



# Refugee Council and University of Birmingham

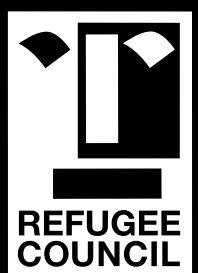
## Refugees' Experiences of Integration

### Executive summary

**Gaby Atfield**  
**Kavita Brahmhatt**  
**Therese O'Toole**

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UNIVERSITY OF  
BIRMINGHAM





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# Executive summary

- This report presents findings from a two-year qualitative study of Refugees' Experiences of Integration, carried out in partnership by the Refugee Council and the University of Birmingham. The aim of the study was to explore the social aspects of refugees' integration, particularly in relation to how these were experienced in two different localities and across different groups of refugees.
- This research uses the term 'refugee' in an inclusive way, to refer to those who are seeking refuge as well as those who have been formally granted refugee status. The report makes reference to asylum seekers, where specific issues arise as a consequence of their legal status that have particular implications for their experiences of integration.
- The study examined: the impact of different local contexts on experiences of integration; the nature and impact of refugees' access to and participation in social networks and how this facilitated or constrained their integration; and refugees' own conceptions of, and aspirations regarding, integration into British society. The gathering of data on these issues was undertaken with a view to contributing to local service provision, the responsiveness of refugee integration policies to refugees' perspectives and aspirations, and knowledge and awareness of forms of support for and among refugee groups.
- The study is based on 116 semi-structured qualitative interviews with refugees in Haringey and Dudley: comprising 45 initial interviews in each area, with a further 26 follow-up interviews with a sub-sample of respondents. In both areas, the research team gathered profiling information and data on: refugee populations (i.e. size, distribution, composition, etc.); the nature and development of statutory refugee services and integration policies; and the presence and work of third sector voluntary and community organisations working with refugees.
- The study found that locality had a very strong impact on refugees' experiences of integration, particularly as a consequence of the different histories and experiences of refugee settlement that were evident in the two areas in which we worked.
- Instances of good practice were evident in Dudley, where there is a relatively short history of development of refugee services, as well as in Haringey, where these have been in place for much longer. Thus, it is not always the case that new areas of settlement need to learn from established areas, good practices can emerge from both types of experience.
- Refugees' own conceptions of, and aspirations for, integration were clustered into three main themes: the first focused on functional aspects of integration, relating particularly to employment, education, English language acquisition and housing, and these were of primary concern to most refugees; the second related to more subjective and emotional aspects of belonging and draw attention to the importance of social networks, social spaces and contact with settled communities for refugees' sense of integration; the third key theme related to equality and to the aspirations of refugees for equal citizenship,

employment, housing and education rights, for both functional and symbolic reasons. This area of focus simultaneously draws attention to the lack of equality in these areas and the obstacles that this poses for processes of integration in other areas of life.

- The study paid particular attention to refugees' access to and participation in social networks. The key benefits that social networks generated that were identified by our respondents include:
  - Informational ('know-how') and material resources that fulfil immediate functional needs;
  - Emotional resources that provide a sense of belonging and social connection or enhance coping strategies or self-confidence;
  - Capacity-building resources that enable people to define and fulfil longer term goals.
- Much research on social networks and relationships distinguishes between the thick or 'bonded' ties that are generated by networks comprised of people with shared ethnic or cultural identities, and the thinner 'bridged' ties generated by those networks that are comprised of members with different identities (but perhaps shared interests). Whilst networks based on bonded social ties are often identified by researchers as important for generating close relationships, coping mechanisms and resources to help members 'get by', bridged social networks are seen as being based on connections that promote wider social and community cohesion and can enable members to 'get ahead'.
- Our research found that bonded social networks were primarily based on shared nationality or language and could be formally or informally constituted. They were particularly important sources of informational, material and emotional resources.
- Bridged social networks were primarily formed through social contacts in neighbourhoods, through childcare activities, attending ESOL courses and places of worship, and engaging in voluntary work. Respondents considered these networks important for generating informational and emotional resources.
- Resources enabling refugees to 'get ahead' were generated by both types of network. Bonded networks tended to provide more material resources in response to immediate needs (such as money or access to employment) and emotional support. Bonded networks also generated more enduring social relationships, providing longer-term mechanisms for social integration than those generated by bridging networks. They were also regarded by some refugees as recognising and meeting their particular and specialised needs more appropriately.
- Factors influencing participation in bonded and bridged social networks were highly context dependent. The characteristics of refugee and non-refugee populations played a role, as did personal characteristics, including gender, age and family status.
- The meanings and benefits that are derived from social networks can change over time

particularly as a consequence of the changing needs of refugees. For example, social networks are often very important for recently settled refugees in meeting material and informational needs. Over time, these needs may change, with members finding that the network is more significant for generating emotional or capacity building resources.

- The benefits of belonging to a social network were undermined by constraints relating to immigration status and lack of access to economic and social resources. Whilst social networks do play a role in facilitating integration in many ways, it is important to bear in mind that there are a range of factors that lie outside of social networks that also determine integration processes.
- Barriers to refugees' abilities to access and maintain social networks included:
  - Lack of choice, particularly in relation to functional processes, such as housing, employment, education and training options.
  - Lack of material resources, which inhibited access to social networks or ability to engage with their activities; or this placed pressure on the network as a whole in terms of its capacity to address individuals' needs (but, even with few resources, we found that refugees' networks were a key source of material resources for their members).
  - Immigration status, both in terms of individual entitlements, but also in symbolic terms related to feelings of belonging and experiences of exclusion.
  - Lack of employment, or employment in small niche enterprises working alongside co-nationals, which meant that employment did not necessarily widen refugees' social networks.
- Some sites and organisations played an important role in generating social networks and integration. Faith groups provided access to a range of resources. Also public and statutory actors played a decisive role, particularly NASS<sup>1</sup>, social workers and Local Authority liaison officers. This proved particularly invaluable to newly-arrived people. Such contacts not only humanised people's experiences of involvement with those agencies, they provided them with immediate access to the informational, emotional and social resources found within social

networks that facilitated their settlement, mobility, participation in legal and statutory processes and ability to build social relationships.

- NASS has a particularly important role to play in the early phases of settlement. However, the positive aspects of NASS's work in this regard were sometimes undermined by a lack of continuity once people had been processed. More attention should be paid to how social networking sites and opportunities can be maintained once people's contact with NASS has ceased, and local statutory and voluntary services could play a role in this.
- Schools have a role to play in social integration. Many younger refugees reported severe obstacles to social integration as a consequence of negative associations attached to their status as refugees or asylum seekers that were expressed and reproduced in the school environment. Additionally, those respondents who reported being subject to harassment, attack or racist abuse in their homes or local areas had very often been subjected to this by children or young people.
- Overall, the research found that refugees do place importance on the role of social networks in facilitating their settlement and integration, with participation in informal networks most in evidence. Participation in bridged social networks was impeded by a number of structural obstacles relating to lack of resources (and ability to access resources through employment for example), English language skills, cultural literacy and the stigma attached to refugees and asylum seekers.
- The report concludes with a series of more detailed recommendations on how government, public, statutory and voluntary sector agencies can contribute to refugees' access to and participation in social networks.

<sup>1</sup> At the time of writing, NASS was the government's body responsible for delivering asylum support. Since the inception of the New Asylum Model however, the structure of asylum support has changed considerably. With continued re-structuring expected, the Refugee Council consider asylum support to fall under the general remit of the Border and Immigration Agency (BIA).



The Refugee Council is the largest charity working with asylum seekers and refugees across the UK. We campaign for their rights and help them to rebuild their lives in safety.



240–250 Ferndale Road London SW9 8BB

T 020 7346 6700 F 020 7346 6701

[www.refugeecouncil.org.uk](http://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk)

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