# From Refugee to Citizen: ‘Standing on my own two feet’

A research report on integration, ‘Britishness’ and citizenship.

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Part of Metropolitan Support Trust

## Summary and public policy recommendations

October 2007

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# Foreword

**Barbara Roche,**
**Chair of Metropolitan Support Trust**

It is a great pleasure to introduce the first piece of research commissioned by our new Research and Consultancy Unit. It explores the experiences of refugees who have arrived over the last 50 years and their sense of Britishness. Fifty years ago, Refugee Support (at that time known as BCAR Housing Society) was established, and we wanted to tell the story of our service users and other refugees over that time.

*From Refugee to Citizen: Standing on my own two feet* allows refugees to speak for themselves. It highlights the high level of political participation and volunteer activity among refugees here in the UK and shows how integration works at the household and individual levels. Britishness is seen as an identity that many refugees come to embrace, not particularly at a cultural level but as a set of values which symbolise freedom of speech and security. We see, through the refugees' own stories, how integration happens over time, not in a linear way but in reaction to everyday experiences, successes and set backs.

I am grateful to those that took part in the research and know that their stories will contribute a great deal to our understanding of these issues.

This is the first of many research projects that Metropolitan Support Trust/ Refugee Support will undertake as it develops its research role, and I hope that this book, in particular, will provide a valuable contribution to the current debate on refugee integration.

# Refugee Support

Refugee Support is one of the country's leading providers of housing and support for refugees and asylum seekers, and is the name of Metropolitan Support Trust's (MST) refugee services. MST is part of Metropolitan Housing Partnership, a family of social businesses that support and complement each other's work.

Refugee Support was established in 1957, as the British Council for Aid to Refugees (BCAR) Housing Society. Its first challenge was to house some of the Hungarian refugees who came to the UK after the 1956 uprising. In 1994 BCAR Housing merged with the Refugee Council's Housing Division, to become Refugee Housing Association. In 1997, Refugee Housing Association – the previous name of Refugee Support – became an independent subsidiary of Metropolitan Housing Partnership.

Metropolitan Housing Partnership, the parent organisation of MST, also works with many refugees, who form part of the diverse communities it serves.

MST was created in April 2007 from four organisations (Refugee Housing Association, StepForward, Threshold Support and Walbrook Support) coming together to provide a wide range of specialist services to vulnerable people. It is a registered social landlord and a registered charity. The purpose of joining forces was to share the skills and experiences of the four organisations, to offer greater choice to service users through the provision of a wider range of specialist support services.

One of the exciting new developments within Refugee Support is the new Ashmore Fund and Research Unit. The Ashmore Fund is a restricted fund within MST which was created from the free reserves of the former Refugee Housing Association. It is named after the former Chair, Gillian Ashmore. The purpose of the fund is to support innovative initiatives for the benefit of refugees and migrants, and the Research Unit has received funding for set up costs from it. The Research Unit will commission a programme of research, of which this 50th anniversary research study is the first. It is staffed by a Research and Consultancy Manager, Charlotte Keeble, and a part-time Research Assistant, Nura Venet.

# Background and methodology

In most European countries, policy debates about refugee and migrant integration have intensified in recent years, primarily as a result of concern about the social segregation of migrant and minority communities and the growth of religious extremism. However, relatively little attention has been paid to how migrants and refugees themselves feel about integration, or becoming and being British.

This book aims to fill this research gap by asking what integration and 'Britishness' means to refugees. It is published as part of the 50th anniversary celebrations of Refugee Support (formerly Refugee Housing Association), a charity founded in the autumn of 1957 to provide housing for Hungarian refugees who had settled in the UK.

The book is based on research comprising 30 life history interviews with refugees who had arrived in the UK between 1956 and 2006. We chose these 30 refugees to reflect different regions of origin of refugees, their length of residence in the UK, gender and occupation. The interview process had two components, namely:

1) two short questionnaires to collect basic data on age, age on migration, nationality and identity, and
2) a taped retrospective life history interview where participants were asked about:
   - pre-migration experiences
   - migration to the UK
   - arrival experiences
   - labour market, educational and housing experiences in the UK
   - volunteering and political activities
   - social interactions with the majority community in the UK, and
   - notions of home and what it means to be British.

Interviews generally took between one and two hours and furnished us with very detailed information about refugee integration – data that generally does not come out of questionnaire research.

We hope that the findings of this work will help inform policy debates about refugee integration, Britishness and citizenship. There are, of course, limits to what can be said based on small sample of refugees. However, by drawing out common themes in what our interviewees told us, triangulating our findings with other quantitative and qualitative

research on refugee integration (including the Census, the Labour Force Survey and the School Census) and discussing our emerging findings with other researchers and refugee activists, we are confident that the findings presented in this research are indicative of the experiences of many more refugees than the 30 we interviewed. We also feel that the dominance of some narratives has enabled us to draw conclusions that are reliable.

Our interviewees came from: Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Chile, Vietnam, Iran, Somalia, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Sierra Leone, Kenya, Uganda, Democratic Republic of Congo and Turkey. Our sample comprised 12 females and 18 males, reflecting the gender balance of the UK's refugee population. Those we interviewed were aged between 16 and 68 years. Eleven of our interviewees arrived in the UK as children.

All but one of our interviewees had secured British citizenship, refugee status or leave to remain in the UK. All participants had lived in the UK for a minimum of 12 months. Some 22 interviewees were resident in Greater London, five in Sheffield and three in other parts of the UK.

# Pre-migration experiences

**"In England, they think you have come to grab your economy, but we had a good house back home, a nice home and a nice garden and a playground for the children. What they show you on the television (about Afghanistan) is not true. I came here to save my life. I did not come here to have a good life. The life there was better, I had two pharmacy shops in the centre of the city. I had a good house. I had a good car. I don't have a car here."**
**T, from Afghanistan.**

The majority of those who we interviewed were from the elite or from middle class families in their home countries, a profile also highlighted in other research about refugees in the UK.

All of those who left their home countries as adults had completed compulsory education and 50 per cent had undertaken some higher education. This is a much higher rate of participation in higher education than the UK population.

Refugees' labour market experiences in their home countries left them ill-equipped for working in the UK. Those who had worked in their home country found that they did not have the skills needed for work in the UK.

# Persecution

**"I had been arrested in 1983, I was originally sentenced to death, the military court then sentenced me to life in prison. A week later, I married my wife who was expecting a child… when I came to the UK and I got a visa, they transferred me to a prison in Santiago that was a kind of preparation for people coming out. They allowed them to grow their hair and put on a bit of weight. In fact I met my son only then, at two and a half years. In fact I joined the family on the airplane, five minutes before take-off… so when I arrived here I arrived free, a father and a husband." E, from Chile.**

Most refugees were fleeing war, or persecution, or both. However, three refugees had no direct experience of persecution, having been outside their home country when their home country conditions changed.

Political engagement, persecution and the deprivation of human rights in countries of origin and sometimes during flight made refugees aware of the importance of security, freedom and rights and appreciative that these existed in the UK.

# Flight

**"I came from Mazar. From Mazar, we came to Tajikistan. From Tajikistan, then the journey started. They took us here and there in different countries. We were not allowed to go out, so we did not know which country it was, or which city is that one.**

**"Four times I was near dying because they put us in different small ships in the river. Near the river there was a lot of snow. Then they said to us 'jump in the river.' They had pistols and they had knives in their hands and they said, if you don't jump we will kill you. We fell down into the water and the water was very cold. When we came out we had to walk through one or two metres of snow. So it was like that, they don't care about you, they just care about the money." T, from Afghanistan.**

Three refugees (from Chile, Vietnam and Afghanistan) came to the UK as part of resettlement programmes and four refugees came as a result of family reunion.

Only one third of our interviewees had made a direct journey to the UK. Many refugees had spent protracted periods living in third countries, with a mean time in transit of 22 months.

Some 60 per cent of those we interviewed paid for the services of agents and smugglers, to provide forged documentation, arrange border crossings or transport them to the UK. The financial costs of paying agents and smugglers means that refugees who are successful in making the journey to the UK are usually those who have the greatest means. That families sometimes select the most resilient or resourceful member to make the journey also adds to the selective nature of refugee migration to European countries.

# Arrival


**"When I came to this country, the businessman, he left me. He said to me 'I'm going to buy cigarettes'. I said to him 'OK', and after that I never saw him again. My sister she was crying and some Eritreans asked me 'why is she crying?' They took us to Kilburn and here we stayed for two days." CC, from Eritrea.**

The majority of arrivals had family and friends already living in the UK. In most cases, these social networks made the initial weeks less stressful for refugees. However, in a few cases the actions of some family members or friends impeded the eventual integration of refugees.

Refugees had very diverse experiences of their initial housing. Many refugees had lived in overcrowded or poor quality accommodation. They also moved home many times when they first arrived and this initial housing mobility impacted on their integration.

Refugees had very diverse experiences of the asylum system. However, rapid asylum decisions appeared to promote early integration.

The time-limited settlement afforded to those who have gained refugee status since 2005 appeared to impact on career choices, with some interviewees balancing long-term aspirations with the short-term need to earn money, to cushion them when or if they are forced to leave the UK.

More than two-thirds of the interviewees arrived in the UK speaking little or no English. All but one of those who arrived in the UK before 2000 were able to secure access to English classes and most of those interviewed now spoke English fluently. Many recent arrivals, however, received no language support at all when they first came to the UK.

Eleven refugees arrived in the UK as children, with five of them coming unaccompanied by their parents. Three child refugees had little or no education before coming to the UK. Most recent child refugees were shocked by the poor behaviour and violence that they witnessed in British schools.

Half the refugees we interviewed received little or no support from helping agencies on arrival in the UK.

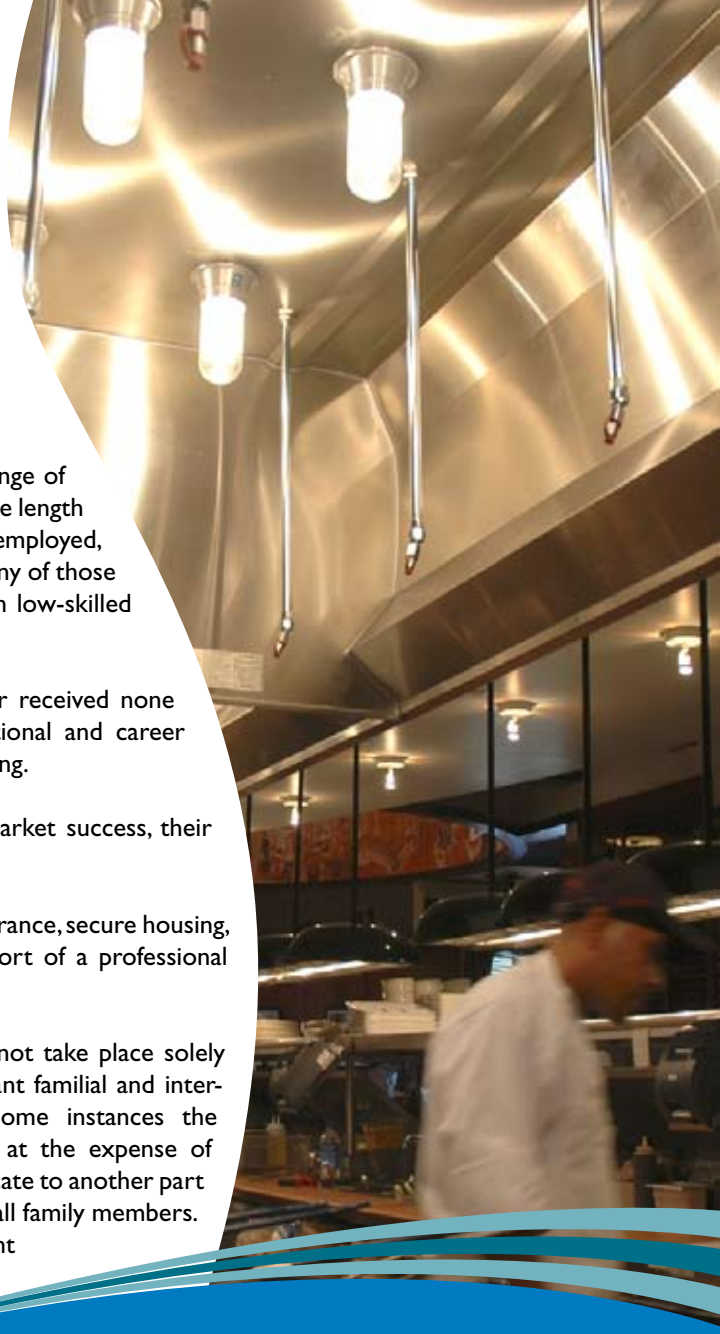
## Institutional and functional integration

**"I applied for a hospital porters' job in an NHS hospital, now closed down. I did work there for about a year and a half… Then I went back to university again and I paid for my course by mini-cabbing. I finished my MA successfully, but no jobs, but because I had passed my test I did a bit more mini-cabbing, then delivery driving, cleaning, you name it. This was not integration.**

**There is no question that I have to be better than an English person. In every moment of my professional life I am reminded I don't belong. I still feel a refugee in terms of opportunities, in terms of racism, in terms of institutional racism… Half of my working life I have been underemployed." E, from Chile.**

We analysed refugees' experiences after they have received a decision on their asylum application, focusing on employment, education and housing, all of which are components of refugees' institutional integration in the UK.

Some 17 of our interviewees had studied or been accepted on university courses in the UK. Eight of the interviewees held UK master's degrees.



Those who arrived as children experienced much less educational success than adult arrivals – few of them passed GCSE examinations at 16 years or other Level Two qualifications on their first attempt. Many of the child arrivals had to retake courses in further education colleges. Interrupted prior education, coupled with a lack of English language and curricular support in the UK, residential mobility and delays in accessing school places, also contributed to the underachievement of child refugees.

One third of our interviewees had successful careers in a wide range of jobs. There was a marked correlation between career success and the length of time spent in the UK. Almost all recent arrivals were underemployed, working in jobs where their qualifications were not fully utilised. Many of those who had successful careers had also spent long periods of time in low-skilled jobs.

Some interviewees did not receive appropriate careers advice, or received none at all. This resulted in interviewees making inappropriate educational and career decisions. They also felt they faced much discrimination in job-seeking.

Interviewees defined their integration in terms of their labour market success, their social interactions and their personal happiness.

In addition to a secure immigration status, interviewees felt that tolerance, secure housing, English language fluency, social networks and the long-term support of a professional helped them integrate.


Many of those interviewed felt that integration did not take place solely at the individual level; there were also important familial and inter-generational aspects of integration. In some instances the integration of one family member was at the expense of another, for example, the decision to relocate to another part of the UK may not be in the interests of all family members. Therefore integration needs to be thought of as operating at household, as well as individual level.

# Social interactions

**"I'm living here for four years now. During my first year here, I went to distribute to everyone Christmas cards. I thought maybe we could be friends. So I distributed cards, but when I went out, they didn't even say hello to me. People back home don't know how unfriendly the UK is."**

**"Everyone who has dark hair, dark eyes, they call 'Paki'. They used to spray graffiti on my doors and put rubbish through my letter box. All of them who do this are children, but behind the children are their parents. It is difficult because the parents don't take responsibility for their children's activity. They encourage their children to do this, they say 'it is not your country, get out.'"**
**T and L, both from Afghanistan.**

Some 22 of 30 interviewees had made friends with both those from their own community, other migrants resident in the UK and those whom our interviewees considered to be British. Many interviewees forged friendships through their leisure activities, such as volunteering and political engagement, sport or in the workplace.

Just four respondents felt they were friends with their neighbours. Most of those we interviewed did not know or had never spoken to their neighbours.

The built environment – housing design – and the existence of soft infrastructure such as parks and sports and community facilities, influenced neighbourhood social integration.

Two thirds of our interviewees had experienced racial harassment, such as name-calling, verbal abuse and damage to their property. One respondent had been physically attacked on two occasions, and three interviewees reported that family members had experienced racially aggravated violence.

Seven interviewees had felt that the UK had become a more hostile place for migrant and visible minority communities since the terrorist atrocities of September 2001 and July 2005.

The unfriendliness of neighbours and hostile social interactions in their neighbourhood prevented most interviewees feeling that they 'belonged' in their locality.

# Active citizenship

**"I enjoyed it (volunteering) because it gave me an opportunity to meet different people, share the experiences, some are the similar experiences like me, some are the more horrible experiences. It helped me to find jobs later on. I think they also helped me then get new friends as well... and later on to know the contacts, yes, they helped me to know where to apply and where to go for the jobs, different contacts, different people. It was a very, very useful experience for me, and they were very instrumental to getting a job." V, from Uganda.**

Our research findings suggest greater political participation among refugees than among the overall UK population, as well as high levels of participation in a wide range of third sector organisations.

All but two of the 20 adult interviewees with the right to vote in the UK exercised this right, with some respondents feeling they were privileged to be able to exercise it. Four respondents were active members of UK political parties.

Some 26 of the 30 respondents had undertaken some volunteering and all but one is still giving their time as a volunteer. Volunteering comprised formal activities, such as chairing a refugee community organisation (RCO), or more informal ones, such as cooking for cultural events.

Most volunteer time was given to RCOs. Such volunteering activity did not impede refugees' integration by limiting their interactions with outside society. Rather, volunteering was a tool for integration as it helped develop language skills, as well as knowledge of UK society.

# Identity and home

**"I am a British Somali… I am proud when I pass through the airport that I have a British passport, that it is a security, but not an identity… Do I feel British? I think through the passport, but at the moment I don't think I feel just British. I am struggling to say that now. But I am British when it comes to football, because I have supported Manchester United since I was very young. When England plays with other countries I support them.**

**"I feel I belong here in the UK when I see my community, if I go where there are a lot of Somalilanders, here in London, I feel part of that, that is my neighbourhood. I feel secure among my community, does that make sense? If I go down Wembley High Road, there are a lot of shops, there is a Somali restaurant, I feel nice and secure and I belong there."**

**"Would I call myself a refugee? Yes, I would. I am, even today I am still struggling with the problems I experienced when I was a refugee. I am sorry to say this, my experience of this country, of applying for jobs, what we go through every day, it is one thing to be black, but it is even worse being black and African with an accent and to cap it all a refugee."**
**J, from Somalia and Q, from Kenya.**

Some 26 interviewees said that they felt British or English, or held diasporic or dual identities which incorporated Britishness, for example, as a British Somali. However, three interviewees who held British passports stated that they did not feel British in any respect.

Eleven interviewees still felt themselves to be refugees. There was a strong association between a refugee identity and a feeling of rejection in British society.

Few interviewees professed local identities, although some did articulate regional identities such as being a 'Londoner'. This absence of local identity was evidence of a lack of local social integration.

# Locations of 'home'

**"I have two homes, there and here. My home is my house here and my home is Afghanistan, both of them. I have my life here, and at the same time I miss there as well, because I was born there."**
**L, from Afghanistan.**

Half of all respondents considered the UK to be their primary home. Length of residence in the UK and having UK-born children were factors that promoted a primary attachment to the UK.

Over a quarter of interviewees felt they had no home – they had lost their home in their country of origin, but did not yet feel that they had a home in the UK.

# Britishness

**"I like to peace, your rights, your right to say anything you want, and no-one can tell you to do things you don't want to do. There is peace and you always feel you have freedom. That is Britishness."**
**I, from Somalia.**

Most of our interviewees felt British. While ideas of what it meant to be British varied from individual to individual, the most frequently valued element of being British was the freedom and security afforded to them in the UK. The persecution and deprivation of rights refugees experienced in their home countries also heightened their sense of freedom and fairness in the UK.

Most interviewees also noted that a feeling of Britishness emerged slowly, and not always in a linear manner in which one felt more British over time.

# Recommendations

One of the most important conclusions from our research is that refugees experienced what we term a 'discongruity of belonging'. Britishness was not fostered by local integration in the workplace and immediate neighbourhood, but was experienced nationally, through refugees' appreciation of freedom and peace.

Yet interactions in our localities are critical for developing a sense of belonging and Britishness. Furthermore, it is relationships made at the local level that bind diverse communities. If Britishness is to be a meaningful and progressive condition, it needs to be fostered both at the grass roots and at the national level. Our research points to a range of public policy interventions that could promote integration and nurture a sense of local belonging among Britain's refugees. Some of these recommendations are specific and relate, for example, to aspects of education or employment policy. Other recommendations are more general.

## 1) Asylum policy

Our research showed that rapid determination of asylum applications promoted early integration. Conversely, the time-limited settlement afforded to those who have gained refugee status since 2005 impacted on career choices and acted as a barrier to integration. We recommend:

- **The Home Office should reconsider the present five year time limit placed on refugee status – giving people permanent residency in the UK might promote earlier integration.**

- **The Home Office should consider implementing a regularisation programme for asylum legacy cases from zones of conflict such as southern Somalia. The Home Office should consider giving this group of people leave to remain in the UK, to facilitate their integration.**

## 2) Integration policy

Our research showed that integration takes place at household and individual level and that decisions taken by one member of a household may affect the integration of other members. Many interviewees also felt that the responsibility for social integration was placed on refugees, but the problem lay with the majority community who were unfriendly and did not integrate. We recommend:

- **Government and refugee organisations should acknowledge the familial and inter-generational aspects of integration. This could be achieved by measures such as including all members of a refugee's family in the SUNRISE interview and integration plan.**

- **Central and local government, as well as refugee organisations, need to better communicate the two-way nature of integration to the whole UK population.**

## 3) Adult education and training

Our research shows that most refugees arrive in the UK speaking little or no English and that English language competency is pivotal to integration. We recommend:

- **There should be a cross-departmental government review on current adult English language (ESOL) provision and future needs. This review should consider levels of funding, as well as funding mechanisms.**

- **Government should maintain some contingency funds for ESOL to ensure that students who arrive outside funding allocation cycles can access English language support at the earliest opportunity.**

## 4) Volunteering and active citizenship

Our research showed high levels of volunteering among refugees. This activity was a tool for integration as it helped develop language skills, as well as knowledge of UK society. We recommend:

- **Government and refugee organisations should work together to develop national volunteering strategies for refugees. Such a strategy would:**
  - **communicate to UK society the high level of active citizenship among refugees**
  - **promote a wider range of organisations to include refugees and asylum-seekers as volunteers**
  - **raise awareness about the aspirations of refugee volunteers to ensure that volunteering can contribute to meeting these aspirations**
  - **disseminate good practice in relation to refugee volunteering and volunteer management, such as practices adopted by Refugee Support.**

- **More research on volunteering activity among refugees should be undertaken, drawing from a larger and perhaps random sample of refugees.**

## 5) Housing

Our research showed that secure housing promoted early integration and protracted homelessness limited integration. Additionally, factors such as building design and soft infrastructure, such as parks and leisure centres, affected refugees' social integration. We recommend:

- **Government and other research funders should commission an examination about hidden homelessness among refugee communities.**
- **Central government should provide guidance to local authorities, commercial developers, the Housing Corporation and registered social landlords to ensure that building design promotes social cohesion.**
- **Central and local government should give greater consideration to the role of public space in promoting social cohesion. Local authority planning departments and relevant Registered Social Landlords should always be included in discussion about social cohesion strategies.**
- **Local authorities should ensure that where their housing is transferred out of the public sector, new management organisations have clear responsibility for social cohesion and community development.**
- **Central government must provide a lead and ensure that the new housing developments in Growth Areas make provision for soft infrastructure such as parks and sports and leisure centres.**

## 6) Employment

Our research shows that many refugees face unemployment and underemployment. Interviewees felt they faced much discrimination in job-seeking. We recommend:

- **Government, the new Commission for Equality and Human Rights, trade unions, employers, migrant and race equality organisations should collaborate on public relations campaigns to tackle widespread prejudice about the employability of refugees (and other migrants). This should build on and extend existing work undertaken by the Employability Forum, as well as sector-based initiatives.**
- **Government, regional development agencies, refugee organisations and employers should work together to increase the number of work experience placements for refugees.**

# 7) Social cohesion and community safety

Our research showed that two thirds of our interviewees had experienced racial harassment in their neighbourhoods. Most of those we interviewed did not know or had never spoken to their neighbours and did not feel any attachment to their locality. We recommend:

- **There is a need to meet policing and protection needs of refugees and asylum-seekers. Refugees need to be better able to seek redress for racially aggravated crime. Police authorities should set up third-party reporting mechanisms, as well as conduct outreach work with refugee communities, where conventional reporting mechanisms do not work.**

- **Local authorities, supported by other experts, should organise in-service professional development for teachers, youth workers, arts educators and other key personnel, in order to develop their skills in teaching controversial issues such as migration.**

- **Arts, cultural and sports funding should be better directed towards initiatives that bring communities together, particularly in areas experiencing conflict.**

- **Refugee organisations and other relevant agencies need to consider how they can better communicate pro-refugee and pro-diversity messages. Grant-making trusts might consider funding some of the larger local refugee groups, to enable them to carry out public education and media work in their locality.**

# 8) Children's services

Our research showed that those who arrived as children experienced much less educational success than adult arrivals – few of them passed GCSE examinations or other Level Two qualifications on their first attempt. Many of the child arrivals had to retake courses in further education colleges. We recommend:

- **Central government should recognise that increased international migration to the UK means that increased funding for English as an additional language teaching is needed.**
- **The funding formula for English as an additional language teaching should recognise the educational needs of older and more vulnerable refugee children, such as those who have received little or no prior education.**
- **Central government should encourage local authorities to develop intensive induction programmes for young refugees and migrants who have received little or no prior education before arrival in the UK.**
- **The funding mechanism for English as an additional language teaching needs to better respond to the unpredictable nature of refugee migration, as well as high levels of pupil mobility in the UK.**
- **Government should review the current qualifications system from the perspective of young refugees, especially those who arrive in the UK late in their educational careers, or with little prior education. Such a review should aim to ensure that young refugees leave school with qualifications and clear progression pathways.**
- **Government should issue practice guidance on the post-16 education of young refugees and commission research on the post-16 educational experiences of young refugees.**
- **Tackling the causes and consequences of pupil mobility among disadvantaged children should become a priority of central government.**

# Acknowledgements

## ippr

This research was conducted by The Institute for Public Policy Research (ippr) and written for Refugee Support by Jill Rutter, Laurence Cooley, Sile Reynolds and Ruth Sheldon. The views expressed in it do not necessarily represent the views of ippr or Refugee Support.

ippr is the UK's leading progressive think tank and was established in 1988. Its role is to bridge the political divide between the social democratic and liberal traditions, the intellectual divide between academia and the policymaking establishment, and the cultural divide between government and civil society.

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Lastly, the 30 interviewees who gave their time to us deserve particular thanks. Their names remain anonymous, but we are deeply grateful to them. We hope that this research will contribute to a better understanding of refugees' experience and play a part in advocating for more progressive integration policies.

If you would like a copy of the full 'From Refugee to Citizen' report, please email Nura Venet, Research Assistant at nura.venet@mst-online.org.uk

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Please note
the identities of all the interviewees in this document have been withheld and all images of people are generic.

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