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Refugees living in Wales

A survey of skills,
experiences and barriers
to inclusion

Executive Summary

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Refugees living in Wales:

**A survey of skills, experiences and
barriers to inclusion**

Executive Summary

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Executive summary

Background and policy context

1. There is currently very limited information on the background, circumstances and needs of refugees (defined as those granted leave to remain in the UK) living in Wales. Much of what is known has been deduced from information about asylum seekers living in Wales, a proportion of whom (varying by individual circumstances, date of arrival and country of origin) will be granted to leave to remain in the UK and may choose to continue living in Wales.

2. Until 2001, relatively low numbers of asylum seekers and refugees decided to settle in Wales compared to some parts of the UK. The numbers of asylum seekers and refugees increased when Wales became a dispersal area. At the end of May 2009, a total of 2,322 asylum seekers were living in Wales. Over half (56.9%) were living in Cardiff, whilst Swansea had 562 asylum seekers (24.2%), Newport 364 (15.7%) and Wrexham just 74 (3.2%). Nearly three quarters (71.1%) of those dispersed to Wales come from nine countries of origin: Afghanistan, China, Eritrea, Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, Somalia, Sudan and Zimbabwe.

3. There is evidence that the population of refugees and asylum seekers living in Wales is distinct from the wider UK refugee population in some important ways. Refugees and asylum seekers are more concentrated in a limited number of towns and cities and they are drawn from a more limited range nationalities and linguistic groups. Existing evidence suggests that very few refugees and asylum seekers specifically choose to come to Wales, but very little is known about secondary migration flows to and from the country.

4. The Welsh Assembly Government (WAG) published its *Refugee Inclusion Strategy* in June 2008. The strategy sets out WAG's vision of refugee inclusion in Wales and aims to support and enable refugees to rebuild their lives and make a full contribution to society. For policy makers and practitioners concerned with the process of integration, the lack of information and data on the background, needs and experiences of refugees living in Wales is highly problematic because it makes it difficult to deliver appropriate support and services and to harness the skills and experiences that refugees bring.

Survey aims and objectives

5. This survey of refugees living in Wales represents a pragmatic response to the lack of information currently available to inform policy and practice in relation to refugee integration and issues of community cohesion. The survey was devised in consultation with policy makers and practitioners and is located within the framework for thinking about integration issues which has been developed by Ager and Strang (2004). The framework identifies a number of key 'markers and means' by which this process of integration might be both attained and measured.

6. The survey included a total of 74 questions (both closed and open-ended) intended to capture information on the demographic characteristics of respondents and their circumstances and experiences of living in Wales including in relation to

housing, support, skills, qualifications, employment and health and well-being. There were also a number of questions around issues of safety and security including experiences of racism and discrimination.

7. A total of 123 refugees participated in interviews for the survey which took place between August and November 2008. The main countries of survey participants were Eritrea, Sudan, Iraq, Somalia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Iran, Turkey, Algeria and Zimbabwe. Around 70% of respondents in the survey are aged 25-44. There is a balance of male and female respondents. Half describe themselves as Muslim, and just under half (43.1%) as Christian, with smaller proportions of Sikh, Buddhist and Hindu. A significant proportion (44%) of respondents was granted status in 2008, with a further fifth granted status in 2007. This is likely to be a reflection of the Home Office 'backlog clearance' or 'legacy' programme'. Nearly half of those who took part in the survey have been living in the UK for more than five years and a third have been living in Wales for that time. Most were dispersed to Wales but ten respondents (8.1%) moved to Wales after being granted refugee status.

8. Efforts were made to ensure the participation of refugees from a wide range of countries and backgrounds. Because of the lack of baseline information it is impossible to know whether the survey participants are representative of the wider refugee population in Wales. Although the survey has limitations it nonetheless provides significant new information about the experiences of refugees living in Wales, and about possible approaches to data collection for the future.

Housing

9. Housing is widely considered to be a cornerstone for successful refugee integration. A significant majority (89.4%) of refugees who participated in the survey live in rented accommodation, with the council or local authority being the landlord for two thirds. Very few of the refugees own their own property (4.1%). Some refugees do not have their own home but are staying with family or friends, or living in temporary or hostel accommodation. Others are effectively homeless. This may be as a result of the requirement that they have a 'local connection' with the area in which they are living in order to be entitled to homelessness services.

10. Although one in five refugees said that they do not have any problems with their accommodation, the vast majority described significant housing problems including a lack of permanency (36.6%), the condition of their accommodation (28.5%), insufficient rooms (20.3%), problems with neighbours or community (14.6%), and cost (13%). Respondents provided extensive comments on the quality of their accommodation, with many describing problems with the condition of the property (most notably damp, insect and mouse infestation, dirtiness of rooms and carpets) and with living arrangements (especially overcrowding and a lack of privacy). Concerns were also expressed about the attitude and behaviour of other residents towards themselves and their children.

Education and training

11. Education creates significant opportunities for employment and for wider social connection. The findings of the survey are broadly consistent with previous studies which have generally found refugees to be more highly qualified than their UK citizen counterparts. Three quarters of respondents held a secondary school certificate of education and a further 43.9% had a diploma. More than a quarter had obtained a University degree in their country of origin with a further 8.9% holding a postgraduate qualification.

12. A third of those surveyed have gained an English language qualification and 13.8% have obtained a University degree or postgraduate qualification (8.1% and 5.7% respectively). More than a third of respondents were undertaking educational courses at the time of survey.

13. Half of all respondents have undertaken training courses since their arrival in the UK, including forklift truck training, food hygiene, ICT, first aid, health and safety, counselling, homeopathy, catering and playwork. The levels of training being undertaken by refugees in Wales are considerably higher than reported elsewhere in the UK.

14. A number of refugees described starting - or wanting to start - educational courses or take up training opportunities but being unable to do so or to complete their studies due to ill health or difficulties with funding and/or childcare and domestic responsibilities.

English language skills

15. The importance of English language skills for the process of refugee integration is universally acknowledged. This is reflected in emphasis placed on the provision of English language (ESOL) training by both the Home Office and WAG. Previous research has found that on arrival, self-reported English language skills among refugees are generally poor but that these skills improve considerably over time. The findings of the survey are largely consistent with this finding.

16. Around a third of respondents described their English language skills as 'very poor' prior to their arrival with less than one in ten (9.8%) considering their skills to be 'very good'. By contrast two thirds considered their English language skills at the time of the survey to be 'very good'.

17. Although two thirds of refugees said they had received some formal English language training since arriving in the UK, many described difficulties in receiving appropriate support to improve their language skills. These difficulties included the appropriateness of the level of training provided (usually too easy), courses and lessons/classes being too short, a lack of childcare and/or the timing of classes which makes it difficult for parents (especially mothers) with school-age children to attend. Several respondents commented on the associated costs of attendance, particularly bus fares.

Employment and volunteering

18. Employment provides a mechanism for income generation and economic advancement and, as such, is widely considered as a key mechanism for integration. Jobs are also valuable in establishing valued social roles, developing language and broader cultural competence and establishing social connections.

19. Existing research indicates that refugees experience high levels of unemployment and under-employment, in spite of the fact that many arrive in the UK with good qualifications and previous work experience in their countries of origin. The findings of the survey confirm that this is also the case in Wales. Although nearly two thirds of respondents were employed in a variety of professions before coming to the UK, less than a third (31.7%) had a job at the time of the survey. Of those refugees who were employed, most were in administrative or clerical positions, cleaning or factory work. Nearly half of those who are employed did not feel that their job was appropriate for their qualifications, skills and experience.

20. Many refugees commented that they had experienced racism and discrimination both in terms of finding employment and in their experiences in the workplace. Issues of skin colour, religion and dress codes (particularly headscarves) were raised as causes of discrimination. Many respondents believe that they are not selected for job interviews because they do not have an English (or Welsh) name.

21. Volunteering is widely viewed as a potentially important route into employment for many refugees, not least because it can provide an opportunity for refugees to gain work experience in the UK, acquire or develop skills and obtain UK references. Although refugees living in Wales are generally under or unemployed, more than half (57.7%) have been involved in voluntary work since their arrival. This is considerably higher than the 29% involved in voluntary work in earlier UK-wide research, but slightly lower than for the population of England and Wales more generally.

22. Lower levels of volunteering could reflect a number of factors. Around a quarter of survey respondents said that they had found it difficult to access volunteering. The main reason given was a lack of information about available opportunities for volunteering. This problem is greatest for those who have recently arrived and have limited English language skills.

Health and well-being

23. Gathering information from population groups on health and well-being is very difficult and a survey methodology poses severe limitations on the kinds of questions and issues that can be explored. Nonetheless the survey provides some basic information about the mental and physical health of refugees living in Wales.

24. The refugees who participated in the survey generally consider their physical health to be better than before their arrival in the UK. Twice as many respondents consider their mental health to be good since arriving compared with previously. It is notable that the proportion of respondents who consider their mental health in the UK to be 'poor' is similar to the proportion prior to arrival. Moreover a significant

proportion of respondents indicated that they felt that both their physical and mental health had become worse since they arrived in the UK (22.8% and 38.2% respectively).

25. Nearly all the descriptions of decline in mental and physical health since arrival in the UK are related to anxiety, stress, depression and isolation associated with being a refugee, the asylum process and separation from home and family. There is some evidence that mental health problems are made worse by the housing and employment situations in which many refugees find themselves.

26. A third of respondents were receiving medical treatment at the time of the survey, most notably treatment for depression in the form of anti-depressants and/or counselling. Nearly a quarter described difficulties in accessing medical treatment including difficulties and delays in securing appointments with GPs, dentists and hospital consultants, and the length of waiting times for appointments, especially with consultants.

Racism and discrimination

27. The process of integration is about more than simply access to services or the labour market: it is also about how communities function on a day-to-day basis, whether individuals feel safe and are how they relate to one another.

28. Half of all refugees participating in the survey have experienced negative public attitudes and racism whilst living in Wales. These figures are significantly higher than the findings of a recent survey undertaken by the Welsh Assembly Government for the population of Wales as a whole.

29. A significant number of incidents were described by survey respondents, many involving verbal and physical abuse, often by teenagers and youths. Damage to property was also widely reported. Reference was made by some respondents to discrimination in the workplace and in dealings with agencies and service providers, including the police. It appears that many racist incidents are not reported due to concerns about the consequences. Many also feel that incidents which are reported are not well dealt with by police, housing providers and the UKBA.

30. A third of survey participants feel that they have been discriminated against because of skin colour, ethnic origin or religion. This figure is three times higher than the finding of the latest *Living in Wales* survey. Visible differences, particularly headscarves, are noted as causing particular problems.

31. Questions were asked about refugees' feelings of safety and security in the place where they live. These questions were drawn in large part from the British Crime Survey with a view to being able to compare the responses of refugees living in Wales with the responses of the population of England and Wales more generally. The findings of the survey are largely consistent for those of the population as a whole.

32. The survey explores feelings and relationships towards the neighbourhood or area within which refugees live and their involvement or otherwise in local organisations. The most important aspect worthy of note is the fact that the majority (61.8%) of respondents agree with the statement 'I feel I belong to the neighbourhood'. More than two thirds of respondents agree with the statement that 'I would be willing to work together with others on something to improve my neighbourhood'.

33. Nearly all respondents indicated that they belonged to one or more organisations or groups but their affiliation varies considerably as do levels of participation. Nearly half of those who participated in the survey are members of refugee or national/ethnic community groups. A similar proportion (45.2%) also belongs to a religious group or faith organisation. These were the largest groups in terms of membership.

34. More than three quarters of respondents said that they intended to stay in Wales. The main reasons provided by respondents for wanting to stay in Wales are community/neighbours (43%), followed by family and friends, public attitudes, employment, and the education of children. Other reasons include 'feeling settled', living near the sea, and the support provided by the church and voluntary sector.

35. Although most refugees indicated their intention to stay in Wales, one in five also said they might leave. A wide range of reasons were given, but the primary reasons given were the desire to be close to family, friends and community members living elsewhere, a perceived lack of diversity in Wales which is sometimes reflected in negative public attitudes and/or racism, issues with housing, and difficulties in accessing appropriate employment opportunities.

36. There is a contradiction between refugees' descriptions of their day-to-day experiences of racism and the comments made by many in relation to their feelings about living in Wales. Among those who indicated their intention to remain in Wales, community and neighbours were cited as the single most important reason for this decision. This would seem to suggest that refugees living in Wales have both positive and negative experiences within their immediate neighbourhoods.

Policy implications

37. The survey provides important new information about the skills, needs and experiences of refugees living in Wales. Many of the key findings of this research are consistent with what is already known about the experiences of refugees living in other parts of the UK.

38. The survey identifies a number of potential barriers to inclusion in the areas of housing, education and training, employment and racism and discrimination. These barriers suggest that future policies should, as a priority, aim to:

- tackle sub-standard accommodation and ensure that refugees are not effectively homeless;
- deal with the specific barriers to accessing appropriate English language training courses;

- remove barriers to education and training;
- increase access to volunteering, especially outside the refugee sector;
- reduce racism and discrimination in finding employment and in the workplace; and
- improve reporting of, and response to, racist incidents.

Future research

39. The Welsh Assembly Government is committed to policies based on evidence and to monitoring and evaluating the efficiency and effectiveness of its policies. The lack of systematic information on the skills and experiences of refugees and asylum seekers living in Wales will make the delivery of this objective more difficult in relation to the *Refugee Inclusion Strategy*.

40. There is scope for improvement in the collection of information on the skills and experiences of refugees living in Wales based on the survey approach developed and piloted in this research. This survey provides valuable insights into the most effective strategies that might be pursued in improving both the quality and quantity of information available.

41. A number of important issues which have been addressed in this research should be taken into consideration in any future efforts to undertake survey research with refugees living in Wales. These relate to the scale and frequency of any future survey work, the techniques that might be used to ensure that the full range of refugee backgrounds and experiences are included, and strategies for improving access and reducing the costs associated with survey work. Given that the Welsh Assembly Government does not distinguish between asylum seekers and refugees in the provision of many services, the inclusion of asylum seekers should be considered in any future research aimed at identifying the skills, needs and experiences of those living in Wales.

