

Voluntary Action for Asylum Seeker and Refugee integration

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Introduction

Starting a life in Britain for most asylum seekers and refugees is far from plain sailing. Many are desperate to integrate to the British society but lack the know-how or opportunity. The term integration has been much contested but is “predominantly used in relation to immigrants’ participation in, and their incorporation into, receiving society” (Grzymala-Kazłowska & Phillimore 2017:4) across multiple domains. Much emphasis tends to be placed on social integration, the extent to which newcomers and longer-established residents mix, but this is not a static entity and priorities for both newcomers and host populations change over time. For the new arrivals, it seems obvious that access to public services: finding a roof above their heads, schools for children and a GP are the most pressing concerns. Once settled (and when permitted to), evidence suggests that the majority of refugees desire to engage in employment and build social networks (see Cheung & Phillimore 2014). Non-recognition of foreign qualification, lacking the ability to speak English and the absence of social connections are the key barriers to integration.

Analysis of the Survey of New Refugees in the UK provides the first systematic quantitative evidence that levels of language proficiency and extent of access to new social networks are closely related to refugees’ self-reported health, employment and housing outcomes (Cheung & Phillimore 2014;2016). Importantly, length of residency and language proficiency are crucial in broadening one’s social networks. Contacts with religious and co-national groups bring help with employment and housing. In contrast, the absence of social networks has a detrimental effect on access to work (Cheung & Phillimore 2014). Being fluent in English not only enhances employment prospects, evidence shows that it is also associated with better mental and physical health. Asylum seekers and refugees with better language proficiency were found to have broader personal social networks with more frequent connections with friends and relatives (Bakker, Cheung and Phillimore 2016) as well as formal networks with civil society and government organisations (Cheung and Phillimore 2016). These findings have clear implications for both asylum and integration policy. The unequivocal importance of language ability for accessing employment points to a clear policy priority in improving competency. It is also abundantly clear that policy actions are needed to support asylum seekers and refugees to develop diverse personal social networks.

While some Northern European states funded refugee integration programmes recognise this relationship and actively intervene to provide support with language and network formation – in terms of mentoring, tuition and volunteering places specifically for refugees, national provision in the UK was scrapped in 2010 austerity cuts. Although refugees arriving under the Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme from Syria do get some help to integrate, the vast majority of refugees do not. Civil society has stepped in where the state has stepped out.

This chapter focuses on the role of a self-organised civil society project known as the Welcome Project, based in the superdiverse neighbourhood of Handsworth/Handsworth Wood, Birmingham, in supporting social integration. We begin by describing the characteristics of Handsworth/Handsworth Wood before setting out the reasons why the project was established and the needs it was intended to address. We then outline the services offered by the project before exploring the ways in which their work supports social integration locally. We end the

chapter by reflecting on the reasons for the project's success and the key dimensions of their approach that could be adopted elsewhere.

The context

The electoral ward of Lozells and East Handsworth, termed herein Handsworth is densely populated. Some 31074 residents were recorded in the 2011 Census, of whom 44.9 % were foreign born, and 89.2% had an ethnic minority background. Handsworth is an archetypal superdiverse neighbourhood. The people who live there come from almost every country in the world, with residents from 162 different countries of origin recorded in GP registration data between 2007 and 2009 (Phillimore 2013). Local people have varying immigration statuses, religions, educational backgrounds and ages. The area continues to be a dispersal area for asylum seekers many of whom remain after they receive refugee status. The ward is the fifth most deprived in Birmingham with a lengthy history of immigration and deprivation despite being the target of numerous regeneration initiatives which have sought to address both social and economic deprivation. It also has a history of civil unrest with so-called race riots occurring in 1985 and 2005. The neighbourhood has a history too, of community led action. Despite a reputation as an area experiencing high levels of ethnic tensions, there is evidence that in recent years the neighbourhood's superdiversity has attracted individuals from diverse ethnic, religious and country of origin backgrounds who see Handsworth as a place where they can be anonymous, where there is a lower risk of experiencing racism than other parts of Birmingham and where they will be accepted regardless of their status, country of origin or religion (Pemberton & Phillimore 2016).

The authors came across the Welcome Project when undertaking research for the UPWEB project <http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/generic/upweb/index.aspx> which looks at the ways in which individuals and organisations use multiple resources to address the health concerns of individuals living in superdiverse neighbourhoods. Following an interview with the Welcome Project lead it was evident that they were providing highly individualised support to individuals with complex needs. To examine further the ways in which they worked we undertook a mini-ethnography in the project over a period of several weeks. It was during our observations there that we realised how much of the work aimed at supporting individuals' overall wellbeing, that is providing support with addressing housing and mental health problems, was also promoting social integration.

Starting up

The project was started some sixteen years ago by Handsworth Inter-Church Council a network formed by several churches from different Christian traditions working together in Handsworth/Handsworth Wood. A big strength of the project is that it is supported by the different churches in the group, both practically, financially and through volunteers. The Welcome drop in is hosted by the Elmwood United Reformed Church, who are part of the Inter-Church Council and where a drop in and a lunch club are run on Fridays between 12 and 2.30pm. Although Welcome Project is aimed at asylum seekers and refugees, other people coming to seek help will be offered lunch, a one-off food bag and signposting to other charities who can help them. The project is intended to provide a place of welcome and friendship, practical help and assistance (e.g. by providing food bags and second-hand clothing). Local churches identified high levels of poverty and isolation in the forced migrant population dispersed by the Home Office as asylum seekers to Handsworth on a no-choice basis. Many individuals were unsuccessful in their claims for asylum and became destitute until they could

raise the resources or identify further evidence for an appeal. Some asylum seekers eventually gained refugee status but were, as is the case for all new refugees, evicted from their Home Officer funded accommodation.

The Welcome Project offers care to all those who come, noting high levels of anxiety and trauma in some individuals many who have lost their families, experienced persecution, conflict or trafficking and struggle to find their way around a new culture with novel institutional systems. Somewhere between 15 and 30 individuals visit the project each Friday with some attending for over a decade, while others are new faces. The project does not keep records about individuals who attend, partly because they fear that asking for personal will put some people off coming. They estimate that since opening they have supported around 1500 refugees and asylum seekers. Most people attend having heard about the project through word of mouth. For those who are experiencing mental health issues the Welcome Project is perhaps the only time they leave their homes all week. For example, Abshir, who originally came to the project as an asylum seeker and has now received his leave to remain after several years of waiting, rarely left his house after a random attack in the street which left him extremely anxious and frightened. The project spent months working with him to build his confidence. They offered him help with housing and other settlement matters. Although he continues to be fearful he now attends the project regularly and enjoys helping out as much as possible.

The project relies heavily on local volunteers with around five or six supporting the lunch club each week. Many have helped there for years, sometimes attending to overcome their own feelings of isolation or because they were supported by the project themselves at an earlier point in their lives. The project specifically focuses upon providing social support for *all* those who attend. For many this means offering some company, whether they are volunteers or beneficiaries, to overcome isolation and offering the place of belonging and anchoring (Grzymala-Kazlowska 2017). For asylum seekers, the project provides a distraction from waiting for a decision. They also assist asylum seekers and refugees to help to address trauma resulting from persecution, separation from families, having been trafficked and racist attacks.

Services offered

The project primarily offers a safe space in which people can meet and get to know each other across immigration status, ethnic and religious cleavages. The space is described as “safe” in that it is said to be completely non-judgemental – an individual does not need to disclose anything about their immigration status or their problems and they will receive no criticism (or denial of services) if they declare, for example, that they are undocumented. Each Friday the project volunteers cook a meal and volunteers and beneficiaries sit down together and talk. They share good news and bad. Through conversations the volunteers learn about the needs of beneficiaries and offer individualised support if they feel they can help. Such support may include reading and explaining letters from utility companies or hospitals, explaining how to pay bills, and making telephone calls to try to address problems with housing or health or other issues.

The project is embedded in the local neighbourhood so volunteers have excellent knowledge about the local ecology of services and frequently signpost individuals to other initiatives to help with specific problems. They also invite services to come and meet beneficiaries. For instance, Spring into Life, a mental health provider, came and assessed beneficiaries and offered cognitive therapy to those who needed it. They organise talks about healthy eating, plus some massage and other therapies from time to time. The project runs some events in the

grounds of the local leisure centre in the summer and uses these to introduce beneficiaries to the facilities available there. They work with other voluntary sector and faith organisations, for example the local mosque provides monthly food to those in need. While most activities are associated with the lunch club, others are organised according to need and the availability of resources. Some volunteers have rented an allotment for some beneficiaries and gave them the responsibility to plan and run it. The club has provided the funds for wellington boots and different tools. Four individuals from three different countries work together and enjoy fresh air, and access to nature. The project leader described to us how access to the allotments has helped to re-build self-esteem and offered opportunities for reciprocity which has a key role in the building of social networks (Phillimore et al 2017):

I think it's mentally good for them as well, isn't it, the ability of grow something from a little seed and then eat it? We had food given to us. There's one guy, he's given us food that he's grown, so I think they'd like to give back to us what they've grown. (...) It's their thing; we're not running it. It's their baby, so it's given them the power and the dignity to run their own thing (Welcome Project lead).

Aware that accessing affordable English lessons is problematic for asylum seekers and refugees, Welcome have organised for their volunteers to run some classes on a Monday. These will provide a further outlet for those who are isolated and also help them develop the language skills needed to build social networks.

Building support networks

The project focuses on providing a safe space where people can belong and make friends with other individuals who come for support and to volunteer. The hope is that beneficiaries will befriend and support each other. Attempts at community building are constructed around celebration and empathy:

We celebrate anything we can, whether that's baby showers, birthdays – the Queen's birthday we've had parties – Olympics, the World Cup we try and celebrate anything. At the same time, when people have sad things happen, we put time into that., e.g. one Syrian families lost relatives in Syria who had been blown up so the Syrian woman was very distraught: I took her round all the volunteers and we all hugged her and said our sorrows and then, when more people came (...) we had a minute's silence to just remember them, and everyone was silent. Then, afterwards, I said, "Please do feel free to go and show your care to Bana", and it was just amazing to see women from different countries just going and hugging her – people who might not have spoken to her that much just showing their love and support. I think that's one thing we do. We laugh when people are laughing, we cry when people are crying and just. We want this place to be a safe place where people feel they can come and feel supported. (Welcome Project lead).

Strong relationships sometimes form between volunteers and beneficiaries – these are spontaneous and frequently cross age and ethnic cleavages. We learned of instances when volunteers met beneficiaries outside of the project driving them to appointments and providing family support. Whilst it may appear that such relationships are rather one-sided in terms of support offered, the volunteers themselves gained a great deal from their interactions. For example, one elderly white British volunteer keeps coming to the club overcoming her initial reluctant attitude towards refugees and talks to participants and teaches them English. The affective nature of support offered whilst not prescriptive, indeed largely spontaneous, is an

important feature of interactions at the Welcome Project. Isolated individuals, both beneficiaries and volunteers, enjoy the intimacy, care, companionship and social interaction that is missing in their lives, and is offered through the social bonds built. Thus, not only do they know each other sufficiently well to provide highly individualised support but they also develop enduring relationships which defy age, country of origin and immigration status. The words of the project leader highlight the importance of mixing different people together in order to support integration:

Actually, integration really works if they are integrated and connected with other women... We think, if we get one together it's going to be of a similar – actually, a mix really helps and the fact that she knows people here have all gone through difficulties, that helps as well. Also, a lot of them want to get out of the mindset of 'I am an asylum seeker,' or, 'I am desperate.' They want to hang out with people who have normal lives.

Success factors

We selected the Welcome Project for both an UPWEB mini-ethnography and then as a chapter for the British Academy report because their approach although small-scale is simple, effective and cheap and could potentially be replicated anywhere, for any community and even scaled up if more resources were available. There are certain ingredients though that are necessary to reproduce such a venture.

Firstly, a community space is needed. The room used is attached to the church but it is reached via a side street so it is not necessary to enter the church. This is important to some beneficiaries who as non-Christians are nervous about entering a building associated with an unfamiliar religion. The space also has cooking and eating facilities meaning people can work together to produce and then share something.

Secondly volunteers do not solely serve beneficiaries but meals are mainly served by volunteers and then they and beneficiaries eat together. Through sharing meals and celebrating together they develop relationships that extend beyond the project.

Thirdly there is a leader who recruits the volunteers and encourages them to be non-judgemental. In the event of conflict the leader intervenes sitting down to openly discuss and resolve any concerns. This approach helps to address any culturally driven and other misunderstandings.

Fourthly the project actively encourages mixing across ages and countries of origin so people can build new networks that expand beyond their own communities.

Fifthly the project has no “agenda” beyond providing a safe space and some lunch. All support emerges from the interaction between volunteers and beneficiaries and the desire to provide help to someone with whom they engage in friendly relations and who may eventually become a friend.

Finally, the project has been running for many years and is well known within the neighbourhood. The knowledge of the local ecology of services possessed by the project leader and some of the volunteers is critical in helping to connect beneficiaries to the kinds of support that they need which is beyond the scope of the help that can be offered on a one to one basis.

In combining personal relationships with local knowledge, the project is able to help individuals with complex problems and begin to address those difficulties in ways that are beyond the remit of state agencies many of which lack the time, expertise and resources to

address complex needs in a superdiverse population. The Welcome Project to some extent fills the gap left by the absence of an integration programme for asylum seekers and refugees in the UK.

While the Welcome Project is aimed at asylum seekers and refugees it is clear that their approach has potential to meet the needs of other communities and build connections that both facilitate social integration and address complex needs. The Project would like to do more to help local communities perhaps running lunch clubs on other days aimed at different beneficiaries. The running costs are around £100 per week which covers the salary of a part-time worker and rental for the space used. From September 2017 they have joined the Fareshare Food network <http://fareshare.org.uk/> which, for £21 a week, provides a weekly supply of fresh food and store cupboard staples. Despite the very low cost of running the existing club and dependence on donations of food and labour they lack the resource to expand their activities. Nonetheless they are confident that their model has wider applications. The final word in this chapter goes to the Welcome Project lead:

You could start similar things to this that have no real agenda, no religious agenda, no funding agenda. I know you need the right people, but I just think this sort of place would benefit the man who's at home, like, the young black man who's got mental health problems who doesn't know how to cope, or the pensioner who's on their own, is lonely. We can have people in different countries come and be unity. I think we could have people who are British who could come and just feel safe. I think if something like this was made, because it doesn't cost much and, you know, if you've got the right people and use volunteers, it's - I would start up many of these. Clone them (laughs).

Note all names used are pseudonyms

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