

MIGRANT EXPERIENCES OF THE BARRIERS TO SETTLEMENT IN THE WEST MIDLANDS

A **MIGRATION POLICY AND PRACTICE** ANNUAL ASSESSMENT



SUPPORTING THE EFFECTIVE SETTLEMENT OF MIGRANTS AND A POSITIVE INTEGRATION AGENDA IN THE WEST MIDLANDS



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OVERVIEW

This is the second year in which our assessment has been informed primarily by the voices of migrants through a series of focus group events across the region. The theme of challenge, both of that experienced by migrants themselves in building new lives in the region, but also for the wider sector providing support, has not only persisted but increased. This year, many of those we spoke to also expressed a strong sense of frustration with the barriers they faced, often as a direct result of government policy.

The challenges faced by migrants themselves have increased since our last assessment and a perilous situation for many has been exacerbated by prolonged uncertainty. Legislation such as the Illegal Migration Bill has placed many in fear of deportation and further hardened the discrimination experienced in attempting to achieve successful settlement and integration. The challenges encountered are not just limited to those seeking asylum, with EU nationals and those on resettlement schemes also finding difficulty in accessing suitable training and employment opportunities. Many, regardless of status or settlement route, still face significant issues around basic needs such as healthcare, adequate housing and other fundamental rights.

Integration can only occur successfully through a partnership between organisations working with migrants, the wider voluntary sector, local authorities and communities as a whole. Although collaboration across sectors has continued in a number of areas, the situation is likely to become more challenging due to significant funding difficulties experienced by local authorities. It is vital that despite expected restrictions those experiencing vulnerable situations, which include many migrants, continue to be protected.

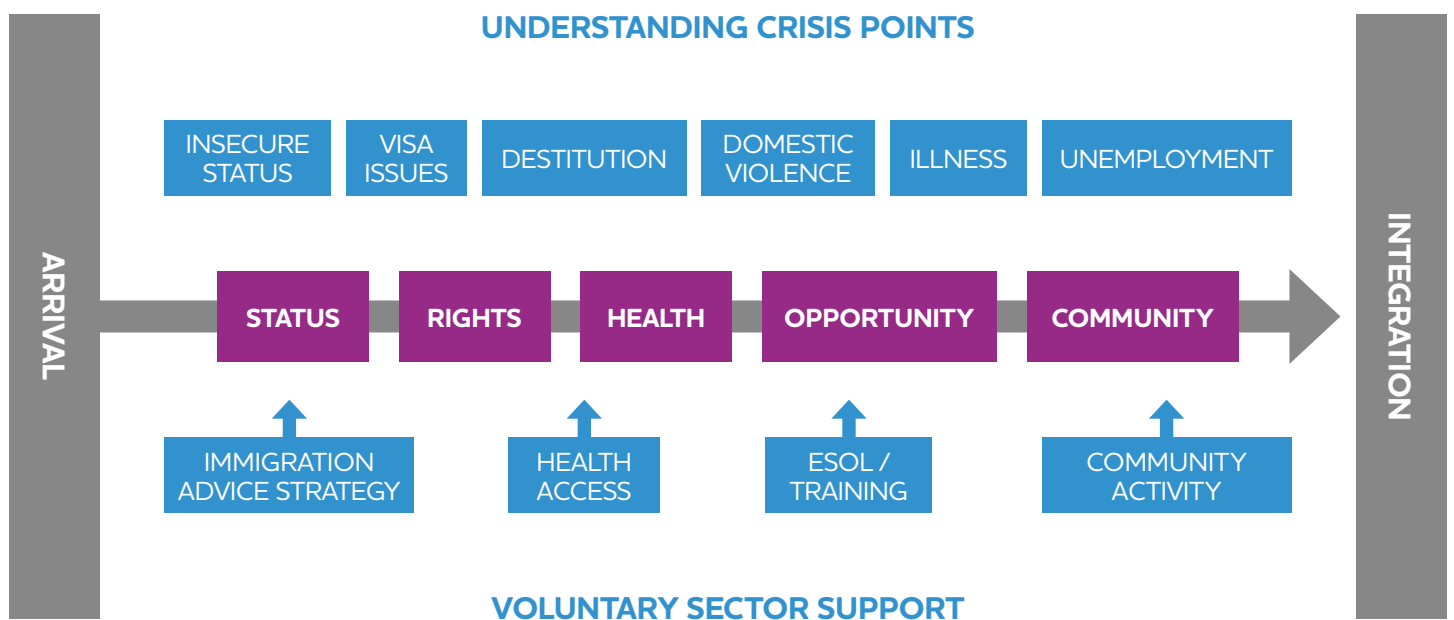
A key challenge for all of those working with migrants is to recognise that those seeking to settle in the region are a diverse group, comprised of many ethnicities and backgrounds. All are at different stages in their journey, and it is important for all those in the sector, as well as partners, to 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.

The past twelve months have shown the support across the region to resettle those fleeing conflict zones, as well as a significant community from Hong Kong. Collaborative working between statutory and voluntary agencies as well as individual members of the community has again highlighted the complex processes required for successful integration. It is vital that this support is extended to all migrants and embedded within long-term service planning.

Finally, whilst the policy decisions that most adversely impact migrants are made at a national level, the support from local authorities and groups to highlight the negative effects caused is crucial. Statutory agencies should continue to work collaboratively and engage with the voluntary and community sector in order to achieve solutions within existing frameworks, as well as acknowledging the consequences of government policy and providing support those that require it.

ABOUT MIGRATION POLICY AND PRACTICE

Migration Policy and Practice is an independent CIO that supports voluntary sector organisations in working towards the effective settlement of migrants ¹ and a positive integration agenda across the West Midlands. Our ultimate aim is to support processes and mechanisms that 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 organisation 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 integration.

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.

¹ Migrants in this context will encompass Asylum Seekers, Refugees, UASC undocumented and Economic Migrants

The structures we support 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.

Over the past twelve months, we have developed a Regional Migration Network, providing a forum for organisations to discuss and develop responses to strategic barriers across all four thematic areas. The network is voluntary sector led, providing a space to share best practice and agree joint positions as well as developing actions and supporting advocacy for legislative change. The findings from this report will be used to inform the work of the network and suggest priorities for further action over the coming year.



REGIONAL CONTEXT

The West Midlands region, and in particular Birmingham and the Black Country, remains one of the most diverse areas in the country. The region as a whole is estimated to have a population where 13.9% were born outside of the UK. ² In five Local Authority areas, over 10% of the population are estimated to have been born overseas. This number has increased in all boroughs since the last census, with Sandwell seeing the largest change.

Local Authority	% Population Non-UK born	% Change since last Census
Birmingham	26.7	4.5
Dudley	7.9	2.6
Sandwell	15.9	7.7
Solihull	10.3	2.8
Walsall	14.8	4.9
Wolverhampton	22.9	6.5

Source: Office for National Statistics, Census 2021

The percentage of the population who have been born overseas continues to be reflective of the many communities who have migrated to the region from the post-war period to the present day, including those recently arrived from areas such as Eastern Europe and Hong Kong. The largest numbers of overseas born residents are from Pakistan, Bangladesh and Poland. The highest numbers of overseas born populations are found in urban areas in the region, primarily in Birmingham but with significant communities also in Coventry, Sandwell and Wolverhampton. ³

The region is also home to a large number of individuals who were born in EU countries, around 8% of the UK total, which is the third highest region outside of London. ⁴

Although recent census data should be a guide to levels of migration and residency, there remain gaps in awareness particularly in relation to numbers of EU nationals. 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. Analysis shows discrepancies between the number of applications ⁶ and the population identifying as EU nationals across the region. ⁷ This, however, may be due to a number of factors including recent changes in population due to leaving the UK or the way in which individuals define their origin, which may not be captured in data.

² Office for National Statistics: Census 2021 Country of Birth – 13th December 2022 ³ Office for National Statistics: International Migration England and Wales Census 2021 – November 2022 ⁴ Migration Observatory: Where do Migrants Live in the UK – March 2022 ⁵ Migration Observatory: EU Migration to and from the UK – November 2023 ⁶ EU Settlement Statistics: Local Authority Tables: June 2023 ⁷ Office for National Statistics: National Identity (Detailed) – November 2022

REGIONAL CONTEXT

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 welcomes 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. ⁸ The region overall has a higher migrant population than other parts of the UK, and those seeking asylum make up a smaller proportion of the total, approximately 5%, just below the national average of 6% ⁹

Current Supported Asylum Seeker Population (as of June 2023)

Local Authority	Asylum Seekers	Resettled Refugees	Combined	Density per 1000 residents
Birmingham	2986	1107	4093	0.36
Dudley	650	196	846	0.26
Sandwell	1410	220	1630	0.48
Solihull	317	291	608	0.25
Walsall	879	210	1089	0.38
Wolverhampton	1289	242	1531	0.58

(Figures do not include British Overseas Nationals resettled from Hong Kong)

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 many other regions.

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 proportionate to the overall population.. This level of density has already been surpassed across the region and is particularly prominent in Sandwell and Wolverhampton. This presents

difficulties in securing suitable accommodation without concentration in specific areas, especially due to the limited funding settlement provided by central government.

The levels of funding provided to local authorities to support this work continues to create challenges in supporting refugees and migrants. 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.

ABOUT OUR ASSESSMENT

This report was informed by a series of focus groups and interviews held with the support of partner organisations across the region over spring and summer 2023. In total we spoke with almost 100 individuals, all at different stages of their migration journey.

All discussions were open-ended but grouped around the four broad themes of our work, allowing participants to talk freely about the issues and barriers they have encountered during their time in the region, and the wider UK.

The key issues raised across the four themes are expanded below:



RIGHTS

Throughout our focus group discussions two key areas emerged as presenting significant difficulties for all migrants, difficulties around accessing specialist advice and housing issues, regardless of immigration status. Many remain unable to access either free or affordable legal advice to support them through the immigration process, with substantial fees for both visas and consultations with a solicitor placing additional burdens during an ongoing cost of living crisis.

In one positive sign, however, there were fewer examples from our focus groups this year where individuals were unsure who to contact to seek advice and were reliant on signposted referrals by friends and family. This is evidence of the increased collaboration across the sector between specialist migration support organisations and the wider voluntary sector, including that supported by the regional migration network convened by Migration Policy and Practice.

KEY FINDINGS

- Migrants continue to experience difficulty in accessing legal support and advice, especially for asylum cases.
- There are significant barriers to accessing housing and issues with the conditions in many properties. Many face overcrowding, and landlords unwilling to make needed repairs.
- Frequent moves between accommodation are disruptive to employment, education, support systems and wellbeing.
- The lack of clarity or awareness around rights, entitlements and UK systems caused stress and delayed access to support. Many relied on advice and/or signposting from friends or family rather than formal avenues.

Housing remains a significant issue for all migrants, regardless of their status, and was highlighted by individuals resident across the region. The use of hotels for those seeking asylum continues, despite being unsuitable and inappropriate for those fleeing conflict. Many have told us that long-term residency has exacerbated or caused long-term health problems and that the nature of accommodation, including sharing rooms, is inappropriate for those in most circumstances.

For those who have been granted status, and for other migrants, the issue of sub-standard housing continues to be a concern particularly in the private rental sector. Many remain living in poor quality accommodation, with issues such as damp causing long-term health impacts for many residents. Faults and problems with property, whilst frequently reported, are often not resolved for long periods.

Cost and availability of housing also continues to have an impact and limits the ability of many migrants to integrate successfully. Individuals are often housed long distances from learning centres or places of work, meaning that significant costs and travel times are incurred. Many of those who we spoke to who had arrived in the UK as part of government schemes reported having to move properties on several occasions. This has affected their ability to fully settle into the region.

Ongoing delays and uncertainty in the administrative processes of the asylum system were again highlighted by many migrants as negatively impacting both their mental health and effective settlement in the region. For those in the asylum system this is the result of deliberate government policy which has starved investment and caused significant delays in decisions on claims, which places individuals in limbo until this is resolved.

Recent legislative changes, particularly the Illegal Migration Act, have increased the anxiety and uncertainty faced by many in the asylum system. Policy changes to reduce the backlog in the asylum system have also negatively impacted both individuals and the wider sector, with 'fast-tracked' claims against some criteria and a reduced period of move on support resulting in a significant increase in requests to organisations across the region which lack resources to assist.

Our focus groups also suggest that problems are not limited to those in the asylum system. Some of those we spoke to who had come to the UK as part of government resettlement schemes spoke of a lack of engagement with authorities and a consequent uncertainty about their future when the funding for their scheme ends.



“

Papers to be a refugee is our life.
Just in our mind only focus on papers...
Some people really struggle with
mental issues because of papers
and some people are dead and they
kill themselves. ”

Participant at Focus Group in Birmingham

ACCESS TO SPECIALIST ADVICE

Regardless of their journey, a large number of those migrating into the region will at some point likely require access to specialist advice. Early interventions to resolve difficulties faced by many migrants around immigration status, housing or employment can have a positive effect on levels of integration and reduce the need for crisis support.

For those navigating the asylum system, advice will be required on immigration matters to support an application, challenge a flawed decision around their leave to remain in the UK or as part of a pathway to citizenship. Many European citizens will still require advice around their right to remain and work in the UK following the UK's departure from the European Union. Many migrants will also require advice and support in relation to issues related to benefits and housing.

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.

There are a limited number of organisations in the region who are accredited to provide this advice and fewer still who do so on a no fee basis. The past year has seen one of the organisations providing this free service closing due to funding issues and although there are plans to resume services under a new structure it has still impacted upon resources in the sector.

The need for many migrants to pay for legal advice places them under a significant financial strain not only through the cost of advice but also with travel to consult with advisers who are spread across the region. Several individuals we spoke to during our focus groups highlighted difficulties with not only obtaining advice, but also negative experiences with solicitors including lack of engagement with their cases.

Some have changed representation on several occasions, which for migrants who are seeking sanctuary in the region can be potentially retraumatising through having to revisit the circumstances around their journey to the UK.

The need for specialist advice is not limited to those seeking asylum, or to immigration matters. There is an ongoing need for support to EU nationals both granted settled status in the UK or who have missed the application deadline to apply for status in the UK. The last available government statistics showed that there had been 6.015 million applications to the scheme, **10** 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. Whilst late applications are still able to be completed, recent changes to the reasonable grounds to make a claim that came into force in August may risk disenfranchising large numbers of people.

The ongoing cost of living crisis continues to negatively impact migrant communities along with other groups, placing them in vulnerable positions. This affects migrants in all situations but can be particularly acute for those in the asylum system who are unable to work and rely on limited asylum support payments. These funds leave many struggling to pay for fundamental needs. **11** Many partner organisations have reported substantial increases in enquiries from individuals requesting advice around housing and benefits support.

Often this will require additional specialist knowledge around immigration conditions which some advisers may not be aware of. Although greater awareness raising and the sharing of best practice across the wider sector has occurred during the last year, this will have an impact on the resources required by the specialist agencies who support migrants.

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 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.

A lack of specialist 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.

The next twelve months will likely see a continued increase in demand for specialist advice, not just due to the ongoing cost of living crisis but also because

of the number of migrants in vulnerable situations moving into the region. This is not only comprised of individuals dispersed in the asylum system, where the region hosts larger numbers than many other areas, but those families on government supported resettlement schemes and nationally mandated transfers of Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children which will increase demand in the medium term.

Whilst our focus groups indicated that there is greater awareness amongst migrants of where and how to access support services, this will continue to impact upon the resources required to provide appropriate levels of support. New initiatives such as the online Migrant Advice Portal being developed by Birmingham City Council will help to raise awareness and should be supported but with a consequence of adding additional work to an already stretched area of the sector.



“

An asylum seeker hotel
is like a prison

”

**Participant at Refugee and Migrant
Centre Focus Group**

HOUSING

Issues around housing remain one of the most significant problems faced by migrants at all stages of their settlement. Ensuring a stable place of residency is essential for individuals to access support and advice where necessary in order to facilitate effective settlement. The problems highlighted by participants in our focus groups are long-standing and affect individuals regardless of immigration status.

Well-documented problems with the use of hotels as contingency accommodation for those in the asylum system continue to occur across the region. These include overcrowding, multiple room occupancy, which is inappropriate for those in vulnerable situations as well as poor facilities and links to the wider community to help integration. Problems also continue in the private rented sector, with examples of exploitation by unregulated landlords. Some of those we spoke to told us of living in poor quality accommodation where faults are not resolved and having to pay significant sums to secure tenancies.

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. For example, in Birmingham there are over 20000 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.

Similarly to other parts of the UK, the use of hotels by Local Authorities as additional temporary accommodation has continued across the region over the past twelve months. This practice is used to house families whilst sourcing accommodation but primarily to house those seeking asylum.

In these situations a number of issues have been identified. Whilst it is a positive sign that, unlike last year, no participants in our focus groups brought up examples of mistreatment by staff there is still significant evidence highlighting the unsuitable nature of hotels for those at any stage of their settlement.

Many people in our focus groups talked of poor-quality accommodation where faults were not resolved as well as issues around cleanliness that contributed to ongoing and new health problems. The sharing of rooms was both inappropriate and, for some, potentially dangerous. Often those sharing rooms did not speak the same languages and were of different nationalities and cultures, which caused difficulties.

More seriously, we spoke to a number of LGBT asylum seekers who felt afraid to disclose their sexual orientation whilst in hotel accommodation and needed access to dedicated spaces provided by charities. This caused severe mental health trauma in many cases, compounding the circumstances of their arrival. Such examples show the need to support those in hotel accommodation as individuals rather than part of a generic process that compounds problems.

All of those we spoke to who had spent time in hotels, regardless of their background, gave voice to the common feeling of helplessness. They felt trapped, cut off from wider society and unable to engage unless organisations were actively providing services on site. Many spoke of feeling dehumanised by the conditions as they had little personal freedom, were unable to cook their own meals and reliant on food provided at certain times which often was of poor quality.

The use of hotels for housing asylum seekers remains counter-productive from both a financial standpoint and in supporting the wellbeing of those being housed. Effective support for those seeking asylum should include as a minimum housing within community settings as advocated by policy makers in the sector. **12** Extensive use of hotels across the region is likely to continue in the short and medium term, further exacerbating these problems.

The situation is further complicated by the lack of a clear transition pathway for many into mainstream welfare support following a grant of status. The reduction in the period of move on support provided to those granted status to 7 days has resulted in a huge increase of demand on voluntary organisations who lack the capacity to assist. This can lead to frequently chaotic outcomes, including eviction into hotel accommodation, putting further stress on the region'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. For those either missed the deadline or applied late to the EUSS scheme, the situation is particularly difficult as it leaves 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.

Some of those who have entered the region as part of government resettlement schemes have also experienced problems, particularly around securing permanent or long-term housing. Much of the property used to support these schemes have been sourced from private landlords and in some cases is often requested to be returned at short notice.

This has meant families having to move, disrupting schooling, work and training at a time when secure and settled location is of paramount importance. Over the past twelve months, many have continued attempts to secure long-term housing but have been unable to do so due to both uncertainty over ongoing support to the scheme and requirements to provide large amounts of rent in advance.

“

Because these people don't have the experience (of being in the asylum process) and have it all figured out, they don't know and they don't care and they just treat you anyhow, which is not fair.

”

**Participant at Focus Group
in Birmingham**

SYSTEMIC DELAYS

The problems experienced by many migrants, regardless of immigration status, have been exacerbated by delays in resolving claims or responding to queries and appeals. This has affected mental health, left them unable to plan for the future and in some cases left them vulnerable to destitution or homelessness.

Although some variation in the length of time taken to reach decision is to be expected due to the unique nature of each case, many in our focus groups spoke of the frustration felt by a lack of communication around their cases or clarity on the process. This was not just seen with those seeking asylum, but across all aspects of the immigration system where individuals felt powerless to move on the process of their settlement and unsure when progress would occur. These delays and difficulties give further evidence of the well-publicised lack of investment in the immigration system and shows the real-life consequences of this policy.

Even once individuals have achieved regularised status, there remain significant financial costs associated with residency for both visas and citizenship. At the end of October 2023, the cost of most fees and applications were increased, some by several hundred pounds. ¹³ This will place families under greater financial strain through the need to pay for extended visas and in some cases trap individuals who are long-term residents but unable to afford to obtain citizenship.

During our focus groups, many of those from resettlement schemes also expressed frustration that they have received limited contact from government 'representatives' despite this being an explicit part of the settlement scheme. It has also made it difficult to plan for their future due to the current limited term nature of the scheme's funding. This is reflective of concerns raised by the National Audit Office around the future of Ukrainian support following its initial three-year cycle and the rising risk of homelessness as sponsorship ends. ¹⁴

These regional issues are reflective of national trends which have seen an increase in the time taken to decide asylum claims with a current backlog of over 132,000 awaiting a decision. ¹⁵ Whilst government investment in the area has increased over the past 12 months with an aim of reducing this backlog, this has not been reflected in the experiences of those we spoke to who remain waiting for decisions to enable them to build new lives in the region.

It is therefore sadly likely that these issues will only be resolved by not just an increase in investment, which more significantly a change in government policy to stop the framing of migration in negative terms. Until such a point, the sector can only work with partners in highlighting areas of need and advocate for change by showing the human cost of these delays.

¹³ Home Office Policy Paper: Immigration and Nationality Fees – 22nd November 2023

¹⁴ National Audit Office: Investigation into the Home for Ukraine Scheme – 17th October 2023

¹⁵ Migration Observatory: The UK's Asylum Backlog – 5th April 2023



“

My friend didn't have any check-ups until she was 6 or 7 months ... because she didn't know. I think that's why her baby was born premature.

”

Participant in Bilston

HEALTH

Although the migrants who attended our focus groups largely echoed that of the wider population in their engagement with the healthcare system, there remain areas where intervention is urgently needed to address inequality of both access and need. Recent research has shown evidence of many migrants in vulnerable situations being unable to access healthcare, creating significant impacts on their wellbeing, ¹⁶ and similar issues have been seen in the experiences of some of those we spoke to. The provision of mental health support remains the key need for migrants at all stages of settlement.

Those in the asylum system, particularly those resident in hotels, require urgent support – due to both the traumatic circumstances of their arrival and the inappropriate nature of their accommodation. The need, however, is not confined to new arrivals, with migrants from all backgrounds often neglected in terms of targeted support. Those from Eastern European communities for example, have been shown to be at greater risk of suffering from mental health issues. ¹⁷

KEY FINDINGS

- There remains a lack of awareness about how to access some NHS services, especially when newly arrived.
- Mental health support is needed but lacking, with counselling services not always effective. Depression and anxiety were common issues for many migrants in our focus groups.
- Some reported negative experiences with maternity care, including dismissal of concerns, inadequate monitoring during labour, and lack of pain relief options.
- There were difficulties for some in gaining approval prescriptions following prior diagnosis in other countries which made management of chronic health conditions difficult.

Our findings around disparity in access to healthcare are similar to the experiences cited in other national reports, namely around adequate care in initial accommodation **18** or that of some pregnant women. **19** It is also of concern that, as with other areas, many did not know how and where to access specific support and relied on friends to provide direction. Although most found primary healthcare and emergency treatment easy to access, despite waiting times remaining an issue, for those that required more specialist treatment and support the system was difficult to navigate, particularly for those where English is not a first language.

Many of the barriers that have been highlighted could be reduced by a greater inclusion of migrant voices within healthcare planning. New structures being developed in the region have identified migrant populations as a key area for engagement and any work to develop understanding of their needs should be supported. Ensuring that the challenges faced by migrants are highlighted in the same way as other parts of the community will help to make healthcare more accessible and help to reduce long term inequalities. New structures that are being developed in the region around Integrated Care Systems that will encourage community involvement in planning and prescribing present an opportunity for this to take place.

18 Doctors of the World - Asylum seekers, health, and access to healthcare in initial and contingency accommodation (April 2022)

19 Doctors of the World - Inequalities in maternity care experienced by migrant pregnant women and babies (April 2022)

ACCESS TO HEALTHCARE

There have been a number of areas in which migrants have struggled to access healthcare treatment, with problems particularly apparent for those living in hotels as initial accommodation. Although all have seen a doctor at some point, many have struggled to receive treatment plans for long-term conditions due to a lack of a permanent address. Such activities prevent migrants from seeking help when in need. Amongst all newly arrived migrant groups, we saw examples where individuals did not know how to access treatment and relied on friends and family for engagement with services.

Some new initiatives have been launched by the organisations Brushstrokes and Faith Action during the past year to try and support increased knowledge around access and these have taken place in several hotels across Birmingham and Sandwell. Initial indicators are that these have been a positive intervention in not only raising awareness but supporting community integration through knowledge of local services and activities and also English proficiency through the interactive nature of the course. Further expansion of this work would help reduce some of the barriers experienced by migrants and should be supported.

Difficulties have emerged when individuals require more specialist treatment or need to be seen in an emergency. Many remain unsure where to go to receive healthcare in these circumstances, with a lack of adequate signposting and support leaving many relying on friends for direction. Transport costs also play a significant factor if A&E departments are located distances from accommodation. These factors may cause some to not seek treatment, potentially worsening their conditions and causing long-term health implications.

Worryingly, some in our focus groups reported negative experiences with maternity care, including dismissal of concerns, inadequate monitoring during labour, and lack of pain relief options. This is particularly concerning for those still learning English who may not feel confident to challenge bad practice or ask questions around treatment and again highlights the barriers faced by some migrants around access. It is also reflective of recent research

highlighting the poorer birth outcomes for migrant groups in comparison to the general population. **20**

The negative health outcomes associated with long-term street homelessness continues to be an issue, particularly 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.

Numbers experiencing homelessness are likely to increase due to a number of factors including the current economic situation, a lack of available housing stock, reduction in the move on period given to those granted asylum and also the higher number of those with NRPf conditions. It is vital to understand the scope of this issue and develop support pathways for this increasing cohort.

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 forthcoming increase in the Immigration Health Surcharge from January 2024 will further increase this risk.



“

Waiting one year and a half,
it is damaging my mind.

**Participant at
Focus Group in Walsall**

”

MENTAL HEALTH

The provision of mental health support remains a key priority for migrants across the region, regardless of status. A significant number have arrived in the UK having undertaken traumatic journeys and fled areas of conflict. This can leave them vulnerable to mental health trauma and conditions that impact upon their ability to settle in the region. Many of those we spoke to as part of our outreach work this year spoke of experiencing depression and anxiety due to their situation, the lack of resolution to their claim of status and the difficulties establishing lives in the region.

In common with other parts of the healthcare system, Mental Health support services continue to suffer from funding cuts which have significantly reduced the availability of treatment. Inpatient treatment **21** has also been affected by a lack of beds. This has severely impacted on the wellbeing of many migrants who, like other excluded groups, often have an increased need for such provision.

Although support is available from groups such as Freedom From Torture or through the outreach services provided by Mind with asylum seekers, these only provide short-term treatment, not the extended support that is required to deal with the trauma that some have experienced. Other groups with specialism in this area are also willing to provide support and treatment but this still requires an element of assessment and triage which requires additional resources not currently available widely across the sector. Waiting lists for NHS support also means that many cannot access services when needed.

Clinical treatment in itself is also not the only solution to supporting those experiencing mental health difficulties. Formal programmes, including talking therapies, may not work for all migrants. Some participants in our focus groups highlighted the difficulties in this approach not just because of language barriers but also having to relive traumatic situations during the process. Some stated that they were unable to receive treatment until they had been placed in permanent accommodation, whilst others talked of the difficulty in obtaining continuity of care when frequently moving accommodation.

All of those in our focus groups recognised the need for additional mental health support and also talked of the positive benefits that could be gained from community activities and groups. These allowed individuals to meet with those from shared backgrounds and experiences which promotes mutually beneficial support and contacts. Voluntary sector organisations who facilitate these sessions should be supported to enhance their availability, which will help those needing support with their mental health.

The need for an expansion in support is also shown by the experiences of other migrant communities. The high risk of experiencing mental health problems within some Eastern European groups that was highlighted in our last assessment remains a key issue. The ongoing conflict following the invasion of Ukraine, and the number of refugees who have fled the country in harrowing circumstances, has only increased the importance of this issue.

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. **22** 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 accessible.

21 Number of NHS mental health beds down by 25% since 2010, analysis shows | Mental health | The Guardian

22 Birmingham City Council Suicide Prevention Strategy: 2019-2024

“

If this charity did not help me,
maybe now I am not sitting here

”

Participant in Birmingham referring to the mental health support she received from a local charity.

SERVICE PLANNING

Since our last assessment, work has continued by statutory bodies to ensure that the specific needs of disadvantaged groups are recognised and embedded within the planning of healthcare provision. Many of the cross-cutting issues identified impact migrants along with other sections of the community who often find themselves in vulnerable situations.

Migration Policy and Practice has sought to establish forums to highlight priority issues and experiences from across the sector and ensure that links are developed with existing forums and structures to ensure representation on the same basis as other parts of the voluntary sector. Initiatives such as the regional Mental Health Consortium and the Flourish Partnership should be supported as an avenue to develop responses on a cross-sector basis.

The VCSE Alliances developed across the region to support the design of healthcare provision should continue to be supported, with the opportunities presented by representation on local leadership groups. Many of the issues that affect migrants have also been raised by organisations in the wider voluntary sector supporting other disadvantaged groups. Statutory health agencies have recognised that understanding of migrant needs are a key knowledge gap to be resolved as a priority and engagement with this work.



“

I went to ESOL classes. I learnt so much there. They took us to show how to do shopping, how to use the tram.

”

Participant in Wolverhampton

OPPORTUNITIES

Difficulties and restrictions around education and employment opportunities remain one of the biggest frustrations for many of the migrants we spoke to. All were keen to find work or build upon existing training and skills but were often prevented in this by both legislation and the inability to access specific support.

The benefits of gaining paid employment or involvement in volunteering, which assist in settlement by providing financial independence and supporting integration in the wider community, were recognised by everyone in our focus groups. Whilst all sought to achieve progress in both work and education, the barriers encountered actively prevented many from doing so.

KEY FINDINGS

- **A lack of UK work experience prevents professionals from finding jobs at their skill level with many remaining underemployed in low wage jobs.**
- **There is difficulty progressing in further education and training due to costs, immigration status and lack of flexible study options to fit around work or childcare commitments.**
- **Limited English skills make finding suitable work very difficult and can lead to a lack of progression and a cycle of long-term low paid work.**
- **There is a lack of awareness of how to get foreign qualifications recognised with the process often costly and out of reach for those on low incomes.**
- **Migrant women carry the burden of childcare responsibilities, causing significant difficulties in finding suitable work. As a result, migrant women are particularly prone to becoming underemployed in low paid work, especially in the care sector.**

Many of these barriers are systemic, and the direct result of government policy to reduce migration by increasing the difficulty to do so. For many migrants, this can be seen in the funding for certain training courses not being available as they are to other sections of the population. Not only does this impact those already resident in the UK, including many who have been so for a number of years, but is also counterproductive. The issues continually raised in

our focus groups, around increased relevant ESOL provision and skills training would assist migrants in their integration, allow them to contribute to the economy and support to their wellbeing.

Some migrants who have previously worked in professional roles are still unable to transfer their qualifications and therefore trapped in low paid work. This is particularly difficult during a period of severe economic downturn with a shortage in certain skilled occupations.

ENGLISH FOR SPEAKERS OF OTHER LANGUAGES (ESOL)

Access to accredited ESOL training remains a key need for migrants, to support both job applications and as a general driver for integration. Whilst almost everyone we spoke to in our focus group had been able to access some degree of ESOL provision where needed, there remain issues around availability of suitable courses, particularly those held by community groups who have seen a reduction in funding. Difficulties also continue for those needing to access course around childcare or work commitments.

Although those who took part in our focus groups all attended ESOL classes where required and found them to be useful in developing both proficiency and confidence in English, some felt that those in community setting were more effective than classroom-based learning. Participants felt that teaching was sometimes not frequent enough to aid learning. In some cases, ESOL learners were only provided with one day of teaching contact per week which does not enable a sufficiently immersive experience to aid learning. One individual highlighted that due to budget cuts, their course had been combined with that of a higher level, which impacted upon comprehension.

Young people, and those able to work, found the process easier as they had greater opportunities to practice conversational English. This meant those with caring responsibilities or other commitments are placed at a disadvantage, potentially delaying integration and reducing opportunities for independence. All who had taken classes which contained community learning and emphasis on real-world applications found them to be a more useful way of learning.

The timing and locations of courses also restricted access, with some disparity across the region. Whilst some people reported that their ESOL sessions fitted around childcare needs, a number of people raised that they struggled to attend due to school drop off times. Others found difficulty in travelling to courses, which were often held at locations far away from accommodation. For those within the asylum system who have had to move frequently, it has been difficult to maintain continuity of learning.

Accessibility and availability of learning remains an issue for some, which has been exacerbated by the cost of living crisis. Some migrants have needed to prioritise paid employment and therefore not progressed language skills which over time may limit employment opportunities. Classes that were provided often mirrored the standard workday, which meant that for those with childcare responsibilities it was often impossible to attend. Although the situation has improved in the last twelve months, providers needed to ensure flexibility to accommodate those who would most benefit from lessons and who might otherwise experience increased levels of isolation.

Whilst many people were able to access ESOL, and there were some examples of good practice such as teachers providing students with a laptop and access to Wi-Fi so that they could study at home, issues around digital access continued to be experienced. 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.

Difficulties have also been presented for those with proficiency in English due to the need to have this recognised with a formal accreditation. Even if an individual can demonstrate proficiency as a second language, they will still need to provide evidence in the form of accreditation from a recognised course.

This requires not only financial expense, but also availability of courses at suitable times.

OPPORTUNITIES

If individuals are unable to demonstrate this, it risks being unable to progress, restricted to low paid employment, unable to utilise their skills or develop their career to aid settlement.

One positive development we have seen is an increased awareness and ability to access ESOL classes held in community settings when compared to the discussions held last year.

Participants had not only been able to find details of courses and join but had also found them to be highly beneficial to support both learning and supporting integration. This increased awareness is likely due to initiatives and outreach such as the online ESOL hub developed by Birmingham Adult Education Services. These should continue to be supported and resources provided to enable the involvement of the widest range of providers as possible.

ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION

Although there are ongoing examples of good attempts to widen participation and access to further education, many of those we spoke to who wished to continue studies remain unable to do so. Although institutions in the region are committed to supporting those seeking sanctuary, with Aston University now accredited as a University of Sanctuary and the University of Birmingham offering some places and grants for those seeking asylum, funding remains an issue for many.

Several barriers were identified, primarily a lack of funding due to immigration status leaving individuals ineligible for student loans. Several individuals also stated that they were unable to take IELTS exams that show the required level of English language ability as the ARC card given to all asylum seekers to show their status was not seen as a recognised form of ID.

Unfortunately, during our outreach we did not speak to anybody who had accessed an educational scholarship, indicative of sample size but also of the number of scholarships remaining remarkably low in comparison to those with experience of migration and seeking asylum.

CONVERSION OF OVERSEAS QUALIFICATIONS

From our outreach work, we continue to see the persistent problem of migrants not being able to use previously achieved qualifications in their home country when in the UK. We spoke to many people with significant experience in professional roles, such as medicine, pharmacy or academia who, found it hard to find similar work in the UK.

Qualifications are often not accepted or require conversion courses with significant costs which is not possible for those on limited incomes. Some have been unable to provide work histories or references due to the circumstances of their arrival. Even when qualifications are accepted, some candidates are disadvantaged due to lack of experience related to the UK so cannot demonstrate how their previous employment can be relevant.

This has been particularly frustrating for many on resettlement schemes who have been unable to take up roles similar to those they left, despite willingness to do so. Many new arrivals from Hong Kong have experienced the same frustrations as previous resettled communities and as a result risk finding themselves, like many other migrants, trapped in low paid work and unable to progress into suitable roles.

OPPORTUNITIES

VOLUNTEERING

Many of those that we met through our focus groups talked of the positive experiences they found from volunteering. This was particularly true of those who currently do not have the right to work in the UK. There were two main benefits: firstly, that it allowed people to develop new social connections with those in their local community; and secondly that it gave people experience in work-like environments in the UK, as well as a connection within a place of UK employment who could then act as a referee.



Volunteering helped me so much. It improved my English; I had more contact with people, and it made me more confident. Before I was very shy. Now I am changed; much more confident.



Participant in Bilston

SEEKING EMPLOYMENT

Although some of the difficulties experienced by migrants were the result of the ongoing UK economic situation, in many cases these have been exacerbated by their immigration status. A number of those we spoke to found that despite working, they were struggling to afford basic costs like rent or food on their current income, with many working multiple jobs in order to try and balance this. Although this situation is sadly common for many in the country, migrants are often disproportionately affected due to often being employed in low paid, short-term roles and unable to access appropriate training to progress.

Whilst most migrants are able to access some level of employment, key barriers remain in progressing towards meaningful career development. Perhaps the most impactful of these is a difficulty in accessing training past a certain level. Many courses for progress in specific careers, for example in social care, require funding through an Advanced Learner Loan. These are not available for those in the asylum system and are also expensive for those in low paid work. Consequently, those seeking progression are unable to afford to obtain the qualifications that would enable them to do so. Although there is some eligibility for free funding, the criteria around income means that many migrants are unable to access it, again leaving them trapped and unable to progress.

The support from specialist schemes provided by groups such as Breaking Barriers, Refugee Education UK and the Refugee and Migrant Centre were seen as invaluable by those in our focus groups who had accessed their training. They were able to receive support to enter the employment market as well as equipping them with the skills to develop a career. Sadly, there are strict criteria for accessing the scheme, with many migrants not eligible. Development of a wider support pathway would help reduce this gap and potentially help many more into better employment opportunities.

The broad needs of migrants and gaps in provision means that support to develop

OPPORTUNITIES

employment and training opportunities cannot be conducted purely by the voluntary sector and require a joint approach involving key stakeholders. There needs to be awareness of both training offers and gaps that can be addressed by providers as well as engagement with employers to understand the benefits gained from offering opportunities to migrants.

Issues could also be addressed through relevant legislative change, 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. ²³ The campaign has already gained cross-party Parliamentary support but would benefit from as many regional organisations as possible to amplify.

At a local level, the support of local authorities to reduce the barriers experienced is crucial. This can be through both lobbying of central government to affect needed legislative change and compiling an evidence base of current challenges but significantly through direct support.

Authorities in the region continue to be engaged with migrant issues, through involvement with the City of Sanctuary movement and also with commissioned services.

A recent example of good practice can be seen in the support provided to those recently arriving from Hong Kong as part of a government resettlement scheme. We spoke to a number of this cohort in one of our focus group sessions and all spoke of the success that came from direct targeted support in helping them into education and employment.

Sadly, even for those able to work or in current employment there remain barriers to achieving meaningful career development. A lack of UK work experience prevents professionals from finding jobs at their skill level leaving many underemployed in low wage jobs. ²⁴ There also continue to be issues for employers, particularly around entitlements to work which leaves some migrants unable to gain employment even when eligible to do so.

A lack of awareness for both individuals and employers can leave many in a precarious position, taking on insecure jobs without the security of permanent contracts. Similarly, without awareness of their rights and recourse, migrants remain at risk of exploitation. Work needs to continue to empower migrants, raise understanding and support enforcement where migrants' rights are being denied.

“

You want migrant people to benefit this country? Look after those people who are serious to work. I'm not coming here begging you to give me money. I don't want your money. Give me my right, let me settle myself.

”

Participant in Walsall



COMMUNITIES

The opportunity for successful social integration remains a key priority for migrants themselves and the organisations working to support them. Many of the barriers identified in our work could be significantly reduced if individuals felt welcomed and safe in the areas they live, not experiencing isolation and able to draw on a wide social network if needed. This is a two-way process, with host communities also able to support and benefit from contacts with those newly arrived in the region.

Ensuring that migrants feel confident in accessing services and support when needed or wanted is a key challenge for the sector, but progress and results remain difficult to assess. Although in some cases, integration was a low priority due to childcare or work situations, many felt a sense of isolation and had little contact with neighbours or wider social groups. Our focus groups also highlighted the long-term nature of this process with some who had been living in the region for over 10 years still experiencing difficulties integrating.

KEY FINDINGS

- Many migrants experience loneliness due to a lack of close friendships or people to rely on for support, with many citing having no family in the UK.
- There can be difficulty integrating into local communities and developing trust with feelings of isolation persisting despite living in the UK for a number of years.
- Limited English skills prevent participation in community activities and friendship with locals.
- There is a lack of awareness of groups, activities, and spaces to meet people. Although there is great interest in involvement in community activities, cost of public transport can limit participation.
- There appears to be a lack of tailored support and opportunities to connect migrants and local people to foster understanding.

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.

“

I feel happy, and I feel welcome in my community - I feel so safe here.

Participant in Wolverhampton

”

“

I don't understand what is the wrong thing and right or good thing in the culture. This makes you not want to go outside.

Participant in Walsall

”

“

My friends have become more than sisters.

Participant in Wolverhampton

”

INTEGRATION AND SETTLEMENT

Successful settlement into a new country and community is for many migrants the key goal in their journey but is often the most difficult to both achieve and measure. In many ways, success is a culmination of the linked processes and issues already discussed in this report. Individuals require regularised immigration status, stable housing, language proficiency and steady employment as basic conditions before they can feel settled.

Integration into the wider community is a linked process but equally complex with migrants feeling that they are a welcomed and integral part of society. This should not only be incumbent on those arriving in the region but requires involvement from resident and host communities to succeed. It has been shown that local areas that invest in activities linked to cohesion show higher levels of neighbourliness and trust between members. **25**

Successful integration for migrants should be a two-way process, with host communities actively participating in their welcome, providing the opportunities and systems that reduce the barriers faced by those newly arrived and creating the conditions for migrants to engage with others. The process itself is not an immediate one, with settlement and integration sometimes not seen as an initial priority. For those who come to the UK for work purposes in order to provide financial support to family members at home, or have caring or childcare responsibilities, long-term integration and settlement is not an initial priority. If this situation changes, often after a significant period of residence, then pathways must be available to access groups and support, particularly if they have not engaged before.

It is crucial that any process that is developed involves the widest range of civil society groups. The experiences of migrants themselves are integral, both from newly arrived individuals in order to understand their needs and the barriers experienced, but also to learn best practice from those more established communities. This work requires a delicate balance, as evidenced in the conversations during our focus groups.

Many recognised and needed the support of their own communities and those with common languages and cultural backgrounds during the initial stages of their arrival but saw that this could be detrimental over the long term in achieving integration.

The support given to those newly arrived from Hong Kong provides a recent example of good practice in the region. Strong links to long-established communities in Birmingham, as well as in areas outside the region such as the North West, provided commonalities that supported those during initial arrival. This was bolstered by immersive support from local authorities in conjunction with third sector and faith organisations who developed programmes giving information on life in the UK and cultural immersion. Many of those we spoke to found this very useful in reducing the period of adjustment faced by most migrants.

Whilst support from within their own community can be beneficial for some migrants, there are also potential negative consequences for many. This is particularly acute for those in the asylum system who are fleeing persecution and will seek to acquire new friendship groups and support.

Local authorities across the region have continued to support integration programmes, but there are still a number of gaps. The support demonstrated at leadership level in many authorities to the City of Sanctuary movement is welcomed, particularly with regard to embedding migrants needs in strategic planning.

It should be emphasized however that integration is not limited to those in the asylum system and migrants from other backgrounds also wish to feel a greater part of wider society. Outreach and engagement need to continue with other significant community populations, particularly those from Central and Eastern Europe.

It remains clear from our research that the continued use of hotels has a negative effect on integration for migrants. Many spoke of isolation and loneliness and, although grateful to groups who engage with residents and provide activities, did not feel part of a community and unsure of how their status would enable this to change. Financial constraints continue to be an issue, with many unable to afford travel to attend events or courses that would assist in settlement.

The barriers in the asylum system meant that most time was spent in proximity to accommodation, with a reliance on friends or groups bringing activities to them. This puts many at a disadvantage, particularly when asylum claims are approved after a significant delay where time could have been used to help build lives in the region. Whilst local authorities recognise the difficulties posed by long-term hotel use, the constraints provided by central government funding settlements make a solution in the short term difficult.

The success of integration and settlement can only be achieved through collaboration between local authorities, the voluntary sector and policy makers. Recognition and engagement of cultural events and national days of celebration for migrant communities in the region should be extended to the large communities of Central and Eastern Europe. The significant support given across the region to those fleeing the invasion of Ukraine presents an opportunity to increase engagement with Eastern European communities with a view to increased representation at leadership and governance levels.

The voluntary sector itself also needs to more to reflect the population it works with, particularly within the leadership of organisations and through empowering and supporting networks of those with lived experience. **26** Work needs to be done to support and develop individuals into roles where they can drive strategy and service delivery through appropriate training and mentorship so that they can play a leading role in societal change.

HATE CRIME

A small number of those we spoke to in our focus groups had experienced discrimination and harassment as a result of their background. Although this was a smaller number than in previous years, which should be welcomed, it is not reflective of a general increase in the reporting of incidents seen over the past year. Where full year figures are available, the number of reported hate crime incidents in the region has increased from 12,193 in 2021 to 12,790 in 2022. 27

The region has also seen an increase in crimes against individuals based on sexual orientation or gender which can particularly affect migrants who have fled to the UK due to persecution. Some individuals in our focus groups who were of Eastern European origin stated that they had been recent victims due to being misidentified as Russian in response to the invasion of Ukraine. Similar instances could also occur to other migrants in response to other conflicts which require monitoring and support from police and partners.

There is ongoing distrust in the authorities for many groups who feel that instances will not be investigated and therefore lack the confidence to report 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.

Although there have been instances in other parts of the UK where accommodation used by asylum seekers has been subject to threats and protests from far-right activists, there have been no instances within the region during this reporting period.

MODERN DAY SLAVERY

There continue to be a larger number of cases across the region where individuals have been victims of Modern Days Slavery (MDS) practices. For the year ending 2022, there were 1178 referrals of potential victims within the West Midlands Police area (that covering the area of the Project. This makes up 7 percent of the total reported in the UK. 28 This is a slight increase from the previous year and remains a substantial issue in the region, with some estimates suggesting that there are potentially over 4000 victims in the West Midlands. 29

It remains crucial that the victims of modern-day slavery practices are identified and supported, knowing that appropriate support is available for those reporting their situations that 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.

More widely, work should continue to increase awareness and knowledge amongst migrant groups of their rights and entitlements upon entering the workforce.

Through empowering individuals, exploitation can be reduced by challenging bad practice and seeking support through allied networks. Equally, employers need to be made aware of their responsibilities to migrant workers, especially as we continue to see examples where career development has been hampered by ignorance of current legislation.



RECOMMENDATIONS

Support greater signposting of specialist advice services, both online and in locations used by migrant populations.

Encourage and support links between generalist and specialist support organisations to develop joint working and knowledge sharing.

Engagement with wider voluntary sector campaigns around housing provision and support to increase awareness of rights.

Investment in all specialist advice services to increase sector capacity.

Support national campaigns for increased investment and reform of the asylum system in order to reduce timescales for cases to be resolved.

Advocate for increased access to Mental Health support.

Ensure involvement of those with lived experience in the planning of healthcare service provision.

Develop links between formal and informal ESOL providers to ensure availability of courses at suitable times and locations.

Liaise with Higher Education Institutions through groups such as the City of Sanctuary movement to encourage availability of bursaries for migrant groups.

Support for conversion of overseas qualifications and increased investment in IELTS courses.

Development of training and support pathway for education and training in the region.

Development of network supporting volunteering opportunities in the region.

Encourage further links between host and migrant communities through social activities.

Empower those with lived experience into leadership positions in the sector as well as developing their own groups and networks.



Migration: Policy & Practice
Birmingham - Black Country

SUPPORTING THE EFFECTIVE SETTLEMENT
OF MIGRANTS AND A POSITIVE INTEGRATION
AGENDA IN THE WEST MIDLANDS

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