MIGRATION POLICY & PRACTICE

ONGOING BARRIERS:

MIGRANT EXPERIENCES OF THE BARRIERS TO SETTLEMENT

IN THE WEST MIDLANDS

A MIGRATION POLICY AND PRACTICE ANNUAL ASSESSMENT 2025





CONTENTS

OVERVIEW	4
ABOUT MIGRATION POLICY AND PRACTICE	6
ABOUT OUR ASSESSMENT	8
RIGHTS	9
HEALTH	23
OPPORTUNITIES	34
COMMUNITY	40
RECOMMENDATIONS	46





The Authors would like to thank our funders — The Barrow Cadbury Trust and The National Lottery Community Fund for their support. We would also like to acknowledge the support of colleagues across the West Midlands Migration Network.

Thank you also to our Board of Trustees for their guidance and support as well as Asma Malik for her invaluable work supporting our outreach and coordination work with asylum seekers that significantly contributed to this report.

We would also like to thank the additional organisations who helped us in hosting the focus groups — ACH, European's Welfare Association, Refugee and Migrant Centre, Restore and Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council.

Most importantly, we would like to acknowledge and thank all those who attended our events and shared their experiences with us.

Photographs Copyright and used with permission.

OVERVIEW



In the period since our last assessment was published, significant changes at both a local and national level have sadly not resulted in progress in reducing the barriers faced by many migrants in the region. The election of a new Labour government gave hope to a fresh approach to migration policy and an end to the hostile environment policies that have adversely impacted the lives of many. Sadly, although there have been some positive legislative changes, such as the scrapping of the Rwanda scheme, many migrants still find themselves trapped in periods of prolonged uncertainty.

Across the region, whilst there is still widespread support from elected representatives to ensure that the West Midlands remains a welcoming place for those seeking sanctuary, ongoing reduced funding settlements have hampered the ability of many local authorities to enhance services. Relationships with the combined authority, particularly from the voluntary sector, remain limited. This has affected the ability to influence the strategic change in areas such as employment and training that would support the needs of many migrants.

Voluntary sector groups continue to provide vital services to migrants across the region in an increasingly challenging environment. Although collaboration across sectors has continued in a number of areas, the situation is likely to become more challenging due to reduced funding opportunities. It is vital that despite expected restrictions those experiencing vulnerable situations, which include many migrants, continue to be protected.

OVERVIEW

Unsurprisingly during this period of change and uncertainty, the challenges faced by migrants themselves have only increased regardless of the circumstances of their arrival or current status. The structural barriers that prevent many from achieving stable long-term settlement in the region do not reduce over time, or through regularization of status, but instead merely change.

For many migrants, the difficulties experienced change from issues around basic rights (including accessing specialist advice support and achieving a stable housing situation) to those around meaningful employment, social integration and participation in wider civil society. All these issues are difficult to resolve and require significant investment from both the sector and partners.

The past twelve months have again emphasised that successful integration for migrants, regardless of how this is defined or measured, can only occur through a wide range of partnership between migrants themselves, specialist organisations, the wider voluntary sector, local authorities and communities as a whole.

The wider sector is providing a complex pathway of support which, due to the precarious situation

and status experienced by many migrants, can be a lengthy process with no defined journey.

Migrants may need particular support in certain stages such as around legal status, housing or employment and many also need to revisit support due to irregular or insecure status but with effective solutions requiring joint working across the sector.

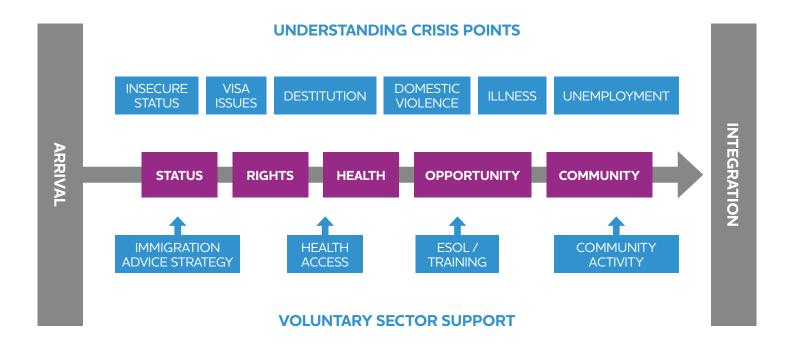
The journey of each individual migrant is a unique experience and whilst all of those seeking to settle in the region have their own view as to what settlement means for them personally, the goal for all those providing support and help is to ensure that they feel secure, welcomed and able to build the lives they wish.

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 for 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 our work develops, activity and outcomes can be measured against our assessment to highlight changes and identify successful project interventions.

It is recognised 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.

The structures we support enable the 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 general 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.

We convene and coordinate 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.



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 at the start of 2025. In total we spoke with almost 60 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 over the following pages:



Two key issues were raised throughout all the discussions, regardless of the status of those participating. These were around access to specialist advice services, particularly in regard to immigration support, and housing issues. The fact that these two issues continue to be raised in our annual assessments highlights not just the long-term often intractable nature of resolving them but also how little progress has been made over the past few years.

Issues around the immigration system continue to affect migrants at all stages of settlement. The majority of those seeking asylum are unable to access free or affordable legal advice to support them during the process. Many of those on resettlement schemes faced ongoing uncertainty due to their short-term status and lack of path to permanent residency. Those seeking to extend visas, or to obtain citizenship, continue to face substantial costs which place additional burdens and risks of losing their status due to an inability to afford the process.

In comparison to previous years, there were fewer examples where individuals were unsure who to contact in order to seek advice. Sadly, however, this was due to a recognition of increasingly limited resources and a scarcity of free services. The ongoing lack of support available across the region remains an ongoing concern and one of the key barriers for individuals in achieving long-term settlement.

KEY FINDINGS

- Migrants continue to experience difficulty in accessing the specialist advice services needed to support their settlement.
- The use of hotels for those seeking asylum remains unsuitable and causes significant difficulties.
- There are ongoing barriers to accessing housing and issues with the conditions of many properties.
- Long-term residence in hotels and temporary accommodation is disruptive to employment, education, support systems and wellbeing.
- Ongoing delays and systemic barriers in the immigration system continue to impact the wellbeing and opportunities of all migrants.

Housing remains a significant issue for all migrants regardless of their status with the topic raised in every focus group session, whether individuals were living in hotel accommodation or privately renting. Problems were particularly acute for those living in hotels, with likely continued use and expansion amongst the most significant barriers to settlement encountered across the region.

The use of hotels for those seeking asylum remains both unsuitable and inappropriate, with many we spoke to feeling that it had actively hindered their attempts to integrate within the wider community. Many 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. More concerningly, some spoke of inappropriate behaviour by staff members with imbalances of power over residents that some likened to a prison.

Those who have been granted status, as well as other migrant groups, continued to experience issues of sub-standard housing, particularly in the private rental sector. Many were 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. Whilst some of those we spoke to were happy with their housing, these were largely individuals who had access to funds to purchase or rent long-term which was not the case for most recent migrants to the region.

A lack of affordable and appropriate housing continues to have wider impacts on settlement and integration. Individuals are often housed long distances from learning centres or places of work, meaning that significant costs and travel times are incurred. Travel costs when individuals are unable to work or seeking employment present one of the biggest barriers identified through our discussions. Support for bus tickets or other travel options would alleviate some of these pressures and support individuals' attempts to integrate and involve with wider society.

Although some legislative changes such as those removing the threat of deportation to Rwanda are welcome, much of the asylum process still causes significant anxiety and uncertainty amongst those seeking sanctuary. Whilst attempts to reduce the waiting time and backlog for decisions have had some effect, in reality this had meant many individuals facing substantive interviews without legal or immigration advice due to a dearth of provision. There has also been a significant demand for move on support, leading to increasingly stretched provision across the sector.

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. Some of those who migrated from EU countries also spoke of an ongoing lack of engagement from authorities.





I feel hopeless now, without any legal support you can't survive in this country. Solicitors charge too much, and I don't have money to pay their fee.

Participant at Focus Group in Birmingham

ACCESS TO SPECIALIST ADVICE

Almost all of those who we spoke to in our focus groups spoke of the importance and need of accessing affordable advice around specialist areas. This was largely in the area of immigration advice, but also around issues such as housing and debt support. The importance of early access to advice cannot be overstated, as early interventions to resolve difficulties around immigration status or other issues places individuals in a more stable position and reduces the need to access crisis support.

Immigration advice in particular remains vital for migrants regardless of status. Those seeking asylum require support during the application process and any potential appeal, individuals on resettlement schemes may need to extend or regularise their status — which is also a situation experienced by those who have arrived as EU or third country nationals.

The region continues to experience a chronic shortfall in the availability of immigration advice. Those wishing to provide the service must first achieve accreditation through the Immigration Advice Authority (IAA), at a relevant level which places additional strain on the voluntary sector due to the cost implications.

There remains a limited number of organisations in the region who are accredited to provide this advice and fewer still who do so on a non-fee basis. The need for many migrants to pay for legal advice places them under significant financial strain not only through the cost of advice but also with travel to consult with advisers who are spread across the region.

Almost all of those we spoke to highlighted some difficulties in obtaining support, either through a lack of sufficient free advice or problems engaging with a solicitor. Many of those claiming asylum had yet to receive consultation prior to their initial interviews, increasing the likelihood of an extended process and prolonged anxiety. Those that could afford to pay for consultation with a solicitor also reported negative experiences including lack of engagement and needing to change representation, 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.

Further issues were raised around cultural competencies and inclusion amongst paid legal service providers. Some of those we spoke to highlighted unease that representatives they spoke to originated from the same communities or countries. There was a fear that the wider community would know about their asylum status and situation, potentially putting themselves and wider family at risk.

This was particularly serious for LGBTQ asylum seekers who not only did not wish to reveal their sexual orientation but felt put in a position where they had no choice but to discuss this at risk of it becoming widely known with the potential to suffer increased discrimination. Frequent changes in legal representation made this scenario more likely as well as causing increased trauma due to the intrusive nature of this process.

The need for specialist advice is not limited to those seeking asylum, with those on resettlement programmes also expressing concern over the time limited nature of the schemes and the lack of clarity around future status. This was particularly apparent for those who arrived from Ukraine who have to apply for an extension and are currently excluded from counting time on the scheme in any application for residency. As with many of those fleeing conflict and seeking asylum, delays put them at increasing risk of homelessness and destitution.

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.

Early access to specialist advice can have a positive effect upon wider social problems and reduce the demand for crisis support. Massive demand across the sector does not allow the time or resources to address 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 access to specialist advice when in need can risk placing migrants into a lengthy period of severe uncertainty, regardless of their immigration status. They can be left unable to work, access training or education 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 can be worsened as individuals 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, with both higher numbers of individuals seeking asylum being housed in the region and an increase in those needing move on support following a successful application for asylum. There are also a significant number of individuals who arrived through government supported resettlement schemes who are awaiting clarity as to their future status.







I don't understand why they keep moving people from one place to another. It's not easy to get accustomed to a new area, especially when you don't know the language.

Current Asylum Seeker in Birmingham

HOUSING

Access to stable, long-term housing is one of the key drivers for successful integration. Individuals with access to a sustainable, long-term address that allows them to live independently fulfills basic needs and makes them more likely to be able to access other avenues of support and employment. Sadly, the situation around housing in the region has not improved over the past twelve months, and in many ways has worsened. Issues around unsuitable and inappropriate accommodation affect all migrants regardless of status.

The ongoing use of hotels as contingency accommodation for those seeking asylum is likely for the foreseeable future, and this represents a significant barrier to achieving lasting settlement. Hotels remain an inappropriate form of housing for those seeking sanctuary, with a number ongoing and serious issues raised by those in our focus groups.

The vast majority of those we spoke to who were living in hotels thought that their situation, especially their mental health, had been adversely affected by long-term residency. Many told us of poor facilities and food and a lack of access to activities and training leaving them feeling prolonged periods of isolation. Whilst the support provided by voluntary groups was welcome, most found it difficult to build links to the wider community to help integration.

Concerningly, there were some instances where individuals highlighted inappropriate bullying behaviour by members of staff in hotels. This presented itself as an imbalance of power with threats of withdrawing access to facilities or activities causing further worry and fear. Such behaviour is completely unacceptable towards any group, especially those placed in a vulnerable position, and whilst isolated should still be highlighted and challenged robustly.

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.

Other issues raised such as overcrowding and the sharing of facilities again highlight unsuitability for long-term residency. Many we spoke to also told us of difficulties around communication with other residents due to language and cultural differences. Living in a hotel was particularly difficult for those from the LGBTQ community who felt unsafe and unable to disclose their sexuality with consequent severe mental health trauma. Access to dedicated safe spaces for members of this community remains a vital need.

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 stated commitment by local authorities in the region to secure diverse housing stock with hotels only as a last resort is welcome and will help to support community integration, it presents practical difficulties in implementation.

Unless policy changes at a national level result in higher levels of funding, it is likely that the use of hotels for accommodation will continue for the foreseeable future. It is therefore vital that coordinated support across sectors continues to ensure that residents have access to meaningful support and engagement to help the process of their settlement.

Issues around housing are not confined to those seeking asylum. We spoke to a number of EU migrants who experienced problems with obtaining good quality accommodation. They felt trapped in low quality accommodation, often as a result of discrimination in the job market where a lack of role development left them in low-paid, work. Issues with the new E-Visa system also presented difficulties where landlords were unaware of new processes making it harder to provide verification of the right to reside. Whilst this process has been paused unless development takes into account wider issues outside of the immigration system, individuals risk being placed into vulnerable positions and potentially homeless.

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. Those who had access to their own funds were largely able to secure housing but still relied on friends and family for assistance. For the majority however, continued attempts to secure long-term housing have often proved unsuccessful due to uncertainty over ongoing support for schemes and requirements to provide large amounts of rent in advance.





Not knowing what will happen to you is the worst. You cannot plan your future when everything is uncertain.

Current Asylum Seeker in Birmingham

SYSTEMIC DELAYS

Regardless of an individual's immigration status, most of those we spoke to expressed frustration and anxiety around dealings with the immigration system. Issues raised include a lack of clarity and information around processes, the length of time taken for decisions and the exorbitant costs associated with visa applications. Such ongoing problems affect mental health, and in some cases risk leaving them vulnerable to destitution or homelessness.

Many of those in our focus groups who had personal experience of the asylum system spoke of the frustration felt by a lack of communication around their cases or clarity on the process. Many felt powerless and left in a state of limbo waiting for progress and unsure when decisions would be made. 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. Increases in fees place an increased burden on those living in the region, particularly for those with families. The cost to those with long-term residency can often effectively price them out of obtaining citizenship and in some cases, where individuals are unable to afford visa renewal, risk losing their status and lives in the region.

Family reunions have also caused difficulties. Many participants were separated from their families, with several trying to bring spouses or children to the UK through a complex reunification processes. The rise in salary requirements for those spousal visas or for those seeking employment visas also risk separating families who have lived in the region for many years.

During our focus groups, many of those from resettlement schemes also expressed frustration that they have received limited contact from government contacts 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 and a lack of clarity over future direction and the possibility of extensions.

Sadly, it seems likely that these issues will only be resolved by a change in government policy that stops 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.





It is not easy to get medical treatment here in the UK. I can't speak English very well, and it is a big challenge for me to get a GP appointment.

Participant in Birmingham

HEALTH

Whilst in general, those who attended our focus groups experienced similar difficulties as the wider population in access to healthcare services, there remain several migrant groups where urgent intervention is still required to address inequalities and gaps in provision. Migrants resident in hotels again suffered from the most disparity in health outcomes, with many experiencing poor mental health linked to their living situation and the asylum process in general.

Access and support with mental health issues remains one of the key barriers faced by migrants regardless of their status. Not only is provision sparsely available but often it is not designed to address the specific circumstances and needs of migrant communities. Further work needs to be carried out in designing services in a way that makes them effective and accessible.

In addition to barriers around mental health support, a number of other areas of concern were highlighted in our focus groups. These included maternity and perinatal support, access to treatment for long-term conditions and the additional burdens placed on caregivers.

KEY FINDINGS

- Access to appropriate Mental Health support remains one of the key barriers faced by migrants.
- Support requires greater co-design and engagement with communities to be effective.
- Language barriers remain a significant barrier to accessing appropriate healthcare.
- Some negative experiences have been reported in relation to accessing maternity support.
- Engagement with community-based activities was effective for many migrants.

Most of those we spoke to found primary healthcare easy to access and could see a GP when needed, despite difficulties in getting an appointment. For some who required immediate or specialist care, the healthcare system could be difficult to navigate, particularly for those where English is not a first language.

More positively, there has been recognition from healthcare providers and NHS commissioners that a greater inclusion of migrant voices within planning could address and reduce some of the barriers experienced. Ongoing and planned engagement work to develop co-production responses should be supported across the sector as any work to develop understanding of help to make healthcare more accessible and help to reduce long term inequalities.

ACCESS TO HEALTHCARE

Although there were no issues reported by any of those we spoke to in terms of access to basic healthcare, such as registering with a GP practice, a number of underlying problems were identified. Support for anything more than an initial appointment did cause problems for all migrant groups, and this was particularly acute for those suffering from long-term conditions.

Such difficulties sometimes prevented individuals from accessing help and support when needed, which could lead to further problems requiring intensive treatment. Navigation of the healthcare system was also highlighted as an issue by many we spoke to, with clarity around processes and how to proceed, needed for many. In many cases, individuals relied on family and friends for engagement with services.

Some in our focus groups expressed frustration around a lack of referral for further treatment or a feeling of not being listened to when speaking to healthcare professionals. This was particularly the case when highlighting mental health difficulties when individuals had been offered medication when referrals for longer term support might have been more effective.

Concerningly, during our sessions we heard the experiences of a number of pregnant women who felt the support offered through the NHS was not of the same standard as that received from charities. Some were upset that their views were not listened to, and support was not forthcoming. This was particularly concerning as many were asylum seekers living in hotels without support networks, placing additional strain and difficulties during a critical time.

The consequences of not receiving appropriate treatment can be catastrophic, particularly for those with specific needs. Members of the LGBTQ community we spoke to, talked of the specific difficulties they had in seeking treatment as asylum seekers.

Many found it especially traumatic to have to speak to numerous individuals and departments in order to seek support, with the situation compounded by often being resident in shared accommodation and having to hide their sexuality.

Many migrants we spoke to felt that they would benefit from additional support and knowledge around the healthcare process in the UK. Often this was due to experiences of different systems in other countries where it was more common to pay privately for consultation. This was difficult for many migrants without access to funds.

Language barriers were also a problem for many, particularly during consultation where a higher level of English was required to explain the situation being experienced. This often placed a burden on family members who had to attend appointments and provide translation. This was 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.

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.





I can't manage everything. If I stay at home on my own, I would commit suicide.

Participant at Focus Group in Wolverhampton

MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT

In comparison with the wider population, many migrants have experienced periods of poor mental health. This is exacerbated by the challenging situations they experience including undertaking traumatic journeys to reach safety from areas of conflict as well as the challenges of navigating the immigration system. Longer established migrant communities, such as those from EU countries, have also been shown to be at risk of poor mental health outcomes. In Birmingham for example 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.

Low levels of access to mental health support continue to be a barrier for many migrants and this has been again highlighted during our focus groups. Those seeking asylum and living in hotels were particularly vulnerable, with over 60% of those we spoke to stating that their mental health had been negatively impacted. 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.

Access to clinical support is limited, with both long waiting times for NHS services and a lack of specialist treatment. During the past year, some clinical therapy has been provided but this was time limited due to funding and therefore not sufficient to deal with the trauma that some have experienced.

Clinical support is also not necessarily suitable for all migrants due to both language barriers and also the need to relive traumatic situations as part of the process. There is also an element of trust building required, with individuals needing a period of time to establish a relationship with any therapist. Some LGBTQ asylum seekers for example, told us that support from their own community was more beneficial and relevant than NHS services.

Several other barriers to accessing mental health treatment were identified, with some participants stating 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.

For many of those we spoke to, the effectiveness of non-clinical support was highlighted and access to these is crucial to improve wellbeing. Engagement with social activities in community settings helped reduce isolation, whilst improving language skills and building social connections. This was especially important for those living in hotels who experienced higher levels of isolation, reporting little structure to their days.

The support being provided to those in hotels by voluntary organisations was vital for supporting mental health and engagement with the wider community. Almost all of those we spoke to in hotels were grateful for the interaction and felt it provided significant benefits. Resources however are limited, and further work needs to done to both enhance the availability of support and link to the wider voluntary sector to enable greater access to provision.

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, the number of refugees who have fled the country in harrowing circumstances, and the uncertainty over any future settlement has only increased the importance of this issue.

There is an urgent need to work with all migrant communities and the groups that are most engaged with them to ensure not only are mental health and wellbeing services accessible but also meet the needs of those they seek to support.



This environment is very isolating, and the lack of support is challenging. However, visits from charity organisations provide muchneeded assistance and help us cope with our stress. This support is truly valuable.

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

HEALTH

SERVICE PLANNING

Over the past twelve months, work has continued to ensure that services meet the needs of migrant communities. This is to be welcomed as our focus groups have shown that currently many aspects of provision, have not been adapted to effectively support those who require them. Many of the adaptations required are cross-cutting, impacting migrants along with other sections of the community who often find themselves in vulnerable situations.

Aside from language barriers that prevent access there is an element of trust building required for many migrants. For those delivering services, time must be taken to build relationships and links within the community before individuals will engage with any support offered. Service providers must factor in a period of engagement, or co-design work, into any delivery plans in order to ensure success.

Evidence from our focus groups and partners has again highlighted that whilst clinical treatment is still appropriate in some cases, for many migrants the greatest support can be found from engagement with community-based treatment and therapies. These should be led by voluntary sector groups who can already offer access and trust from migrant communities.

Migration Policy and Practice continues to develop forums that 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.

The VCSE Alliances developed across the region to support the design of healthcare provision should continue to be engaged with and the opportunities presented by representation in 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 migrants needs remains a key knowledge gap to be resolved as a priority.





I have a language barrier. I am from Eritrea and my English is not very good. This is a big issue for me I can't express myself to others.

Participant in Birmingham



I found it challenging to help my son with his homework. It felt less like a task for him and more like a test to determine how proficient I am in English. I worry about my children being judged by others because of my language barrier.

Participant in Oldbury

In relation to issues around work and training, the views of all those we spoke to were reflective of the wider migrant population in the region. All were focused on gaining independence and building their lives without requiring support from government or partner organisations and saw employment and training as crucial to achieving this.

There was a high level of frustration from almost all of those we spoke to due to the obstacles they encountered. All sought to access relevant opportunities to develop, either through education or employment, but were often prevented by existing barriers which were both legislative and institutional. This often left individuals reliant on support and struggling to develop independence, despite efforts to do so.

Issues that have continued to be identified include the availability and length of ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) training, difficulties in converting overseas qualifications and accessing relevant work experience or volunteering opportunities to support entry into the job market. These barriers leave many

stuck in low paid work for long periods, unable to develop meaningful career progression or utilise skills they had developed. These issues, which were raised continually in our focus groups, regardless of the immigration status of those we spoke to, would greatly assist integration for all migrants, allowing them to contribute to the economy and support to their wellbeing.

The benefits of gaining paid employment or involvement in volunteering, such as helping to assist in settlement by providing financial independence and supporting integration in the wider community, were recognised by everyone in our focus groups but many felt increasingly disillusioned by their progress towards achieving this.

KEY FINDINGS

- Proficiency in English remains a key barrier to accessing employment.
- 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.
- 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.
- More flexibility in accreditation of proficiency is needed.
- Greater access to volunteering will support migrants in building work history.
- Lifting employment restrictions on work would support settlement and provide economic benefits.

ENGLISH FOR SPEAKERS OF OTHER LANGUAGES (ESOL)

All of those in our focus groups recognised the need to improve their English language skills in order to support engagement within the wider community, increase independence and to support career development. This was done through both formal accredited courses or in a community based learning environment and whilst all had managed to access some form of provision, it remains apparent that there are gaps and that the strategy for delivery in the region does not address the needs of the migrant population.

The most common form of training accessed were formal classes within further education colleges. However, there remain issues around availability and whether this form of learning suitable for most migrants. Recent studies indicate that around 20% of those in need of ESOL training struggle to access it, and this was borne out in the discussions in our focus groups. Registration can often be difficult, with classes opening in September and filling almost immediately, this process only takes place annually and leaves many unable to access this form of training and needing to rely on voluntary provision which is already stretched.

Legislative barriers also have a severe impact for many migrants. Currently, those seeking asylum are not able to access free tuition unless they have been waiting for longer than six months for the result of their claim. Due to the annual enrolment process, this leaves many unable to access formal training due to both cost and timescales. This is a significant gap that potentially sets back an individual's ability to settle for a long period. Whilst some were able to access interim training, for many this period can represent wasted time that could be better used helping to build a life in the UK, particularly as a better level of English enables access to other opportunities.

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 and also struggled with the cost of travel needed to attend lessons.

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. For those within the asylum system who have had to move frequently, it has been difficult to maintain continuity of learning.

Whilst some class-based learning was still the most utilised approach for those in our focus groups, the benefits of community-based learning were also highlighted by those who had done so. Many thought that this was a more effective way of gaining language proficiency and also provided additional support through building friendship groups, improving social skills and embedding individuals within locality.

Sadly, although there were clear benefits that support migrant settlement in this approach, there

support migrant settlement in this approach, there have been difficulties in ensuring wide access. The majority of provision is provided by voluntary sector organisations where there are limited resources that cannot meet current demand. There is also a difficulty in recruiting and retaining sufficient skilled teachers and, amongst learners, a lack of confidence and knowledge in how to access courses.

Migrants with proficiency in English also experienced difficulties outside of education. Some described how they often were required to support family members with translation during appointments or when shopping which negatively impacted on their ability to access work, further training or other measures that would support their settlement. Difficulties in accessing language training more widely meant that these individuals often provide unpaid carer support for family members who cannot speak English.

This meant those with these responsibilities or other commitments are placed at a disadvantage, potentially delaying integration and reducing opportunities for independence.

Difficulties have also continued to be evidenced 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 from a recognised course. This requires not only financial expense, but also availability of courses at suitable times. If individuals are unable to demonstrate this, it risks being unable to progress being restricted to low paid employment, unable to utilise their skills or develop their career to aid settlement.

Young people, and those able to work, found the process easier as they had greater opportunities to practice conversational English. 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. Parents of school age children found the process of helping with homework initially challenging but also developing their own proficiency at the same time.

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.

ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION

In the twelve months since our last assessment there have been further examples of attempts to widen participation and access to further education. The accreditation of Aston and Birmingham Universities as Universities of Sanctuary is a welcome development however many of those we spoke to who wished to continue studies remain unable to do so.

Funding of courses remains the biggest challenge, not just due to costs but that many migrants are ineligible for student loans due to their immigration status.

CONVERSION OF OVERSEAS QUALIFICATIONS

Sadly, we continue to see instances where migrants are unable to use previously achieved qualifications once in the UK. We spoke to a number of people with significant experience in professional roles who found it hard to find similar work in the UK, or at worst had to go through a process of retraining or accreditation at a significant cost.

This disenfranchises a large number of migrants who cannot afford to fund courses and therefore potentially unable to return to a skilled career path. If individuals are able to begin the process, this will usually take a significant amount of time with the impact on other areas of their lives and income.

This was particularly frustrating for the many who have come to build lives in the UK but have been unable to take up roles similar to those they left, despite willingness to do so. Many new arrivals are experiencing the same frustrations as previous migrants and as a result risk finding themselves trapped in low paid work and unable to progress into suitable roles.



I don't know where to go or who can help me find employment. I am not seeking a high-level job; I am willing to do any work to earn a respectable living here.

Participant in Birmingham



Working at a local store boosted my confidence, allowing me to engage with others without any fear. Before that, I would often avoid interactions, telling people I was busy if they tried to talk to me. However, this new role helped me overcome my hesitation and become more comfortable in social situations.

Participant in Sandwell

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 employment who could then act as a referee.

Volunteering was particularly beneficial for those who did not have the right to work in the UK, particularly those going through the process of claiming asylum. Due to the length of the process, it allowed individuals to prepare and develop skills for employment and make positive use of a period where they experienced great uncertainty.

Despite the many positive experiences however, there remained a number of barriers experienced. These were primarily around a lack of knowledge around how to access volunteering opportunities, language barriers that limited the options to do so and frustrations around finding roles that allowed individuals to develop or maintain existing skills.

SEEKING EMPLOYMENT

Discussions in our focus groups across the region highlighted the profound difficulties experienced by migrants in seeking and developing employment opportunities. Many found uncertainty in the process and were at a disadvantage in any recruitment process due to lack of experience and knowledge of UK employment practices.

We spoke to a number of Eastern European migrants who experienced difficulties in gaining employment but had actively sought work outside of community owned businesses not just to support career aspirations but because it would provide better opportunities for language and integration.

It was also significantly more difficult for migrants to support their long-term career aspirations with the costs of retraining, further study and travel in addition to those on visa or settlement fees. This left many in low paid jobs and unable to afford the means to progress. As a result, 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.

The inflexibility of employer requirements when recruiting was also highlighted as a regular frustration.

The majority of those we spoke to could converse in English to a high level and also had qualifications in maths or other subjects to at least the equivalent of GCSE. Despite this, many employers required applicants to have UK qualifications and would not accept alternatives. Small adjustments when recruiting to provide an assessment of functional skills would allow a more equitable process.

Even when individuals can evidence recognised qualifications, a lack of work history in the UK has proved a considerable barrier for many. As an example, we spoke with a number of individuals who had resettled into the region from Hong Kong where they had been employed in senior roles in multinational companies. Despite being able to evidence their work history, they had no comparable experience of how UK legislation or working practices would apply to their roles and so were unsuccessful in obtaining comparable jobs.

OPPORTUNITIES

After a two year period of searching for work, many of this group are now classed as long-term unemployed, have deskilled and in a similar position to many new migrants.

Many of the barriers experienced 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.

The broad needs of migrants and gaps in provision means that support to develop employment and training opportunities cannot be conducted purely by the voluntary sector and require a joint approach involving key stakeholders, including local authorities and employers. In many ways, the current structures are not fit for purpose and do not address the needs of migrants seeking employment. There is a danger that unless better support systems are available then many migrants risk falling into destitution and seeking unregistered or unregulated work, leaving them vulnerable to exploitation.



I don't understand why we are not allowed to work, even when we want to contribute to the economy. We don't want to depend on any aid or benefits. It astonishes me when people say that asylum seekers are a heavy burden on the country's economy while we want to work, but the government is not allowing us to do so.

Participant in Birmingham

Migrants in the region will only achieve long-term, stable settlement if they feel a level of security and belonging. Most of those we spoke to saw this as an ideal outcome of their journey once they had established a stable situation in terms of their immigration status, housing or employment. There were many different aims for settlement with some desiring to fully embedded in the community and developing friendships whilst some wished purely to start work and achieve independence in order to provide for their families.

Integration itself is a loaded term that means different things to each individual, but with the commonality that all wanted to feel welcomed and safe in the areas they live in, not experiencing isolation and able to draw on a wide social network if needed. There should be equitable access to meaningful opportunities for training and employment like other sections of society, but also that their cultural background is recognised within the region and their contributions recognised. If conditions enable this to be achieved, then it will provide a significant boost to achieving stability.

It remains a key priority for the sector, and wider partners, to assist migrants in feeling a level of security and engagement within the community, however progress and measurement in achieving this remains difficult to assess. Each individual has their own view as to what a final settled status and level of community engagement will be, and this may change over time depending on current needs and circumstances.

Nevertheless, it remains important for all those who provide support to help to facilitate the conditions that enable this.

It is also crucial to note that any development around social integration should be a two-way process, with host communities also able to support and benefit from contacts with those newly arrived in the region. Any support needed will also be over a longer-term due to the difficulties in establishing lasting connections within a community. Our focus groups highlighted this, with some individuals who had been living in the region for over 10 years still experiencing difficulties integrating. It also showed the importance of this work, with many participants feeling a sense of isolation and little contact with wider social groups

KFY 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.
- Building links into local communities can take many years, with those who have been resident for long periods still experiencing isolation.
- 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 with community activities
- Community organizations and cultural groups provided vital support and connection.

 Many participants relied heavily on these informal networks.
- Limited transport options restricted the ability of many to engage with social activity.
- There appears to be a lack of tailored support and opportunities to connect migrants and local people to foster understanding.

INTEGRATION AND SETTI EMENT

Achieving stable settlement in a new country remains the key goal for all the migrants we spoke to, regardless of the circumstances of their arrival. Regardless of their needs and aspirations, it should be the final step in a linked process drawing on all areas of support to ensure regularised immigration status, stable housing, language proficiency and steady employment are achieved before they can feel settled.

Integration into the wider community is a further linked process but equally complex. Migrants need to feel that they are a welcomed and integral part of wider society, and this requires involvement from resident and host communities to create the conditions for this. All of those we spoke to, and in particular those in the asylum system, were grateful for the safety and sanctuary they found in the region and were eager to start new lives and contribute in return

Successful integration for migrants can only be a twoway process, with host communities actively participating in providing the opportunities and conditions for migrants to engage with others. The process itself is not an immediate one, with settlement and integration understandably seen as not an immediate priority for those fleeing conflict who wish to focus on securing their basic needs. Alternatively, for those who initially came to the UK for work purposes such as EU nationals, then initial priorities were to provide financial support to family members or undertake caring responsibilities. For many of this group long-term integration and settlement was not a significant issue but might have changed after a period of residence.

The difference experiences for all migrants show that fluidity of this process and also the lengthy timescales experienced by many. As it is likely that personal situations will change, often after a significant period of residence, then pathways must be available to access groups and support, particularly for those with no previous history of engagement.



The experiences of migrants themselves are integral to this process, encompassing both the needs of newly arrived individuals and the skills and experiences of more established communities who can provide trust and access. 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.

In one of our focus groups, we spoke to a number of parents at a Polish supplementary school in the region. They spoke of the value and support gained from community-based organisations, boosting confidence for individuals and providing a space to meet others in order to share experiences. Many in this group felt that there was often a disconnect between how communities defined cohesion and integration and how local government and public bodies perceived this.

It was thought that authorities placed more emphasis on obtaining relevant documentation to prove residence and citizenship, rather than addressing the underlying issues and barriers that prevent community groups from coming together. There was also a lack of support from both central and local government in developing supplementary schools, with funding needing to be raised from parental donations and sometimes little cooperation from school principals.

Community groups thought that these schools provided an important service for families that was in addition to mainstream education. It provided children with insight into language and culture from their families countries of origin, allowing them to converse with wider family members and not loosen these ties due to being brought up in another country. This awareness is crucial, as integration should include valuing contributions of those coming to the region without having to abandon links to their places of origin.

The experience for those who have arrived from Hong Kong during the past twelve months continues to be a largely positive one with support at a local level. Regular group meetings take place which provide immersive help to give 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 but thought that greater language support was needed in official correspondence or online, where both Mandarin and Cantonese translation would support in the initial stages of arrival.

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 new friendship groups and support. Often, due to fleeing persecution, those seeking asylum will not wish to engage with those from the same background. This is a particular issue for those in the LGBTQ community who understandably felt particularly at risk and consequently isolated, with an urgent need to develop new support networks.

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 were unsure of how their status would enable this to change. Financial constraints continue to be an issue, with many unable to afford to travel to attend events or courses that would assist in settlement.

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, as were efforts in include migrant views and perspectives in strategic planning.

Engagement still needs to be inclusive of the wide range of migrant experiences that are represented in the region. This should involve not just those in the asylum system or resettlement schemes but also those who have migrated from Europe and other parts of the world.

It is also important to encourage and support civic participation for migrants, including involvement in the political process. Just as the voluntary and community sector needs to be reflective of those it works with, political representation needs to take into account the diverse needs and experiences of society in the region. Even if individuals are unable to participate fully due to voting restrictions, then support should still be available to increase involvement at local and community levels.

The success of integration and settlement can only be achieved through collaboration across sectors to foster understanding and mutual support. Recognition and engagement with cultural events and national days of celebration for migrant communities in the region should continue and be expanded where possible. This will help to foster a sense of welcoming and inclusivity that will particularly support those facing uncertainty such as those awaiting the outcome of asylum claims or on time limited resettlement schemes.

As previously mentioned, it is vital that the voluntary sector itself continues efforts to ensure that it is reflective of the communities it works with, particularly within the leadership of organisations. Work needs to be done to support and develop individuals into leadership roles where they can drive strategy and service delivery.



Need to help each other, supporting neighbours is important. People come here for work and safety.

We should help them.

Participant in Wolverhampton



Maintaining our cultural norms and values while living in the UK can be stressful. It was a wonderful moment for me when I discovered that my daughter speaks Polish fluently alongside her English.

Participant in Oldbury

HATE CRIME

Although, as with last year, only a small number of those we spoke to had directly experienced discrimination or harassment, wider national events have significantly impacted upon perceptions of safety and security. There is also an ongoing lack of faith in the police to investigate and prosecute offenders as well as distrust that complaints will be acted upon.

The riots across the UK in summer 2024 had a profound impact on many of the asylum seekers we spoke to. They had seen news coverage of hotels housing asylum seekers being attacked in other parts of the country and whilst such incidents did not occur in this locality, they were fearful of this happening. Hotels within the region were under a lockdown during the period as a safety precaution which amplified these feelings.

Some of those we spoke to felt that whilst they had initially felt safe in the UK, this activity had actively changed this perception. They told us that they felt that a large part of the population were against their presence and made them less likely to go outside. Some said that they had taken measures such as not speaking their own language when in public to avoid drawing attention.

Political developments as a result of the UK's departure from the EU have also impacted on individual's feelings of security. Some of those we spoke to of Eastern European background thought that this had exacerbated a divide around discourse on migration, dividing people into 'good' and 'bad' groups

with a narrative that those from Europe were 'taking' jobs. Some told of associates who had returned to their home countries feeling that it provided a more welcoming environment.

There is ongoing distrust in the authorities from many groups who feel that instances of hate crime will not be investigated and therefore lack the confidence to report them. This was particularly difficult for already marginalised groups who are targeted not just as migrants but for other reasons such as sexual orientation. Some were also reluctant to engage with the police over fears that it would jeopardise their status in the UK.

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.

MODERN DAY SLAVERY

There continue to be a significant number of cases across the region where individuals have been victims of Modern Days Slavery (MDS) practices. Although we were understandably unable to speak to any victims, it should be noted that many of those we engaged with were living in precarious situations with regards to their immigration, housing and work status as a result of current government legislation. This could potentially put them at risk of exploitation if these positions are not regularised.

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

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.

Ending use of hotels for housing those seeking asylum seekers

Increased access to both clinical and community based Mental Health support.

Enhanced access to maternity and perinatal support.

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

Widen access to ESOL provision through learning in the community.

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.

Work with employers to develop a network supporting volunteering opportunities in the region.

Lift the ban on employment for those in the asylum system.

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

Develop better access to travel for migrants to enable engagement with work, training and social activities.

Support efforts to develop those with lived experience into leadership positions in the sector as well as building their own groups and networks.



MIGRATION POLICY & PRACTICE

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

Unit 2, Alma House, Newtown, Birmingham, B19 2AB

amigrationpolicy.org.uk

Email info@migrationpolicy.org.uk

Website migrationpolicy.org.uk