

Refugee Housing in Birmingham, UK

**An assessment of the
local experience from
diverse perspectives**

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Introduction

In early 2022, BBC News reported failings of refugee integration housing provision.¹ Some 41,000 asylum seekers were living within the main integration scheme with numbers set to rise above 80,000 in 2023. The challenges of refugee integration, and housing needs, increased as the U.K. transitioned into a Covid-19 Endemic. This impacted local authority funding, the growing cost of living crisis in the UK, and the post-Brexit environment engendering specific consequences for refugee social and economic integration. This is happening in the context where the UK faces a shortage of houses, referred oftentimes to a 'housing crisis'. It is this broader lens of the limited availability of homes that contextualizes media coverage and conversations around housing and refugees.

The national trend of austerity cuts frames Birmingham's local context. The Local Authority struggles to support the housing needs of its population. In what follows, we note that provision is increasingly under pressure as the UK negotiates a cost-of-living crisis. The macro context of continued global conflict in Ukraine, as well as the cost-of-living crisis, are a backdrop against which one needs to understand demand for affordable housing. As our research unfolded the nature of the crisis, at a local level, became increasingly clear. In May 2023 the Birmingham Local Authority was issued a Regulatory Notice.² Its houses have not met fire, electrical and asbestos safety checks. Moreover, a significant proportion of the properties did not meet the Decent Homes Standard. How it addresses this challenge amidst filing for bankruptcy remains unclear. In October 2023 the council filed a Section 114 notice.³ It is unable to balance its budget and meet its financial commitments. It is within this local environment that our

1 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-59763205> Last accessed 10 January 2024

2 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/birmingham-city-council--3/regulatory-notice-birmingham-city-council-24-may-2023>
Last accessed 10 January 2024

3 https://www.birmingham.gov.uk/news/article/1381/statement_regarding_section_114_notice

Speaking to the refugee community about housing quickly revealed that housing is not understood as one location at a particular point in time. It becomes evident from our focus groups that housing is itself a journey.

research unfolded. It is within these intersecting challenges that this report is situated. We pay particular attention to the availability of housing for refugees and migrants in Birmingham and unpack the challenges they, and those that support them in their journey to find a house, experience.

The Local Picture

Birmingham City Council has a unique perspective on housing. The Council is one of the largest landlords in Europe. It has a stock profile of 60,000 houses. Yet, the reliance on social housing outweighs demand and this has been the case for some time. Furthermore, limited investment in stock housing means that the Council is playing a game of catch up.⁴ This impacts the quality of housing provided. These challenges bear reflection. Local authorities are involved in the process of refugee integration. As noted in the Indicators of Integration Framework (2019) Local Authorities are charged with providing access to local housing support, access to housing benefits, and finding suitable accommodation. (Ss. 7.4)⁵ In the absence of accessible housing it is impossible for BCC to engage with the outlined local best practice expectations. This is the situation that a recognised refugee faces in Birmingham once they are granted asylum.

There are a variety of housing categories within the wider debates of asylum, refugee and migrant housing. It is worth noting the homes that inform this research are distinct from the 'initial housing' and temporary housing that asylum seekers reside in while awaiting the outcome of their asylum application. Initial Housing, also referred to as 'Section 98 support', is the first point of refugee housing in the UK.⁶ These usually take the form of a hotel or a hostel. Here, all meals are provided. Individuals living in initial housing do not get money or additional funding. Asylum seekers remain in this housing until the Home Office decides if they are eligible for full asylum support. Yet it is worth noting that s.98 and s.95 housing is available only to destitute asylum seekers. Not all asylum seekers will qualify for this support. For example, s.98 is for people that are homeless and need urgent accommodation.

4 Birmingham City Council. Housing Strategy 2023-2028. Available on: https://www.birmingham.gov.uk/download/downloads/id/25281/housing_strategy_2023_to_2028.pdf&usg=AOvVaw1Kwib_oo0ryYcXHCvQD0vz&opi=89978449

5 The Home Office. Indicators of integration framework 2019 third edition. Available on: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/home-office-indicators-of-integration-framework-2019>

6 UK General Public Acts. Immigration and Asylum Act 1999. Available on: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1999/33/introduction>

Individuals are then provided with ‘dispersal housing’ otherwise referred to as ‘Section 95 support’.⁷ Refugees can be dispersed to any part of the UK. They lack the ability to choose the time of their movement and the location of their accommodation. Families with children are more likely to be in a self-contained flat or house, if possible. Single individuals and couples are most likely to be in a shared house or a hostel. While living in dispersal housing refugees do not pay rent or other bills.

A final category of housing bears discussion. Supported accommodation is a broad term which describes a range of housing types. Exempt accommodation is supported housing which is exempt from certain Housing Benefit provisions.

It is defined as:

- a resettlement place; or
- an accommodation provided by a council, housing association, registered charity or voluntary organization where the body or person acting on their behalf other half provides the claimant with care, support or supervision.⁸

It is worth noting that the refugees that we spoke to during our study were, at the point of our discussion, living in supported accommodation. Their stories reflected a variety of housing experiences during their journey to Birmingham, UK.

7 UK General Public Acts. Immigration and Asylum Act 1999. Available on: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1999/33/introduction>

8 Wilson, W. (2022). Supported exempt accommodation (England). Commons Library Research Briefing, 20 June 2022. Available on: <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-9362/CBP-9362.pdf>

During the all-female focus group, women discussed the emotional attachment to achieving a settled housing space. Both the all-male and all-female focus groups reflected on the emotional experience of leaving their home at the start of the refugee journey.

Speaking to the refugee community about housing quickly revealed that housing is not understood as one location at a particular point in time. Moreover, it becomes evident from our focus groups that housing is itself a journey. This journey is not straightforward nor is it linear. There are both elements of time, space and location that play into the idea of housing that emerged when speaking to members of the refugee community, with refugees often reflecting on what had been 'left/lost' behind both in terms of the homes they were forced to flee and the homes they made along the way. These memories reflect the affective and emotional elements that emerge at the point of securing supported accommodation. During the all-female focus group, women discussed the emotional attachment to achieving a settled housing space. Both the all-male and all-female focus groups reflected on the emotional experience of leaving their home at the start of the refugee journey.⁹ While their housing experiences were challenging one outcome was apparent. Housing, when experienced positively, and supported by third sector (non-governmental) organizations (TSOs) led to a positive conclusion to their asylum process.

9 Two focus groups were held during the course of this research. An all-female focus group took place on 27 February 2023. An all-male focus group took place on 7 March 2023.

What bears noting, in the context of this pilot study, is that access to housing plays a role in understanding the integration journey of a refugee.

Refugee Integration

Integration is a contested term in the academic literature. As early as 2004, Ager and Strang were researching Indicators of integration.¹⁰ Their work went on to inform policy approaches to understanding the process. Jenny Phillimore identified themes that emerged across a diverse set of engagements with the topic.¹¹ For example, enabling refugees to access public services. Furthermore, supporting the developing of social capital for newly arrived refugees. Integration is relational. It involves a two-way relationship between newcomer and host. This relationship is unique and diverse. What is clear is that there are distinct conversations relating to the practice of integration and the academic debates about the process itself. What bears noting, in the context of this pilot study, is that access to housing plays a role in understanding the integration journey of a refugee. As the 2019 Indicators of Integration states:

Housing structures much of an individual's experience of integration. Housing conditions impact on a community's sense of security and stability, opportunities for social connection, and access to healthcare, education and employment.¹²

The indicators furthermore outline what is the best practice in housing at the local level. These include access to local housing support services; support to enable access to private rented sectors; support to accommodate household disability access needs; and policies supporting access to local housing support services and housing schemes.

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- 10 Ager, A. and Strang, A., 2004. *The Experience of Integration: A qualitative study of refugee integration in the local communities of Pollockshaws and Islington*. Research Development and Statistics Directorate, Home Office.
 - 11 Phillimore, J., 2012. Implementing integration in the UK: Lessons for integration theory, policy and practice. *Policy & Politics*, 40(4), pp.525-545.
 - 12 The Home Office. *Indicators of integration framework 2019 third edition*. Available on: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/home-office-indicators-of-integration-framework-2019>

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Methodology

This report uses a mixed methodological approach. We held two focus groups with members of the refugee community in Birmingham. Individuals from different backgrounds and origins were invited to the study to gather as diverse as possible arrival stories and housing journeys. Individuals who participated in the focus groups were recruited through Ashley Community Housing (ACH), a research partner of the project. The focus groups were comprised of up to eleven individuals. One focus group was held for women and one for men. In making this decision, we sought to understand the differences that gender might play in the experiences of refugee housing during the process of integration in the United Kingdom.

A second set of interviews were held with two specific communities. The project reached out to members of local authorities to understand the successes and challenges of housing strategies in general. Focus was paid to the intersection of housing policies and integration policies, aware that Birmingham is a dispersal city. This methodology was also employed to engage with members of the third sector, charity and non-governmental organizations that comprise the Birmingham Migration Ecosystem (BME). We have adopted this term as a catch-all phrase to refer to the various organizations that are not formally part of the local authority system yet exhibit a relationship with them through their work with the asylum seeking and refugee community in the West Midlands.

The focus groups and interviews were transcribed and anonymized as required by our university ethical requirements. These documents were put in conversation with each other, and common themes and ideas were identified and cross referenced within the team. These themes provide the basis for this report.

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General Conclusions

Our research challenges the academic scholarship that describes the experiences of refugee housing in a mostly negative light. Participants were, for the most part, happy with their accommodations and felt supported by their local communities. Focus group participants did not reveal a negative impact on their mental health and both men and women explained that the goal of a fixed, long term, address, would provide them with greater opportunities in the future.¹³ Work prospects were mentioned by the male participants. A fixed address would, they suggested, open the possibility for permanent work.¹⁴ Women, on the other hand, focused on housing as a pathway to relationship building. A fixed address, many discussed, would enable becoming part of a wider community.¹⁵ This positive, future-oriented, approach is we believe, due to the supported nature of their housing integration. Focus group participants had acquired housing with the support of organizations within the BME.

Interviews with members of the BME provided a rich set of details about the work being done to support refugees on their housing journey. It is noted that many individuals who do this work are themselves refugees. This lived experience facilitates empathy and a desire to go the extra mile to do the work that they do. This commitment can have a negative impact on their own mental health. Long hours are needed to plug gaps in the provision of local authorities and signpost members of the refugee community to the appropriate support mechanisms and organizations. A general sense of frustration at the length of time it takes for the Birmingham local authority to provide housing to members of the refugee community informs their experiences supporting refugees. There is also an acknowledgment that this mirrors the experiences of non-refugee users of social housing.¹⁶

13 Focus groups held 21 February and March 7, 2023.

14 Focus group, 21 February, 2023.

15 Focus group, 7 March, 2023.

16 Interviews held 11 July, 2023.

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When the experiences of refugees are put in contrast with those providing refugee support, outside of the local authorities, their lived experiences are quite different. Participants from the refugee community were hopeful. Overall, they looked to the future, with possibilities. The other, employees within the BME, wondered how long they could carry on, in the face of local authority challenges to refugee housing provision, and a reliance on personal knowledge to facilitate conversations between the various organizations in the ecosystem providing support.¹⁷ It is worth noting that one formal mechanism exists within BCC to facilitate local knowledge sharing. Birmingham City Council runs the Birmingham Migration Forum. It brings local community organizations into conversation with each other. It is run by the department responsible for refugee integration.

We can also begin to understand the local authority's inability to deliver timely housing to refugees as a form of slow violence. Here, we draw on the insights of Elliot-Cooper et. al whose work on displacement in urban studies discusses the temporalities of displacement.

17 Interviews held 11 July, 2023.

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They write:

What appears particularly important is that displacement is never a one-off event but a series of attritional micro-events that unfold over time, generating different emotions and states for those affected: anxiety, hope, confusions, fear, dislocation loss, anticipation, dread and so on.¹⁸

The attrition of this experience is documented in the experiences of the solidarity communities supporting refugees and asylum seekers in Birmingham. Austerity cuts, begun in the UK in 2008, impact access to housing and contribute to wider structure inequalities, affecting the least well off in society. Our findings reveal this impacts on those within the third sector supporting recognised refugees and migrants to find housing. There is a real threat that individuals involved in this work face burnout and will leave the sector fuelling the loss of specialist knowledge and lived experience. This knowledge is vital to the proper supporting of those seeking housing.

Local Authorities can offset some of these challenges in the short term. Barbehön and Münch note in the long term it is the least well off in society that bear the brunt of austerity cuts.¹⁹ Austerity policies, they argue, prompt high level of staff-turnover. This reduces specialist knowledge and sharing of best practice, thus challenging the goals of the Indicators of Integration Policy. Our report evidence this unfolding process of long wait times for housing reported by the BME community.²⁰ It also reveals their concerns about burnout and the long-term sustainability of their work.²¹ More often than not, however, it is refugee communities that bear the brunt of these unfolding events. This is best evidenced in the refugee protests outside a dispersal hotel in Liverpool in

18 Elliott-Cooper, A., Hubbard, P. and Lees, L., 2020. Moving beyond Marcuse: Gentrification, displacement and the violence of un-homing. *Progress in Human geography*, 44(3), p. 502.

19 Barbehön, M. and Münch, S., 2017. Interrogating the city: Comparing locally distinct crisis discourses. *Urban Studies*, 54(9), pp.2072-2086.

20 Interview, 11 July 2023.

21 Interview, 11 July 2023.

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February 2023.²² Media reports suggest far-right protestors challenged the presence of asylum seekers in the dispersal hotel. Residents were left with feelings of insecurity and fear as they awaited the next phase of their integration, and housing journey.

Members of the BME voiced frustration with the role of the BCC in relation to housing provision.²³ This frustration is tempered with hope that the relationship might be strengthened into the future. Relationship building requires long-term commitments on the part of BCC. It is worth noting that since the adoption of the Cohesion Policy (2018), three new councilors have held the role. Considering the various types of housing options, and programs, on offer to the refugee community in Birmingham, there is a need to bring the portfolio concerned with refugee dispersal and integration into conversation with the portfolio for housing. As BCC works towards the renewal of their City of Sanctuary Pledge, we urge BCC to work towards this possibility. It will begin to address the vulnerability and precarity that asylum seekers face once they are recognized refugees. This can be a first step towards integrating best practice as outlined in the Indicators of Integration (2019) local housing practice.

22 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-merseyside-64689140>

23 Interview, 11 July 2023.

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Areas for further research

More work remains to be done on this area of study. It is clear that the national housing crisis impacts the least well-off communities. Refugees lack formal political representation and rely on the actions of others to advocate for legislative change. Housing for the refugee community must remain at the forefront of this conversation to ensure equitable access to accessible, affordable, and appropriate housing. Housing intersects with the refugee arrival and dispersal process in the United Kingdom. This intersection is negatively influenced by years of national austerity policies impacting the ability of local authorities to effectively perform their roles. This relationship between the local and the national inspired this work and revealed that more research is required.

At the level of local policy, an element of unpredictability informs the work of local refugee integration teams. How long-term planning can be effective when reacting to crisis, in an already underfunded and understaffed environment, or can even take place remains a vital question in relation to refugee housing and support. As the Indicators of Integration Best Practice require access to long term housing solutions this will remain a challenge if the various portfolios do not begin to speak together.

At an academic level it is increasingly clear that there are emotional and affective stories to tell about the housing journey of refugees. Bringing in the emerging conversations of everyday emotions and the lived experience of refugees will help provide a more nuanced understanding of the journey that refugees embark upon when they arrive in the United Kingdom. What is more, the gendered nature of these affective and emotional experiences also remains a space to explore.

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This pilot study of Birmingham also raises questions about universalizability and generalizability. What this study showcased was the challenge of an integrated approach to housing. It also demonstrated that inequalities in housing provision exist in Birmingham. How localized is this phenomenon, or do other localities in England work within the binaries of citizenship and non-citizenship when addressing a right to housing? Situating this conversation in the wider work on the role of political institutions at the local and national level can begin to help us understand the crafting of policy.

Housing intersects with the refugee arrival and dispersal process in the United Kingdom. This intersection is negatively influenced by years of national austerity policies impacting the ability of local authorities to effectively perform their roles.

Credits

Many individuals and organisations were instrumental in seeing this project through to completion.

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About this report

This report is the result of research awarded by Midlands Innovation. It brings together a team of researchers from Aston University, The University of Leicester, and Ashley Community Housing. The project sought to understand the lived experience of refugee housing in the United Kingdom in a post-Covid environment. This report is based on research conducted within a project titled 'From Pandemic to Endemic: Identifying best practice in refugee integration in the West Midlands'. The research took place between March 2023 and December 2023.

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