

Integration works:

The role of organisations in refugee
integration in Yorkshire and the Humber

Policy Briefing

December 2020



Background

The integration of all migrants in the United Kingdom remains a ‘hot topic’ of political, policy and public concern. A lack of integration has been seen as a key driver in issues such as community cohesion, the EU Referendum and poorer outcomes for some migrant communities. The impacts are particularly acute for refugees due to their vulnerability, largely as a result of the pre-migration reasons for their arrival in the UK.

Refugees are individuals who are granted leave to remain in the UK because they have a ‘well-founded fear of persecution’, as defined in the 1951 Refugee Convention. They have largely the same rights as citizens, including the right to work, and can claim welfare benefits. Most refugees become British citizens.

In 2018, the national Integrated Communities Strategy Green Paper and a related Action Plan were published. Creating an integrated society can be challenging. Integration requires a wide range of people, organisations and institutions to come together and create an inclusive society. Together they can help ensure refugees reach their full potential, their rights are met and their marginalisation is prevented.

In the UK 133,094 individuals have been granted refugee status in the last ten years, of whom approximately 12% live in Yorkshire and the Humber, although exact figures are unavailable (Migration Yorkshire, 2019; UNHCR, 2020). This total includes refugees who arrived in the UK as asylum-seekers and through government resettlement schemes.

There is a growing evidence base about the experiences of refugees, as well as the work of national organisations such as agencies and officials who are involved in refugee status determination and immigration and border enforcement. This research fills a vital gap in knowledge by focusing on the experiences of organisations in the middle – between refugees and powerful national organisations – who are doing the everyday work of supporting refugee integration. This study, based on interviews with organisations in the Yorkshire and Humber region, offers a rich picture as to three main issues:

1. Who is involved in ‘doing’ refugee integration and how?
2. How do policies and strategies at the local, regional and national levels ‘govern’ refugee integration?
3. What are organisations’ ‘evaluations’ of the successes and challenges of refugee integration?



Key findings

What organisations are involved in delivering integration and what work do they do?

- Organisations play a crucial role in shaping refugee integration. Their involvement is part of the two-way nature of integration, which requires actions by both refugees and other actors in society.
- Organisations are engaged in a wide range of activities to support refugee integration, including improving the skills and knowledge of refugees, ensuring public services are fully accessible to refugees and mediating how refugees interact with longer-standing residents.
- There are a wide range of organisations who impact integration – through both their actions and inaction – but are often ‘overlooked’ in existing research and policy, including media organisations, housing associations, arts, culture and heritage organisations, universities and employers.

How is policy experienced, and how is refugee work governed and led?

- Policy related to refugee integration is underdeveloped and underfunded and was not seen as offering guidance to organisations working in this area.
- Organisations largely see national policy as creating a ‘hostile environment’ that hinders their work or having insufficient relevance to their specific context.
- Strategic leadership on refugee integration was seen as lacking, as was a clear vision across sectors about how to drive forward successful integration activities.

What are the challenges and what works in refugee integration?

- **Employment:** There are very few tailored recruitment or training schemes being offered by employers in the region that organisations saw as offering routes to paid employment.
- **English language:** Provision varied in terms of quality and quantity across the region, with many organisations offering informal settings for refugees to practise speaking English and gain confidence.
- **Health:** Individual practitioners and specialist providers aim to improve understanding of migrant health as an area of research and practice that is better able to meet the specific health and access needs of refugees.
- **Welfare:** Refugees face challenges accessing Universal Credit and housing, especially during the 28-day ‘move-on’ period. Tailored provision means resettled refugees access these services on arrival in the UK.
- **Social relations:** Organisations aim to establish and strengthen ties within societies through a range of activities, with personal contact with, or accounts of, individual refugees seen as important for changing attitudes.

In what ways does the wider structural context shape the integration of refugees?

- Resettlement schemes established strong partnerships in the region and brought new actors in the area of refugee integration. The schemes also offered comprehensive and tailored engagement with refugees, but organisations were concerned by the unequal provision for non-resettled refugees.
- Personalised, rights-based ways of working, particularly among voluntary sector organisations, were seen as beneficial in the context of housing, education, employment and health, although often hindered by a shortage of resources.
- Organisational leadership was a challenge for some organisations who engage with refugee integration outside their core activities. They struggled to ensure the embeddedness of the actions of motivated individuals and to influence the strategic direction of their organisations, often due to a lack of experience or knowledge of the area on the part of senior staff members.
- Partnerships, on the whole, were strong and valued, particularly within the voluntary sector, although some organisations, such as funders, did not have strong links with key actors in the area.
- Funding as a whole is sparse and, when granted, imposes challenging delivery constraints on organisations. Funders attempted to weigh up long-term sustainable funding against making more flexible and diverse grants.

Policy implications

The study has policy implications for a range of actors, including policy actors, public sector organisations and employers, as well as for all organisations. These are as follows:

Policy actors

There is a need to develop a clear national policy on refugee integration, specifically one that provides practical guidance to the diverse range of actors involved in integration.

At the national and regional levels, any approach to policy making should focus on actions that can guide organisations as to best practice and, importantly, be supported by additional funding that is agile enough to support initiatives over the long term.

In order to overcome decades of antipathy towards national policy making, regional and local authorities should be encouraged to develop refugee integration policies that are grounded in genuine co-production, bringing together refugees, longer-standing communities and diverse organisations from across sectors to ensure mutual ownership.

Within the Yorkshire and Humber region Migration Yorkshire are well placed to grow and make visible their strategic leadership within the region and adopt a clear co-ordinating role in refugee integration.

There should be an end of the suite of policies that are known collectively as the ‘hostile environment’. The 28-day move-on period should be extended, and there should be a fully funded strategy to ensure refugees can access high-quality ESOL classes and tailored employment support.

Public sector organisations

The work of public sector organisations in this area is often pivotal and wide-ranging, and this should be appropriately funded and co-ordinated.

There should be a focus on strengthening cross-sector partnerships that are focused on sharing and learning and are meaningful and sustainable.

Public authorities already have access to a clear framework to help address integration challenges in the form of the 2010 Equality Act. The Public Sector Equality Duty sets out the positive steps public sector bodies should take to ensure their services are fully accessible. Refugees are protected under the Equality Act and are directly protected under the characteristic of ‘race’. Public authorities should therefore consider the impacts of policies on refugees in the production of Equality Impact Assessments.

Employers

Employers across sectors have a key role to play in the integration of refugees. Commercial businesses especially should be supported to offer tailored training and recruitment schemes to assist refugees into the labour market.

All organisations

All organisations working to support refugees should embed personalised approaches to supporting refugees in order to more adequately and efficiently meet the needs and harness the strengths of individuals.

The wider longer-standing community should be engaged with via talks and training schemes that include accounts of refugees’ experiences to change attitudes and improve understanding of refugee issues and rights.

There should be ways to showcase and celebrate the wide array of activities that facilitate refugee integration in order to share best practice and build a positive consensus about the value of this work and the wider contribution it makes to helping societies become more inclusive and equal.

The study

The study consists of 92 semi-structured interviews completed between June 2019 and August 2020 with representatives from organisations based across the Yorkshire and Humber region. In total, we engaged with 117 respondents. The organisations we consulted include: voluntary sector organisations (both refugee- and non-refugee-specific); service providers related to education, housing, police and healthcare; public authority officers, including elected officials; and representatives from the transport sector, arts, culture and heritage organisations, faith-based organisations, the media, private sector businesses and funders.

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