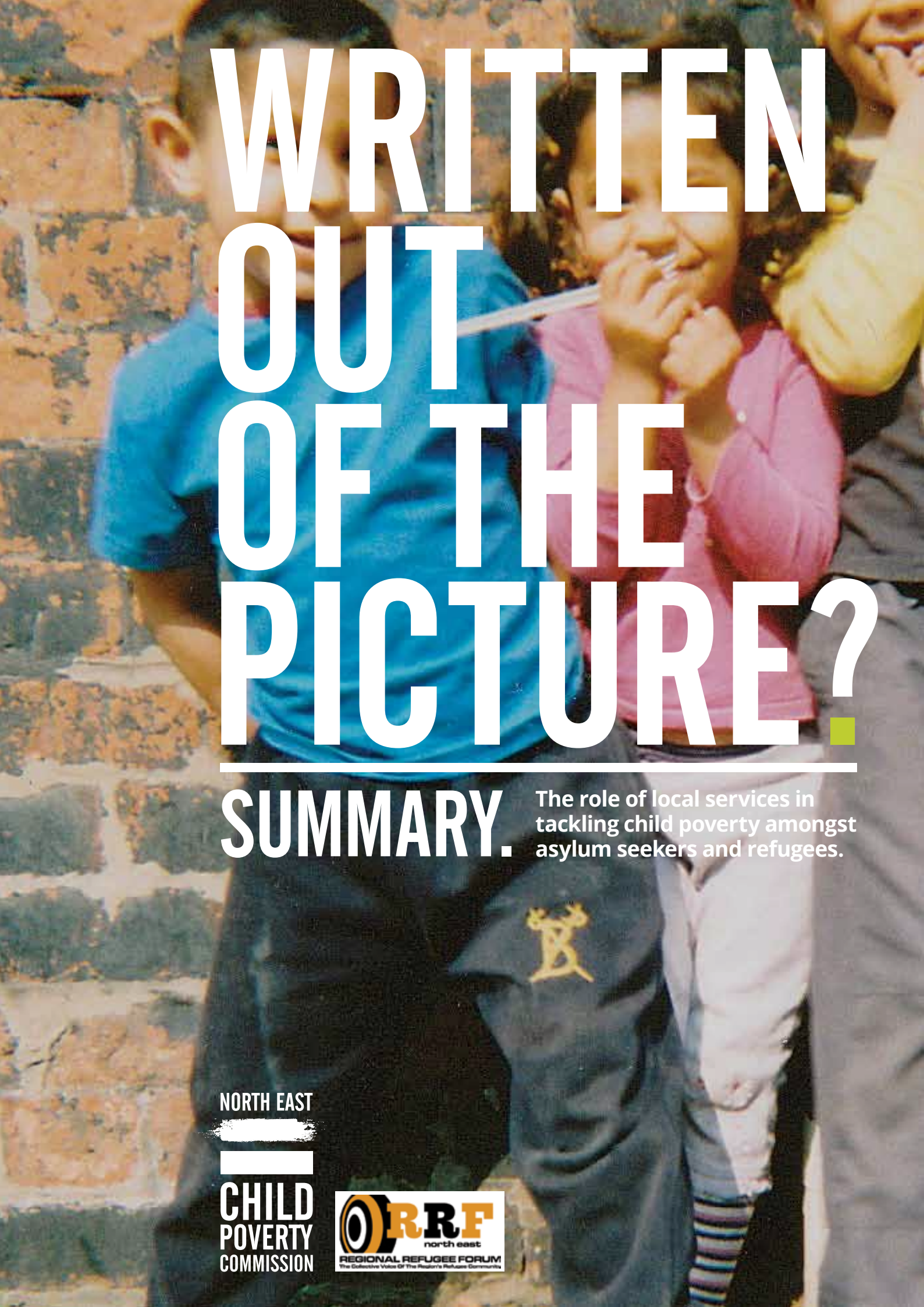

WRITTEN OUT OF THE PICTURE?

SUMMARY.

The role of local services in tackling child poverty amongst asylum seekers and refugees.

NORTH EAST CHILD POVERTY COMMISSION

RRF north east
REGIONAL REFUGEE FORUM
The Collective Voice Of The Region's Refugee Community

INTRODUCTION

This report explores the role of local services in tackling child poverty amongst refugees and asylum seekers. It also makes recommendations for future policy and practice in this area and draws on existing research evidence where possible. A key concern in the development of the report has been to highlight the resources that exist in the North East to improve our understanding of the specific and additional barriers that refugees may face in trying to escape poverty and improve their lives.

Despite there being a good body of evidence relating to the interactions between poverty, ethnicity and migration and an acknowledgement that the support offered to asylum seekers in the UK effectively *'traps'* them in poverty, the issue of poverty amongst individuals once they have been granted leave to remain has not received much attention from researchers or policy makers.

This case study accompanies *'Written out of the picture?'*, an **RRF / NECPC** report looking at the role of local services in tackling child poverty amongst asylum seekers and refugees. For more information or to request a copy, please email; *info@refugeevoices.org.uk*

BACKGROUND

There has been a strong policy focus on tackling child poverty in the UK for over a decade. Unfortunately, during that time, little central or local government attention has been paid to poverty amongst refugees and asylum seekers, with some targets and measures appearing to *'miss out'* asylum seeking children.

In 1999, **Tony Blair** set out a *'historic aim'* to end child poverty, stating that it would take a generation to achieve this goal. In 2007, while he was still Prime Minister, the government introduced a **Public Service Agreement (PSA) Delivery Agreement** to *'halve the number of children living in poverty by 2010-11'*. However, a footnote on page 3 states that the agreement *'does not specifically cover the children of asylum seekers'*. Local child poverty statistics, published by **HMRC**, are based on the numbers of children in families that are *'in receipt of out-of-work (means-tested) benefits, or in receipt of tax credits'*, excluding asylum seekers. During the scrutiny process of the **Child Poverty Bill** (now the **Child Poverty Act**), the **Joint Committee on Human Rights (JCHR)** was concerned about the potential for *'differential treatment'* of children not in qualifying households:

> ***The beneficiaries of the duty to meet the income targets will apparently only be children in qualifying households. The legislation is therefore, on its face, designed to require policy-making to prioritise such children over others, including Roma children, children in children's home and asylum-seeking children.***

Part 2 of the **Child Poverty Act** requires local authorities to *'prepare and publish an assessment of the needs of children living in poverty in its area ('a local child poverty needs assessment')'* and to *'prepare a joint child poverty strategy in relation to its area'*. No local authorities in the North East identified poverty amongst refugees or asylum seekers as an issue that required addressing in the local child poverty strategies published to date.

In April 2011, the Coalition government published the first ever UK central government child poverty strategy entitled, *'A New Approach to Child Poverty: Tackling the Causes of Disadvantage and Transforming Families' Lives'*. Refugees are mentioned once in the document and the children of asylum seekers or unaccompanied children seeking asylum are not mentioned anywhere in the strategy. A submission to a **JCHR** enquiry into children's rights argued that, *'The poverty of certain children under immigration control is not being eradicated, it is being written out of the picture'.*

LOCAL AUTHORITY APPROACHES

The decision to issue non-statutory guidance to local authorities in support of their local duties under the **Child Poverty Act** allowed them to develop **Child Poverty Needs Assessments** and **Child Poverty Strategies** in different ways. Analysis of the priorities for action that Local Authorities in the North East identified suggests that they fall into six broad categories:

- Worklessness
- Early Intervention
- Maximising Household Income
- Health & Wellbeing
- Improved Neighbourhoods
- Education

WORKLESSNESS

Asylum seekers do not have the right to work in the UK which leads to no other option but *'dependency'* on the state. There are additional barriers to employment for refugees such as the length of time people have been *'inactive'*, the lack of recognition for some overseas qualifications and employers attitudes to refugees. Participation in the labour market is lower for refugees than it is for the rest of the population. Research referenced in the government's child poverty strategy highlighted that terms and conditions were often poor and that one quarter of refugees were in temporary employment because they were unable to find permanent jobs. The research also found that less than half of refugees were entitled to holiday pay, only a third were likely to be offered training and that *'the work people were looking for was not always commensurate with (their) skills and qualifications'*. Concerns around the cost and time needed to address documentation issues, language barriers and negative media images of refugees have been highlighted by some employers as reasons why refugees might struggle to find employment.

EARLY INTERVENTION

A lack of understanding about the experiences of asylum seekers and refugees, coupled with cultural assumptions in health care, can have traumatic implications for parents. Concerns also exist about a fear of *'social services'* and reports of feelings of negative assumptions towards refugees and asylum seekers amongst health and social care staff, which leads to some people not accessing local services.

MAXIMISING HOUSEHOLD INCOME

There is little opportunity to *'maximise household income'* for asylum seekers. For refugees, problems at the *'move-on'* stage, including administrative errors, a lack of understanding of energy saving practices or of the complicated UK fuel and energy system, a complex and rapidly changing benefits system, unfamiliarity with how credit works in the UK, poor access to mainstream financial services and the responsibility for sending remittances to support family members back in their countries of origin all make *'money management'* very difficult.

HEALTH & WELLBEING

A lack of cooking facilities and utensils may make buying fast food, processed food and ready meals more attractive to refugees and asylum seekers, some of whom may not be familiar with the particular nutritional *'value'* of some of these meals. Research has suggested that having no social networks was significantly associated with poorer health for refugees. The quality and safety of housing has an impact on peoples' health and refugees and asylum seekers are often housed in accommodation which isn't beneficial to them.

NEIGHBOURHOODS

As a direct result of the dispersal policy begun in 2000, the asylum community in the North East is concentrated in the region's wards of highest deprivation and, therefore, a focus on improving neighbourhoods is very relevant to their experience of poverty. Despite a wide range of community integration work taking place in the North East, the experience of hate crime is still widespread amongst refugees and asylum seekers. This highlights the important role of local services in supporting not only asylum seekers and refugees but also the host community in preparing for dispersal and inward migration

EDUCATION

Refugee and asylum seeking children often experience interruptions in their education as a result of enforced house moves and this comes on top of other issues such as potential language barriers, difficulties accessing Higher Education, the possibility of them being separated from family members and concerns for their mental health and well-being. Young asylum seekers education can also be affected by bullying and a lack of parental knowledge of the education system.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1 In an austerity context, where spending cuts have reduced the capacity of specialist and 3rd sector support while simultaneously increasing demand on universal services, it is vital that mainstream local services take practical steps to ensure they deliver an inclusive and effective service to all local residents. This universal service approach is likely to have most impact on the poorest and most marginalised individuals who come into contact with services.

2 Local services should develop effective, sustained and two-way engagement processes with local refugee led community organisations which will;

- Provide accurate and up to date info about services to a community that predominantly disseminates information through word of mouth, and promote the communities' ability to engage with a changing system.
- Enable planners, commissioners and managers to hear the authentic voiced experience of service users who can evidence what is actually happening (as opposed to what should happen) and provide recommendations about what would work best.
- Increase the knowledge, skills and competencies of practitioners and point of access staff to deliver to this community through challenging perceptions and behaviour built on the *'single story'*.
- In planning engagement, it must be remembered that the vast majority of community groups are unfunded and rely entirely on their voluntary commitment to support change.

3 As part of this commitment to mainstreaming, services should identify what is transferable and generalisable from specialist practice and expertise, including from what was previously held in *'stand-alone'* asylum and refugee teams within their agencies or externally.

4 Equality and diversity training and courses teaching social, health and youth work in particular, need to incorporate the increasing diversity of minorities and their differing histories, circumstances and specific needs in order to produce effective outcomes at the front line. Reflective practice is an essential part of training to prevent staff from making assumptions based on their own cultural norms, to recognise power dynamics in operation, and to ensure an explicit *'culture of belief'* (as opposed to disbelief) is adopted when working with asylum seekers and refugees. The new **Public Health Duty** on local authorities and the new commissioning arrangements provide an excellent opportunity to embed this training at an early stage in this transition.

5 Local services should engage with the cross sector **North East Migration Network**. Chaired by the **Association of North East Councils**, its **Migrant Databank** and issue based subgroups provide an opportunity for services to highlight issues of current concern in relation to new migrant communities and work together to identify further actions at the level of policy and practice.

6 Services should establish clarity about the contractual role and responsibilities of **G4S** and its sub-contractor for the region, **Jomast**, towards their clients (asylum seekers housed in the region through dispersal) and the articulation with local services to ensure asylum seekers do not *'fall through gaps'* or excluded from support.

7 Services should audit the provision of – and liaison between - services at the *'point of decision'* to ensure that administrative delays and errors do not lead to destitution, debts, arrears or hardships for refugees at a critical life stage.

8 Advisers working in schools should be aware of entitlements and funds still accessible to children of asylum seekers, and while their advice may be informed by the current status of the child, it should not be limited by it. They should deliver support based on the assumption that leave to remain will be granted and include advice on putting any forced waiting time between school and university to best use.

9 Further education courses need to provide a clearly signposted, respected, credible vocational training offer that will provide people with a clear and realistic route into employment, help them progress in their prior careers or support them in starting their own business.

10 Employment and enterprise support services should consider the **Good Practice Guide** and the recommendations of the **Refugee Forum's Skilled Project**. Specific support is needed for prior skills accreditation, opportunities to refresh and update prior skills, work placements or apprenticeships providing orientation in the UK workplace and references of skills demonstrated, and for transfer and utilisation of entrepreneurial ambitions. Public sector bodies could develop and offer volunteering and work experience opportunities.

11 There should be a parallel investment in training the business sector/employers in equality and diversity, including how they are implemented in recruitment, in progression and in retention, otherwise evidence indicates that the investment in preparing a refugee for the labour market is not maximised.

12 Financial advice services should consider both the specific and additional information needs of refugees who may be unfamiliar with financial arrangements in the UK, particularly for credit and debt, and the specific barriers they face in accessing financial institutions.

13 The region's political leadership should ensure discourse on asylum seekers and refugees is responsible and accurate. Leadership should reinforce not just the region's values but also its specific economic context, as has developed in Scotland where the benefits of migration in terms of population, skills, entrepreneurial drive and international connections has been recognised.

NORTH EAST

CHILD POVERTY COMMISSION

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REGIONAL REFUGEE FORUM

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design by Wonder Stuff Studio