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MOVING ON? DISPERSAL POLICY, ONWARD MIGRATION AND INTEGRATION OF REFUGEES IN THE UK

Community
Organisations
Briefing

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Moving on? Dispersal policy, onward migration and integration of refugees in the UK

Community organisations briefing

Since 2000, the UK has operated a policy of compulsory dispersal, designed to 'spread the burden' of housing asylum seekers across the UK and to discourage long-term settlement in London and the South East. This research enhances the understanding of refugee integration in the UK by focusing on the onward migration after dispersal of those who were granted refugee or humanitarian protection status.

This two-year (2012–14), ESRC-funded project:

- mapped the geography of onward migration among refugees dispersed across the UK as asylum seekers;
- explored the main factors that influence refugees' decision to move or stay in a town or city and how this affects the process of integration; and
- considered the policy implications for the different levels of government, service providers and the voluntary sector of the impact of UK dispersal upon refugee onward migration and integration.

The results are based on quantitative and qualitative research data from four different sites across the UK: Glasgow, Cardiff, Manchester and London. The data included 83 in-depth interviews with refugees, analysis of Refugee Integration and Employment Service (RIES) client data (2008–11) and Home Office Survey of New Refugees (SNR) data (2005–09).

The key findings of the study are:

- Dispersal policy has diversified the ethnic composition of UK cities, with evidence of growing numbers of refugees staying in the areas to which they were dispersed.
- Nevertheless, refugees who are dispersed as asylum seekers still have higher levels of onward migration than other new refugees.
- Multiple factors influence refugees' decisions to stay or move on from dispersal locations including co-ethnic and local communities, employment, education, life course, housing, place of dispersal, racism and health.
- Refugees may onward migrate or decide to stay after being dispersed, but neither of the two options can be regarded as always being the best for integration.

This briefing focuses on interactions with local communities and community organisations as factors influencing decisions to onward migrate or stay, as well as the impact of such interactions on refugee integration.

Policy context

UK dispersal policy began in 2000, a result of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999. Asylum applicants can opt to be 'fully supported' (i.e. receive housing and subsistence) or 'subsistence only'. If individuals require housing while awaiting their asylum decision (fully supported), they are dispersed across the country on a no-choice basis. Alternatively, they can choose to live with friends or family in any location (subsistence only). Once an individual is granted refugee status, those fully supported must leave their dispersal accommodation within 28 days. Section 11 of the Asylum and Immigration (Treatment of Claimants etc.) Act 2004 provides that asylum seekers establish a local connection to the dispersal site where they are provided accommodation. This means that refugees who require local authority housing must apply in the same area to which they were dispersed and is known as the 'local connection rule'. Local authorities can therefore refer individuals to the original dispersal area for housing claims, with the aim of reducing onward movement.¹

While key integration domains for refugees concern access and achievement within housing, employment, education and health, these structural factors are related to and mediated by the processes of social connections including social bonds, social bridges and social links, which connect to the process of acculturation.²

Integration strategies at the national,³ regional and local⁴ levels have acknowledged the importance of refugees' inclusion in local communities and the specific barriers to participation they face, such as negative perceptions and attitudes and fear of being seen as an outsider.⁵ At the same time, the role of community organisations, including refugee community organisations⁶ (RCOs) and religious institutions⁷ in fostering stability and encouraging social interactions has also been recognised.

Creating an integrated society is seen as a priority by the UK, Scottish and Welsh Governments.⁸ In England, the Government's approach focuses on creating the conditions for integration – enabling everyone to play a full part in national and local life – with an emphasis on locally-led action and limited government involvement. The Welsh Government promotes community cohesion – the ability of all communities to function and grow in

¹ Different rules apply in Scotland where asylum seekers are not deemed to have established a local connection as a result of being provided with dispersal accommodation there.

² Ager A. and Strang A. 2008. Understanding integration: a conceptual framework. *Journal of Refugee Studies* 21(2): 166–91.

³ Home Office. 2000. *Full and Equal Citizens: A Strategy for the Integration of Refugees into the United Kingdom*; Home Office. 2005. *Integration Matters: A National Strategy for Refugee Integration*; Home Office. 2009. *Moving On Together: Government's Recommitment to Supporting Refugees*.

⁴ Scottish Government. 2013. *New Scots: Integrating Refugees In Scotland's Communities*; Welsh Assembly Government. 2008. *Refugee Inclusion Strategy*; Yorkshire and Humber Regional Migration Partnership. 2009. *Finding Sanctuary, Enriching Yorkshire and Humber – the Regional Integration Strategy for Refugees and Asylum Seekers (2009-2011)*; Greater London Authority. 2009. *London Enriched: The Mayor's Strategy for Refugee Integration in London*.

⁵ Phillimore J. 2010. Refugees, acculturation strategies, stress and integration. *Journal of Social Policy* 40(3): 575–93.

⁶ Griffiths D., Sigona, N. and Zetter, R. 2005. *Refugee Community Organisations and Dispersal*. Policy Press: Bristol.

⁷ Allen R. 2010. The bonding and bridging roles of religious institutions for refugees in a non-gateway context. *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 33(6): 1049–68.

⁸ Department for Communities and Local Government. 2012. *Creating the Conditions for Integration*; Welsh Government. 2014. *Community Cohesion National Delivery Plan 2014 -2016*; Scottish Government. 2013. *New Scots: Integrating Refugees In Scotland's Communities*.

harmony together – through a specific strategy and a National Delivery Plan. The Scottish Government aims to create resilient, supportive and inclusive communities, enabling individuals to fulfil their aspirations, and has placed the need to build such inclusive communities in its national outcomes framework. So far, however, the needs and experiences of asylum seekers and refugees have not been fully included in initiatives aimed at developing integrated communities. The need to address this gap also arises under the Equality Act 2010, which stipulates that all public authorities are subject to the general equality duty, requiring them to eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation; advance equality of opportunity; and foster good relations between people who share a relevant protected characteristic and those who do not.⁹

Dispersal, community organisations and refugee integration: findings and policy implications

Building bridges with host communities and enabling refugees to participate actively in civic, political and community life is key to refugee integration. The research explored how interactions with local communities and community organisations influence mobility decisions as well as how they impact on the integration of refugees.

Key findings

Onward migration decisions are informed by:

- interactions with British and other residents in neighbourhoods or in the larger community; and
- difficulties refugees encounter in interacting with people more generally.

Interactions with local communities and community organisations foster integration:

- shared activities that transcend ethnicity cultivate positive feelings about place and encourage stability.

Discussion

Concerning the impact of interactions with local communities and community organisations on refugees' decisions to move on or stay in their dispersal location, the research found that:

- Interactions with British and other residents can influence onward migration decisions, whether they occur in neighbourhoods or in the larger community.
- Refugees struggle to interact with people generally, often adversely affecting any sense of being at home in the UK and leading to onward migration.

⁹ The relevant protected characteristics are: age, disability, gender reassignment, pregnancy and maternity, race (including ethnicity and nationality), religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation.

Despite refugees' desire to interact with people from various communities, they sometimes encounter negative experiences as an 'outsider', even in ethnically diverse areas, encouraging onward migration. As one refugee explained:

'You can speak very well like English people and they know that [you] come from the foreign country. They ignore us, they ignore my children. For example because of our pronunciation, for example we are speaking my language and they heard some of the words in my language and repeat it and laugh at us.' [Sarah, F, Iran, Salford].

The fear of being identified as an outsider often leads to refugees lacking confidence to seek relationships with local people, causing them to withdraw from social contact, feel isolated and want to onward migrate. Conversely, positive interactions with those living in the neighbourhood or in the larger community encourage refugees to stay. These results show that, in addition to complying with their public sector equality duty and taking a leading role in maintaining and fostering community cohesion, local authorities could help overcome social isolation and discourage refugees from moving on by creating the conditions for such positive interactions.

Interactions with local communities and community organisations were found to influence a sense of belonging and had an impact on refugee integration. The research found that:

- **Shared activities that transcend ethnicity, such as through religious institutions or volunteering, cultivate positive feelings about place and encourage stability.**

Volunteering was highlighted as an important way to develop bridging relationships with British people as well as bonds with asylum seekers and refugees:

'When I joined [this Refugee Community Organisation], I learned so many things, how to talk to people and get experience ... My community is important for me because of sharing information and sharing fun. Sometimes we help people from our community, but also I like to communicate with people from other communities. I like all kinds of people ... Sometimes I could live without [other Eritreans and Sudanese]. I don't want to be like people who stay here a long time just in their community and can't speak English. It's really important to meet different people and get to know other communities better.' [Moon, M, Eritrea, Manchester].

'I volunteered in an organisation [local charity] ... I would train their volunteers on how to engage with young people. They work with gangs in Manchester. So I would recruit volunteers and train them and release them to do it, so that filled in the time for me greatly [while awaiting his asylum decision].' [Rodrick, M, Zimbabwe, Manchester].

Volunteering accelerates integration by allowing refugees to become active members of the community, build relationships and gain valuable skills. This positive impact should be reflected in policies aimed at promoting integrat-

ed communities. By providing information about volunteering opportunities available in the area, local authorities could facilitate refugee integration and encourage them to remain in their dispersal location. Although asylum seekers are generally not allowed to work while their claim is under consideration, they are permitted to undertake volunteering at any stage of the asylum process.¹⁰ Hence, information about volunteering opportunities should be provided as soon as possible after dispersal. Volunteering should, however, be viewed as a step towards paid employment, after being granted status, rather than a substitute for this and individuals should never feel coerced to volunteer.

The research also found that religious institutions play a key role in diversifying refugees' networks while maintaining links with co-nationals. As one refugee explained:

'The Methodist Church was close [to our house] and we try to go on Sunday. We met a lot of people there and made friends, friends from Nigeria, Ethiopia, Eritrea ... All my neighbours are English and they are so nice ... It's good to have diversity. It's good to have commonality with Eritreans because we have the same culture and language and background. These things are good, but we must live with everyone, so it doesn't matter where people come from. We are the same in front of God.' [Abnet, F, Eritrea, Salford].

The results of the research also indicate that refugees do not wish to limit social interactions to their ethnic communities. Instead, refugees actively seek exposure to different ethnic groups and UK nationals, recognising the importance of such connections for successful integration. In addition to volunteering and religious institutions, participation in community events as well as everyday encounters were highlighted as important for fostering a sense of belonging. Therefore, local authorities could facilitate integration by encouraging refugees' participation in community events and creating opportunities and spaces where people from various backgrounds can meet and interact.

Recommendations

The Department for Communities and Local Government should:

- ensure asylum seekers and refugees provide input into and benefit from national initiatives for promoting equality, integrated communities.

The Scottish and Welsh Governments should:

- ensure asylum seekers and refugees provide input into and benefit from initiatives for promoting equality and integrated communities.

Local authorities should:

- in partnership with refugee-assisting NGOs, map community groups, faith groups and refugee community organisations in the local area, identify gaps in funding and services and develop a strategy to address them;

¹⁰Home Office. 2014. *Asylum Policy Instruction: Permission to Work*.

- develop and provide information packages to asylum seekers and refugees about volunteering opportunities in the local area;
- consult, inform and encourage refugees to participate in cultural, recreational and sports activities; and
- develop and implement strategies to disseminate accurate information about asylum seekers and refugees which address local residents' concerns.

The results presented are drawn from the project report: Stewart, E. and Shaffer, M. [2015] *Moving on? Dispersal Policy, Onward Migration and Integration of Refugees in the UK*, University of Strathclyde, Glasgow.

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