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

Housing
Briefing

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

Housing 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 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 housing as a factor influencing decisions to onward migrate or stay, as well as its impact 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). Since March 2012, the provision of asylum accommodation has been delivered through private companies contracted by the Home Office.¹ This replaced the previous arrangement under which suppliers encompassed a mix of private providers, local authorities and the voluntary sector. Once granted status, those fully supported must leave their dispersal accommodation within 28 days. Refugees have the same rights to access housing as other UK nationals. In addition to a general duty to provide advice and information about homelessness, free of charge to any person in their district, and to prevent homelessness, local authorities are obliged to provide accommodation to those who are homeless or threatened with homelessness² and in priority need³. Additionally, local authorities may limit assistance to those who have established ‘local connection’ through residence, employment, family associations or special circumstances. Section 11 of the Asylum and Immigration [Treatment of Claimants etc.] Act 2004 stipulates 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. Local authorities can refer individuals to the original dispersal area for housing claims with the aim of reducing onward movement.

As housing is a devolved matter, a number of policy differences exist between England, Scotland and Wales. In Scotland, a refugee is not deemed to have formed a local connection with the local authority area where they lived in dispersal accommodation. In 2012, priority need was abolished, expanding the scope of applicants entitled to assistance. In 2014, amendments were introduced in Wales, placing a duty on local authorities to help secure suitable accommodation for those homeless or threatened with homelessness, regardless of priority need, and extending the period of eligibility for assistance from 28 to 56 days.⁴

While having appropriate housing is essential for providing stability and facilitating refugee integration, research has shown that destitution and homelessness are realities for refugees in the move-on period,⁵ as the time is insufficient to find accommodation, access mainstream benefits and explore the labour market. The lack of the targeted refugee integration sup-

¹ Under the Commercial and Operational Managers Procuring Asylum Support Services (COMPASS), the provision of accommodation across the UK is organised into six regions with three contractors – G4S, Serco and Clearel – each awarded a contract for two regions.

² A person is threatened with homelessness if it is likely that s/he will become homeless within 28 days in England and 56 days in Scotland and Wales.

³ An individual (or a person with whom they reside) is considered to have a priority need if there is a pregnancy or there are children or if there is vulnerability because of old age, mental illness, physical disability or other special reasons.

⁴ Housing (Wales) Act 2014.

⁵ Carnet P., Blanchard C. and Apollonio F. 2014. *The Move-On Period: An Ordeal for New Refugees*, British Red Cross, London; Doyle L. 2014. *28 Days Later: the Experiences of New Refugees in the UK*. Refugee Council, London.

port which had been provided nationally under RIES until 2011, and included assistance with housing, exacerbates the problem. Following the change in administering accommodation, there is less flexibility to allow refugees to remain in dispersal accommodation until they can access mainstream support and suitable housing. Renting privately is difficult because of limited financial resources and guarantors, with refugee integration loans, usually limited to £400, insufficient to cover a deposit and advance rent.

Previous integration strategies at the national,⁶ regional and local⁷ level have acknowledged the importance of stable housing, the obstacles faced by refugees in accessing it and the need for support. Despite these efforts, however, barriers to securing housing persist, exerting a negative impact on refugees' integration prospects.

Dispersal, housing and refugee integration: findings and policy implications

Housing is a key factor that impacts on refugee mobility and integration, as it can affect stability as well as access to services, education and employment.

Key findings

Onward migration decisions are influenced by:

- continued movement during the asylum process; and
- experiences of homelessness after the grant of refugee status.

Access to stable housing is closely related to refugee integration:

- widespread experiences of housing instability, transience and insecurity impact on the long-term integration of refugees.

Discussion

Regarding the impact of housing on refugees' onward migration decisions, the research found that:

- individuals who move repeatedly during the asylum process have a lack of local knowledge, roots and local connections; and
- continued movement during the asylum period is destabilising (physically and mentally) and can lead to onward migration after grant of status.

One refugee described the typical experience of those seeking asylum:

⁶ 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*.

⁷ 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*.

'I just stayed two days in [Cardiff hostel] because it was full, and then we have been sent to different hotels ... After I have been sent to three different hotels, finally they put me in a NASS accommodation. When I got my status, I received NASS letters to give me 28 days to leave the place, and when I got that letter I straightaway came to London.' (Yasin, M, Syria, Cardiff).

If refugees are to be encouraged to stay at their dispersal location, moving accommodation repeatedly during the asylum process should be avoided. Where moving to a different accommodation is necessary, asylum seekers should be given the choice to remain in the same area. The COMPASS model has resulted in local authorities having no direct responsibility for the management and delivery of dispersal accommodation, leaving them with limited opportunities to intervene when the accommodation does not meet required standards or is deemed inappropriate. Regional and local authorities should be given a greater role in the oversight of accommodation provision, which would also allow them to better plan and discharge duties in relation to service provision.

The research findings indicate that being granted refugee status does not end housing instability:

- **Widespread experiences of homelessness were identified after grant of status, which can lead to high levels of onward migration as well as negatively impacting upon access to adult and children's education, health and employment.**
- **The 28 days policy may force refugees to move on if housing is unavailable locally.**

For most refugees, the 28-day period during which they have to find accommodation and make a transition to mainstream benefits is insufficient, resulting in destitution, homelessness and refugees being more likely to move on. A lack of information and knowledge about potential destinations means refugees rely upon social networks, which can result in poorly informed decisions and expectations not being met. It is therefore essential that local authorities provide accessible and reliable information and advice about refugees' housing rights and housing options in the area. Local authorities have a duty to prevent homelessness and should engage with the Home Office and housing providers to ensure refugees who have been granted status are not left without accommodation. The introduction of Universal Credit could potentially exacerbate the problem further, as it envisages a single monthly payment of all benefits, one month in arrears, and no direct payment for housing costs to landlords. The change could put refugees at a significant disadvantage and increase the risk of homelessness.

Single refugees constitute a large proportion of recent arrivals. They are often classified as not being in priority need and therefore face a greater risk of homelessness. It should be noted that the definition of priority need includes persons who are vulnerable for any special reason and the relevant guidance⁸ stipulates that refugees may fall into this category as a result of

⁸ Department for Communities and Local Government. 2006. *Homelessness Code of Guidance for Local Authorities*.

their experience of persecution or trauma in the country of origin or hardship en route to the UK. Adopting specific guidance on the assessment of priority need in relation to refugees, taking into account their vulnerability, would help prevent or alleviate homelessness and could encourage refugees to remain in the dispersal area.

Additionally, refugees face a number of obstacles in accessing privately rented accommodation. Given that an overwhelming majority of those granted status are unlikely to have savings sufficient to cover the deposit and rent payment in advance, providing loans and preferably, where possible, grants to refugees would have a positive impact on preventing homelessness.

Despite the aim for refugees to remain in dispersal sites, the research found that the local connection rule was ineffective in two main ways:

- **The local connection rule may only prevent onward migration in the short-term, with refugees planning to move on after some time.**
- **The local connection rule can prevent subsequent desired return to the original dispersal site.**

As one refugee who was dispersed to Wales but migrated onward to London explained:

'When I came here [to London], they refused to give me any accommodation because they told me I'm intentionally homeless. Then I went and lived with a friend for six months and after six months I have access to local housing. The problem now if I go to [Wales], the housing will consider me as intentionally homeless [again] so I must get my permanent accommodation in London and then I can swap and go there [to Wales].' [Omar, M, Iran, London].

In order to alleviate some of the difficulties which the local connection rule presents for refugees, local authorities could develop clear guidance on its application to refugees, including its discretionary nature and any flexibility in relation to what constitutes a local connection. In particular, the 'family associations' criterion could be applied more broadly, in line with existing guidance, to relatives with whom there are sufficiently close links or dependency.

- **Widespread experiences of housing instability, transience and insecurity impact on the long-term integration of refugees.**

The lack of stable housing delays access to education and reduces the opportunity for contact with people and learning English. These results underscore the necessity of introducing a coordinated multi-agency approach to ensure refugees granted status are not left without accommodation and support. Refugees must receive appropriate assistance to access the benefits and services to which they are entitled, so as to facilitate integration. Early intervention, preventing homelessness and promoting stability should be the guiding principles of this approach.

Recommendations

The UK Government should:

- ensure asylum seekers are placed in appropriate, stable accommodation immediately on dispersal and the time spent in initial accommodation is minimised (where moving is necessary, asylum seekers should be given the choice to remain in the same area);
- consider contracting the provision of asylum-seeker accommodation to devolved governments and/or local authorities;
- work with local authorities and the DWP to ensure refugees are supported until they are in receipt of mainstream benefits and have access to housing; and
- increase the amount of integration loans available to refugees to cover a deposit and rent in advance.

Local authorities should:

- develop clear guidance on the assessment of priority need and the flexible application of the 'local connection rule' to refugees, especially in relation to 'family associations';
- engage with the Home Office, housing providers and the DWP to advocate for placing asylum seekers in stable and appropriate accommodation, and to establish a coordination mechanism to discharge their duty to prevent homelessness;
- develop housing information packages for refugees specific to their circumstances and the local context, including the local connection rule, and ensure staff have the capacity to provide advice and assistance tailored to refugees' needs;
- consider introducing loans or, where possible, grants to refugees to cover a deposit and rent in advance; and
- develop, coordinate and monitor a local refugee integration strategy, promoting a multi-agency approach.

The Department for Work and Pensions should:

- ensure the implementation of Universal Credit takes into account the specific needs and circumstances of refugees; and
- ensure Jobcentre Plus staff have sufficient knowledge of the barriers to accessing housing, employment and welfare facing refugees, as well as adequate skills to address them by providing training, including through partnership with specialist refugee providers.

The Scottish Government should:

- use the administrative powers to be devolved in relation to Universal Credit to prevent homelessness and support refugees in accessing stable and appropriate housing as well as maintaining a healthy tenancy.

The Welsh Government should:

- ensure sufficient administrative resources are in place to cope with the consequences of the extension of the period of eligibility for homelessness assistance to 56 days; and
- revise the Refugee Integration Strategy in relation to housing in partnership with local authorities, the DWP, refugee-assisting NGOs and other relevant stakeholders with a view to agreeing on concrete actions and the time-frame for their implementation.

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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