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Interventions to support positive housing outcomes for refugees

Research Digest

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**Refugee Integration
Yorkshire and Humber**
Part of Migration Yorkshire



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Interventions to support positive housing outcomes for refugees

Background

Providing suitable and appropriate housing for refugees is fundamental for an integrated society. Integration, in its broadest sense, requires a wide range of people, organisations and institutions to come together and create a shared and inclusive sense of belonging. In the UK context, housing for asylum seekers and refugees is currently under intense political scrutiny, and this in turn impacts on how the public respond to refugees arriving for sanctuary. A range of structural factors such as an under-supply of affordable accommodation and social housing, increasing pressure on public sector finances, the cost-of-living crisis and political ideology, have amplified the pressures on the housing system and contributed towards a hostile environment for those seeking refuge. It is within this context that increasingly unconventional measures are being proposed as housing solutions for asylum seekers. Alongside this, evidence suggests that historically, out of all migrant groups, refugees experience some of the worst housing outcomes¹.

Despite the challenging environment, organisations involved in the settlement of refugees often demonstrate creativity, persistence, and motivation. Their work sits within a difficult context, constrained by a shortage of resources, fragile strategic leadership, and a policy environment that many view as contrary to their aims and values. Yet, despite this, organisations provide significant direct and indirect support to refugees which has a positive and measurable impact. Much of this work is undertaken in isolation from other organisations and the success of this work is also often not well known. Whilst more evidence and understanding is required about the nature of housing outcomes experienced by refugees and the factors preceding them, it is important to understand what we can do now to ameliorate their impact.

This research digest has been developed to summarise the available evidence on what is known about what works in improving housing outcomes for refugees. It is aimed at those in leadership and management roles in the housing and social welfare sectors. It should also be of interest to leaders and elected members with responsibility for housing, neighbourhoods, and equalities. It will be of particular interest to those working in the voluntary and community sector who play a foundational role in supporting refugees in exile.

This document draws on a rapid evidence assessment (REA) that systematically identified 67 separate items of evidence drawn from the UK and other OECD countries. It examines 'what works' in the context of housing and resettlement, through identifying policies, interventions and measures being taken within the UK and in comparable international contexts. The review focuses on refugees, not those awaiting a determination on their asylum application, and includes resettled refugees (arriving through a sponsored resettlement programme), asylum-pathway refugees (those moving on from asylum accommodation post-decision) and arrivals who have come through other programmes (e.g. Homes for Ukraine etc.).

¹ Brown, P., Gill, S., and Halsall, J. P. (2024) The Impact of Housing on Refugees: An Evidence Synthesis, *Housing Studies*, Vol. 39(1), pp. 227-271, DOI: 10.1080/02673037.2022.2045007.

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Policies used to assist in the settlement of refugees

Refugees share commonalities with members of other communities who struggle with low levels of capital and household income, who may have existing health and wellbeing challenges, and/or are without secure paid work. However, their refugee status makes them particularly vulnerable given the wider context of othering and discrimination, alongside the co-existing challenges that come with being a 'refugee'. Policies which would enable a functional supply of social housing, a regulated private rented sector, a supportive social welfare system, a responsive health service, reducing income disparities and, employment support services, would help address many of the issues experienced by those who currently experience poor outcomes, including refugees. Evidence has found that these are just some of the urgent steps needed to improve the health of all². It should be noted that the policies which we found in the evidence reviewed are often in place to address the shortcomings of these foundational policies being absent.

The policies that help are ones that are developed with a sense of welcome and facilitated integration as core values. These policies tend to usher in a range of complementary initiatives and interventions to address multiple disadvantages that are typically experienced by refugees. These allow for various activities to be delivered including: providing orientation guidance, generous funding for language learning, provision of rights-based advice, funding for non-governmental organisations and, active assistance to enable rapid engagement with the labour market³.

Local discretion and policy entrepreneurialism within regions and localities was also seen to be encouraged to provide organisations the flexibility to respond to the local context(s)⁴.

Policies which encourage, and resource, personalised approaches to resettlement was consistently advocated due to the clear benefits to reducing housing stress⁵. Similarly, there were policies on a structural level that made a real difference, particularly those which helped increase the level of affordable housing and increased intercultural settlement⁶. Finally, policies which allowed for greater choice for refugees in where they could settle long-term were also seen as beneficial⁷.

2 Marmot M., Allen J., Boyce T., Goldblatt P., and Morrison J. (2020) Health equity in England: the Marmot review 10 years on. Institute of Health Equity. Available at: <https://www.health.org.uk/publications/reports/the-marmot-review-10-years-on>

3 Carter, T. S., Polevychok, C., & Osborne, J. (2009). The role of housing and neighbourhood in the re-settlement process: a case study of refugee households in Winnipeg. *The Canadian Geographer/Le Géographe canadien*, 53(3), 305-322; Flatau, P., Colic-Peisker, V., Bauskis, A., Maginn, P. & Buergelt, P. (2014) Refugees, housing, and neighbourhoods in Australia, AHURI Final Report No. 224. Melbourne: Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute. Available at <https://researchers.cdu.edu.au/en/publications/refugees-housing-and-neighbourhoods-in-australia> (accessed 19 December 2023).

4 Mahieu, R., & Van Caudenberg, R. (2020). Young refugees and locals living under the same roof: intercultural communal living as a catalyst for refugees' integration in European urban communities? *Comparative Migration Studies*, 8(12). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40878-019-0168-9>

5 Haycox, H. (2023). Policy paradoxes and the Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme: How welfare policies impact resettlement support. *Critical Social Policy*, 43(1), 76-96; Mitton, L. (2021) The newly-recognised refugees most at risk of homelessness in England, *Journal of Social Policy*, 50, pp. 59-78.

6 Bris, P., & Bendito, F. (2017). Lessons Learned from the Failed Spanish Refugee System: For the Recovery of Sustainable Public Policies. *Sustainability*, 9(8), 1446; Adam, F., Föbker, S., Imani, D., Pfaffenbach, C., Weiss, G., & Wiegandt, C. C. (2021). "Lost in transition"? Integration of refugees into the local housing market in Germany. *Journal of Urban Affairs*, 43(6), 831-850; Torpan, K., Sinitsyna, A., Kährrik, A., Kauppinen, T. M., & Tammaru, T. (2022). Overlap of migrants' housing and neighbourhood mobility. *Housing Studies*, 37(8), 1396-1421.

7 Auslender, E. (2022). Multi-level Governance in Refugee Housing and Integration Policy: A Model of Best Practice in Leverkusen. *Journal of International Migration and Integration*, 23(3), 949-970; Vogiazides, L., & Mondani, H. (2021). Geographical trajectories of refugees in Sweden: Uncovering patterns and drivers of inter-regional (im) mobility. *Journal of refugee studies*, 34(3), 3065-3090.

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Housing and support interventions

From the evidence reviewed, the interventions that can make a substantial difference are those where advocates (such as key workers or case workers) help refugees in their settlement journey. In light of the decreasing volume of social and community housing in many countries, support from advocates was particularly valuable when they actively supported refugees in their engagement with the private-rented sector. This could be via indirect support, where landlords were encouraged and primed to supporting refugees as and when they settled, or via direct support where advocates acted as trusted intermediaries for both the landlord and the refugee to address any settling and ongoing issues⁸.

Non-governmental groups, where they were resourced properly and/or able to, were also seen as providing a vital role in delivering a range of positive interventions⁹.

The building of social connections was a key intervention that was undertaken in many different ways, but which consistently demonstrated benefits for refugees. This included involving settled residents in the approach to resettlement, accommodating refugees with local community members and the practice of refugee hosting¹⁰.

Interventions which focus on helping refugees enter and sustain employment within the labour market were also seen to be critical to improving housing outcomes¹¹.

8 Lumley-Sapanski, A. (2020). Explaining contemporary patterns of residential mobility: Insights from resettled refugees in Chicago. *Geoforum*, 116, 1-11; Weidinger, T. & Kordel, S. (2020) Access to and exclusion from housing over time: Refugees' experiences in rural areas, *International Migration*, 61 (3) pp. 54-71, doi:10.1111/imig.12807; Adam, F., Föbker, S., Imani, D., Pfaffenbach, C., Weiss, G., & Wiegandt, C. C. (2021). "Lost in transition"? Integration of refugees into the local housing market in Germany. *Journal of Urban Affairs*, 43(6), 831-850

9 Nagel, A. K. (2023). "I Was a Stranger and You Welcomed Me". The Role of Religion and Faith-Based Organizations in Refugee Accommodation. *Interdisciplinary Journal for Religion and Transformation in Contemporary Society*, 1, 1-24; Meer, N., Dimaio, C., Hill, E., Angeli, M., Oberg, K. & Emilsson, H. (2021) Governing displaced migration in Europe: Housing and the role of the "local", *Comparative Migration Studies*, 9, 1-17; Vergou, P., Arvanitidis, P. A., & Manetos, P. (2021). Refugee mobilities and institutional changes: Local housing policies and segregation processes in Greek cities. *Urban Planning*, 6(2), 19-31.

10 Mwanri, L., Miller, E., Walsh, M., Baak, M., & Ziersch, A. (2023). Social Capital and Rural Health for Refugee Communities in Australia. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 20(3), <https://www.mdpi.com/1660-4601/20/3/2378>; Kim, K. (2022). Community experiences and aspirations of young Syrian newcomers in a neighborhood in Amsterdam, the Netherlands. *Journal of Community Practice*, 30(4), 418-438; van Dijk, H., Knappert, L., Muis, Q., & Alkhaled, S. (2022). Roomies for life? An assessment of how staying with a local facilitates refugee integration. *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies*, 20(3), 321-335.

11 Lumley-Sapanski, A., & Callahan, N. J. (2019). Mutual Benefit: How Vocational Training Programs Utilize Employer Engagement and Refugee Strengths to Facilitate Integration. *Social Sciences*, 8(5), 145; Phillimore, J. (2017). Embedded integration and organisational change in housing providers in the UK. *Social Policy and Society*, 16(1), 1-14; Oliver, C., Geuijen, K., & Dekker, R. (2023). Challenging the 'Youth Gaze': Building Diversity into Refugee and Asylum Reception and Integration Programmes. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/feac064>

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Potential housing and support solutions

In terms of potential housing and support solutions these were found to have synergy with the approaches that have been explored above. Several housing specific solutions were identified and proposed including improving housing provision¹² and addressing housing affordability¹³. Creating opportunities for social connectedness with non-refugee/local populations was seen as pivotal. These had to be meaningful and non-tokenistic and support regular inter-cultural contact¹⁴.

The role of intermediaries and advocates was a particular area that was seen to have potential to address many housing inequalities for refugees. A study in Germany, in particular, called for the use of 'rental mediators' who could help refugees navigate the private rented sector¹⁵.

The impact of increasing the opportunities for language acquisition as well as facilitating economic integration into the labour market were also seen as critical approaches to enhancing the prospectives for positive long-term housing sustainment¹⁶.

The direct involvement of refugees in designing services was highly recommended¹⁷ as was the building of meaningful networks of practitioners who can work collaboratively to overcome challenges, share knowledge and learning¹⁸.

Conclusion

The available evidence demonstrates that organisations are not yielding to a restrictive policy framework that dismisses refugees as the 'other' and diminishes their needs. Instead, it shows that across OECD countries, including the UK, organisations have found ways to enhance the housing and settlement outcomes of refugees.

Our digest has focussed on three key areas of concern:

1. Policies used to assist in the settlement of refugees within UK and international settings: highlighting the inherent challenges within existing policy frameworks yet also identifying approaches which work, in particular those which are rooted around principles of inclusion and integration.
2. Housing and support interventions: including the value of advocates in enabling positive housing outcomes for refugees, especially navigating the private rented sector.

12 Carter, T. S., Polevychok, C., & Osborne, J. (2009). The role of housing and neighbourhood in the re-settlement process: a case study of refugee households in Winnipeg. *The Canadian Geographer/Le Géographe canadien*, 53(3), 305-322.

13 Rabiah-Mohammed, F., Hamilton, L. K., Oudshoorn, A., Bakhash, M., Tarraf, R., Arnout, E., ... & Theriault, L. (2022). Syrian refugees' experiences of the pandemic in Canada: Barriers to integration and just solutions. *Studies in Social Justice*, 16(1), 9-32.

14 Mwanri, L., Miller, E., Walsh, M., Baak, M., & Ziersch, A. (2023). Social Capital and Rural Health for Refugee Communities in Australia. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 20(3), <https://www.mdpi.com/1660-4601/20/3/2378>; Mahieu, R., & Van Caudenberg, R. (2020). Young refugees and locals living under the same roof: intercultural communal living as a catalyst for refugees' integration in European urban communities? *Comparative Migration Studies*, 8(12). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40878-019-0168-9>

15 Weidinger, T. & Kordel, S. (2020) Access to and exclusion from housing over time: Refugees' experiences in rural areas, *International Migration*, 61 (3) pp. 54-71, doi:10.1111/imig.12807

16 Ran, G. J., & Join-Lambert, H. (2020). Influence of family hosting on refugee integration and its implication on social work practice: the French case. *European journal of social work*, 23(3), 461-474

17 Synovec, C. E., & Aceituno, L. (2020). Social justice considerations for occupational therapy: The role of addressing social determinants of health in unstably housed populations. *Work*, 65(2), 235-246.

18 Mullins, D. and Jones, P. (2009) 'Refugee integration and access to housing: a network management perspective', *Journal of the Built Environment*, 24, 2, 103-25.

3. Potential housing and support solutions: improved housing provision and affordability, alongside increased opportunities for social integration, language acquisition, and the involvement of refugees in shaping solutions.

Whilst creating effective responses to the poor housing outcomes experienced by refugees requires increasing resources to ensure needs are met, there are nevertheless examples of good practice which can be developed within the context of existing approaches, and the evidence suggests that these are invaluable and essential to support refugees in their housing journeys.

About this digest

This digest draws on research that has been produced as part of Refugee Integration Yorkshire and Humber. The project ran from January 2021 to December 2023. It sought to understand the housing pathways and experiences of refugees who had settled in the UK over a 30-year period. It has involved extensive scoping reviews of the literature and in-depth research with over 80 refugees and over 100 policy actors and practitioners.

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