland.com/news/24439768.rural-voice-not-heard-scotlands-housing-crisis/> - The Highlands and Islands are facing a construction crisis due to rising costs and a shortage of tradespeople. Housing projects are stalling, and the region is experiencing a 30% premium to undertake developments. The lack of affordable housing is contributing to depopulation, with communities struggling to attract and retain residents. The construction sector's challenges are exacerbating the housing crisis, necessitating urgent intervention to meet housing needs.