

MIGRANT VOICES ON BARRIERS TO SETTLEMENT IN BIRMINGHAM AND THE BLACK COUNTRY

A **MIGRATION POLICY AND PRACTICE** ANNUAL ASSESSMENT





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OVERVIEW

Last year, our assessment characterised the current state of the migration support sector across Birmingham and the Black Country as one of challenge. Although this persists, and in many ways has increased, another descriptor has emerged over the past twelve months – that of uncertainty. This is not just for organisations working with migrants, who are having to contend with providing services in an increasingly challenging financial environment, but most crucially for those actually seeking to settle and build new lives in the region.

The challenges faced by migrants themselves have increased since our last assessment and a perilous situation for many has been exacerbated by prolonged uncertainty, often as a direct impact of government policies around immigration. Systemic discrimination continues to hamper significant numbers of migrants in achieving successful settlement and integration, through being unable to access suitable training and employment opportunities. Many, regardless of status or settlement route, still face significant issues around basic needs such as healthcare, adequate housing and other fundamental rights.

Legislative changes, particularly those enshrined in the Nationalities and Borders Act, have increased the barriers faced by those fleeing persecution. The challenges for many, particularly caused by the effective 'two-tier' approach to asylum claims depending on route of entry, mean that the process of settlement and integration has become even more fraught and precarious.

Integration can only occur successfully through a partnership between organisations working with migrants, the wider voluntary sector, local authorities and communities as a whole. Whilst the support for settlement initiatives, integration and public commitments from local elected officials to creating communities of welcome are to be encouraged, further work is required to ensure that the culture and contributions of all communities are recognised. A failure to do so will ensure a continued lack of trust and confidence in public institutions from some migrant groups.

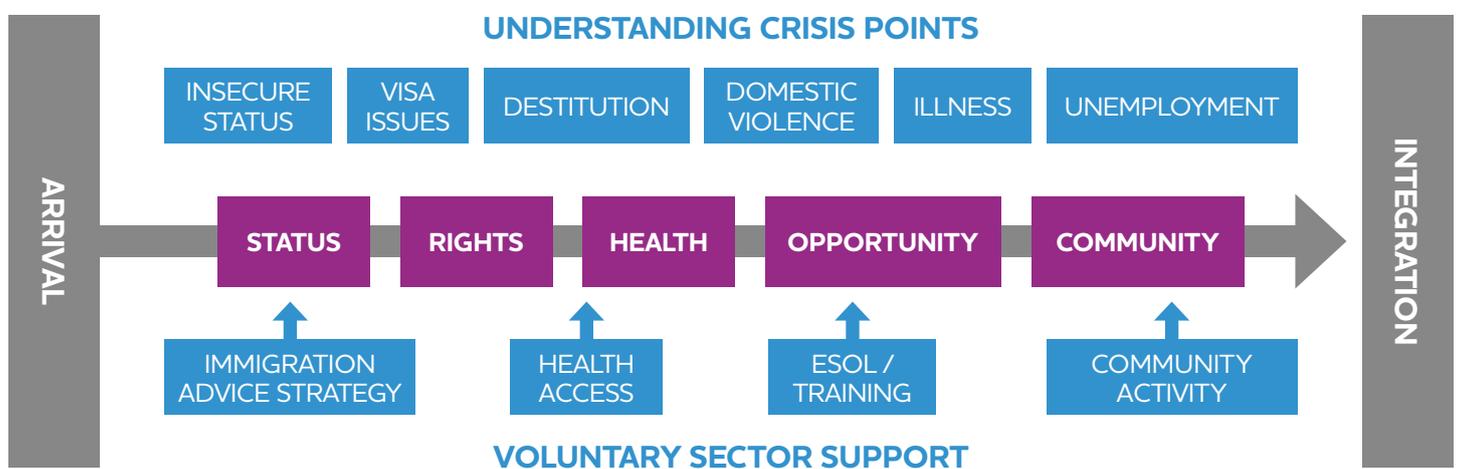
A key challenge for all of those working with migrants is to recognise that those seeking to settle in the region are a diverse group, comprised of many ethnicities and backgrounds. All are at different stages in their journey and it is important for all those in the sector, as well as partners, to understand the breadth of the communities across the region to support their aspirations and needs. The voices of those with lived experience should be at the forefront of any sector activity.

The past twelve months have shown the support across the region to those seeking to flee conflicts in Syria, Afghanistan and Ukraine. Collaborative working between statutory and voluntary agencies as well as individual members of the community has again highlighted the complex processes required for successful integration. It is vital that this support is extended to all migrants and embedded within long-term service planning.

Although it is recognised that the policy decisions that most adversely impact migrants are made at a national level, and local authorities have limited scope to shape their direction, their support in highlighting the negative effects caused is crucial. If statutory agencies are unable to work collaboratively to engage and achieve solutions within the existing framework then at the least they must acknowledge the consequences of government policy and work to support those requiring help

ABOUT MIGRATION POLICY AND PRACTICE

The purpose of the Project is to support the effective settlement of migrants ¹ and a positive integration agenda across the region. Our ultimate aim will be to support processes and mechanisms to enable the development of a clear pathway for the integration of migrant communities, providing the appropriate levels of support required at all stages to achieve this.



Our aim is to build a comprehensive understanding of all activity currently taking place within the sector, so that problems, emerging issues and opportunities can be effectively recorded. This is crucial in enabling a comprehensive picture of current activity across the sector to be produced. As the Project develops, activity and outcomes can be measured against our assessment to highlight changes and identify successful project interventions.

It is recognized that building understanding of the communities we work with is crucial to the success of integration. This presents a significant challenge due to the diverse nature of both the region and these groups. The sector works not only with 'known groups', such as well-established

migrant communities or newly arrived individuals and supported by immigration services, but also those unknown and undocumented. Undocumented migrants have insecure status and may only engage with public bodies when they reach a point of crisis.

The structures we support will enable development of early action against key strategic priorities, allowing long-term support for the issues that are preventing migrants from achieving settlement. Due to the varied nature of work in the sector, with organisations providing both specialist and generalist support in a number of areas, we have grouped our assessment into four broad thematic areas. These are reflective of the wide range of challenges that currently exist.

¹ Migrants in this context will encompass Asylum Seekers, Refugees, UASC undocumented, EU citizens with Settled Status and Economic Migrants such as those with work visas and international students.



REGIONAL CONTEXT

The West Midlands region, and in particular Birmingham and the Black Country, remains one of the most diverse areas in the country. The region as a whole is estimated to have a population where 13.9% were born outside of the UK. ² Although overall this is slightly lower than the UK average, in those areas with densely populated urban areas the number is significantly higher. In four of the five Local Authority areas, over 10% of the population are estimated to have been born outside of the UK. There are also significant populations of non-UK nationals resident within all areas, highlighting the number of migrants living throughout the region.

Local Authority	% Population Non-UK born	% Population Non-UK Nationals
Birmingham	25	12
Dudley	4	3
Sandwell	22	15
Walsall	10	7
Wolverhampton	19	13
UK	14	9

Source: Office for National Statistics, June 2021

The percentage of the population who have been born overseas is reflective of both long-established communities who migrated to the region in the post-war period and those more newly arrived from Eastern Europe. The largest numbers of overseas born residents are from Pakistan, Bangladesh and Poland. Most are resident in Birmingham, with significant communities also in Walsall and Wolverhampton. ³

There are also significant numbers of residents holding non-UK nationality primarily from India, Poland and Pakistan. Most are resident within Birmingham, although Wolverhampton contains the largest population of Indian nationals. The region is also home to a large number of individuals who were

born in EU countries, around 8% of the UK total, which is the third highest region outside of London. ⁴ Recently, over 1400 individuals have settled in the region as part of the Ukrainian Sponsorship Scheme

Although population estimates can be used as a guide to indicate levels of migration and residency, there remain significant discrepancies in highlighting accurate figures, particularly in relation to numbers of EU nationals. This difficulty is evidenced through the number of applications made within the region to the EU Settled Status Scheme, required for EU nationals wishing to reside within the UK following Brexit. At the closure of the scheme in June 2020 it was clear that the number of applicants greatly exceeded the estimated eligible population. ⁵

² House of Commons Briefing Paper: Migration Statistics, September 2022

³ Data from ONS, Annual Population Survey, June 2020

⁴ Migration Observatory: Where do Migrants Live in the UK – March 2022

⁵ Migration Observatory: What Now? The EU Settlement Scheme

After the Deadline – June 2021

REGIONAL CONTEXT

The lack of accurate data causes significant problems in planning and engagement both for the voluntary sector and local authorities. Without accurate figures, service provision becomes more difficult, and this will adversely affect communities such as Roma who have historically not been engaged with by statutory agencies. Where such groups are not often represented, this places an increased burden on the voluntary sector who provide support, often at point of crisis.

Until accurate data and engagement takes place, service planning to address long term needs of migrant communities cannot take place.

In comparison to other regions of the UK, the West Midlands receives higher numbers of asylum seekers than many others. Currently numbers are the fourth highest in the country, below only the North West, Yorkshire and London.. **6**

Local Authority	Asylum Seekers	Resettled Refugees	Combined	Density per 1000 residents
Birmingham	2033	116	2149	1.9
Dudley	446	0	446	1.1
Sandwell	1056	0	1056	2.8
Walsall	472	4	476	1.7
Wolverhampton	874	20	894	3.5

Source: West Midlands Strategic Migration Partnership, Statistics Briefing Paper Q3 2022

Local Authorities across the region continue to demonstrate a commitment to the resettlement of refugees. Birmingham, Sandwell and Wolverhampton Councils are signatories to the City of Sanctuary campaign, committing to a welcoming and inclusive environment for migrants. The region itself supports the third highest total of resettled refugees in the UK, with only Yorkshire and the Humber and Scotland hosting more. **7**

In order to support settlement and integration Local Authorities in the region, where they have powers to do so, try to ensure that levels of those being settled remain as proportion to population numbers. This level of density has already been surpassed across the region as is particularly prominent in Sandwell and Wolverhampton. This presents difficulties in securing suitable accommodation without concentration in specific areas. Such an approach risks undermining integration and community cohesion as has been seen in other areas such as Stoke.

The commitment demonstrated across the region to migrants has not been replicated with equivalent levels of funding from central government. Many of those settling in the region require additional financial support to access housing, training and employment which all impact on available public finances. A lack of additional funding to meet these demands risks individuals not being supported and pushed into crisis.

The region continues to welcome refugees as part of the Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (VPRS). Since September 2015, 1,908 individuals have been resettled in the region, representing 9.4% of the national total. Although most local authorities in Birmingham and the Black Country have participated in the scheme, the vast majority of refugees have been resettled within Birmingham.. **8**

REGIONAL CONTEXT

All Local Authorities in the region pledged to support both the UK Resettlement Scheme as well as specific programmes for those fleeing Afghanistan and Ukraine. Specific information for the region is not yet available, although for the UK scheme 160 individuals have been resettled into the West Midlands or over 14% of national arrivals in this period.

There are likely to be significant changes to the levels of resettlement in future. The UK Government's Nationalities and Borders Act risks creating a two-tier immigration system with an emphasis on claims made through legal routes that are yet to be established. Current Resettlement Schemes will also be revised and consolidate existing measures into one global scheme with a wider remit than displacement from specific conflicts.

ABOUT OUR ASSESSMENT

This report was informed by a series of focus groups and meetings held with the support of partner organisations across the region. In total we spoke with almost 100 individuals, with a range of immigration status and living in the UK for different periods. All discussions were open-ended but grouped around the four broad themes of our work. 9 This allowed participants to talk freely around the issues and barriers they have encountered during their time in the region, and the wider UK.

It should also be noted that the sample of people we spoke to provides only a small sample of the migrant population in the region and may not be reflective of those with greatest need. The nature of the focus groups we arranged, through partner organisations, meant that those who took part were already engaged with established networks. We had no contact with those outside of the range of this study, meaning that some issues may not have been raised.

They key issues raised have been identified and detailed as follows:



RIGHTS

Throughout our focus group discussions three key issues emerged around access to specialist advice across a range of areas, problems with housing, and systemic delays in processes that hamper integration. Many remain unable to access either free or affordable legal advice around immigration matters with the costs of visa fees and solicitors placing additional burdens during a cost of living crisis. Another concern was, despite a network of well established organisations in the sector, many were unsure who to contact to seek advice and only did so when signposted by a friend.

KEY FINDINGS

- **Migrants find it difficult to access the correct specialist advice to deal with the complex situations they experience.**
- **The availability and provision of quality housing remains a problem for migrants, regardless of their status.**
- **The problems experienced by many migrants, regardless of immigration status, have been exacerbated by delays in resolving claims or responding to queries and appeals.**

Housing remains a significant issue for all migrants, regardless of their status, and were highlighted by individuals resident across the region. Many remain living in poor quality accommodation, with issues such as damp causing long-term health impacts for many residents. Faults and problems with property, whilst frequently reported, are often not resolved for long periods. This situation appears worse for those in private rented accommodation. Some of those living in hotels as initial asylum accommodation reported problems with treatment by certain staff members.

In addition to problems with the standard of housing, there were issues with location that have limited the ability to many migrants to integrate successfully. Individuals are often housed long distances from learning centres or places of work meaning that significant costs and travel times are incurred. Limited school places in certain areas mean extensive travel

for the children of migrants. Many of those who we spoke to who had arrived in the UK as part of government schemes, reported having to move properties on several occasions. This has affected their ability to fully settle into the region.

Delays and uncertainty in administrative processes were highlighted by many migrants as an ongoing concern that has negatively impacted both their mental health and effective settlement in the region. For those in the asylum system, a lack of investment in both the sector and the Home Office has caused significant delays in decisions on claims, which places individuals in limbo until this is resolved. This was not just confined to those in the asylum system, many of those on settlement schemes spoke of a lack of engagement with authorities and a consequent uncertainty when the funding for their scheme ends.

“

[I have] lots of unanswered questions about the [Homes for Ukraine] Scheme

”

**Ukrainian participant,
Focus Group at Centrala**

LEGAL ACCESS

Regardless of their journey, a large number of those migrating into the region will at some point likely require access to legal advice. In the case of those navigating the asylum system, this may be to challenge a flawed decision around their leave to remain in the UK or as part of a pathway to citizenship.

Many European citizens are still to secure continuing rights to live and work in the UK following the UK's departure from the European Union. Although the scheme to secure settled status closed in June last year, over 600,000 applications were received after the deadline, with several hundred thousands still awaiting results – including significant numbers who applied ahead of the scheme's closure. ¹⁰

Those still awaiting result of cases are placed in a position of severe uncertainty and potentially unable to access basic services. Many migrants will also require advice and support in relation to issues related to benefits and housing.

Legal advice relating to immigration matters can only be provided by an adviser accredited by the Office of the Immigration Services Commissioner (OISC). Complex cases involving asylum claims or appeals against Home Office decisions can only be supported by those registered at a higher level. The shortage of such advisers across the region continues to be a significant issue for migrants, severely impacting upon their ability to settle into the region in the long-term.

If a case requires substantial work or a hearing before a judge, then an adviser registered at OISC Level 3 will be required. The current database of accredited advisers ¹¹ shows only 37 organisations in the region currently possess this, of which only 9 do so on a no fee basis. This places a significant financial strain on migrants requiring legal support, not only through the cost of advice but also with travel to consult with advisers who are spread across the region. In terms of general legal aid access, the situation is even more difficult with recent research showing that only 44 offices are active across the whole Midlands region. ¹²

Significant financial pressures due to current economic uncertainty and a challenging funding environment may also lead to a reduction in services if specialist organisations are no longer able to operate. There is already a lack of resource to match demand across the region and any closure would not be absorbed by current capacity, potentially leaving many unrepresented and in an extremely vulnerable position.

Many groups in the region have reported increased demands in recent months for legal advice, particularly in relation to the EUSS scheme. ¹³ Across the wider sector, many groups report that a fifth of clients may not have applied to the scheme in time for the deadline. ¹⁴ Support will be required until their cases are resolved, not just from within the voluntary sector, but from statutory agencies to prevent individuals from falling into destitution due to an inability to access basic services.

An example of the support required can be seen when some individuals seek to access welfare benefits such as Universal Credit. Existing guidance states that a grant of pre-settled status is not enough to enable a claim, potentially placing families in need of further support to prevent destitution. It is important that this requirement does not fall solely on the voluntary sector, particularly as in many cases there is a statutory requirement under legislation such as the Children's Act.

Some additional resources to enhance provision are in place, such as the Foundation for Integration Project currently coordinated by Birmingham City Council, which works to support integration in the city. Partners in the Project offer both general advice and 'move-on' support for new refugees helping them into housing, education, health. Funding for this is focused on third country nationals, but must also remain accessible to EU nationals. Any exclusion, particularly at a time when application period for the EUSS scheme has closed, places additional financial burdens and barriers at a time when the right to settle in the UK is most precarious.

Organisations providing legal advice also report continued difficulties in recruiting, training and retaining appropriately trained advisers. Many charitable funders do not routinely support legal work, despite successful outcomes and regularized status for migrants providing positive benefits in other areas.

Early access to specialist legal advice can have a positive effect on wider social problems. Current barriers between the voluntary and statutory sectors mean that migrants seeking legal support are already at a point of crisis, seeking to resolve an immediate issue. This crisis intervention approach does not allow the sector the time or resources to address the underlying issues that have led migrants into a situation requiring support. Increased funding would allow capacity building in the sector, increasing the resources to address with long-term issues within communities and move towards a targeted and preventative approach.

A lack of specialist legal advice relating to immigration status risks placing migrants into a lengthy period of severe uncertainty. They can be unable to work, access training or employment and consequently unable to provide for themselves and their families. Refugees and asylum seekers are already in a vulnerable position upon entering the UK and this precarious situation can be worsened as individuals upon arrival can find themselves trapped in a cycle of low quality transient accommodation or potentially made homeless.

This is particularly important at a time when not only is the asylum system seen as being in crisis, but additional demands for legal advice are also likely to be created by those who have missed the deadline to apply for the EUSS scheme, are still awaiting a decision or have only been granted pre-settled status. Recent analysis by Refugee Action has suggested that there are over 360,000 people in the region with no settled outcome from their application. **15**

In the case of the rights of EU nationals to remain in the UK, the disparity between estimated population sizes and the actual number of applications means it is highly likely that significant numbers will have missed the deadline to apply for residency. The last available government statistics showed that there had been 6.015 million applications to the scheme **16** double the 3 million who were thought to be resident in the UK. Although the full number of repeated applications is not yet known, with estimates suggesting around 8% of the total, this still suggests a real risk that large numbers may be unknown to authorities, will not have applied and risk having their immigration status exposed.

Another area of concern over the next twelve months is a likely continued increase in demand for legal advice with a number of groups in vulnerable positions moving into the region. In addition to those families on government supported resettlement schemes, widening dispersal of asylum seekers and nationally mandated transfers of Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children will increase demand in the medium term.

Issues around demand may also be slightly masked by the lack of awareness amongst some migrants of where and how to access support services. As this information becomes more widely known, through both personal contact and publicity, levels will likely increase. New facilities such as the online Migrant Advice Portal being supported by Birmingham City Council should be welcomed and supported. This will provide signposting for individuals to organisations that provide services that can aid in integration. Such an initiative should cater for all migrants groups, but this requires those organisations working within communities to engage with it as signposting will only work if relevant data is included.

10 UK Government: EU Settlement Scheme Statistics (July 2022) – EU Settlement Scheme statistics – GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)

11 https://home.oisc.gov.uk/adviser_finder/

12 Refugee Action: The Midlands – Immigration Services Demand in 2021 (June 2022)

13 Refugee and Migrant Centre: Two years of litigation: Representation of clients before the Asylum and Immigration Chamber – June 2022

14 Refugee Action Information Hub Bulletin 11 – 11th June 2021

15 Ibid

16 EU Settlement Scheme statistics – GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)

“

The Council rent cheap houses,
there is damp and mould.
I had to do many things to fix it

Participant,
Focus Group with current asylum seekers

”



HOUSING

The availability and quality of housing provision remains a significant problem in the sector, not just for those in the asylum system, but for many other migrant groups. Whilst the commitment by local authorities in the region to secure diverse housing stock that is not concentrated in single areas is welcome and will help to support community integration, it presents practical difficulties in implementation. For example in Birmingham there are over 18,000 people on the housing waiting list, a significant number of whom are migrants.

Rising costs and outsourcing have made it increasingly difficult for local authorities to obtain suitable housing in certain areas which for those in the asylum process has meant increasingly lengthy stays in what is temporary accommodation. Some organisations in the region have reported clients waiting up to 18 months in this initial stage.

Hotels have been utilised by Local Authorities in a number of scenarios, such as to house families to whom they have a duty of care whilst sourcing temporary accommodation. They have also been used as temporary accommodation for asylum seekers, and in these situations a number of issues have been identified. This was shown in our research focus groups where a number of people living in hotels claimed to have been victims of bullying and mistreatment by staff.

The use of hotels for housing asylum seekers appears counter-productive both from a financial sense and in the negative effects on the wellbeing of those being housed. This should include support for housing migrants within community settings as advocated by policy makers in the sector **17** Locally, integration has been further affected by the discontinuation of hotel usage during the Commonwealth Games, moving residents into other areas where they have no contacts and beginning the process of settling anew.

The situation is further complicated by the lack of a clear transition pathway for many into mainstream welfare support following a grant of status. This has led to frequently chaotic outcomes, including eviction

into hotel accommodation, putting further stress on the regions emergency housing stock and disrupting children's education.

Issues around housing are not confined to those seeking asylum. Many European migrants feel trapped in low quality accommodation due to discrimination in the job market that forces them into low paid work with a lack of training development. For those still awaiting outcomes of applications to the EUSS scheme, the situation is particularly difficult as they lack the physical documentation issued to those granted status. This can leave individuals in a vulnerable position with regards to dealing with private landlords who are unfamiliar with this significant change to the immigration system, causing delays in the verification of the right to reside in the UK.

Some of those who have entered the region as part of government resettlement schemes have also experienced problems, particularly around securing permanent or long-term housing. Much of the property used to support these schemes have been sourced from private landlords and in some cases is often requested to be returned at short notice. This has meant families having to move, disrupting schooling, work and training at a time when secure and settled location is of paramount importance. Many would also like to secure long-term housing but are unable to do so due to both uncertainty over ongoing support to the scheme and not being able to present required financial records to rent due to the nature of their arrival in the UK.

“

Whenever I feel settled,
we have to move out

”

**Syrian participant, Focus Group with
individuals on resettlement schemes**

SYSTEMIC DELAYS

The problems experienced by many migrants, regardless of immigration status, have been exacerbated by delays in resolving their cases. This has them unable to plan for the future, affected their mental health and in some cases left them vulnerable to destitution or homelessness.

Although some variation in the length of time taken to reach decision is to be expected, many have reported feeling frustrated by a lack of communication around their cases or clarity on the process. This is not just limited to the asylum system, with many outstanding EUSS cases still to be resolved and no estimate as to when this backlog will be cleared.

During our focus groups, many of those from resettlement schemes also expressed frustration that they have received limited contact from government contacts despite this being an explicit part of the settlement scheme. Those who we spoke to who had recently arrived from Ukraine stated that it was also difficult to plan for their future due to the current limited term nature of the scheme's funding.

These regional issues are reflective of national trends which have seen an increase in the time taken to decide asylum claims with a current backlog of over 125,000 awaiting a decision. ¹⁸ This is the result of government policy which has reduced investment in the asylum and immigration system as part of a stated desire to reduce the number of people seeking to settle permanently in the UK.

It is therefore sadly likely that these issues will only be resolved by an increase in investment, which will only result from a change in government policy. Until such time, the sector can only work with partners in highlighting areas of need and advocate for change by showing the human cost of these delays.

“

Why do I need to wait again?
I've already waited four years
to start my life

”

Current Asylum Seeker

“

I don't want any problems,
I just want to live peacefully

**Iranian Asylum Seeker,
Focus Group at Brushstrokes Sandwell**

”



HEALTH

The experiences of the healthcare system for some of the migrants we spoke to were significantly different from that of the wider public, with difficulties in accessing specialist care. Many shared the same difficulties as the wider population, with frustrations over the ability to book appointments with healthcare professionals when needed and the waiting times for specialist treatment.

KEY FINDINGS

- **There have been a number of ways in which migrants have struggled to access healthcare treatment, particularly those in initial asylum accommodation.**
- **Mental health support and treatment continues to be difficult to access for many migrants**
- **Further work needs to be conducted to ensure that the specific needs of migrants are included in strategic planning.**

Some migrants living in initial accommodation reported difficulties in accessing specialist care, especially around mental health issues. This is particularly concerning due to the traumatic reasons for fleeing to the UK in order to escape conflict and persecution that many have experienced. Access to specialist Mental Health support will likely be an increased issue, particularly with the region hosting increased numbers of individuals as part of resettlement schemes from current conflict zones.

Our findings around disparity in access to healthcare are similar to the experiences cited in other national findings, namely around adequate care in initial accommodation ¹⁹ or that of some pregnant women. ²⁰ It is also of concern that, as with other areas, many did not know how and where to access specific support and relied on friends to provide direction.

Although most found primary healthcare and emergency treatment easy to access, despite waiting times remaining an issue, for those that required more specialist treatment and support the system was difficult to navigate, particularly for those where English is not the first language for most.

Many of the barriers that have been highlighted could be reduced by a greater inclusion of migrant voices within healthcare planning. New structures that are being developed in the region around Integrated Care Systems that will encourage community involvement in planning and prescribing present an opportunity for this to take place. Ensuring that the challenges faced by migrants as included as with other groups will help to make healthcare more accessible and help to reduce long term inequalities.

“

It's ok for you as you have citizenship
but for me it is difficult

**Participant at Focus Group
held at Brushstrokes Sandwell**

”

ACCESS TO HEALTHCARE

There have been a number of ways in which migrants have struggled to access healthcare treatment, particularly those in initial accommodation. Despite there being no requirement to do so some have been asked to provide identification and proof of address in order to register with a GP. Some who have moved frequently between locations due to changes in the asylum system have found it difficult to achieve continuity of care. Although all we spoke to had seen a doctor on arrival, many have struggled to receive treatment plans for long-term conditions due to a lack of a permanent address. Such activities disenfranchise migrants from seeking help at point of need.

The UK Government's 'Hostile Environment' policies have also contributed to many migrants' reluctance to access healthcare provision. There are fears that any details they provide will be used to check residency and immigration status which could be then reported to the Home Office if they are found to be overstayers. This impacts not just on those seeking asylum, but also wider migrant groups, particularly those who may be experiencing homelessness.

The 'Safe Surgeries' scheme developed by Doctors of the World ²¹ is an initiative that should be publicised and supported across the wider sector to encourage access to healthcare. It is a network of GP practices throughout the UK, including many in the region, which commits to taking steps to ensure availability of access for everyone in their community. Although the number of people we spoke to in our research represents a small sample of the migrant community in the region, the vast majority were able to register easily with a GP. This represents a positive step in ensuring all are able to access these basic services.

Difficulties have emerged when individuals require more specialist treatment or need to be seen in an emergency. Many remain unsure where to go to receive healthcare in these circumstances, with a lack of adequate signposting and support leaving many relying on friends for direction. Transport costs also play a significant factor if A&E departments are located distances from accommodation.

These factors may cause some to not seek treatment, potentially worsening their conditions and causing long-term health implications.

The negative health outcomes associated with long-term street homelessness continues to be an issue, particularly amongst European migrant communities. In Birmingham, a significant proportion of the homeless population is assessed to be from Eastern European nationalities. The number of migrants currently homeless impacts upon already stretched services in the region. As many as 40% of homeless people exhibit underlying health concerns such as mental health problems which are exacerbated by their situation.

Numbers experiencing homelessness are likely to increase, both due to the worsening economic situation but also the higher number of those with specific conditions attached to their immigration status. Many are classed as having No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) which means that they are unable to access state benefits or support, placing them at risk of destitution and homelessness. It is vital to understand the scope of this issue and develop support pathways for this increasing cohort. Initiatives such as the WMCA Homelessness Taskforce are seeking to respond to this on a regional level and the expertise of groups in the sector should be engaged.



“

You have to be in a certain amount of pain before they will attend to you

**Current Asylum Seeker
in Birmingham Focus Group**

”

Charges for certain healthcare treatments remain an issue, not only for those who have to pay, but also for those who may delay seeking treatment over worries around charging. For many, the fact that some level of payment for certain healthcare procedures exists is a barrier in itself. A lack of clarity around when these are incurred means they are reluctant to seek treatment when needed.

EU nationals who did not apply for Settled Status in the UK by the 30th June 2021 lost their leave to remain in the UK and will have no right to access healthcare, except in emergencies. Those who still have outstanding applications are likely to be left in a vulnerable situation, with the potential that this creates a serious public health issue in the region. Efforts should continue to identify those who have missed the deadline and understand what support is being offered to retain their status.

MENTAL HEALTH

Mental Health services continue to suffer from funding cuts which have significantly reduced the availability of treatment. ²² In-patient treatment has also been affected by a lack of beds, a legacy of the COVID pandemic. ²³ This has severely impacted on the wellbeing of many migrants who, like other excluded groups, often have an increased need for such provision. A significant number have arrived in the UK having undertaken traumatic journeys and fled areas of conflict. This can leave them vulnerable to mental health trauma and conditions that impact upon their ability to settle in the region.

Although support is available from groups such as Freedom From Torture or through the outreach services provided by Mind with asylum seekers, these only support short-term treatment not the extended support that is required. Waiting lists for NHS services also means that many cannot access services when needed. During our focus groups, some individuals expressed their difficulty in accessing treatment for mental health trauma. Some stated that they were unable to receive treatment until they had been placed in permanent accommodation, whilst others talked of the difficulty in obtaining continuity of care when frequently moving accommodation.

A need for expanded Mental Health support is also common to other groups supported by the voluntary sector which also impacts upon availability.

The high risk of experiencing mental health problems within some Eastern European groups that was highlighted in our last assessment remains a key issue. The invasion of Ukraine, and the number of refugees who have fled the country in harrowing circumstances, has only increased the importance of this issue.

Within Birmingham, local data has shown that Polish nationals, as well as those from wider Eastern European backgrounds have the highest suicide rate by country of birth and is two thirds higher than the city population as a whole. ²⁴ There is an urgent need to work with these communities and the groups that are most engaged with them to ensure mental health and wellbeing services are accessible.

²² Number of NHS mental health beds down by 25% since 2010, analysis shows | Mental health | The Guardian

²³ Psychiatric patient stuck in Wolverhampton A&E due to bed shortage - BBC News

²⁴ Birmingham City Council Suicide Prevention Strategy: 2019-2024

“

Such a long process (to register)...
you have to make it so dramatic,
to exaggerate

”

**Participant in Focus Group
held in Wolverhampton**

SERVICE PLANNING

Since our last assessment, work has continued by statutory bodies to ensure that the specific needs of disadvantaged groups are recognised and embedded within the planning of healthcare provision. The needs of migrants, although aligning in many ways with that of other groups, should be included in order to address the long-term inequalities they face. Through networks established through Migration Policy and Practice, we have sought to ensure that migrants have a voice to highlight barriers in accessing healthcare. These should link with existing forums so that the migration sector is represented on the same basis as other parts of the voluntary and community sector.

Recently established VCSE Alliances, bringing voluntary and community groups into the strategic planning process to support the design of healthcare provision across the region should be supported, with the opportunities presented by representation on local leadership groups. Many of the issues that affect migrants have also been raised by organisations in the wider voluntary sector supporting other disadvantaged groups. Forums and strategic planning present an opportunity to develop collaborative responses to advocate for change.

Existing strategies and initiatives should continue to be supported, such as Birmingham City Council's 'Creating a City Without Inequality' which seeks to address problems on both a geographical and demographic basis. Current assessments do include analysis of inequalities experienced by some disadvantaged groups and although some of these are also common to many migrants, they do not fully explain the systematic barriers often experienced by those settling in the region.

Whilst our focus groups and outreach work have captured limited insight into issues around health inequalities, groups such as Healthwatch Birmingham, who have produced analysis around the barriers to healthcare experienced by ethnic minority groups, should be supported in identifying and speaking to migrants so that their needs can be understood.



OPPORTUNITY

Throughout our focus groups, regardless of their stage of migration, a feeling of frustration was apparent amongst participants. All recognised the value in undergoing training and gaining employment to assist in their settlement and provide financial independence, but were often prevented in achieving their aims by numerous barriers.

KEY FINDINGS

- **There are issues around the awareness of ESOL course availability and whether these are suitable for those with work or caring commitments.**
- **Access to Further and Higher Education remains a barrier.**
- **Volunteering has been a positive experience for many migrants, both in terms of increasing social integration and developing an employment history.**
- **Problems persist in ensuring that overseas qualifications are converted and recognised.**

Many of these are systemic, and likely the direct result of government policy to reduce migration through increasing the difficulty to do so. Not only does this impact those already resident in the UK, including many who have been so for a number of years, but are counterproductive. The issues raised in our focus groups, around increased ESOL provision and skills training would assist migrants in their integration,

allow them to contribute to the economy and contribute to their wellbeing.

Some migrants who have previously worked in professional roles were unable to transfer their qualifications and were therefore trapped in low paid work. This is particularly difficult during a period of severe economic downturn with a shortage in certain skilled occupations.

ENGLISH FOR SPEAKERS OF OTHER LANGUAGES (ESOL)

Access to accredited ESOL training remains a key need for migrants, not just for those seeking work but also as a support to integration. Whilst the majority of those we spoke to were able to access some degree of ESOL provision, there remain issues around the suitability of courses, availability for those with childcare or work commitments and awareness of alternative routes to obtain support.

Although those who took part in our focus groups all attended ESOL classes where required, there were issues raised around their effectiveness in an existing format. Most participants felt that classes were not frequent enough to provide effective learning. In most cases, ESOL learners were only provided with one day of teaching contact per week which does not enable a sufficiently immersive experience to aid learning. Young people, and those able to work, found the process easier as they had greater opportunities to practice conversational English. This meant those with caring responsibilities or other commitments are placed at a disadvantage, potentially delaying integration and reducing opportunities for independence.

Classes that were provided often mirrored the standard work day, which meant that for those with childcare responsibilities it was often impossible to attend. Further work should be done to ensure that timings are flexible enough to accommodate those who would most benefit from lessons and who might otherwise experience increased levels of isolation.

The timing and locations of courses also restricted access, with some disparity across the region. Whilst some people reported that their ESOL sessions fitted around childcare needs, a number of people raised that they struggled to attend due to school drop off times. Others found difficulty in travelling to courses, which were often held at locations far away from accommodation. This necessitated long trips, with significant financial implications.

Whilst many people were able to access ESOL, and there were some examples of good practice on an individual basis such as teachers providing students with a laptop and access to Wi-Fi so that they could study at home, issues around digital access continued to be experienced. For many in the migration system there is disparity in access. Those housed in contingency hotels at the start of an asylum claim should have

access to Wi-Fi, however those in dispersed or private accommodation may not do so as this will be paid out of their own funds. Many then have to rely on public access in venues such as libraries, colleges or cafes.

A lack of digital skills, coupled with many being unable to access both devices and data meant that courses could not be undertaken or only sporadically. This had led to many disengaging from learning or setting back their progress significantly. Potentially, this has delayed the learning and development that many need to effectively settle in the region by years.

The lack of interaction between student and teacher that can arise from online or virtual lessons are also not conducive to effective learning. Although it was practical during the COVID pandemic to offer courses in this manner, there should now be efforts to offer face-to-face learning wherever possible.

Throughout many of our focus group discussions, there remained a lack of awareness around the wide variety of ESOL courses offered by voluntary and community groups in the region. These can often help with issues around availability as they are held at different times, within localities, and therefore increase the level of provision for those learning English. Those who had attended courses were only aware of them due to referrals or conversations with other migrants. This again reflects the difficulty many have experienced in identifying relevant support and services and the reliance on networks of friends and family.

Further efforts should be made to raise awareness of services and provide means to identify and access them. Initiatives such as the ESOL Hub being developed within Birmingham should be supported and resources provided to enable the involvement of the widest range of providers as possible.

“

English was the main problem for me

Participant in Focus Group held in Nechells

”

ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION

There have been some recent examples of good practice in widening participation to further education, for example the University of Birmingham now offers 5 fully fee-waivered undergraduate places, accompanied by a £5,000 grant and a fully paid for place in University accommodation for people who have lived experience of seeking asylum or are a dependent of someone who has.

Unfortunately, during our outreach we did not speak to anybody who had accessed an educational scholarship, indicative of sample size but also of the number of scholarships remaining remarkably low in comparison to those with experience of migration and seeking asylum.

CONVERSION OF OVERSEAS QUALIFICATIONS

From our outreach work, we discovered that a further persistent problem affecting migrant groups regardless of specific journey or experience, was not being able to use previously achieved qualifications in their home country when in the UK. We spoke to many people with significant experience in professional roles, such as medicine, pharmacy or academia who, found it hard to find similar work in the UK.

Qualifications are often not accepted, or require conversion courses alongside additional formal English qualifications both with significant costs. Some have been unable to provide work histories or references due to the circumstances of their arrival. This has been particularly frustrating for many on resettlement

schemes who have been unable to take up roles similar to those they left, despite willingness to do so. The result is that many found themselves trapped in low paid work and unable to progress into suitable roles that would provide wider economic benefit to sectors suffering staffing issues, such as the NHS.

VOLUNTEERING

Many of those that we met through our focus groups talked of the positive experiences they found from volunteering. This was particularly true of those who currently do not have the right to work in the UK. There were two main benefits: firstly, that it allowed people to develop new social connections with those in their local community; and secondly that it gave people experience in work-like environments in the UK, as well as a connection within a place of UK employment who could then act as a referee.

Despite the successes many have experienced, there remain difficulties in accessing these opportunities which require knowledge of networks and services that not all migrants are aware of. It should also be noted that the size of this problem may be masked by the sample of people we spoke to. The nature of the focus

groups we arranged, through partner organisations, meant that those who took part were already engaged with established networks. We had no contact with those outside of the range of this study, meaning that the issue may be much wider than thought.

SEEKING EMPLOYMENT

Some of the common issues pertaining to finding work were not necessarily exclusively linked to experiences of migration. The current UK economic situation has negatively impacted many. A number of those we spoke to found that despite working, they were struggling to afford basic costs like rent or food on their current income, with many working multiple jobs in order to try and balance this. Although this situation is sadly common for many in the country, migrants are often disproportionately affected due to often being employed in low paid, short-term roles.

Some of those who were part of resettlement schemes expressed frustration over difficulties in finding work. Problems had been encountered over the ability to meet with job coaches, both in terms of arranging appointments and ensuring these take place when childcare is available.

Legislative change would also support the employment of migrants, in particular removing the ban on asylum seekers undertaking paid employment.

Lifting this restriction would help integrate asylum seekers into the community, allow them to provide for themselves and use their skills as well as providing a financial gain to the economy. ²⁵ The campaign has already gained cross-party Parliamentary support but would benefit from as many regional organisations as possible to amplify, particularly from those beyond the refugee support sector.

“

I am the only person working in my house with two kids. First I do care support at night and in the morning I do cleaning. I take care of a disabled person and two kids.”

”

Participant in Focus Group held in Walsall

“

I was lucky. I had a friend who helped me [find work]

Participant in Focus Group held in Nechells

”



COMMUNITY

Ensuring that migrants feel successfully integrated and settled in the region remains one of the key challenges for the sector, particularly as progress and results are difficult to assess. In the case of many of those we spoke to, the situation was mixed and differed across the region. Although most felt safe where they lived, particularly compared to the circumstances of their arrival, there was often little social contact with neighbours or wider social groups.

KEY FINDINGS

- **Many migrants are unable to engage outside of established networks due to childcare or work commitments.**
- **There remains a difficulty in establishing successful criteria for measuring community integration.**
- **Hate Crime remains a problem experienced by many migrants.**
- **Modern Day Slavery continues to be evidenced in the region.**
- **The sector itself also needs to reflect the population it works with, particularly in its leadership and through empowering those with lived experience.**

Although in some cases this was by choice, due to childcare or work situations, it does show a lack of confidence to engage outside established networks. As with other aspects of our research, the problem is likely to be more acute as we only spoke with those who were already linked with the organisations hosting our events. There are likely to be significant numbers of migrants in the region experiencing isolation and only seeking support at point of crisis.

There also remains difficulty in establishing successful criteria for measuring community integration and settlement. For migrants to achieve effective settlement in the region not only should they be treated equitably, with the same access to meaningful opportunities for training and employment as other sections of society, but they should also feel that they are part of the wider community.

Integration should mean that all cultures within the region are embraced, recognising the differences but celebrating the contributions made by all migrants.

Finally, although the vast majority of those we spoke to felt safe within the areas they lived, a number did report instances where they had been a victim of crime which they felt was a result of their ethnicity or nationality. In these cases, there was a lack of confidence in the police to resolve complaints and prosecute offenders. Some felt reluctant to pursue cases due to this belief. Migrants need to feel secure in the knowledge that that any experienced hate crimes will be dealt with, so dialogue and engagement with statutory bodies to support this process remains crucial.

“

It was tough at the start. I knew nobody and was stuck on the 18th floor

Participant in Focus Group held in Nechells

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HATE CRIME

Several of those we spoke to in our focus groups had been victims of crime, with some experiencing harassment due to their background. Sadly these incidents are not reflective of the growing levels of hate crime seen in the region. Where full year figures are available, the number of reported hate crime incidents in the region has increased from 9,734 in 2020 to 12,193 in 2021. ²⁶

Hate Crime obviously remains a problem experienced by many and is made worse both by delays in the investigation and prosecutions of offenders but also a lack of confidence in the police to investigate instances thoroughly. The number of recorded crimes may also underestimate the true depth of the issue, as many who are victims of hate crime do so on numerous occasions before reporting it.

There is ongoing distrust in the authorities for many groups who feel that instances will not be investigated and therefore lack the confidence in reporting them. The use of third-party reporting centres has increased the routes available for reporting and removed the need to directly contact the police, however further centres and options should be made to support marginalised groups. Increased language

provision for those reporting is also required as current systems are predominately in English.

Those within the asylum system have also experienced increased threats from far-right activists, particularly targeting those within hotels. Although no incidents have been reported in the region covered by the Project, several have occurred in neighbouring areas.

MODERN DAY SLAVERY

There continue to be a larger number of cases across the region where individuals have been victims of Modern Day Slavery (MDS) practices. For the year ending 2021, there were 895 referrals of potential victims from within the West Midlands Police area (that covering the area of the Project). This makes up 7 percent of the total reported in the UK. ²⁷

Although this is a slight reduction from the previous year, there is still a substantial issue in the region, with some estimates suggesting that there are potentially over 4000 victims in the West Midlands. ²⁸

The problem is cross-generational, annual statistics from the West Midlands Police area shows that 360 adults and 478 potential child victims identified. ²⁹

At a national level, the most common overseas nationalities of victims were Albanian and Vietnamese. ³⁰ Partner agencies and voluntary groups in the region who provide support to survivors have identified similar patterns, with a number of Eastern European nationals seen. This is particularly concerning in light of uncertainty over continued funding for those

resettled from the Ukraine conflict as well as media reporting around the lack of checks conducted upon some hosts.

It remains crucial that not only are the victims of modern-day slavery practices identified and supported, but that the networks and organisations comprising these are engaged with. Potential victims should have the confidence to report their situation knowing that they will be provided with not only appropriate support, but that by doing so they will not put their immigration status at risk. Such worries will not only reduce instances of referrals but could place victims into a more precarious situation.

²⁶ Lift The Ban - Common Sense

²⁷ Home Office: National Referral Mechanism statistics UK: End of year summary 2019 second edition

²⁸ Centre for Social Justice: Fighting UK Slavery in the 2020's

²⁹ Modern Slavery: National Referral Mechanism and Duty to Notify statistics UK, End of Year Summary 2021

³⁰ ibid

“

My husband was robbed at knifepoint

Participant in Focus Group held in Birmingham

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“

The city [Birmingham] is not that
much good, not safe, dangerous

Participant in Focus Group held in Sandwell

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COHESION AND INTEGRATION

For settlement in the region to have been judged a success, then migrants must feel that they are integral parts of the wider community. It has been shown that local areas that invest in activities linked to cohesion show higher levels of neighbourliness and trust between members. 31

Although there are many organisations working to provide social outreach and befriending services, there remains some disconnection between third sector and statutory bodies as well as geographical disparity and a lack of engagement with some specific community groups.

Although local authorities have recognised the need to support integration programmes, and included these in their strategic planning, there are still a number of gaps. Further work needs to be done to better publicise and highlight specific departments who have responsibility for cohesion as well as increase the access for grass roots groups to bid for funding.

Commitments to the City of Sanctuary movement across the region have rightly increased the support and awareness for the needs of newly arrived migrants, many in initial accommodation still remain feeling isolated. Some other significant community populations, particularly those from Central and Eastern Europe also feel excluded from planning and service involvement.

Difficulties were experienced by those we spoke to who were currently in the asylum system. Many felt that they had been 'dehumanized' by the system which had prevented them from engaging in activities that would have helped with integration. Some had initially been unable to open bank accounts so were unable to join gyms or access other services. Others spoke of being turned away from volunteering opportunities as their asylum status meant that they were liable to be moved to another location.

Financial constraints also featured, as many were unable to afford travel to attend events or courses that would assist in settlement. The barriers in the asylum system meant that most time was spent in proximity to accommodation, with a reliance on friends or groups bringing activities to them.

This puts many at a disadvantage, particularly when asylum claims are approved after a significant delay where time could have been used to help build lives in the region.

Migrants from Central and Eastern Europe, and in particular newly arrived refugees from Ukraine, have also experienced difficulties despite the generosity of host communities. There appears to have been a lack of planning in central government around placing families in practical locations. Although all were grateful to their hosts, many were living with families in rural locations or away from significant migrant populations. This has caused problems with settling due to poor and expensive transport links and a lack of school places.

Many Central and Eastern Europeans in our focus groups also talked about there being two stages to integration, both with wider society but firstly within communities themselves. Many did not know where to go in order to meet others from their community, which was made difficult by previous migrants feeling that a hostile environment led them to hide their origins in order to settle. Some felt that the situation was easier in London where there were larger populations.

Some spoke of communities being isolated with some long-term residents unable to speak English. It was thought however that this situation was changing generationally, with those that had been born in the UK now passing through the education system which has helped the integration process considerably.



“

I was detained twice, I was near deported, I got depressed but I always tell my sisters don't give up. Get into charities around you, go to churches and go to mosques, explore”

Participant in Focus Group held in Birmingham

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A current problem for recently arrived Ukrainians was the around the status of the Russian language. Many of those who arrived from eastern Ukraine spoke it as their first language, with it forming an integral part of their culture, however felt uncomfortable to now do so in light of the invasion. This additional significant change presents a further challenge to settlement for many of this group and also shows the need for involvement of those with lived experience of migration who will be aware of intra-community issues and are best placed to formulate successful responses.

It should also be noted that the priorities and needs of migrants play a significant role in the success of integration strategies. For many, the purpose of coming to the UK was for work purposes in order to provide financial support to family members at home. Long-term integration and settlement is not an initial priority at this point in their lives. If this situation changes, often after a significant period of residence, then pathways must be available to access groups and support, particularly if they have not engaged before.

The success of integration and settlement can only be achieved with the support of local authorities and policy makers. Although there has been some progress since our last assessment there are still gaps in representation, albeit with opportunities for greater engagement. Support and recognition for cultural events and national days of celebration for migrant communities in the region should be extended to the larger newly arrived communities of Central and Eastern Europe. Support for similar events at a local authority level could support integration and raise awareness. This would be a particularly beneficial approach, helping to increase engagement with Eastern European communities at a council level.

The recent Commonwealth Games presented an opportunity to celebrate the diverse cultures and nationalities resident in the region and although successful was limited by its nature to represent a specific grouping of countries. More should be done to highlight the contributions of European nationals now living in the region.

The voluntary sector itself also needs to do more to reflect the population it works with, particularly within the leadership of organisations and through empowering and supporting networks of those with lived experience. Many migrant led groups continue to feel structurally disadvantaged in the nature of their relationships with the wider sector, underrepresented at a service planning level and regarded as providers of information rather than as groups who could instigate change. **32** Work needs to be done to empower these groups and provide long term support and training so that they can play a leading role in societal change.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Support greater signposting of specialist advice services, both online and in locations used by migrants populations.

Engagement with wider voluntary sector campaigns around housing provision and support to increase awareness of rights.

Investment in all specialist advice services to increase sector capacity.

Campaign for increased government investment in the asylum system in order to reduce timescales for cases to be resolved.

Advocate for increased access to Mental Health support.

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

Develop links between formal and informal ESOL providers to ensure availability of courses at suitable times and locations.

Liaise with Higher Education Institutions through groups such as the City of Sanctuary movement to encourage availability of bursaries for migrant groups.

Support for conversion of overseas qualifications and increased investment in IELTS courses.

Development of training and support pathway for education and training in the region.

Development of network supporting volunteering opportunities in the region.

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

Establish a framework for measuring success of social integration in the region.

Encourage the reporting of Hate Crime through use of trusted partner organisation and language support for victims.

Empower those with lived experience into leadership positions in the sector as well as developing their own groups and networks.



Migration: Policy & Practice

Birmingham - Black Country

SUPPORTING THE EFFECTIVE
SETTLEMENT OF MIGRANTS
AND A POSITIVE INTEGRATION
AGENDA IN BIRMINGHAM
AND THE BLACK COUNTRY

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