

PROMOTING HEALTH, SAFETY AND WELLBEING WITHIN MIGRANT COMMUNITIES

The West Midlands is home to a growing and diverse migrant population. In Birmingham, approximately 250,000 people were born outside the UK¹ and 12% of the total number of asylum seekers in the UK currently claiming support whilst awaiting a decision on their status are resident in the wider West Midlands region². Local authorities across the region are committed to creating an inclusive environment for all migrants and the work of the voluntary sector provides a vital component of this strategy.

Despite its importance and measurable impact, **voluntary sector activity in this area remains underfunded**. Recent analysis has indicated that less than 1% of all independent funding within the sector is directed towards migrant groups. The impression given is that investment in migrant activity is viewed as specialist area, attracting only dedicated funders and service provision. However, the successful support of migrant activity can be seen to have a positive impact upon wider societal issues.

Migrants can be amongst the most marginalised in society, at risk of falling into poverty and crisis. The voluntary sector provides support, however lacks the resources to address the root causes of these issues. **Adopting an approach based upon the principles of early action** can significantly reduce this level of crisis and the need for later intervention by statutory bodies³.

Early action to address the systemic inequalities that affect migrant groups can have wider positive implications. These include **reduced demand** upon stretched public service and **better outcomes** for migrants themselves, crucially enabling them to achieve the greater involvement in active society which they seek⁴.

Ignite is an Early Action Neighbourhood Funded programme working to help Coventry children's services understand how it can better shift its resources and approaches to earlier action. Using legal advice casework and social connecting alongside children's services staff, Ignite has uncovered what is required to support families earlier to avoid crisis and how services can be designed to achieve this. Focusing on the delivery of Coventry's family hubs, Ignite has created a blueprint for change that ensures family hubs can more effectively respond to family's needs before they develop into serious concerns.

Such activity relies on **collaboration between the statutory and voluntary sectors**. It is only through this joint working can the needs of communities be understood and addressed, which is crucial in building a long-term sustainable model that will empower these marginalised groups and assist in their integration.

The regional MiFriendly Cities Project operating in the region has recruited 38 Community Health Champions to address an identified need for specialised training so that migrant groups could access vital health services. These Health Champions are trained in how to best raise awareness, champion health messages and transform health and wellbeing in their communities. The scheme builds a sustainable model within migrant communities by upskilling them but also ensuring they engage with health services in a more effective way improving the services they receive but also that of the wider community. By focusing on refugees, migrants and asylum seekers, the Community Health Champions are able to access hard to reach communities to improve their health outcomes.

This Briefing is the second in a series commissioned by voluntary sector organisations working with migrant communities in the West Midlands. It is intended to highlight current areas of concern across the sector which are adversely impacting migrants in achieving successful settlement in the region. The next briefing will discuss issues relating to community cohesion.

¹ Birmingham City Council, City of Sanctuary Policy Statement

² <http://www.wmsmp.org.uk/> - Migration Statistics Briefing Paper 24th May 2019

³ Refugee Action: Asylum Early Actions Principles - <https://asylumearlyaction.org/principles>

⁴ Details about the Ignite Programme can be found [HERE](#)

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Integration and Basic Rights: Migrants wish to integrate and build their lives in the region, gain employment and become civically engaged alongside host communities. A number of systemic barriers can prevent this, notably a lack of awareness around the specific needs of these groups. This is particularly important around healthcare provision which often does not take into account issues such as the prevalence of mental health issues amongst refugees in comparison to the general population. Studies have shown that tailored programmes are a more effective aid to integration⁵.

Third sector organisations such as the Refugee and Migration Centre in the Black Country and Birmingham provide health and wellbeing support to migrants. RMC's early intervention model features: early engagement, holistic assessment, supported primary care registration, support to maintain good mental health, onsite health clinics including latent TB screening and much more; combined, they form a package which reduces the risk of costly crisis.

Risk of homelessness: Migrants can find themselves in a vulnerable position upon entering the UK, especially if they are navigating the asylum process. They can be unable to work, access training or employment and consequently unable to provide for themselves and their families. The situation can be worsened as individuals can lose access to decent housing, leaving them reliant on low quality transient accommodation, potentially at risk from rogue landlords or rendered homeless.

Vulnerability to homelessness is also an issue amongst European migrant communities. In Birmingham, a significant proportion of the homeless population is assessed to be from Eastern European nationalities. The number of migrants currently homeless impacts upon already stretched services in the region. As many as 40% of homeless people exhibit underlying health concerns such as mental health problems which are exacerbated by their situation. Councils have a statutory duty to deal with homelessness, and early intervention processes support could prevent many migrants from entering this situation and allow resources to be deployed into other vital areas⁶

One of the biggest challenges in tackling homelessness is in gathering reliable information in order to redesign services to aid prevention. The Prevention Opportunities Mapping and Planning Toolkit (PrOMPT) developed by Homeless Link highlights the need to involve those with direct experience of sleeping rough in order to identify pathways the points where more effective interventions would have helped. Recently, the Polish Expats Association have provided regular outreach services in conjunction with SIFA Fireside, assisting individuals to achieve settled status in order to access mainstream services and support.

Risk of Exploitation: Due to their often insecure status, migrants can be targets for human trafficking gangs who approach them for work in the informal economy. The unregulated nature of this sector gives risk of individuals being held in exploitative or slave-like conditions⁷.

Once trapped in these conditions, migrants can find it difficult to access services that provide a means to escape. Unsure of their rights, and worried that their status may see them treated as criminals rather than victims. It is vital that barriers between sectors be removed in order to ensure that not only are victims protected, but those carrying out this activity effectively prevented and prosecuted.

Spring Housing are currently running a Modern Slavery Project, assisting victims of both forced labour and sexual exploitation with resettlement and integration.

⁵ Integrating Refugees: What Works? A Summary of Evidence - [LINK HERE](#)

⁶ Information on the PrOMPT Toolkit can be found [HERE](#)

⁷ Anti-Slavery Commission Report: Modern Slavery in the Homeless Sector [LINK HERE](#)