

# WRITTEN OUT OF THE PICTURE?

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

NORTH EAST

CHILD  
POVERTY  
COMMISSION



# FOREWORD

We greatly welcome this opportunity to work with the North East Child Poverty Commission. As with all parents, the safety, health, well-being and happiness of our children, and their future opportunities to achieve and contribute are paramount concerns. This report is an attempt to highlight how the particular circumstances of being an 'asylum seeker' and refugee impact on our ability to secure this for our children.

The Regional Refugee Forum North East was created ten years ago, uniting the region's diverse refugee and asylum seeker led community groups to create an independent, collective advocate voice to inform policy and practice. Much of the evidence presented in this report is the authentic voiced experience of our members, collated from projects we've been involved in over the years. While it serves to highlight the specific and additional issues faced by the community, the report makes clear the need for a focused, bigger, richer picture informed by the experiences, perspectives and expertise of the great range of agencies, from all sectors, who play a role in supporting and delivering services to our communities.

Two strands of national asylum policy dominate our lives whilst we wait to know if sanctuary will be granted to us and carry a legacy for those eventually granted leave to remain: not being

allowed to work to support ourselves and family, and being made dependent on support set lower than needed to meet essential living needs. As members of the national Still Human Still Here coalition, we therefore urge the region's MPs to sign up to Early Day Motion No.1019 on Asylum Support Rates<sup>1</sup> and the Declaration<sup>2</sup> restoring permission to work.

However, we also know so much can be achieved at the level of local services. These frame our everyday lives, as local residents. How they are planned, commissioned, delivered and evaluated has a direct impact on our lives and those of our children. Many of us come from countries without routes for the local community to sit down and discuss policy and service planning with public agencies. But through the Refugee Forum we've learned how valuable 'engagement' with local services is. We've learned the value of 'grass roots' evidence about specific issues, what isn't working, and what would work better. And the importance of providing a richer, more complex understanding of who asylum seekers really are by challenging the 'single story' from which a 'culture of disbelief' stems. Our 43 active member groups are committed and motivated partners in this work.

#### Mustafa Othman

Chair of the Board of Trustees,  
Regional Refugee Forum North East

[www.refugeevoices.org.uk](http://www.refugeevoices.org.uk)



<sup>1</sup> [www.parliament.uk](http://www.parliament.uk)

<sup>2</sup> [www.38degrees.org.uk](http://www.38degrees.org.uk)

# CONTENTS

|          |   |      |
|----------|---|------|
| <b>1</b> | Introduction  | P.4  |
| <b>2</b> | Background  | P.6  |
| <b>3</b> | Context   | P.10 |
| <b>4</b> | Child Poverty, Asylum Seekers & Refugees<br>The Picture in the North East   | P.12 |
| <b>5</b> | Local Authority Approaches<br>Education<br>Worklessness<br>Early Intervention<br>Maximising Household Income<br>Health & Well-being<br>Neighbourhoods | P.18 |
| <b>6</b> | Conclusions   | P.30 |
| <b>7</b> | Recommendations   | P.34 |
| <b>8</b> | Acknowledgements  | P.36 |
| <b>9</b> | References  | P.37 |

# ONE

## 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 face in trying to escape poverty and improve their lives. The report is aimed at a North East audience but we hope that our findings – and our recommendations – will have resonance outside of the region as well as within it.

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 role of local services in tackling poverty amongst refugees and asylum seekers and the issue of poverty amongst individuals once they have been granted leave to remain has not received similar attention from researchers or policy makers. No local authorities in the North East identified poverty amongst refugees or asylum seekers as an issue that required addressing in their local child poverty strategies. This report is an attempt to draw attention to this gap in the evidence base and it aims to highlight areas where future investigation could take place.

Throughout the report, use is made of evidence that relates to ethnicity, race and migration. Whilst there is obvious overlap between some of these issues, it is important to be clear from the outset that they are not the same as each other and the experience of refugees and asylum seekers living in poverty is likely to be different from that of other migrants in many ways. Someone who has chosen to come to this country as an economic migrant or as an overseas student, for example, will have experienced very different administrative and welfare related (housing, education, health, employment) encounters than someone fleeing their country of origin and seeking asylum in the UK. Similarly, the experience of the ethnic minority communities living in established and settled communities is likely to be very different from new arrivals from countries without strong historical links to specific local areas within the UK.

The issue of ‘intersectionality’ is both helpful and important here. Many factors affect people’s experience of poverty and their ability to cope with it and/or escape it. Some of these factors, such as good quality housing, good health, strong social networks or good language skills are likely to ‘intersect’ and help ameliorate some of the effects of poverty. However, it is likely that many of the specific and additional barriers faced by refugees, when they intersect with each other, are likely to compound their experience of poverty, rather than ameliorate it.

Therefore, the report uses research relating to poverty and ethnicity and migration where similar evidence relating to asylum seekers and refugees is not readily available. The report also seeks to include the voices of refugees and asylum seekers wherever possible, agreeing with the sentiment that there has been a lot of talk about these groups, but not much talk with them.



# TWO

## 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<sup>3</sup>. During the speech, he noted that poor children were 'more likely to be from an ethnic minority family' and whilst the speech had a strong focus on social justice and how the UK had changed since the Beveridge Report of 1942, there was no other mention of 'race', ethnicity, diversity, migration or asylum, despite research showing a strong association between poverty and membership of certain minority groups<sup>4</sup>.

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'<sup>5</sup>. Local child poverty statistics, published by HMRC<sup>6</sup>, are based on the numbers of children in families whose income is below the 60% median income threshold and where these families are 'in receipt of out-of-work (means-tested) benefits, or in receipt of tax credits', excluding asylum seekers.

In July 2009, the Child Poverty Bill was introduced to Parliament and it received Royal Assent on 25th March 2010, becoming the Child Poverty Act (2010). The Act 'sets targets relating to the eradication of child poverty' but the 4 targets include reference to children living in 'qualifying households'. The definition of a 'qualifying household' is not provided

in the Act but the Secretary of State is required to ensure that the criteria is 'to have as wide an application as is reasonably practicable, having regard to the statistical surveys that are being or can reasonably be expected to be undertaken'. During the scrutiny process of the Bill, the Joint Committee on Human Rights (JCHR) was concerned about the potential for 'differential treatment' of children not in qualifying households:

*The Government accepts that there could be indirect discrimination because for some groups, such as Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children, and asylum seeking children, the likelihood of their being excluded is higher than for some other groups. The Government also accepts that the groups which have a lower chance of being captured by a survey include some groups which are already disadvantaged.*

*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.<sup>8</sup>*



<sup>3</sup> Beveridge Lecture

<sup>4</sup> For example, Platt, J.

<sup>5</sup> PSA Delivery Agreement

<sup>6</sup> HM Revenue & Customs

<sup>7</sup> Child Poverty Act

<sup>8</sup> Joint Committee on Human Rights



The JCHR suggested that Article 14 of the European Convention on Human Rights<sup>9</sup>, covering the enjoyment of rights without discrimination, applied to the legislation and went on to note that:

*...there is differential treatment of children not living in qualifying households, that differential treatment calls for justification, and the onus is on the Government to show that there are no other measurable targets for the groups currently excluded from the targets because of the way those targets are defined. In our view that onus is all the heavier because the excluded groups include some of those children who are particularly poor. We do not consider the Government to have discharged the heavy onus of justification by relying solely on the cost and impracticality of surveying children who do not live in qualifying households. We therefore conclude that it is highly likely that, as presently drafted, the Bill will give rise to a serious risk of future breaches of Article 14... because policy-makers will prioritise raising the income of children only in qualifying households, in a discriminatory way.<sup>10</sup>*

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’. Non-statutory guidance was issued in support of these local duties and local authorities were free to develop these documents as they saw fit. Asylum seekers and refugees are identified as an ‘at risk group’ in a Building Block Guides document that formed part of a Child Poverty Needs Assessment Toolkit, produced as part of the guidance. The current ‘Core Offer of Support’ from the Child Poverty Unit for local areas does not mention refugees or asylum seekers.<sup>12</sup>

A number of ‘partner authorities’ are referred to in Part 2 of the Act, including local police forces, Primary Care Trusts, Youth Offending Teams and Integrated Transport Authorities. The Immigration Law Practitioners’ Association (ILPA) was ‘discouraged’ that the UK Border Agency was not included in this list and suggested that because “by reason of its policies and operations, (it) clearly affects the socio-economic experiences of children within the meaning of ‘child poverty’”<sup>13</sup> it should be included in the list of agencies.

In April 2011, the Coalition government published the first ever UK central government child poverty strategy: ‘A New Approach to Child Poverty: Tackling the Causes of Disadvantage and Transforming Families’ Lives.<sup>14</sup> The strategy notes that ‘Children from black and minority ethnic families are almost twice as likely to live in relative poverty as children from white families’<sup>15</sup> and the barriers affecting children from these families are highlighted on a number of other pages. However, the only mention of the specific barriers or challenges faced by refugees can be found on p.18 where it is noted that ‘Language barriers or low/unrecognised qualifications can make finding work difficult for refugees’. The children of asylum seekers or unaccompanied children seeking asylum are not mentioned anywhere in the strategy.

Given the absence of refugee and asylum seeking children as an issue of concern in relation to the eradication of child poverty at a national level<sup>16</sup>, it is not surprising that local authorities and their partners, in discharging their local duties, have similarly not explicitly addressed the issue. It is, one might conclude, difficult to disagree with the ILPA submission to a JCHR enquiry into children’s rights that ‘The poverty of certain children under immigration control is not being eradicated, it is being written out of the picture’.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>9</sup> European Convention on Human Rights

<sup>10</sup> Joint Committee on Human Rights

<sup>11</sup> Child Poverty Act

<sup>12</sup> Child Poverty Unit

<sup>13</sup> Child Poverty Bill

<sup>14</sup> Department for Education

<sup>15</sup> ibid

<sup>16</sup> Pinter, I.

<sup>17</sup> Joint Committee on Human Rights

# THREE

## CONTEXT

Asylum seekers are not allowed to work whilst their claims are being determined. The vast majority must depend therefore on Section 95 support, which is a lower rate of support than for UK citizens who are also unable to work. The majority of asylum seekers have to pay for food, clothing, toiletries and other essential items on just over £5 a day (housing and utility bills are paid for separately).

The current weekly rates of support for asylum seekers are<sup>18</sup>:

- Qualifying couple (married or civil partnership): £72.52
- Lone parent, aged 18 or over: £43.94
- Single person, aged 18 or over (excluding lone parent): £36.62
- Young Person, aged 16–18 (except if half of a qualifying couple): £39.80
- Person aged under 16: £52.96

Some mothers with children are entitled to additional payments. A baby under the age of 12 months receives an extra £5 a week. Pregnant women and children of one to three years receive an extra £3 a week<sup>19</sup>. The vast majority of asylum seekers are not entitled to child benefit.

To use other benefits as a comparison, single asylum seeking adults over 25 get 52% of Income Support, a lone parent 50% and a couple 65%.<sup>20</sup> In 2009, Still Human Still Here argued that 70% of Income Support is the absolute minimum required to meet essential living needs.<sup>21</sup> Support rates are even lower for refused asylum seekers who have been found eligible for section 4 support, which is a non-cash payment redeemable only at prescribed retailers.

The treatment of asylum seekers within the UK, from both institutions and individuals has led O'Neill and Hubbard to suggest they represent a 'new underclass: the minority within a minority';

The same researchers also highlighted the role of the media in 'setting agendas' and bolstering an 'us' and 'them' divide. They highlight work carried out which, in an analysis of news coverage concerning asylum issues, identified over:

***13,000 occurrences of the word 'illegal' as opposed to 7,000 'legal', and 3,800 'bogus' as opposed to 270 'genuine', with mentions of warfare, exile, torture and conflict outweighed by attention to system abuses, loopholes and deception.***

Leitner & Ehrkamp<sup>23</sup> have argued that there should be less talk about and more talk with migrants which highlights not only a challenge for local service providers but also the importance of independent support for refugees and asylum seekers to advocate on their behalf and enable them to participate in decisions in their lives.<sup>24</sup>

***Those who are forced to live on the 'margins of the margins' while they are waiting for their cases to be processed. Cut off from the world of work, and often denied decent housing, adequate medical provision or cultural services, many drift into a state of destitution, rely on charity hand-outs or are forced into an underground economy.***<sup>22</sup>

<sup>18</sup> www.parliament.uk

<sup>19</sup> Ibid

<sup>20</sup> Children's Society

<sup>21</sup> Home Affairs Select Committee

<sup>22</sup> O'Neill, M. & Hubbard, P.

<sup>23</sup> Leitner, H. & Ehrkamp, P.

<sup>24</sup> See also Craig, G., O'Neill, M., Cole, B., Antonopoulos, G.A., Devanney, C & Adamson, S.



# FOUR CHILD POVERTY, ASYLUM SEEKERS & REFUGEES

There is a gap in the evidence base in relation to the role of local services in tackling child poverty amongst asylum seekers and refugees. There is also a wider gap in relation to the experience of refugees in relation to poverty and the barriers that individuals face once they have been granted leave to remain in the UK.<sup>25</sup>

A considerable body of evidence exists that highlights the links and intersections between poverty, race, ethnicity and migration<sup>26</sup>, well

***We believe that successive governments have failed children by delivering an asylum support system that keeps children in poverty, leads to dependency on the state and denies asylum-seeking families the resources they need to meet their needs.***<sup>30</sup>

documented concerns about the poor levels of support that asylum seekers receive<sup>27</sup>, the impact of withdrawal, in 2002, of permission to work for asylum seekers whilst awaiting a final decision on their case<sup>28</sup>, and a number of reports exploring the issue of destitution among refused asylum seekers in the UK<sup>29</sup>. In January 2013, the report of a Parliamentary Inquiry into Asylum Support for Children and Young People specifically raised the issue of child poverty amongst asylum seekers. The Executive Summary of the report notes:

Policies intended to 'deter' people from seeking asylum in the UK and those that create destitution amongst refused asylum-seekers have also come under close scrutiny from a range of individuals and organisations.<sup>31</sup> In 2007, the JCHR stated:

***We have been persuaded by the evidence that the government has indeed been practicing a deliberate policy of destitution of this highly vulnerable group. We believe that all deliberate use of inhumane treatment is unacceptable.***<sup>32</sup>

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation operates a large programme of research exploring the links between poverty and ethnicity.<sup>33</sup> Much of this work stresses the 'difference within diversity' amongst ethnic minority groups as well as the issue of 'intersectionality' – how different aspects of people's lives interact with each other to either alleviate or compound disadvantage. Similarly, the Child Poverty Action Group has produced a number of resources supporting a greater understanding of the issue of migration in relation to poverty.<sup>34</sup>

However, as noted earlier, there is less research which has explored the experiences of poverty amongst families once they have been granted leave to remain and much research in this area has focused on national immigration policy. A report by researchers at Glasgow Caledonian University in 2010 suggests that, in comparison with asylum-seekers, 'the experiences of those who have leave to remain have received considerably less attention'.

They go on to say:

***The 'invisibility' of refugees in administrative data collection systems arises in part because attainment of refugee status brings with it the status of 'ordinary resident'. This means that individuals are not obliged to declare their refugee status.***<sup>35</sup>

In 2010, the Home Office published findings from the Survey of New Refugees in the UK<sup>36</sup> which highlights a number of employment, housing and health-related issues, amongst others, which could combine to keep refugees in or at risk of poverty.



<sup>25</sup> Lindsay, K., Gillespie, M. & Dobbie, L.

<sup>26</sup> For example, O'Neill, M.

<sup>27</sup> For example, 'I don't feel human'

<sup>28</sup> 'Still Human Still Here'

<sup>29</sup> For example, JRCT (2007) Commissioners Report

<sup>30</sup> Children's Society

<sup>31</sup> For example, 'Still Human Still Here'

<sup>32</sup> Joint Committee on Human Rights

<sup>33</sup> JRF

<sup>34</sup> CPAG

<sup>35</sup> Lindsay, K., Gillespie, M. & Dobbie, L.

<sup>36</sup> Cebulla, A., DanieL, M. & Zurawan, A.

## THE PICTURE IN THE NORTH EAST

Recent research has helped to build an understanding of the region's ethnic minority populations and communities and, in some cases, their experiences of poverty. Considerable work has also been carried out by organisations supporting, working with and giving voice to refugees and asylum seekers, often on issues which are closely linked with poverty. However, there is, it would appear, little available research highlighting the role of local services in tackling child poverty experienced by ethnic minority communities, migrants and/or, more specifically, refugees and asylum seekers.

The latest ONS estimates suggests that the 'non-white' population of the North East stands at 5.3%<sup>37</sup>, although this masks great variation both within and between different local authority areas. Professor Gary Craig, of Durham University, has noted that the largest rise is amongst Black Africans where the numbers have nearly tripled since 2001 and suggests that this likely to be the result of ten out of the twelve local authorities in the region having hosted dispersal areas for asylum seekers from 2000.<sup>38</sup> Since the policy of dispersing those awaiting determination of their asylum application began nearly 15 years ago, the North East has provided accommodation for between 5,000 and 2,000 asylum seekers at any one time. No records are kept of people once they are granted leave to remain nor how many have stayed resident

in the region. However it is commonly accepted that this number amounts to several thousand, with 15,000 having been used as a best estimate. The latest regional statistics from the UK Border Agency, at 31st March 2013, showed a total of 904 asylum cases were accommodated in the region supported under Section 95, 474 of which were families. Of the 2,064 people represented by these cases, 887 were aged under 18 years of age. Of the 233 cases supported under section 4, 38 were families, with 53 children aged under 18.<sup>39</sup>

A report by the Social Policy Research Unit at the University of York in 2009<sup>40</sup> highlighted that the risk of poverty in the North East was considerably higher for all non-White classifications (with the exception of 'mixed') than it was for the White population, although this was based on a very small number of cases using 2006/07 HBAI data. Since the publication of this report, there has not been any other research produced which highlights the prevalence of poverty amongst the region's ethnic minority populations. Local authority Child Poverty Needs Assessments did not highlight ethnic minority groups or migrants, refugees or asylum seekers in any great detail and none of the Child Poverty Strategies produced to date have included actions or priorities specifically relating to any of these groups. A report by the North East Child Poverty Commission exploring local authority approaches to tackling child poverty in the North East highlighted this omission but then did not make any suggestions or recommendations to address the issue.<sup>41</sup>

However, a number of research and policy related projects involving refugees and asylum seekers – and members of ethnic minority communities more widely – have taken place in the North East and provide us with some understanding of many of the specific issues faced by individuals and families within different communities.

The Regional Refugee Forum has developed and participated in a number of projects exploring and articulating the lives of asylum seekers and refugees in the region. Their projects have included: a 'Let Us Work' campaign to allow asylum seekers to work<sup>42</sup>; a 'Skilled' project<sup>43</sup> which raises awareness of the specific barriers refugees face in transferring the skills, qualifications and experience they bring with them and the unrealised value this could have for the region; a 'Women's Lives, well-being and community project in conjunction with Durham University<sup>44</sup> and a Youth Voice project campaigning for access to higher education for asylum seekers leaving school or college<sup>45</sup>. Some of the findings from these projects, which were developed with and by refugees and asylum seekers, will be explored in more detail in Section 6.

Research by Oxfam, in association with The Angelou Centre in Newcastle, has explored the 'financial lives of ethnic minority mothers in Tyne and Wear'<sup>46</sup> and found that 'levels of material deprivation in the study households were generally high, especially for mothers'. This 'had both physical and psychological consequences'

with many reporting anxiety and depression. Other findings of this research included many of the women having limited access to their household income and the need to send money to extended family, either abroad or at home. A number of barriers to paid work were highlighted such as a perceived lack of culturally sensitive childcare and the lack of available jobs.

Building on and developing this work, the Black and Minority Ethnic Community Organisations Network (BECON) set out to 'understand how local authorities in the region address issues of child and maternal poverty in BME communities'. A report based on this work highlighted a 'paucity of data on BME communities' in relation to local authorities' work on child poverty and recommended support that '*will enable the BME voluntary and community organisations to be able to participate both in the shaping of public services and their delivery*'.<sup>47</sup>

More recent work by academics and researchers from across the region exploring issues around 'race', crime and justice in the North East found that, '*the key issue identified by BME people is the continuing experience of racism, at individual and institutional levels, within public and private sectors. The report highlighted how it is 'absolutely essential that... the dimension of ethnicity is carefully examined by all policy actors in the development of new policies and in shaping future practice in all areas of welfare*'.

<sup>37</sup> Craig, G., O'Neill, M., Cole, B., Antonopoulos, G.A., Devanney, C & Adamson, S

<sup>38</sup> Ibid

<sup>39</sup> UKBA

<sup>40</sup> Bradshaw, J.

<sup>41</sup> Crossley, S.

<sup>42</sup> Regional Refugee Forum North East

<sup>43</sup> Ibid

<sup>44</sup> O'Neill, M. & Mansaray, S.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid

<sup>46</sup> Warburton-Brown, C.

<sup>47</sup> Singh, D.



The authors also note that:

*It is important to develop policy and practice which recognises the increasing diversity of minorities and the differing histories and needs of, for example, long-standing settled minorities, migrant workers and refugees and those seeking asylum. For some of these groups... some work has been done; for others, a research and policy agenda has hardly begun to be explored.<sup>48</sup>*

The UK Border Agency currently contracts with a sole provider of supported accommodation for asylum seekers in the region. A 'One Stop Service' is also centrally funded and delivers independent advice and referral whilst cases are being determined. Both contracts have been subject to cuts along with other public services. In 2011 government ended funding for the national Refugee Integration & Employment Service, leading the CEO of the Refugee Council to remark it "means for the first time in living memory there will be no UK government statutory funding to support refugees to integrated in the UK". Local Authority 'move on' teams were disbanded following the end of the supported accommodation contract with the UK Border Agency in 2011.

<sup>48</sup> Craig, G., O'Neill, M., Cole, B., Antonopoulos, G.A., Devanney, C & Adamson, S

# 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 (CPNAs) and Child Poverty Strategies (CPSs) in different ways across different authorities, often with different departments within councils taking the lead. Analysis of the priorities for action that Local Authorities in the North East identified in the CPSs suggests that they fall into six broad categories:

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

The 'Local authorities, local duties and local action' report produced by the North East Child Poverty Commission<sup>49</sup> highlighted that, in many of these areas, there was a lack of evidence to support the dominant media and political focus on the perceived behavioural shortcomings of individuals in, or at risk of, poverty. A presentation at the launch of the report used a quote from Peter Townsend to suggest alternative forms of action:

*All too easily the social scientist can be the unwitting servant of contemporary social values, and in the study of poverty, this can have disastrous practical consequences. He may side with the dominant or majority view of the poor. If, by contrast, he feels obliged or is encouraged from the start to make a formal distinction between scientific and conventional perspectives, he is more likely to enlarge knowledge by bringing to light information which has been neglected and create more elbow room for alternative forms of action<sup>50</sup>*

There has been little evidence historically or in the present that poverty is caused by the people experiencing it. At the same time, there is a substantial volume of robust social scientific research stretching back decades which highlights the structural causes of much of the poverty and inequality that exists in our society today.

Peter Townsend argued that there was an 'over-confident division of the population into 'we the people' and 'they the poor'<sup>51</sup> in attempts to tackle poverty and this approach has a particularly negative impact on refugees and asylum seekers. Headlines about 'bogus' asylum seekers coupled with negative images of migrants more generally demonstrate that refugees and asylum seekers are perceived as being 'different' or 'othered'<sup>52</sup> on grounds other than, as well as, economic status.

The focus of this report now turns to the relevance – or otherwise – of local authority approaches to tackling poverty amongst refugees and asylum seekers and what the research evidence can tell us about refugees' experience of local welfare services.

## EDUCATION

Improving educational attainment and/or 'raising aspirations' is often viewed as a route out of poverty and most local authorities highlight work to tackle educational disadvantage in their child poverty-related work. However, research suggests that a focus on aspiration is not necessary or appropriate for many families on low incomes, including refugees and asylum seekers.

The Regional Refugee Forum's Youth Voice group has highlighted the aspiration of young asylum seekers themselves to enter higher education and graduate related employment;

*I wanted to tailor my degree choice towards a subject that would be vocational, and lead to a job. I felt a real pressure to do a subject that had immediate work application. I also looked at subjects where there was a demand for skills, where there was evidence of a shortage of skilled workers in the UK, such as teaching.*



<sup>49</sup> Crossley, S.

<sup>50</sup> Townsend, P.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid

<sup>52</sup> Lister, R.

However, as a result of their status, they cannot take up university places offered to them. Similarly, they are also not allowed to work. The group state,

***Whilst our friends go off to university and move forwards with their lives, we find ourselves left waiting, with very limited opportunities to spending our time productively. We cannot go to university, nor are we allowed to work. We have seen how young people have grown more disillusioned, more withdrawn, more angry, then more depressed, until they give up aspiring altogether. The situation is also devastating for those young asylum seekers who left school and started university in their country of origin, but the need to seek sanctuary tore them away.***<sup>53</sup>

Therefore, focusing on ‘realising’ as opposed to ‘raising’ aspirations is more appropriate. Universities have discretionary powers to offer tuition fee concessions, such as home student rates, for asylum seekers applying for admission, and they are also able to provide bursary schemes at their own expense.

Young asylum seekers and refugees’ education can also often be affected by poor housing, frequent house moves (often at short notice), bullying, SEN provision<sup>54</sup> and their experience at school cannot be helped by the lack of resources available to their parents (resulting in missed extra-curricular activities for example). Parents, who may have little orientation in the UK’s education system themselves, are often unable to provide parental guidance others might expect. Therefore, accurate, well-informed and non-judgemental guidance and careers advice whilst at school is also a significant factor in opening up pathways out of poverty for

young asylum seekers and refugees, highlighting the important role of advisors and professionals working with young people.

The Regional Refugee Forum has noted that whilst there is a very high motivation amongst adult asylum seekers to attend Further Education colleges to obtain UK-recognised qualifications, their subsequent experience has been that these did not in fact lead to employment or provide routes for realising their entrepreneurial ambitions. Those who are genuinely motivated to use Adult Learning & Skills as a route to employment often see little or no practical results.<sup>55</sup> An independent review of vocational education by Professor Alison Wolf supports these findings and suggests that the ‘staple offer for between a quarter and a third of the post-16 cohort is a diet of low-level vocational qualifications, most of which have little to no labour market value’.<sup>56</sup>

## WORKLESSNESS

The Coalition government child poverty strategy ‘has at its foundation the belief that work, not welfare, is the best route out of poverty for those who are able to work’.<sup>57</sup> However, denied permission to support themselves through work, the vast majority of asylum-seekers have no other option but ‘dependency’ on the state or to work illegally in order to avoid destitution.

The Government justified its withdrawal, in 2002, of the concession that allowed asylum-seekers to work after they had been waiting six months for a decision on the basis that most decisions were made in less than six months.<sup>58</sup>

However, in 2012 there was a backlog of 28,500 asylum applications and ‘a growing backlog of cases pending an initial decision for more than 6 months’ amongst the new asylum cases. Only 63% of asylum cases are concluded within one year<sup>59</sup> and asylum seekers spend an average of nearly 18 months on Section 95 support.<sup>60</sup>

In 2008 the Refugee Council and TUC launched the national ‘Let Us Work’ campaign which made both an economic and human rights case to restore permission to work. The Regional Refugee Forum led the campaign actions in the North East region, in alliance with the Churches’ Regional Commission and Northern TUC. Testimonies<sup>61</sup> collected from its membership across the region highlight both a strong work ethic, a finding echoed elsewhere in the UK, and the impact this policy has on people;

***Not being able to work is degrading to me... Its depressing because my background is feeding my own family... I have a big duty of care that has been stripped away. And not being able to do that for myself, I feel a failure in life. I feel very much a failure in life.***<sup>62</sup>

***I’ve been living here for 6, almost 7 years, and I am not permitted to work. This policy has a huge negative impact, on both myself and my family. It has caused us severe depression. At the moment when my children ask me to provide for them like any other citizen around, I am not able to do what my children ask. As a result, my children feel they are inferior. I am not allowed to work and I sit around. This is affecting all of us.***<sup>63</sup>

<sup>53</sup> Regional Refugee Forum North East

<sup>54</sup> Rutter, J.

<sup>55</sup> Regional Refugee Forum North East

<sup>56</sup> Department of Education

<sup>57</sup> Department of Education [www.refugeecouncil.org.uk](http://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk)

<sup>58</sup> House of Commons Home Affairs Committee

<sup>60</sup> House of Lords

<sup>61</sup> Regional Refugee Forum North East

<sup>62</sup> Ibid

<sup>63</sup> Ibid



Research across the UK has evidenced the long term impact this policy has had on the employment prospects of those who eventually are granted leave to remain and so have permission to work. Still, refugees face specific and multiple barriers to employment: some are a legacy of the extended period of

enforced dependency and inactivity, such as the outdatedness of skills and lack of UK work references; others relate to a lack of recognition, or downgrading, of some overseas qualifications, a lack of understanding of UK recruitment processes and helper agency and employer attitudes;

*I used to work in Iran as an accountant for 7 years. I've been in the UK for nearly 7 years, and I'm allowed to work here. But I haven't been able to work as an accountant in the UK as they require UK work experience... Nobody accepted me here as an accountant with my experience and all the certificates I have brought from my country.*

*When I had to get out of my country I left behind many things, including a good career managing a major retail store. I waited 7 years before I was finally granted status and was allowed at last to work to support myself and family. But the closest I came to using my skills and experience was a backroom job unpacking and hanging clothes.*

*We feel that when we go to the JCP [JobCentre Plus], if we are a refugee, they direct us into factory work. But if you are British, they send that person to Debenhams.<sup>64</sup>*

The Survey of New Refugees in the UK (SNR) suggested that around 49% of refugees were employed 21 months after a leave to remain was received. This compares with a UK average of around 80% at the same time.<sup>65</sup> Further analysis of the SNR for the Nuffield Foundation<sup>66</sup> suggested, that, in terms of employment:

- Women fared worse than men regardless of their pre-migration employment or education profile.
- Refugees were over-qualified for work undertaken in the UK, a situation that barely changed over the SNR period.
- Refugees with no social networks were the least likely to be employed.

The Refugee Forums' Skilled project and other research has also shown that refugees are more likely to find employment in temporary, part-time, low skilled and low wage jobs – exactly the type of job which is unlikely to offer a sustainable route out of poverty. The Refugee Forum's membership have highlighted that many people fall into destitution after signing onto agencies offering no permanent or full time employment, no employment contract and no commitment of hours, thinking they have to accept any offer of work.

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'*.<sup>67</sup>

Since 2007, under the New Asylum Model, refugees have no longer been granted indefinite leave to remain, but a period of 5 years, after which it is reviewed. Other forms of leave to remain can be shorter still. Employers may, therefore, be reticent to employ and invest in someone who may be forced to leave the country within a couple of years. A report by the Institute for Employment Studies exploring the experience of organisations employing refugees also included concerns around the cost and time needed to address documentation issues, language barriers and negative media images of refugees. Five out of the ten case studies included in the report wished to remain anonymous, with the main reason being 'fear of receiving hostile media coverage'.<sup>68</sup> However, this report also stated that 'these employers can point to the benefits of recruiting refugees' and it contained a number of recommendations that might encourage other organisations to adopt a similar approach.

In 2008, the Government itself recognised the existence of specific and additional barriers faced by refugees seeking employment or self-employment through its funding of a specialist national case work support service for new status refugees, the Refugee Integration and Employment service. However, funding for this service was cut completely in 2011.

<sup>64</sup> Regional Refugee Forum North East

<sup>65</sup> Cebulla, A., Daniel, M. & Zurawan, A.

<sup>66</sup> Cheung, S.Y. & Phillimore, J.

<sup>67</sup> Heath and Cheung

<sup>68</sup> Hurstfield, J., Pearson, R., Hooker, H., Richie, H. & Sinclair, A.

## EARLY INTERVENTION

There is a strong emphasis on ‘early intervention’ within the governments child poverty strategy with a chapter devoted to ‘supporting family life and children’s life chances’ which argues that ‘what is needed is a much wider culture change towards recognising the importance of parenting’.<sup>69</sup> Crossley & Shildrick have argued that, in adopting this approach, the strategy ‘begins to fall very quickly into the popular, but completely erroneous, trap of equating child poverty with poor and irresponsible parenting’.<sup>70</sup>

Similarly some local authority strategies linked early intervention with child protection issues and the concept of ‘families at risk’.

The Regional Refugee Forum has argued that a lack of understanding about the experiences and entitlements of asylum seekers and refugees, coupled with cultural assumptions in health care, can have particularly traumatic implications for parents and children. A presentation to a regional Migrant Health Conference<sup>71</sup> powerfully highlighted the ‘personal journey’ of a single mother seeking asylum for herself and her three children:

*The level of tension and anxiety I live with on a daily basis is far in excess of an average white British single mother. I survive on food tokens and vouchers, am not allowed to find work, can’t afford to take the kids to Sure Start care, can only access 2.5 hours at a nursery, and so cannot attend classes in the college, can’t have a break from the kids or feel I want to achieve something in life. I am trapped inside, with my thoughts and fears, and the children are screaming in the background. I am stressed all day. Signs and symptoms of post-traumatic stress set in, I can’t sleep, my physical and mental health deteriorates, and therefore I become withdrawn. I find it hard to relate to health visitors who do not understand my culture or my experience and what I am currently going through.*

*The children absorb the sense of my disempowerment and vulnerability, where I am trapped by the asylum system –controlled and limited by a system that determines what I can and cannot do, which leaves me in extreme poverty. And at that time I realise what power the health workers have over us. They can undermine our role as the parent. How can we trust and put our faith in those agencies that have done this to my children, my community and my sisters.*

*How can we admit to health services our health needs, our need for support, when it might mean our children are taken away from us and that we are open to judgement? So we learn to avoid all contact with agencies as much as possible. So people do not seek help for their health needs. They prefer to suffer in silence. To be left alone in a degree of safety.*

The Regional Refugee Forum, concerned about fears of ‘social services’ amongst members and reports of feelings of negative assumptions towards refugees and asylum seekers amongst health and social work staff, have argued for increased understanding of the complex needs and issues faced by refugees and asylum seekers and improvements in ‘cultural competency’ from these agencies. Similar concerns have been echoed by researchers from the region’s universities<sup>72</sup> and at a national level, albeit in response to concerns amongst wider BME communities.<sup>73</sup>



## MAXIMISING HOUSEHOLD INCOME

A number of local authorities in the North East included priorities around financial inclusion and/or maximising household income in the child poverty documents, and the government strategy highlights the need to ‘support money management’. However, the support rates for asylum seekers on Section 95 fall well below the government definition of poverty and even further below the Minimum Income Standard devised by JRF and researchers at Loughborough University. There is little opportunity to ‘maximise household income’ for asylum seekers. Those receiving Section 4 support are not even given cash and have to rely on the stigmatising practice of using a plastic pre-payment card or vouchers to purchase ‘essential items’, which are decided by the government, at a limited range of shops, which do not include markets and discount stores.

However, problems more in keeping with the wider population occur at the ‘Move on’ stage when applicants are finally granted leave to remain. At this stage, they have only 28 days to move out of their accommodation and sign on to mainstream housing and benefits provision. This process often breaks down, or some front line staff are not aware of procedures to process claims necessary to access Job Seeker’s Allowance and Housing benefits. Families have ended up in emergency hostels or Bed & Breakfast, with interruptions to schooling. When living in supported accommodation, utilities are handled by the housing provider. After living like this, people often have no experience of energy saving practices or of the complicated UK fuel and energy system. These issues, and the desire to have a warm home, often combine to send people quickly into debt with utilities companies.<sup>74</sup>

<sup>69</sup> Department for Education

<sup>70</sup> Crossley, S. & Shildrick, T.

<sup>71</sup> Regional Refugee Forum North East

<sup>72</sup> Craig, G., O’Neill, M., Cole, B., Antonopoulos, G.A., Devanney, C. & Adamson, S

<sup>73</sup> Social Exclusion Task Force

<sup>74</sup> Lindsay, K., Gillespie, M. & Dobbie, L.

Even when refugees find work, many of them will not receive an income sufficient to lift them out of poverty. The complex system of tax credits and 'tapers' and new wide-ranging welfare reforms (including the localisation of Council Tax Support and elements of the Social Fund) mean that people with lots of experience of the UK benefits system often struggle to understand it and claim what they are fully entitled to. There is no evidence to suggest that refugees are any better at claiming benefits than the wider population, and plenty of reasons which suggest take-up rates may not be as high as other groups.

Within the Refugee Forum's membership there is also concern around high levels of debt and incidence of bankruptcy amongst refugees. Access to mainstream financial services is often hampered by difficulties providing the right types of documentation required by banks. Delays and errors in processing benefits claims have meant that many people have turned to doorstep lenders to make ends meet over a short period of time, with 'access to credit being just as easy as fast food'. The 'Race, Crime & Justice' report carried out in the North East in 2012 also found 'Discriminatory lending and mortgage practices amongst banks and building societies for those wishing to buy houses or start up businesses'.<sup>75</sup>

Other issues affecting refugees' ability to maximise their income often include the lack of extended family networks to help with informal childcare arrangements, pressure to 'fit in' with the consumerist UK culture, and the responsibility

for sending remittances to support family members back in their countries of origin, with sometimes as much as £100 per month being sent to families whilst people survived in the UK with support from friends.<sup>76</sup>

## HEALTH & WELLBEING

The links between poverty and ill-health are well-known, although there is relatively little emphasis on health in the governments' child poverty strategy. However, local authority strategies in the North East included a number of priorities designed to 'promote healthy living' and 'encourage healthy choices and behaviours'.

Many member organisations of the Regional Refugee Forum are developing, or would like to develop, projects to promote health and wellbeing as a result of the particular issues facing their communities. There is concern about forced inactivity and exposure to foods with much higher levels of sugar and salt than those in their countries of origin. Meanwhile fast food is seen as tempting but understanding of its nutritional value is low. Work carried out in the region by Children North East has shown that it is often cheaper to buy a pizza than it is to buy strawberries.<sup>77</sup> Zoe Williams has argued that 'crap food is an economic, not a moral choice'<sup>78</sup> and communal cooking facilities and utensils and concern about costs of energy 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. There are concerns amongst refugee groups that the incidence of obesity and diabetes is rising amongst their communities.

A report produced for Newcastle PCT in 2002<sup>79</sup> suggested that 45% of refugees and asylum seekers identified understanding the health system as the main barrier to accessing health services and 60% did not know ways of accessing NHS services beyond a GP. 78% of respondents stated that they had immediate health needs on arrival, covering a range of physical and psychological issues. 59% said that they had more problems looking after their own health here than in countries of origin, citing diet,

problem in recognising medicines, understanding pharmacist's directions for taking a medicine, and the cost of non-prescribed medicines as the most significant factors.

The recent report by Maternity Action and the Refugee Council on the dispersal of pregnant women asylum seekers 'shows very clearly that there are groups of women who are receiving care that is way below even minimum expected standards', and highlights the serious implications this has for the child's healthy development and life chances.<sup>80</sup>

The quality and safety of housing also has an impact on peoples' health and well-being. The Report on the Parliamentary Inquiry into Asylum Support for Children and Young people, published in January 2013, states:

***For most people the home environment represents the secure foundation of their lives. For children, home remains the primary source of emotional support, material security and secure social relationships. However, for children on asylum support, home life represents a number of challenges. We heard how families are living in poorly maintained, overcrowded accommodation which can be damp, dirty, cold and unsafe; infested with mice, cockroaches and other pests, rotting floorboards and locked windows. The 'decency standards' applied in the past to local council provision no longer apply, and 'the Statement of Requirements... places little obligation on providers to ensure high quality and appropriate accommodation.' Asylum seeking families do not have any choice about where they live. Through written and oral testimony, we repeatedly heard how unsafe families felt in very deprived areas where drug and alcohol misuse was prevalent.***<sup>81</sup>

<sup>75</sup> Craig, G., O'Neill, M., Cole, B., Antonopoulos, G.A., Devanney, C. & Adamson, S

<sup>76</sup> Lindsay, K., Gillespie, M. & Dobbie, L.

<sup>77</sup> Children North East

<sup>78</sup> Williams, Z.

<sup>79</sup> Regional Refugee Forum

<sup>80</sup> Refugee Council

<sup>81</sup> Children's Society

## NEIGHBOURHOODS

Several local authority child poverty strategies highlighted the importance of neighbourhoods where children were safe and where they could thrive, with access to appropriate housing, services and facilities, recognising the important role that these can play in mitigating the effects of poverty and disadvantage.

The importance of a safe and secure environment is especially significant for refugees and asylum-seekers, many of whom will not have enjoyed safety in their home in their country of origin. As a direct

result of the dispersal policy begun in 2000, the asylum and refugee community is concentrated in the region's wards of highest deprivation.

There is a wide range of community integration work going on in neighbourhoods across the North East, led both by host community and refugee groups themselves. There are also some excellent examples of committed and constructive engagement by local policing teams with asylum seekers and refugees resident in their area. However, the experience of hate crime is widespread amongst the Regional Refugee Forum's membership;

***We know that... local communities were not prepared for our arrival. We know that many of them face disadvantages themselves and are angry. And we know the negative picture the national media presents about asylum seekers as 'bogus' and 'scroungers'. We see how asylum seekers become the target of hate and we're easily identified by our skin colour and the painted red doors of the houses we're accommodated in.***<sup>82</sup>

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. Findings in the 2012 report, Race, Crime & Justice

in the North East Region,<sup>83</sup> produced by Durham University in collaboration with the Regional Refugee Forum, showed a significant under-reporting of race hate crime across the BME community in the region with the consequent risk that it is de-prioritised in policy making;

***Until minorities feel their issues are treated sensitively, respectfully and seriously, we are faced with a circular problem: a lack of respect by minorities for the police and aspects of the Criminal Justice system (which also reflects, in some cases, their experience before coming to the UK) will mean that minorities remain reluctant to report racist incidents to the police, and under-reporting will lead to a continuing downgrading of the seriousness of the issue.***



As local residents, asylum seekers and refugees also want to see improvements to the fabric of their neighbourhood. Those granted leave to remain are required to leave supported accommodation within 28 days. A report for JRF in 2005 highlighted this 'point of decision' as 'the critical stage at which housing and support options need to be available and the different local

agencies to be in effective liaison with each other'.<sup>84</sup>

Within the region there are several examples of the Regional Refugee Forum's member organisations getting directly involved in and even initiating local regeneration initiatives and neighbourhood improvement schemes. One example is the work of the Stockton African Caribbean Association on Stockton's Victoria estate.<sup>85</sup>

<sup>82</sup> Craig, G., O'Neill, M., Cole, B., Antonopoulos, G.A., Devanney, C. & Adamson, S  
<sup>83</sup> Regional Refugee Forum  
<sup>84</sup> Perry, J.  
<sup>85</sup> See [www.gazettelive.co.uk](http://www.gazettelive.co.uk) for example

# SIX CONCLUSIONS

The role of local authorities in tackling child poverty is vital. As Winifred Holtby wrote in 1935;

***Local government (is) in essence the first line of defence thrown up by the community against our common enemies – poverty, sickness, ignorance, isolation, mental derangement and social maladjustment***

There is still a role – and a legal duty – for local authorities and their partners to fulfil in ameliorating the impact of poverty. However, the North East Child Poverty Commission report ‘Local authorities, local duties and local action’ suggested that the proposed focus of some local authority priorities in attempting to change individual behaviour as a way of tackling poverty was largely unsupported by research evidence. There are many structural and institutional barriers faced by people attempting to improve their lives and get on in the world, and refugees face specific and additional barriers arising from the circumstances which forced them to seek asylum, whilst waiting for a decision, and once they receive leave to remain.

There is a lack of information about the role of local services in tackling poverty amongst refugees and asylum seekers in the UK, although there is a growing body of evidence about the effects of the asylum process and the destitution it often leads to for those refused asylum. There is a need to better understand how refugees cope and manage at the ‘point of decision’, how changes take place over time and what can help refugees to settle in communities, find work and begin to build new lives for themselves and their families.

Notwithstanding this lack of information, we know that local services and relationships formed with local people and agencies will be very important at all stages of their integration. Refugee Forum members believe that ‘mainstream services should be inclusive and accessible’. When their views were sought on a proposed ‘Transient People Health Centre’ there was a positive response to specialist provision, but deep concerns about separate provision.<sup>86</sup> Reliance on addressing specific barriers through separate, specialist service provision is dependent on additional streams of funding. It can also mean that universal or mainstream services continue to lack competence to include refugees in their provision. In the context of austerity it is even more vital that mainstream services have the reach, understanding and competencies to deliver effective support and services to all local residents.

Refugees and asylum seekers are very much part of some of the most deprived neighbourhoods and communities in the region. Engaging with them to hear their voice on the specific issues they face and what works best in overcoming them is an important consideration for local authorities and local services.

The Race, Crime & Justice report<sup>87</sup> notes;

***This is not in fact particularly difficult but it does require both the political will, broadly defined (i.e. a commitment to hearing the voice of the user), and the commitment of some, albeit limited, resources to ensure it is done effectively. The benefits of doing so are not only that the moral case for regarding all citizen residents (and those aspiring to be so) in this country as of equal worth is acknowledged, but that needs can be effectively assessed and met, thus avoiding the waste of resources which has characterised the delivery of welfare for so long in this country, by the inappropriate understanding of how needs can and should be met.***

Through their collective action over the past decade, members of the Regional Refugee Forum have had the opportunity to experience and understand the value of engagement and co-production in the UK as processes where ‘grass-roots’ evidence and authentic voiced experience can inform planning. The Equality & Human Rights Commission promotes engagement as a key tool for public bodies to employ in delivering their Public Sector Equality Duty.

***Evidence shows that those who are the target beneficiaries of a policy must be a part of the process through which they receive those benefits in order for that policy to be effective. It is, therefore, a recommendation of this Network that Good Practice lies in Process itself... Enabling and empowering refugees to be an integral part of the process of their own integration promotes and encourages active citizenship as opposed to dependency and marginalization.***<sup>88</sup>

This approach to involving service users in decision-making is entirely in keeping with wider discussions around rights-based and/or asset-based approaches to tackling poverty. It has been

The Regional Refugee Forum was born from the findings and recommendations of a trans-national project for the European Commission in 2000. The report, ‘Hearing the voices of refugees in policy and practice in the European Union’, highlights the links between voiced experience and effective policy and practice, and between engagement and empowerment;

suggested that a ‘rights framework can increase societal understanding of poverty and serve to include, within policy making, the voices of those who endure poverty’.<sup>89</sup>

<sup>86</sup> North of England Refugee Service

<sup>87</sup> Craig, G., O’Neill, M., Cole, B., Antonopoulos, G.A., Devanney, C. & Adamson, S

<sup>88</sup> North of England Refugee Service

<sup>89</sup> Minujin, A. & Nandy, S.

Adopting a rights-based approach to tackling poverty could be accompanied by an explicit 'culture of belief' in the development of policy and service delivery for not just refugees and asylum seekers, but all people living in poverty. The perception of 'disrespectful services' is not unique to refugees and/or asylum seekers and other

people experiencing poverty have experienced what Richard Titmuss called 'poor services for poor people... the product of a society which saw welfare as a public burden'.<sup>90</sup> In a report exploring the evidence on the best ways to promote 'Capability and Resilience',<sup>91</sup> Professor Mel Bartley of University College London highlighted that:

***Time and again, our research revealed that those welfare professionals who listened, who were not judgemental, gave their clients time, who were prepared to advocate for their clients and seek solutions which were appropriate to their needs, were highly valued and made a positive difference to their lives.***

In a section called 'Resilience-enhancing services', the role of welfare professionals is discussed, bringing to mind the idea of front line workers – or 'street level bureaucrats' – as the ultimate policy-makers:

***Too often the way services are provided is patronising and disrespectful of people's lives and experiences. This is most often felt as 'not being listened to' and being on the receiving end of highly prejudicial judgements. Hence, the capabilities of the poor and the disadvantaged are often overlooked and the approach is highly problem-focused and negative.***



<sup>90</sup> Abel-Smith, A. & Titmuss, K.

<sup>91</sup> Bartley, M.

# SEVEN

## 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.

# EIGHT

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## PHOTOGRAPHY

All of the photographs presented in the report have been taken by refugees and asylum seekers in the North East.

Photographs on the cover and pages 5, 12, 17, 19, 22, 25, 29 & 33 were taken by children as part of a photography project run by Children North East.<sup>92</sup>

Photographs on pages 6, 8 & 11 were taken as part of a project involving Durham University, Regional Refugee Forum North East and Purple Rose Stockton.<sup>93</sup>

# NINE

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NORTH EAST



**CHILD  
POVERTY  
COMMISSION**

