



Understanding the experiences of refugee living in Wales...what next?

This briefing paper provides a summary of the discussion and conclusions of a one day-symposium inviting responses to *Refugees Living in Wales: Skills, Experiences and Barriers to Inclusion*. The symposium was organised by the Centre for Migration Policy Research (CMPR) and took place at Swansea University on Friday 18th June 2010. The research, which was undertaken by CMPR and launched at The Senedd in November 2009, highlights four key themes of housing, employment and employability, health and well-being and racism and discrimination which formed the basis of action-oriented workshop discussions. These workshops culminated in the identification of five key areas which symposium participants consider should be prioritised in future work relating to these themes.

BACKGROUND AND POLICY CONTEXT OF THE REPORT

The survey of refugees living in Wales which was undertaken by CMPR represents a pragmatic response to the lack of information currently available to inform policy and practice in relation to refugee integration. Dispersal means that since 2001 asylum seekers have come to Wales in much larger numbers than previously (a total of 2,322 asylum seekers were living in Wales at end of May 2009). Publication of the *Refugee Inclusion Strategy* in June 2008 has further increased the need for robust baseline information for service delivery and to monitor progress towards outcomes.

It was in this context CMPR undertook a survey of 123 refugees in the latter half of 2008. Survey respondents came from a wide range of backgrounds, and more than half had been living in Wales for more than 5 years. The survey questions were structured around a number of key domains that existing evidence suggests are of central importance for refugee integration. The key findings of the research are:

Housing

Almost 90% of refugees are living in rented accommodation with only 4% owning their own property. Some are effectively homeless. The vast majority of refugees described significant housing problems including lack of permanency, poor conditions, overcrowding, problems with neighbours and cost.

Employment and employability

Refugees living in Wales are more highly educated than those born in the UK. Although two-thirds had been employed in their country of origin, less than a third were in employment at the time of the survey, often in jobs for which they were over-qualified. Barriers to appropriate employment include a lack of recognition of previous experience/qualifications, poor standards of ESOL training and lack of access to volunteering opportunities outside the refugee sector.

Health and well-being

There appear to be significant improvements in physical, and particularly, mental health for most refugees after arrival. Despite this, a significant proportion of respondents felt that both their physical and mental health had deteriorated (22.8% and 38.2% respectively). This decline was attributed to the stress and isolation associated with the asylum process, refugee status, and separation from home and family. There were some issues with securing access to GPs and appropriate medical consultants

Racism and discrimination

Half of all those who participated in the survey had experienced negative public attitudes and racism whilst living in Wales. This is significantly higher than other survey exploring ethnic and racial discrimination. Discrimination in the workplace and in dealings with agencies and service providers, including the police was reported as well as verbal and physical abuse (often by youths), and damage to property. Despite this, a significant proportion (61.8%) feels that they 'belong to the neighbourhood' and more than three quarters indicated their intention to stay in Wales.

There is a need for ongoing research and information-gathering in relation to the experiences of refugees – and asylum seekers – living in Wales in order to monitor the impact of policies for refugee inclusion.

RESPONSES FROM KEY STAKEHOLDERS TO THE REPORT

Key stakeholders were invited to respond to the main findings and conclusions of the research.

The **Wales Strategic Migration Partnership (WSMP)** represented by Councillor Gwenllian Lansdown is undertaking further work to find out to explore the factors influencing public attitudes towards asylum seekers and refugees living in Wales. In addition the WSMP is seeking to improve legislation surrounding asylum seeker and refugee employment policies. In particular the WSMP is working with organisations outside the refugee sector to ensure refugees have a positive experience of work.

Fides Vyubuzima provided a refugee perspective on the findings of the research. She suggested that there is a need for better policy and support surrounding the transition from asylum seeker to refugee. The waiting period before benefits start and receiving a National Insurance number in order to work etc can lead to families experiencing months of poverty. There should be more 'conversion' schemes such as those available for doctors and for other professions e.g. accountancy to allow refugees to transfer their skills and apply them in the UK. There is a need for education and training schemes for young refugees who may have missed out on education and for increased training opportunities outside the refugee sector to build confidence and enable refugees to engage and work in mainstream organisations and society

The **Welsh Refugee Council (WRC)** represented by Kate Smart is working with other organisations to secure funding for a specialist mental health advice and referral service to be established in Wales. In addition the WRC is working with police and community safety partnerships to address issues of racism. The WRC hosts refugee organisations within the WRC offices and offers training courses and refugee led forums. It is working in partnership with University of Wales Institute Cardiff (UWIC) to improve access to Refugee Integration and Employment (RIES) courses. The WRC is aware of the need to improve its response to refugee employment issues. This work is currently mainly undertaken by Displaced People in Action (DPIA).

The **Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA)** represented by Anna Morgan is working to provide adequate housing, education and address issues of access to public services. The WLGA acknowledged the need to increase the role of community safety partnerships to combat racism and discrimination.

Finally, the **Welsh Assembly Government (WAG)** represented by Daisy Cole informed symposium participants that £1 million has been allocated to organisations working with refugees and asylum seekers in Wales. A multi-agency employment and training group has been established in response to the findings of the research. In addition an ESOL advisory group and will carry out scoping work on care sector work experience for refugees. WAG is also working to find a solution to housing issues. In September 2010 a unity and diversity guidance pack will be issued for the education sector.

WORKSHOP DISCUSSIONS AND ACTION POINTS

There were four action-oriented workshops based on the key themes of the report.

Housing

The group discussed how refugees are often discriminated against in access to social and private housing with many landlords unwilling to rent properties to refugees. It was suggested consideration was needed with regard to where refugees are placed to ensure that their needs were met. The group concluded that more education and training is needed to make providers aware of the resources available to support asylum seekers and refugees, and that more rigorous monitoring of frontline services needed to be undertaken to protect against discrimination.

The following priority action points were identified:

1. Provide training to housing staff on the needs of asylum seekers and refugees, inform private landlords about refugees e.g. eligibility for housing benefit and train refugees on basic practical aspects to manage and maintain their homes.

2. Undertake more awareness raising initiatives for housing benefit staff to combat discrimination, and for refugees on their rights and access to housing benefit. A return to housing benefit paid directly to landlords may encourage more landlords to let their properties to refugees.

3. Expand the bond system (for deposits) and increase access to these schemes for refugees.

4. Raise awareness and sensitivity around the needs of people in housing allocation, e.g. access to cultural amenities in order to reduce isolation and improve living conditions.

5. Encourage residents associations to engage with refugees and encourage refugees to join these organisations and where they do not exist, try and facilitate the creation of such organisations.

Employment

The need for language training at an early stage of arrival was identified, as well as enough support and courses in place for progress through ESOL stages. Discussants felt that current policies which prevent asylum seekers from working can lead to a loss of skills and confidence which in turn hinders refugees in the employment market when they are granted leave to remain. The group felt more could be done to support refugees into jobs that matched their skills and previous work history from their countries of origin, instead of a push to place them in any available job that might minimise their chances of employment mobility.

The following priority action points were identified:

1. Work with higher education providers to condense ESOL training and run concurrent training courses from same venue on skills training e.g. CV writing and interview techniques, to better prepare refugees for the job market

2. Identify and meet the needs of potential users who are not accessing language and employment services

3. Lobby for legislative change / clarity to increase opportunities for asylum seekers and refugees to volunteer in mainstream organisations and match skills to volunteering opportunities.

4. Allow individuals more time to find a job compatible with their skills rather than pushing them in to any available job.

5. Allow individuals to volunteer or work without impacting upon benefits and increase the availability and range of employment training and placements

Health and well-being

The discussion was heavily focused on the mental health needs of asylum seekers and refugees, especially the difficulties in locating counsellors with the appropriate skills to understand and work with asylum seekers and refugees. The group also discussed the wider issues that contribute to poor mental and physical health including housing and living conditions, isolation, language problems and the lack of contact with the wider

community. There was an emphasis on the need to recognise diversity within the asylum seeker and refugee population in terms not only of health needs, but also of gender, age, culture and religion.

The following priority action points were identified:

1. Raise awareness of the mental health needs of asylum seekers and refugees by training counsellors in relevant issues. Develop schemes to train asylum seekers and refugees to become counsellors.

2. Reduce barriers to access by ensuring services are culturally and religiously sensitive. Monitor and enforce the use of existing services such as Language Line.

3. Increase funding to third sector organisations for initiatives to combat isolation which can lead to mental health problems. Learn from examples of good practice across UK e.g. gardening projects

4. Recognise diversity and meet needs in terms of experience of trauma, gender, age, and health needs.

5. Review asylum processes and allow asylum seekers to work. This will allow them to utilise skills and not feel helpless and potentially lose confidence in their ability to work.

Racism and discrimination

The group discussed the pervasive negative attitudes towards asylum seekers and refugees and how this could be reduced, primarily through a greater acknowledgement of its existence, and more community cohesion projects to battle isolation amongst asylum seekers and refugees and to promote a sense of a shared community. It was suggested that programmes need to be developed for schools which educate young people, and that teachers also needed to be educated on how to recognise, and respond appropriately to, discrimination.

The following priority action points were identified:

1. Raise awareness of racism and discrimination in teacher training and in the wider community through training and events.

2. Create opportunities for different communities to mix and allow new friendships to develop.

3. Address social exclusion in wider community and engage with all marginalised communities to reduce the targeting and stereotyping of asylum seekers and refugees

4. Increase the choice of work within and outside voluntary sector in the mainstream by giving people more choice of where and who they work with

5. Need more coordinated working across groups working with asylum seekers and refugees to identify needs and gaps in service provision

NEXT STEPS

It is hoped that the participants of the symposium and other relevant bodies will take forward the action points of the day. CMPR will be working with the Wales Strategic Migration Partnership and Welsh Refugee Council to encourage the Welsh Assembly Government to repeat the survey on a regular (two-yearly basis) and to extend the sample to include asylum seekers living in Wales. CMPR also intends to disseminate the findings of the research to refugee community organisations and involve them in the next stages of this work.

Further information about the Centre for Migration Policy Research including research and events can be found at www.swansea.ac.uk/cmpr

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