

# BARRIERS TO MIGRANT INTEGRATION: CHALLENGES FACING MIGRANTS AND THE MIGRATION SUPPORT SECTOR IN BIRMINGHAM AND THE BLACK COUNTRY

A MIGRATION POLICY AND PRACTICE ANNUAL ASSESSMENT





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Many thanks to all our colleagues across the sector for their help in compiling this report.

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# OVERVIEW

**The current state of the migration support sector in the region can be characterised as one of challenge. For voluntary sector organisations working with migrants this does not just involve seeking appropriate funding for services in an increasingly competitive environment, but also maintaining and developing services to support the needs of an increasingly diverse group of clients.**

Most importantly, the challenges faced by migrants themselves to effectively settling and building lives within the region have increased. Systemic discrimination continues to hamper many in accessing not only training and employment, but crucially basic needs such as healthcare, adequate housing and other fundamental rights.

It is vital that the sector works with partners to support migrant integration and cross community awareness, ensuring that migrants feel that they are valued and equal members of wider society. Whilst the support provided for cohesion initiatives at a local authority level is welcomed, further work is required to ensure that the culture and contributions of all communities are recognised. Equally, for many migrants trust and confidence in authority and institutions needs to be improved.

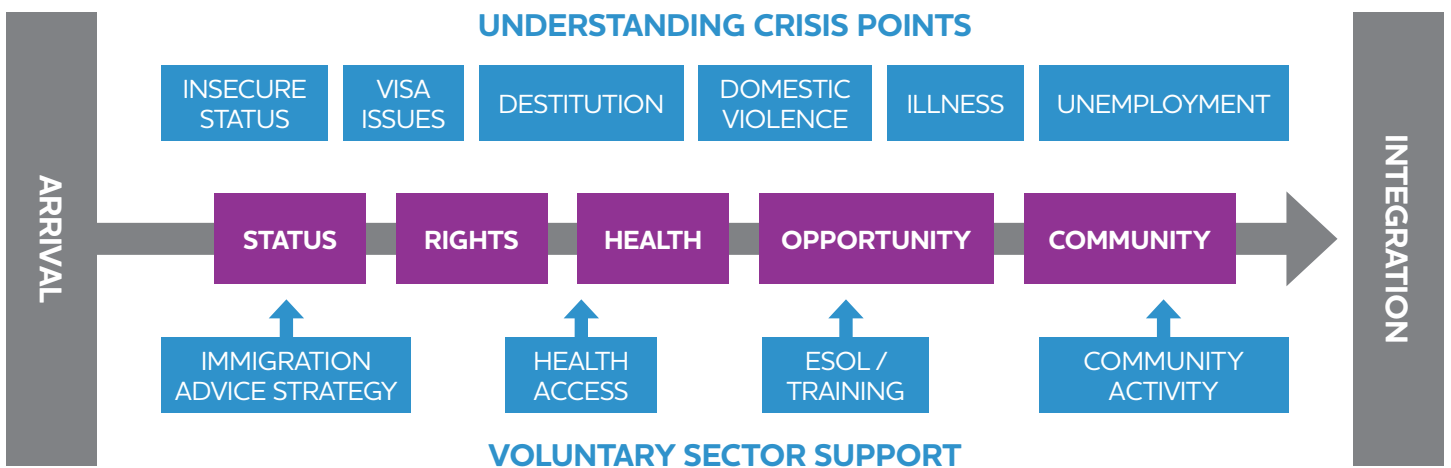
A key challenge for all of those working with migrants is to recognise that those seeking to settle in the region are a diverse group, comprised of many ethnicities and backgrounds. All are at different stages in their journey and it is important for all those in the sector, as well as partners, to understand the breadth of the communities across the region to support their aspirations and needs. The voices of those with lived experience should be at the forefront of any sector activity.

Over the past twelve months, the response to the COVID pandemic has shown the strength and resilience of the voluntary sector in continuing to support those requiring assistance. The period has enabled new ways of working and enabled those working in the migration space to align and collaborate with the wider voluntary sector. It has opened opportunities for third sector and statutory agencies to collaborate and shown the benefit of this approach. It is crucial that the opportunity this presents is not squandered.

Although it is recognised that the policy decisions that most adversely impact migrants are made at a national level, and local authorities have limited scope to shape their direction, their support in highlighting the negative effects caused is crucial. If statutory agencies are unable to work collaboratively to engage and achieve solutions within the existing framework then at the least they must acknowledge the consequences of government policy and support those that require it.

# PROJECT BACKGROUND

The purpose of the Project is to support the effective settlement of migrants <sup>1</sup> and a positive integration agenda across the region. Our ultimate aim will be to develop and embed processes and support mechanisms to enable the development of a clear pathway for the integration of migrant communities, providing the appropriate levels of support required at all stages to achieve this.



Our aim is to build a comprehensive understanding of all activity currently taking place within the sector, so that problems, emerging issues and opportunities can be effectively recorded. This is crucial in enabling a comprehensive picture of current activity across the sector to be produced. As the Project develops, activity and outcomes can be measured against our assessment to highlight changes and identify successful project interventions.

It is recognized that building understanding of the communities we work with is crucial to the success of the Project. This presents a significant challenge due to the diverse nature of both the region and these groups. The sector works not only with 'known groups', such as well-established

migrant communities or newly arrived individuals and supported by immigration services, but also those unknown and undocumented. Undocumented migrants have insecure status and may only engage with public bodies when they reach a point of crisis.

The structures developed by the Project will enable development of early action against key strategic priorities, allowing long-term support for the issues that are preventing migrants from achieving settlement. Due to the varied nature of work in the sector, with organisations providing both specialist and generalist support in a number of areas, we have grouped our assessment into four broad thematic areas. These are reflective of the wide range of challenges that currently exist.

<sup>1</sup> Migrants in this context will encompass Asylum Seekers, Refugees, UASC undocumented and Economic Migrants

# REGIONAL CONTEXT

The West Midlands region, and in particular Birmingham and the Black Country, remains one of the most diverse areas in the UK. In four of the five Local Authority areas, over 10% of the population are estimated to have been born outside of the UK. There are also significant populations of non-UK nationals resident within all areas, highlighting the number of migrants living throughout the region.

Local Authority	% Population Non-UK born	% Population Non-UK Nationals
Birmingham	21	11
Dudley	5	4
Sandwell	23	19
Walsall	11	5
Wolverhampton	18	13

Source: Annual Population Survey (APS), Office for National Statistics, Mid-2020

The percentage of the population who have been born overseas is reflective of both long-established communities who migrated to the region in the post-war period and those more newly arrived from Eastern Europe. The largest numbers of overseas born residents are from Pakistan, Bangladesh and Poland. Most are resident in Birmingham, with significant communities also in Walsall and Wolverhampton. **2**

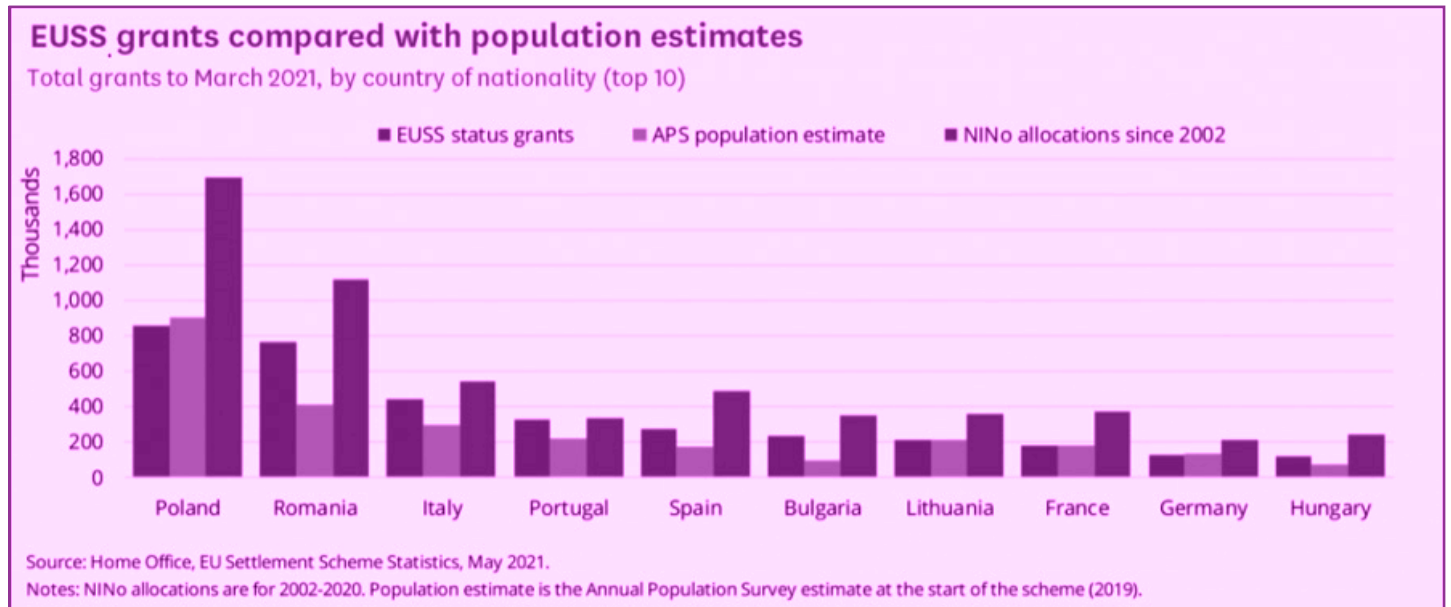
There are also significant numbers of residents holding non-UK nationality primarily from India, Poland and Pakistan. Most are resident within Birmingham, although Wolverhampton contains the largest population of Indian nationals. It should also be noted that population trends may alter regional demographics quickly. This can be seen in the significant change in levels of migration from the EU since the Brexit referendum. **3** Future changes

may occur through arrivals from Hong Kong due to the changes in citizenship laws passed by the UK government and the establishment of a 'Welcome Hub' for new arrivals. **4**

Although population estimates can be used as a guide to indicate levels of migration and residency, there remain significant discrepancies in highlighting accurate figures, particularly in relation to numbers of EU nationals. Recently, the government has suspended reporting of figures due to issues with the methodology employed in calculation. **5** This difficulty is evidenced through the number of applications made within the region to the EU Settled Status Scheme, required for EU nationals wishing to reside within the UK following Brexit.

The number of applications across the region differed greatly from current population estimates.

Nationally, the number of applications across the region differed greatly from current population estimates.



House of Commons Library: EU Settlement Scheme applications: Figures in final month - 14th June 2021

The lack of accurate data causes significant problems in planning and engagement both for the voluntary sector and local authorities. Without accurate figures, service provision becomes more difficult, and this will adversely affect communities such as Roma who have historically not been engaged with by statutory agencies. Where such groups are not often represented, this places an increased burden on the voluntary sector who provide support, often at point of crisis. Until accurate data and engagement takes place, service planning to address long terms needs of migrant communities cannot take place.

In comparison to other regions of the UK, the West Midlands receives higher numbers of asylum seekers

than many others. Currently numbers are the fourth highest in the country, below only the North West, Yorkshire and London.<sup>6</sup> A fifth of all those claiming asylum who are currently being supported in the region originate from Iraq, with the next most common nationalities being Iran, Albania, Pakistan and Eritrea.<sup>7</sup>

Local Authorities across the region continue to demonstrate a commitment to the resettlement of refugees. Birmingham, Sandwell and Wolverhampton Councils are signatories to the City of Sanctuary campaign, committing to a welcoming and inclusive environment for migrants. The region itself supports more resettled refugees than any other apart from Yorkshire.

Local Authority	Asylum Seekers	Resettled Refugees	Combined	Density per 1000 residents
Birmingham	1679	524	2203	1.9
Dudley	250	95	345	1.1
Sandwell	927	0	927	2.8
Walsall	461	21	482	1.7
Wolverhampton	828	100	928	3.5

Source: West Midlands Strategic Migration Partnership Briefing Paper - February 2021

<sup>6</sup> Oxford Migration Observatory – Asylum and Refugee Resettlement in the UK – 11th May 2021

<sup>7</sup> West Midlands Strategic Migration Partnership Statistics Briefing Paper – 25th February 2021

# REGIONAL CONTEXT

In order to support settlement and integration Local Authorities in the region, where they have powers to do so, try to ensure that levels of those being settled remain as proportion to population numbers.

This level of density has already been surpassed across the region as is particularly prominent in Sandwell and Wolverhampton. This presents difficulties in securing suitable accommodation without concentration in specific areas. Such an approach risks undermining integration and community cohesion as has been seen in other areas such as Stoke.

The commitment demonstrated across the region to migrants has not been replicated with equivalent levels of funding from central government. Many of those settling in the region require additional financial support to access housing, training and employment which all impact on available public finances.

A lack of additional funding to meet these demands risks individuals not being supported and pushed into crisis.

A number of councils in the region have recently written to the Home Secretary indicating that they will pause any procurement of additional dispersal accommodation until the methodology employed is revised. **8** This situation may become increasingly precarious if the numbers of those seeking asylum begins to rise following a recent drop due to the COVID pandemic. **9**

The region continues to welcome refugees as part of the Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (VPRS), although new arrivals were paused for most of 2020 owing to lockdown restrictions.

Currently, 1841 individuals have been resettled in the region, approximately 10% of the national total. Although all local authorities in Birmingham and the Black Country have participated in the scheme, the vast majority of refugees have been resettled within Birmingham. **10**

All Local Authorities in the region have pledged to support the ARAP Afghan Relocations and Assistance Policy, helping to resettle those who have worked on behalf of the UK government. This includes 80 individuals who will be settled in Birmingham and Wolverhampton respectively whilst Dudley will support 20 families and between 20–25 in Sandwell. Nationally, the scheme aims to support 5000 individuals which will place a significant demand on resources within the region. Additional resettlement, following the fall of the Afghan government to Taliban forces, will likely also result in many arrivals into the region.

A number of children have also been settled into the region through the Vulnerable Children Resettlement Scheme (VCRS) with 156 in the West Midlands, approximately 9% of the national total. The vast majority have been accommodated by Coventry City Council, although Birmingham and Walsall have also taken in children under the scheme. **11**

There are likely to be significant changes to the levels of resettlement in future. The UK Government's proposed New Plan for Immigration risks creating a two-tier immigration system with an emphasis on claims made through legal routes that are yet to be established. The current Resettlement Scheme is also to be revised and will consolidate existing measures into one global scheme with a wider remit than displacement from the Syrian conflict.





# RIGHTS

**We have seen significant challenges across the sector that have prevented many migrants from accessing basic rights and entitlements. Legislative barriers have excluded some communities from obtaining free legal advice. Organisations have often been unable to meet the level of demand due to capacity which has been exacerbated by issues such as COVID, the EUSS Scheme and increasingly lengthy asylum application processes.**

Housing also remains a key issue for many migrants, particularly those navigating the asylum system, both in terms of standard and availability. As with many other aspects of settlement, this has been made worse by the ongoing pandemic.

## KEY FINDINGS

- **Migrants find it difficult to access specialist legal advice to deal with the situations they experience.**
- **A significant number in the region will not have applied to the EU Settled Status Scheme prior to deadline.**
- **Many who have applied for the EUSS are still waiting for cases to be resolved and may experience difficulties in accessing essential services until this is resolved.**
- **The availability and quality of housing provision remains a significant problem in the sector, not just for those in the asylum system, but for many other migrant groups.**
- **Significant difficulties have been experienced by many of those who have no access to public funds (NRPF) conditions of their immigration status. These numbers are likely to rise due to economic and political factors**

“

...you know when I came here to Brushstrokes I was at the lowest end of my life, I was so depressed, frustrated and thinking of returning back to my country, and Brushstrokes helped to register me with a GP to assist with my mental health, found me a legal aid solicitor and advocated for me to the local MP to help with my asylum and immigration matter.

”

“Syed”, client of Brushstrokes

## LEGAL ACCESS

**Regardless of their journey, all of those migrating into the region will at some point likely require access to legal advice. For those navigating the asylum system, this may be to challenge a flawed decision or as part of a pathway to citizenship. Those with European citizenship, who have previously held the right to live and work in the UK, may have needed advice to obtain Settled Status through the EUSS Scheme in order to maintain continuing rights following the UK's departure from the European Union.**

Legal advice relating to immigration matters can only be provided by an adviser accredited by the Office of the Immigration Services Commissioner (OISC). Complex cases involving asylum claims or appeals against Home Office decisions can only be supported by those registered at a higher level. The shortage of such advisers across the region continues to be a significant issue for migrants, severely impacting upon their ability to settle into the region in the long-term.

If a case requires substantial work or a hearing before a judge, then an adviser registered at Level 3 will be required. The current database of accredited advisers **12** shows only 37 organisations in the region currently possess this, of which only 9 do so on a no fee basis. This places a significant financial strain on migrants requiring legal support, not only through the cost of advice but also with travel to consult with advisers who are spread across the region.

Some additional resources to support provision are in place, such as the Foundation for Integration Project currently coordinated by Birmingham City Council, however this is limited to third country nationals. The exclusion of EU nationals, particularly

at a time when the end of the application period for the EUSS scheme has elapsed, places additional financial burdens and barriers at a time when the right to settle in the UK is most precarious.

Organisations providing legal advice also report continued difficulties in recruiting, training and retaining appropriately trained advisers. Many charitable funders do not routinely support legal work, despite successful outcomes and regularized status for migrants providing positive benefits in other areas.

Early access to specialist legal advice can have a positive effect upon wider social problems. Current barriers between the voluntary and statutory sectors mean that migrants seeking legal support are already at a point of crisis, seeking to resolve an immediate issue. This crisis intervention approach does not allow the sector the time or resources to address the underlying issues that have led migrants into a situation requiring support. Increased funding would allow capacity building in the sector, able to deal with long-term issues within communities and move towards a targeted and preventative approach.

**Another project, Kids in Need of Defence UK, led by Central England Law Centre, is a collaboration between the US charity, KIND Inc. and five UK not-for-profit organisations that provides migrant children with legal representation. The project ensures migrant children have access to high quality, free legal representation so that they be helped to navigate a complex immigration system and secure British citizenship or leave to remain.**

**The positive role played by early advice provision can be seen in Sandwell where Brushstrokes undertake an Early Action approach combining outreach with linking individuals with available services. In 2020, this has secured legal representation for 135 individuals and supported 313 asylum seekers through a dedicated advice worker. <sup>13</sup> Such approaches should be funded and supported as early intervention will reduce the risk of longer-term adverse social consequences, and a subsequent cost to both the individual and the state. <sup>14</sup>**

A lack of specialist legal advice relating to immigration status risks placing migrants into a lengthy period of severe uncertainty. They can be unable to work, access training or employment and consequently unable to provide for themselves and their families. Refugees and asylum seekers are already in a vulnerable position upon entering the UK and this precarious situation that can be worsened as individuals can lose access to decent housing, finding themselves in low quality transient accommodation or potentially homeless.

This is particularly important at a time when not only is the asylum system seen as being in crisis, but additional demands for legal advice are also likely to be created by those who have missed the deadline to apply for the EUSS scheme. Recent analysis by the Refugee Council has shown that the number of people awaiting an initial asylum decision is at its highest point for a decade and that over 30,000 people have been waiting more than 12 months for an initial decision. <sup>15</sup>

In the case of the rights of EU nationals to remain in the UK, the disparity between estimated population sizes and the actual number of applications means it is highly likely that significant numbers will have missed the deadline to apply for residency. The last available government statistics showed that there had been 6.015 million applications to the scheme <sup>16</sup>, double the 3 million who were thought to be resident in the UK. Although the full number of repeated applications is not yet known, with estimates suggesting around 8% of the total,

this still suggests a real risk that large numbers may be unknown to authorities, will not have applied and risk having their immigration status exposed.

Many groups in the region have reported increased demands in recent months for legal advice, particularly in relation to the EUSS scheme. <sup>17</sup> Across the wider sector, many groups report that a fifth of clients may not have applied to the scheme in time for the deadline. <sup>18</sup> Support will be required until their cases are resolved, not just from within the voluntary sector, but from statutory agencies to prevent individuals from falling into destitution due to an inability to access basic services.

An example of the support required can be seen when some individuals seek to access welfare benefits such as Universal Credit. Existing guidance states that a grant of pre-settled status is not enough to enable a claim, potentially placing families in need of further support to prevent destitution. It is important that this requirement does not fall solely on the voluntary sector, particularly as in many cases there is a statutory requirement under legislation such as the Children's Act.

The availability and quality of housing provision remains a significant problem in the sector, not just for those in the asylum system, but for many other migrant groups. Whilst the commitment by local authorities in the region to secure diverse housing stock that is not concentrated in single areas is welcome and will help to support community integration, it presents practical difficulties in implementation.

“

...I received a Notice of seeking possession of the house I rent privately. I was very worried about being homeless as I have a 7 year old daughter but the advice I got has helped me

”

**“Farid”, client of Birmingham Settlement**

For example in Birmingham there are over 18000 people on the housing waiting list, a significant number of whom are migrants.

Rising costs and outsourcing have made it increasingly difficult for local authorities to obtain suitable housing in certain areas which for those in the asylum process has meant increasingly lengthy stays in what is temporary accommodation. Some organisations in the region have reported clients waiting up to 18 months to be moved

into their own property. This situation has been prolonged by the COVID pandemic, increasing the stress placed on those navigating the system.

Hotels are utilised by Local Authorities in a number of scenarios, such as to house families to whom they have a duty of care whilst sourcing temporary accommodation. They have also been used as temporary accommodation for asylum seekers, and in these situations a number of issues have been identified.

**Several hotels in central Birmingham being used to house asylum seekers were criticised by residents with provided food not meeting nutritional standards and allegations of abusive comments from staff. Food was initially shown to be short of the guidelines around daily nutritional requirements published by Public Health England, and although it subsequently was improved, this was only following a campaign and interventions by elected representatives. One of the hotels used was eventually closed but has subsequently reopened due to an increase in regional demand. The situation should be monitored to ensure that these issues are not repeated.**

Although the campaign was successful and involved residents being able to share their experiences, many felt reluctant to speak out for fear of jeopardising their asylum claims. It remains vitally important to amplify the voices of those within the system, not speaking on their behalf, to raise issues where appropriate and provide evidence of bad practice to advocate for change by policy makers.

The use of hotels for housing asylum seekers appears counter-productive both from a financial sense and in the negative effects on the wellbeing of those being housed. This should include supporting housing migrants within community settings as advocated by policy makers in the sector. **19**

The situation is further complicated by the lack of a clear transition pathway for many into mainstream welfare support following a grant of status. This has led to frequently chaotic outcomes, including eviction into hotel accommodation, putting further stress on the city's emergency housing stock and disrupting children's education.

Issues around housing are not confined to those seeking asylum. Many European migrants feel trapped in low quality accommodation due to discrimination in the job market that forces them into low paid work with a lack of training development. The EUSS scheme will also impact on this group, particularly around the lack of physical documentation issued to those granted status. This can leave individuals in a vulnerable position with regards to dealing with private landlords who are unfamiliar with this significant change to the immigration system, causing delays in the verification of the right to reside in the UK.

Changing economic conditions will also impact, particularly if job losses continue to be experienced as result of the COVID pandemic and shifting supply chains following Brexit. This has already been observed in the region with a number of groups providing food and destitution support reporting an increase in use by EU nationals.

**Birmingham Settlement has been working in partnership with the Refugee and Migrant Centre, providing debt and money advice to drop in clients who are experiencing immigration issues. The combination of specialists from two linked fields has enabled a number of clients to resolve problems with accommodation, seek redress through appropriate channels and help with ongoing budgeting.**

## NO RECOURSE TO PUBLIC FUNDS (NRPF)

**Significant difficulties have been experienced by many of those who have NRPF conditions, meaning that they are not entitled to support from public funds such as benefits. This affects many migrants, as the condition is applied in many situations, from those who have been refused asylum to some EEA nationals. <sup>20</sup> Accurate analysis of the issue has been hampered by government refusal to disclose the exact numbers of individuals subject to the condition, <sup>21</sup> although data collected by local authorities suggests a significant rise during 2020/21. <sup>22</sup>**

Factors influencing this rise include the COVID pandemic, lengthy asylum appeals and increased unemployment caused by a worsening economy. During the period of lockdown, a disparity between the level of support given by local authorities in the region may also have resulted in local changes. It is also likely that proposed changes to the UK immigration system under the 'New Plan for Immigration' will also increase the risk of destitution for many. <sup>23</sup>

The situation is further complicated by the high fees charged by the Home Office to make applications for long-term settlement. For those on 10-year pathways to settlement for example, an inability to routinely afford regular fees risks routinely falling in and out of undocumented status.

Children in families who have NRPF conditions are not eligible for free school meals and, as a consequence, their schools do not benefit from the Pupil Premium

system made available to alleviate child poverty and disadvantage. This further impoverishes some of the poorest children in the region and exacerbates pockets of deprivation in areas with high migrant populations.

As part of the public health response to the COVID pandemic, Birmingham City Council committed to housing all those who were street homeless, including those with NRPF as part of the Everyone In programme. Birmingham City Council approached The Controlling Migration Funded Partnership, comprised of Central England Law Centre, ASIRT and Refugee and Migrant Centre, to offer legal advice to those housed by the Everyone In project who had insecure immigration status. This involved longer-term support including legal advice to assist in achieving settled status, housing and employment.



**Over the periods of lockdown during the pandemic, a total of 165 individuals were supported of which 89 were EU nationals and 76 from other countries. 28 of the EU nationals were from Poland. The majority of those supported were able to achieve successful outcomes with 40 individuals being granted EU Settled Status, three referred into the NRM <sup>24</sup> and a further five into other support pathways.**

**A number of non-EU nationals were also assisted with 15 securing Section 4 support, 8 receiving Unlimited Leave to Remain with a further individual receiving limited leave to remain in the UK. Four non-EU nationals were also helped into ongoing support and housing from local organisations.**

**Although these measures were successful, they were limited to the cohort affected at the start of the pandemic and time-limited due to central government funding. Many had complex cases, requiring lengthy periods of support. At the end of the funded period, in mid-August 2021 there were still 30 individuals with no clear onward pathway. Twelve of these were refused asylum seekers without formal accommodation options or immediate legal remedies.**

The numbers of those with NRPF will likely continue to rise and will require support, which will not be available at required levels. Successful outcomes from Everyone In demonstrate that support can be provided that removes people from vulnerable situations but that it is a lengthy process without requiring investment. This approach would work for many of those currently experiencing difficulty but would require additional, specific funding from central government.

The support provided within the region to ensure migrants have access to their basic rights is a response to current legislative and policy initiatives.

Whilst collaborative working with local authorities and other statutory partners has been beneficial, meaningful change will only occur when primary legislation is enacted that is more supportive of the needs of migrants.

Organisations throughout the sector should therefore continue to support national campaigns aiming to achieve effective change particularly around lifting the ban on paid employment for refugees, the removal of NRPF conditions and the overarching campaign for reform of the asylum system.

<sup>24</sup> National Referral Mechanism – a framework for identifying victims of human trafficking and ensuring they receive the appropriate protection and support.



# HEALTH

**Issues around healthcare remain a significant problem for across the sector, both around barriers to access for migrants and in ensuring that their specific needs are included in planning service provision. Many migrants have found difficulties in accessing primary care services, but also a reluctance to do so for fear of being challenged over their immigration status or being charged for accessing healthcare. Health issues and inequalities affecting migrants have been exacerbated by the COVID pandemic, with recent research suggesting that 60% of applications for GP registration to access vaccinations were unlawfully refused, further eroding the pandemic response strategy.** <sup>25</sup>

Although many of the health issues experienced by migrants are also seen in other vulnerable groups there are also specific needs that must be addressed and considered when planning service delivery. Whilst local Clinical Commissioning Groups are rightly keen to involve patients in this strategic work, the views of migrants are often not included, despite many requiring additional support. Further outreach work needs to be encouraged to ensure their voices are heard.

## KEY FINDINGS

- **Many migrants experience barriers in accessing healthcare treatment, including a reluctance to access over fears of charges or revealing their immigration status.**
- **Many migrant groups have been adversely affected during the COVID pandemic, with existing inequalities being further highlighted and exacerbated.**
- **There is a need for increased access to mental health services for migrants.**
- **Further work needs to be conducted by statutory bodies and health agencies to ensure that the specific health needs of migrants are included in the planning of service provision**

## ACCESS TO HEALTHCARE

**There have been a number of ways in which migrants have struggled to access healthcare treatment, despite entitlement to do so. This is partly due to a lack of awareness around relevant legislation by providers. Migrants have been unable to register with some G.P.s in the region as they have been asked to provide identification and proof of address, even though this not being a requirement. Such activities disenfranchise migrants from seeking help at point of need.**

The UK Government's 'Hostile Environment' policies have also contributed to many migrants' reluctance to access healthcare provision. There are fears that any details they provide will be used to check residency and immigration status which could be then reported to the Home Office if they are found to be overstayers. This impacts not just on those seeking asylum, but also wider migrant groups, particularly those who may be experiencing homelessness.

The 'Safe Surgeries' scheme developed by Doctors of the World is an initiative that should be publicised and supported across the wider sector to encourage access to healthcare. It is a network of GP practices throughout the UK, including many in the region, which commits to taking steps to ensure availability of access for everyone in their community.

At a minimum, this means ensuring that lack of ID or proof of address, immigration status or language are not barriers to patient registration.

Access to healthcare provision has been supported by a Doctors of the World <sup>26</sup> initiative in the region that funded a mobile clinic which visited accommodation

being used by migrants so that services could be used. Activities such as TB screening provided by several organisations across the region has also supported positive health outcomes for migrant groups.

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.

Charges for certain healthcare treatments remain an issue, not only for those who have to pay, but also for those who may delay seeking treatment over worries around charging. For many, the fact that some level of payment for certain healthcare procedures exists is a barrier in itself. A lack of clarity around when these are incurred means they are reluctant to seek treatment when needed.

**The work undertaken through MiFriendly Cities across the region has helped to reduce barriers to health information. In Wolverhampton this included supporting a 'Back to School' providing materials in different languages for parents with school aged children. A number of individuals in Birmingham have been trained as Community Health Champions providing direct reach into communities and through established, trusted relationships. <sup>27</sup> The establishment of these roles through a formal Community Interest Company (CIC) which help to develop legacy opportunities and potential ongoing funding.**

There have been reports of individuals who have been incorrectly charged for healthcare. Two were billed for treatment despite being in possession of pre-settled status through the EUSS scheme. Not only is further training and awareness needed for front-line partner agencies to ensure that individuals are not denied access to services to which they are entitled, but instances such as these highlight issues that are likely to occur in future months. This may be a significant problem for those who have applied for the EUSS scheme and are awaiting the result of the process.

EU nationals who did not apply for Settled Status in the UK by the 30th June will lose their immigration status and will have no right to access healthcare, except in emergencies. As those who have not applied are likely to be left in a vulnerable situation, this may create a serious public health issue in the region. Efforts should continue to identify those who have missed the deadline and understand what support is being offered to retain their status.

## COVID RESPONSE

**Many migrant groups have been adversely affected during the COVID pandemic, with existing inequalities being further highlighted and exacerbated. <sup>28</sup> The period of lockdown led to deteriorating physical and mental health, particularly for those in the asylum system who were confined within accommodation that was not designed for long-term stay. A lack of social ties, the inability to develop these during lockdown and limited facilities for exercise were all contributory factors.**

EU nationals, particularly Eastern Europeans have also been severely impacted. Many are over-represented in the hospitality sector (30%), transport and storage (28%), and health and social work (20%) <sup>29</sup> placing them in roles at greater risk of COVID infection and also job loss. Many organisations in the sector operating food banks reported increased use by EU nationals during the period.

Anxiety around the pandemic was also increased by a lack of clarity and understanding of public health measures due to accessibility. Information was often not readily available in languages other than English or was only in digital form. <sup>30</sup> Although translated guidance was produced by groups such as Doctors of the World, this was a resource developed by the sector as a response rather than something that should have been readily available.

<sup>28</sup> Doctors of the World: The Impact of the COVID Pandemic on Excluded People, p4, 22nd May 2020

<sup>29</sup> Migrants in the UK Labour Market: An Overview - Migration Observatory - The Migration Observatory (ox.ac.uk), 11th January 2021

<sup>30</sup> Migrant Voice: Briefing on Impact of COVID-19 on BAME & Migrant Communities

## MENTAL HEALTH

**Mental Health services continue to suffer from funding cuts which have significantly reduced the availability of treatment. <sup>31</sup> This has severely impacted on the wellbeing of many migrants who, like other excluded groups, often have an increased need for such provision. Many who, due to the circumstances of their arrival in the UK, can suffer from conditions that impact upon their ability to settle in the region.**

Although support is available from groups such as Freedom From Torture or through the outreach services provided by Mind with asylum seekers, this does not address the long-term treatment that can be required. Waiting lists for NHS services also means that many cannot access services when needed.

A need for expanded Mental Health support is also common to other groups supported by the voluntary sector which also impacts upon availability. This is particularly urgent for some Eastern European groups

which have been identified as being at high risk of experiencing mental health problems.

Within Birmingham, local data has shown that Polish nationals, as well as those from wider Eastern European backgrounds have the highest suicide rate by country of birth and is two thirds higher than the city population as a whole. <sup>32</sup> There is an urgent need to work with these communities and the groups that are most engaged with them to ensure mental health and wellbeing services are culturally accessible.

## SERVICE PLANNING

**Further work needs to be conducted by statutory bodies and health agencies to ensure that the specific health needs of migrants are included in the planning of service provision. Although strategies such as Birmingham City Council's 'Creating a City Without Inequality' seek to address problems on both a geographical and demographic basis, they would benefit from an increased focus on migration issues. Current assessments do include analysis of inequalities experienced by some disadvantaged groups and although some of these are also common to many migrants, they do not fully explain the systematic barriers often experienced by those settling in the region.**

Focus groups and outreach work that is being conducted with members of disadvantaged groups need to capture the insight of those with lived experience of migration. Groups such as Healthwatch Birmingham, who have produced analysis around the barriers to healthcare experienced by ethnic minority groups, should be supported in identifying and speaking to migrants so that their needs can be understood.

Opportunities to engage in the design of healthcare provision should also be pursued, such as through recent proposals for a VCSE leadership group in the Black Country and West Birmingham. Many of the issues that affect migrants have also been raised by organisations in the wider voluntary sector supporting other disadvantaged groups. Forums and strategic planning present an opportunity to develop collaborative responses to advocate for change.



# OPPORTUNITIES

**Issues around employment and training continue to be the most significant issues affecting the ability of migrants to effectively settle in the region. Many continue to encounter discrimination and barriers when seeking work and training, leaving them unable to enter the job market or trapped in low paid work. English language skills remain a key barrier to employment and the availability and provision of courses are likely to change over the next 12 months.**

A lack of information around the availability and cost of training also remains an issue. Many recognise the need to improve their literacy and language skills but are unsure how to do so or even aware that free training is often available. This leads to reliance on advice and employment from within communities, leaving individuals in low skilled work. Disadvantages in the labour market are particularly felt by European migrants who often find themselves in roles for which they are overqualified, and which take place outside normal working hours. **33**

## KEY FINDINGS

- **Access and provision of relevant ESOL services for migrants remains problematic.**
- **Future provision and demand for ESOL in the region is likely to change as a result of both government policy and demographic change.**
- **Issues around digital exclusion and a lack of appropriate training pathways are the primary barriers to migrants seeking meaningful work and career development.**
- **It is important that both migrants and their employers are aware of statutory rights, with information available to understand the processes around both employment and protections**



“

...when I came to the UK I thought I would find a job quickly as I am a hard working person and I was willing to work. But it was not enough. No English proved to be a huge barrier to employment for me.

”

**Octavian, client of Refugee and Migrant Centre**

## ENGLISH FOR SPEAKERS OF OTHER LANGUAGES (ESOL)

**Access to ESOL training remains a key element for migrants seeking work. Accredited levels of proficiency shown by formal classes are increasingly demanded by employers. The Refugee and Migrant Centre (RMC), one of the largest providers of skills and education training to migrants in the region, has found that many of their clients have attended self-financed courses in areas such as social care or security but are still unable to find employment due to a lack of spoken English qualification.**

Demand is particularly prevalent in the West Midlands when compared to other regions. Recent analysis shows that in 1.2% of households across the region, none of the adults (but some children) have English as their main language, compared to 0.8% nationally, and in 5.7% of the region's households nobody has English as their first language, compared to 4.4% nationally. <sup>34</sup> As many as 10% of the foreign-born population in state that their English ability negatively impacts their work and career.

Levels of provision remain problematic, with a particular shortage of courses classed as pre-Entry or Entry level <sup>35</sup> which will be used by those starting to learn English. Workplace ESOL is also limited,

often emphasising Health and Safety legislation rather than being linked to progression in comprehension of a language.

There are also difficulties at the higher end of the spectrum, where individuals require higher level International English Language Testing System (IELTS) qualifications for university study or certain occupations. Many migrants also have professional qualifications that are not recognised by UK authorities, meaning that they cannot undertake commensurate roles and are forced into lower paid roles. This situation is particularly seen by those fleeing recent conflicts in areas such as Syria but also amongst wider Eastern European communities.

**By allowing recognition of overseas professional qualifications or providing a lower cost process to convert them to UK equivalent, would not only help migrants to settle and feel valued but would also assist wider society by filling key roles. Initiatives such as USE-IT! have helped medically qualified migrants find work in the NHS. Building on this, Sandwell and West Birmingham CCG developed the Health Overseas Professional Programme provided training in the English language for medically qualified refugees to find a way to resume their medical careers, whilst putting much needed resource back into the local NHS. <sup>36</sup>**

# OPPORTUNITIES

Funding remains a key issue and is particularly acute across the voluntary sector which provides much of the non-classroom learning often used by migrants. This is a crucial resource for the many who are unable to access formal education due to personal circumstances. Where these courses are available, they are vital for migrants as they are accessed for free or at low cost. There are barriers to many migrants in accessing funded courses. Asylum seekers are only eligible if they have been waiting more than 6 months for a claim, whilst new arrivals from outside the EU (for example those on spousal visas) must wait 3 years.

As in many other areas, the COVID pandemic has severely impacted both the availability of courses and the progress of those seeking to learn English. Many organisations were unable to provide ESOL training as funders diverted resources to crisis support. Provision that moved into the online space left many migrants disadvantaged, highlighting the issue of digital exclusion that has affected many.

A lack of digital skills, coupled with many being unable to access both devices and data meant that courses could not be undertaken or only sporadically. This had led to many disengaging from learning or setting back their progress significantly. Potentially, this has delayed the learning and development that many need to effectively settle in the region by years.

Future provision and demand for ESOL in the region is likely to change as a result of both government policy and demographic change. The end of free movement from the EU and new visa requirements for arrivals may reduce demand for basic level courses whilst increasing the need for those at a higher level. **37** Proposed changes to the immigration system, such as the potential for offshoring asylum processing and a revised resettlement scheme, will also impact demand in the near future. Overall, demand is likely to increase as existing migrants in the country will still desire to progress in both work and socially.

Within the region, proposals to develop an ESOL hub within Birmingham may go some way to providing an understanding of current service provision, address gaps in delivery and bring both voluntary and statutory providers together. It should however take into account the digital exclusion experienced by many migrants and ensure that delivery and access is through a mixed approach not solely online.

It should also not act as a barrier to funding services, resulting in only a few select providers offering services at the expense of grassroots organisations with proven links into communities who can support the informal opportunities to develop English outside of formal classroom settings that have proven to be successful.

## BARRIERS TO EMPLOYMENT

**In addition to language provision, issues around digital exclusion and a lack of appropriate training pathways are the primary barriers to migrants seeking meaningful work and career development. For those in the asylum system or wishing to remain in the country, the barriers are more pronounced. Many are unable to work whilst claims are being processed, with poor data sharing between government departments giving individuals misadvice around their rights to seek employment. Further barriers to employment such as a lack of work experience within the UK and the need to obtain a statement of comparability for overseas qualifications via UK ENIC place significant obstacles in enabling their settlement in the region.**

Application processes for jobs have increasingly moved online, particularly during the pandemic, which creates disadvantages for those migrants experiencing digital exclusion. Many roles are only accepting online applications, whereby previously clients could attend agencies who would process paperwork on their behalf. The increased use of online interviews has also caused barriers for many who have limited access to data or mobile devices. Groups such as RMC have provided additional support during this period, through loans of devices and assistance to complete applications.

Although funded training courses are available, they do not address the long-term strategic change needed to close the disparities between migrants and other elements of the workforce. Training is often directed towards specific roles in the service sector, fulfilling needs of employers by enabling jobs to be recruited but not supporting workers themselves who required additional training for career development. This is particularly acute for migrant workers who are disproportionately employed in service industries <sup>38</sup> and unable to progress.

Forthcoming funding opportunities provide a real opportunity for the sector to address these issues and instigate structural change. The Shared Prosperity Fund, launching in 2022, presents the possibility of the sector bidding for a significant sum to address employment needs. A consortium of organisations providing training support could commission and develop a dedicated training pathway offering long-term support for migrants in achieving meaningful career development.

Legislative change would also support the employment of migrants, in particular removing the ban on asylum seekers undertaking paid employment. Lifting this restriction would help integrate asylum seekers into the community, allow them to provide for themselves and use their skills as well as providing a financial gain to the economy. <sup>39</sup> The campaign has already gained cross-party Parliamentary support but would benefit from as many regional organisations as possible to amplify.

**Whilst asylum seekers are currently unable to work, organisations are continuing to provide training and support to equip them for when they are able to enter the job market. A successful example in the region is Code Your Future which provides free training to support refugees and asylum seekers to find work in the tech sector. In the first West Midlands class, 70% of trainees had a job interview within 10 days of graduation and many are now in employment. Although such initiatives require significant investment, they should be supported as bridging a gap that government policy has created.**

“

...the need to strengthen the capacity of individuals and organisations in the social justice field is essential to tackle homegrown slavery. Homegrown slavery, labour migration law, employment interrelations, and labour market control are the new key words voluntary organisations need to familiarise themselves with, to protect migrant workers.

”

**Ake Achi, Founder, Migrants at Work CIC**

## LABOUR EXPLOITATION

**Migrants who are in employment may also be vulnerable to exploitation, particularly in light of requirement for employers to check on the immigration status of workers. Not only will the lack of physical documentation supplied to those with Settled Status cause confusion for those unfamiliar with new systems, but the online processes used to carry out checks can also result in false negative for some groups. 40**

It is important that both migrants and their employers are aware of statutory rights, with information available to understand the processes around both employment and protections. Newly developing trade unions, such as United Voices of the World and the Independent Workers of Great Britain are making inroads into organising migrant workers. The legal issues involved, particularly when individuals are potentially discriminated against, are complex so it is vital that these can be simplified so that the migrants are aware

of their rights and the avenues that can be taken to challenge discriminatory practices.

Those who are victims of modern-day slavery practices should also continue to be supported. Although strong support networks exist in the region that are linked to both the statutory and voluntary sector, with referral processes in place for victims, support should continue to be available for those exiting these systems or those not eligible.



# COMMUNITY

**For migrants to achieve effective settlement in the region not only should they be treated equitably, with the same access to meaningful opportunities for training and employment as other sections of society, but they should also feel that they are part of the wider community. Integration should mean that all cultures within the region are embraced, recognising the differences but celebrating the contributions made by all migrants.**

Those living in the region should be able to feel confident in their involvement with both available services and other community groups. Although it is very difficult to measure how successfully this level of cohesion has been achieved, as in many ways cohesion and integration are subjective terms but a priority for the Project should be to speak with migrants themselves to understand the barriers they feel and how settled within the region they feel.

Many voluntary organisations across the regions have provided support to migrants to help them settle in the region and increase their confidence in engaging with services and groups. Although work by local

authorities to support migrants, such as joining the City of Sanctuary movement, is welcome there is more that needs to be done to ensure that certain community groups are included in planning and their contributions to the region promoted.

Finally, those creating division within wider society and particularly targeting migrant groups should be challenged and prosecuted wherever possible. Migrants need to feel safe and confident that any experienced hate crimes will be dealt with, so dialogue and involvement with statutory bodies to support this process remains crucial.

## KEY FINDINGS

- **Although local authorities have recognised the need to support community integration, and included these in their strategic planning, there are still a number of gaps.**
- **Despite Eastern Europeans forming significant populations within the region, representation within official activities is much lower.**
- **Local Authorities could assist through refining the way in which they record and define the ethnicity of their service users.**



## KEY FINDINGS

- **Hate Crime remains a problem experienced by many and is made worse by systemic delays in dealing with offenders and a lack of confidence in the police to investigate instances thoroughly.**
- **The region as a whole continues to experience significant issues with individuals being subjected to Modern Days Slavery (MDS) practices.**

## COHESION AND INTEGRATION

The way in which migrants feel integrated into the region, and community, is crucial in measuring the success of settlement. For some academics and policy makers, it is the most important metric in understanding immigration. <sup>41</sup> It has been shown that local areas that invest in activities linked to cohesion show higher levels of neighbourliness and trust between members. <sup>42</sup> Integration should not be seen as an assimilationist process but a two-way process of mutual accommodation between all groups. <sup>43</sup>

This involves collaboration not only between migrant groups and others in the wider community, but crucially between the statutory and voluntary sectors to enable these processes to take place. Within the region, there has been a great deal of work to support the integration of migrants into the wider community, however some disconnection remains.

Groups across the voluntary sector have continued to support migrants through building friendships and equipping them with the skills for integration. In Birmingham for example, Restore has continued to run befriending for migrants, as well as group social activities. <sup>44</sup> These kinds of activities not only combat the loneliness and isolation felt by many migrants, but also help to equip them with skills to assist in settling in the region.

Any successful integration of communities requires the building of social bridges between migrants and 'host' communities, with a particular need for a proactive approach by those seen as hosts. Groups and initiatives such as the City of Sanctuary voluntary groups; the work around Refugee Week and Celebrating Sanctuary all encourage campaigning on refugee and migrant issues and work to create a welcoming environment for those seeking to settle in the region.

<sup>41</sup> Migration Observatory: Integration in the UK: Understanding the Data – March 2021

<sup>42</sup> COIN: Beyond Us and Them: Policy and Practice for Strengthening Social Cohesion in Local Areas – March 2021

<sup>43</sup> Home Office Indicators of Integration framework 2019 <sup>44</sup> Restore Annual Report 2020

“

...having someone to talk to, was a big problem to me until I met my befriender who came and took that burden away. She is very kind hearted, is always ready to listen to me and has helped me to regain my self-confidence by her kind support.

”

**Anonymous client of Restore**

Lockdown measures and social distancing requirements have severely affected the ability of groups to carry out befriending activities **45** and this has consequently impacted upon the health and wellbeing of those being supported. Although services have begun to resume, the delay has obviously impacted upon the integration of many.

Although local authorities have recognised the need to support integration programmes, and included these in their strategic planning, there are still a number of gaps. Although commitments to the City of Sanctuary movement has rightly increased the support and awareness for the needs of newly arrived migrants, however some other communities such as those from Eastern Europe can feel that they are excluded.

Despite Eastern Europeans forming significant populations within the region, representation within official activities is much lower. Some local councils recognise and support cultural events to support large migrant communities in the region, for example supporting national days of celebration for the Indian, Irish and Pakistani communities. Although the Polish community is of a similar, or larger size, there is not a similar level of engagement. Support for similar events at a local authority level could support integration and raise awareness. This would be a particularly beneficial approach, helping to increase engagement with Eastern European communities at a council level.

Difficulties exist in how to effectively measure integration within the region, particularly as it is largely a subjective view based on individual experiences. The most effective method will be to listen to migrants themselves, either through feedback from sessions attended with organisations or from direct conversations with migrants themselves. The Migration Policy and Practice Project intends to conduct regular focus groups over the next 12 months based around

the four key thematic areas in order to identify barriers to settlement experienced by migrants and to shape policy decisions that will address these.

Local Authorities could assist in this process through refining the way in which they record and define the ethnicity of their service users. This particularly affects those of Central or Eastern European origin who are classed as 'White Other' in many forms. This oversimplifies the diverse nature and needs of these communities as well as excluding them from current anti-racism measures by placing them in the same category as other Europeans or North Americans who do not experience discrimination. **46** Some of the difficulties with this approach were highlighted in the EUSS process, in which some local authorities struggled to identify EEA+ national children and young people in their care, potentially delaying applications for regularisation under the scheme.

Further work needs to be completed in defining an adequate measure for capturing the experiences and needs of this particular group. In order to support this significant percentage of the migrant population it is important to draw the attention of policy makers to the diversity within whiteness.

It is also important that the needs of migrant communities are best served by those who have lived experience of migration and the leadership of groups within the sector should reflect this. Many migrant led groups report feeling structurally disadvantaged in the nature of their relationships with the wider sector, underrepresented at a service planning level and regarded as providers of information rather than as groups who could instigate change. **47** Work needs to be done to empower these groups and provide long term support and training so that they can play a leading role in societal change.

**45** Migration Policy and Practice Briefing: Impact of COVID-19 on Befriending Services – April 2021

**46** In-Between Spaces (birmingham.ac.uk)

**47** NOMI Network: Barriers to Funding Report

## HATE CRIME

**Hate Crime remains a problem experienced by many and is made worse by systemic delays in dealing with offenders and a lack of confidence in the police to investigate instances thoroughly. Where full year figures are available, the number of reported hate crime incidents in the region has increased from 6150 in 2019 to 8378 in 2020. <sup>48</sup> This however does not show a complete picture as many migrants have reported being subjected to multiple incidents before contacting the police.**

There is ongoing distrust in the authorities for many groups who feel that instances will not be investigated and therefore lack the confidence in reporting them. The use of third-party reporting centres has increased the routes available for reporting and removed the need to directly contact the police, however further centres and options should be made to support marginalised groups. Increased language provision for those reporting is also required as current systems are predominately in English.

Those within the asylum system have also experienced increased threats from far-right activists, particularly targeting those within hotels. Although no incidents have been reported in the region covered by the Project, several have occurred in neighbouring areas. A response project developed by Hope Not Hate and Migration Exchange to understand the extent and nature of the threat and develop responses both the long and short term should be supported across the sector.

## MODERN DAY SLAVERY

**The region as a whole continues to experience significant issues with individuals being subjected to Modern Day Slavery (MDS) practices. Between April 2019 and March 2020, 969 potential survivors were referred which is an increase of 45 percent compared to the previous year. This makes up 8 percent of the total reported in the UK. <sup>49</sup>**

This increase may also not fully reflect the size of the issues within the region, with some estimates suggesting that there are potentially over 4000 victims in the West Midlands. <sup>50</sup> The problem is cross-generational, recent statistics from West Midlands Police show that in the last quarter of 2020, 74 adult and 92 potential child victims were identified. <sup>51</sup>

At a national level, the most common overseas nationalities of victims were Albanian and Vietnamese. <sup>52</sup> Partner agencies and voluntary groups in the region who provide support to survivors have identified similar patterns, with a number of Eastern European nationals seen.

**Victims of MDS are able to access the National Referral Mechanism (NRM), the UK framework for providing support, which will give access to 45 days tailored assistance including legal and financial support as well as potentially leave to remain. Within the region, the WM Anti-Slavery Network works with sector organisations including the Red Cross and SIFA Fireside to ensure that identified victims are fully supported.**

It remains crucial that not only are the victims of modern-day slavery practices identified and supported, but that the networks and organisations comprising these are engaged with. Potential victims should have the confidence to report their situation

knowing that they will be provided with not only appropriate support, but that by doing so they will not put their immigration status at risk. Such worries will not only reduce instances of referrals but could place victims into a more precarious situation.

<sup>49</sup> Home Office: National Referral Mechanism statistics UK: End of year summary 2019 second edition

<sup>50</sup> Centre for Social Justice: Fighting UK Slavery in the 2020's <sup>51</sup> Modern Slavery: National Referral Mechanism and Duty to Notify statistics UK, Quarter 3 2020 – July to September second edition <sup>52</sup> ibid

# Migration: Policy & Practice

Birmingham - Black Country

SUPPORTING THE EFFECTIVE  
SETTLEMENT OF MIGRANTS  
AND A POSITIVE INTEGRATION  
AGENDA IN BIRMINGHAM  
AND THE BLACK COUNTRY

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