

Powerful Participation: voices that change minds, policy, and practice



Research from the AVAIL Project

AVAIL

Amplifying the Voices of
Asylum Seekers and Refugees
for Integration and Life Skills

Co-ordinated by



In partnership with



Croce Rossa Italiana



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Executive Summary

The AVAIL (Amplifying the Voices of Asylum Seekers and Refugees for Integration and Life Skills) project was designed to explore new ways to support integration of refugees, asylum seekers and host communities by testing participatory approaches. Between February 2018 and February 2020, the project set out to explore and learn from different ways of involving people with lived experience in different contexts. AVAIL operated in four countries – United Kingdom, Ireland, Latvia and Italy – employing a variety of participatory approaches. These included:

- Peer-led Life Skills Courses
- Peer Mentoring
- Community Buddying
- Refugee-led Language Learning
- Refugee and Asylum Seeker-led Advocacy
- Refugee-led Web Radio
- Football Team

Research was imbedded in all countries alongside a sample of projects to gather evidence on the use of participatory approaches.

Research Design

The research was designed to answer the following question:

What are the benefits, challenges and impacts of participatory approaches to refugee and asylum seeker integration?

The study collected data between September 2018 and October 2019 in the four project countries (UK, Italy, Ireland and Latvia). This involved 246 surveys, 51 semi-structured interviews and 9 focus groups. Three refugee and asylum seeker Peer Researchers used their experiential knowledge along with cultural and linguistic skills in data collection and analysis.

An Integration Framework was developed from existing models in the literature to provide a conceptual basis on which the impacts on integration could be assessed.

This project and all photos were taken prior to the coronavirus pandemic and any national regulations designed to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

Key findings

Skills Development and Knowledge Exchange

Adopting participatory approaches within service design enabled skill and knowledge development through training and to practice these skills in activities such as public speaking, writing media articles, and course delivery. Active project roles, where power and responsibility was shared with participants, offered participants the opportunity to develop and use skills or gain knowledge. These roles included Peer Educators (Wales, UK), Peer Mentors (Italy), VOICES Ambassadors (UK), and Chatterbox Tutors (UK). Participatory approaches also facilitated the development of peer-to-peer exchange mechanisms, where knowledge and experience was shared to support integration prospects of newly arrived asylum seekers.

Improvements to Mental Wellbeing

Participatory approaches that were underpinned by giving self-agency to individuals led to self-reported improvements to mental wellbeing. This incorporated increases in feelings of confidence, self-esteem and self-worth. Having space to share issues and gain solutions with others who listen and can relate, being able to use experience to help others, activities that enabled skills and knowledge development, and raising issues and concerns to people in positions of power, all contributed to the improvements in mental wellbeing. This finding was strongest in VOICES Ambassadors (UK) and Peer Educators (UK), and was identifiable for Peer Mentors (Italy).

Influencing Policy, Practice and Public Opinion

Representations with different levels of government and enactors of policies led to policy and practice change. Through the VOICES Network (UK), VOICES Ambassadors (refugees and asylum seekers) spoke in the UK, Scottish and Welsh Parliaments, met with policy makers, and spoke to the public either at events or through the media. Politicians reported the impact of enabling participants with lived experience to contribute, bringing credibility and insight, to the issues.

VOICES Ambassadors received media and advocacy training and were supported through engagements. Having a supported network of participants with lived experience enabled a mechanism for consultation responses or representation at key meetings to draw on lived experience more easily.

Fostering of Resilient and Supportive Social Networks

Social connections formed across projects, with emerging evidence of the additional benefits of participatory approaches for developing social connections. In the Buddy projects (Ireland/Latvia), these connections were more likely to be expanded into host communities. Host 'buddies' formed safety nets, as well as using their social networks and capital to facilitate access to healthcare and the labour market for refugees and asylum seekers.

Cultural Exchange and Changing Perceptions

Involvement in services designed and delivered by those with lived experience, led to increased cultural awareness for newly arrived asylum seekers participating in the Life Skills course (UK). Transfers of cultural understanding between refugees, people seeking asylum and host communities was also facilitated by the Buddy projects (Latvia and Ireland). In the Chatterbox (UK) and Buddy Projects (Latvia and Ireland), host society perceptions of refugees and asylum seekers were enhanced after interactions in the project.

Requires Time and Effective Support

Where participants took on responsibility, staff and participants stated the need to allow time for skills and confidence development at the start of participants' involvement. This reflects the myriad challenges facing refugees and asylum seekers. Having staff or volunteers who can facilitate effective participation, provide emotional support, and manage relationships was also seen as very important for successful outcomes by participants of all projects.

Recommendations

Policy Makers

- Enhance ongoing and authentic engagement opportunities in policy work for those with lived experience
- Where meaningful opportunities can be created in policy development and reviews, plan enough time for early dialogue with people with lived experience, outlining the parameters of any areas that may be coproduced and areas that are limited to consultation

Service Providers and NGOs

- Diversify approaches to design, deliver and evaluate services: Embed opportunities to include local communities and people with lived experience where appropriate
- Provide a platform to support those with lived experience to speak directly to policy makers or enactors of policy such as local government or housing associations. This can be done on a basis of independence of message for those with lived experience or within parameters agreed with an organisation.
- At the outset of a project, allow sufficient time for confidence and skills development as well as the development of trust

Funders

Encourage participatory approaches in funding calls:

- Allow a minimum of 4-6 months lead in time for funding application deadlines to allow for applications to be co-produced
- When adopting place-based funding approaches, ensure effective support allows meaningful and safe participation for local communities
- Ensure sufficient scope and flexibility for co-design or co-production of projects such as enabling project iterations to be developed during the project cycle and ensuring Grant Managers are equipped to approve a more flexible iterative approach



Introduction

Operating in the United Kingdom, Ireland, Latvia and Italy, the Amplifying the Voices of Asylum Seekers and Refugees for Integration and Life Skills – or AVAIL – project was designed to explore new ways to support integration of refugees, asylum seekers and host communities by testing participatory approaches. With funding from the European Union’s Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF) for February 2018 to February 2020, the project set out to explore and learn from different ways of involving people with lived experience in different contexts.

The four countries were chosen to investigate the impact of these approaches for their complementary characteristics. Italy and Latvia – often viewed as transit countries, on different migration routes – were chosen alongside the UK and Ireland – destination countries – to test the application of participatory practices in different contexts. The countries hosted the following interventions:

- **Buddying, Ireland and Latvia.** Members of host communities acted as a ‘Buddy’ for newly arrived refugees and asylum seekers. These projects employed a community participation model, seeking to give power to local host community members to facilitate integration.
- **Football Team, Italy.** People seeking asylum were supported to form a football team in a reception centre in Italy. They joined up with a local community sports association to test integration through sport, playing matches against and alongside local teams.
- **Chatterbox, United Kingdom.** Facilitated through an existing service, host community members learnt languages from refugee teachers. Languages included Arabic, Farsi, French, Mandarin and Spanish. The lessons facilitated interactions between host community members and refugees.
- **Life Skills Project, Wales.** Using a Peer Educator model, those with lived experience co-designed and co-delivered a ‘life skills’ service for newly arrived asylum seekers. Over 6-10 sessions, Peer Educators, staff and topic specialists delivered classes on themes including health, education, the asylum system and local orientation.
- **Peer Mentoring, Italy.** Similar to the Peer Educator model, more established refugees and asylum seekers passed on knowledge and skills to others within three Reception Centres. Using their experience, Peer Mentors attempted to enhance the integration prospects of peers.
- **Web Radio, Italy.** Produced by those with lived experience, the web radio shows collected stories from around the country – sharing the voices of people seeking asylum and refugees in Italy, but also the experiences and views of people in the host communities they have arrived in to.
- **VOICES Network, United Kingdom.** Refugees and asylum seekers were trained and supported as ‘VOICES Ambassadors’ to raise their individual and collective voices to speak directly of their experiences. They aimed to employ the power of their voices to change minds (through working with the media and public events), policy (through advocacy work) and practice (through service improvement).

[→ See Country Contexts for more detail](#)

Research was imbedded alongside a sample of the projects in all countries to gather evidence of the impacts, challenges and benefits of participatory approaches to integration. The aim was to contribute to the evidence base on the practical application of participatory approaches to integration.

1

Background

To build upon previous projects and ground the research in the academic literature, a review of existing evidence relating to the use of participatory methods in integrating refugees and asylum seekers was carried out (See Appendix 1). To provide background to the topic, the key relevant findings are summarised here.

Integration

From the review of the literature, the most relevant definition is employed by UNHCR, which defines integration as ‘the end product of a dynamic, multi-faceted two-way process with three interrelated dimensions: a legal, an economic and a socio-cultural dimension’ (2015, p.13). The two-way process – separate from the one way process of assimilation – implies obligations on the part of refugees and asylum seekers, and host communities and states. Integration, while a while a community-level process with multiple social, economic and political factors, also occurs on an individual level and is approached by each person differently (UNHCR, 2016).

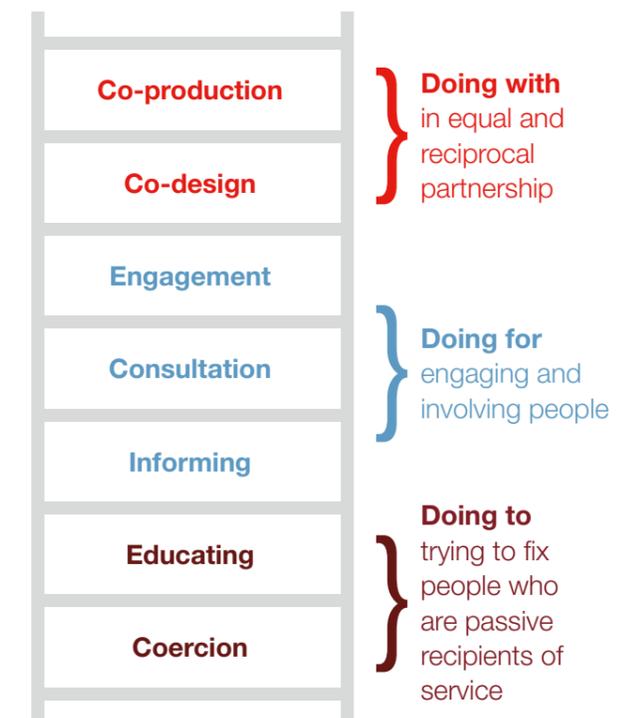
Use of Participatory Approaches

There has been a conceptual shift from ‘a needs-based approach to a rights-based approach’ in many organisations working with refugees and asylum seekers (UNHCR, 2014, p.9). Part of this change has been moving away from viewing beneficiaries or service users as ‘vulnerable persons’ to agents of change in the integration process, who possess ‘human capital and resources, through education, language skills and personal and professional experiences’ (UNHCR, 2016, p.88). From this conceptual shift, there has been a growth in interest and use of participatory approaches in the sector.

Parallel to this, there has been recognition of the value and importance of involving host communities (UNDP, 2018). This is through the emergence of spontaneous volunteers that presented during the so-called migrant crisis in Europe, and impacting public attitudes and fostering opportunities for direct contact to counter balance negative stereotypes and stigma (Bodeux et al., 2019).

At their core, participatory approaches are about the sharing of power with people with lived experience. In this context, this included refugees, people seeking asylum and host communities. Participatory approaches can take many forms, ranging from informing and consultation to co-design and co-production (See Figure 1). Through participation, people’s unique knowledge of their circumstances and the systems they encounter can be capitalised upon. Described by Duarte et al., participatory approaches work on the premise that ‘people are all experts about themselves and their actions’ (2018, p.33). Participatory approaches offer a new way to integration that offer many potential benefits above more traditional approaches.

Figure 1: ‘Ladder of co-production’, (Think Local Act Personal, 2015)



2 Research Design

Research Question

The research was designed to answer the following question:

What are the benefits, challenges and impacts of participatory approaches to refugee and asylum seeker integration?

Research Methodology

The study employed both qualitative and quantitative methods in a mixed methods participatory convergence model (see diagram below). Data collection took place between September 2018 and October 2019, alongside projects in four countries (UK, Italy, Ireland and Latvia) and incorporated the following:

Quantitative

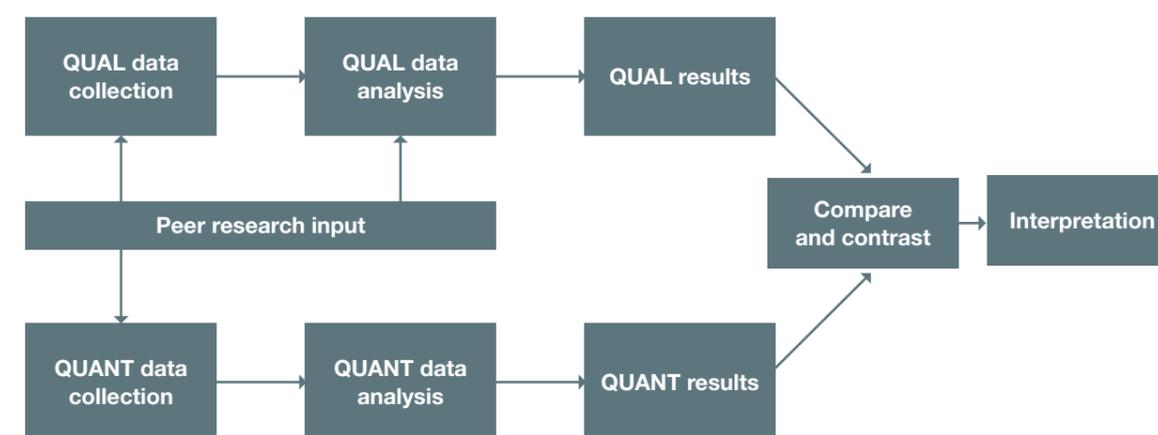
246 surveys were collected from participants from across the projects. Where possible and applicable this included a base and end point survey at the start and end of involvement in a project.

Qualitative

51 semi-structured interviews and 9 focus groups were conducted with 103 people. Participants were purposively sampled from each project to try and capture a diversity of experience. Interviews of staff and relevant key informants such as politicians were also undertaken.

Participatory

To reflect the ethos of the project, the research was also participatory. Three Peer Researchers – those with lived experience of being a refugee or asylum seeker – were given training in research methods. They used their experiential knowledge along with cultural and linguistic skills in data collection and analysis.



Integration Framework

Individual integration journeys are diverse, individualised and impacted by a wide number of factors (Ndofor-Tah et al., 2019). Therefore, to allow the measurement of integration progress and create indicators for the impacts of projects and interventions, an Integration Framework was developed in the project literature review at the start of the project (Appendix 1). The Framework synthesised different models of integration (Ager and Strang 2004; Cebulla et al., 2010) with more contemporary literature and practice to produce a three-tier system of measuring integration. This is broken into: **signifiers of integration, enablers of integration, and contextual factors**:

- **Signifiers of integration** include employment, housing, mental wellbeing and health. These are generally easier to measure than other indicators and are likely to feature further along the integration journey. They still play a significant role in facilitating integration.
- **Enablers of integration**, while similar to signifiers of integration, play an enhanced role in facilitating integration. These include language, social connections, education, skills, resilience, and knowledge of rights and process. They are also measures which assist refugees and asylum seekers in responding to contextual factors to achieve more positive outcomes in relation to signifiers of integration.
- **Contextual factors** include rights, the asylum process, safety, access to state support, economic conditions and openness of the host society. These are the legal, social and economic realities of a society through which refugees and asylum seekers must navigate.

Integration is a dynamic process and any model for measuring integration must acknowledge its inherent fluidity. It occurs at different speeds, along different trajectories, incorporating multiple interconnected variables. For example, having higher levels of mental wellbeing (signifier) is likely to impact the chances of improving social connections or learning a language (enablers). Dividing the process of integration in this manner allows for easier conceptualisation.

→ For more background to measuring integration see Ndofor-Tah et al. 2019.

Challenges and Limitations

Length and Scope

Some of the projects originally intended to feature in the research – the Football Team (Italy) and Web Radio (Italy) – were not included in the analysis due to a lack of data resulting from operational delays. Some of the projects included in the research – Chatterbox and Peer Mentoring at 2 of the 3 locations – were only active for 6 months or under before the conclusion of data gathering. Therefore, findings from these projects are limited.

Participant Flux and Response Rate

The realities of the lives of some of the participants in the target group – changing legal status, not in a settled community, family life – led to difficulties in data collection. This particularly led to challenges in survey data collection, with participants included in baseline data, not included in end point data and vice versa. Other participants were also reluctant to complete surveys, due to concerns about the use of their data. This has resulted in gaps in the quantitative data, complicating analysis. Where quantitative data is incomplete or missing, the research has relied on the qualitative data for its findings, including relevant quantitative data with a caveat.



Sampling and Selection Bias

Overall, due to the relatively small numbers involved in individual projects, those involved in the research cannot be said to be reflective of the wider population. Therefore, findings are descriptive rather than inferential.

Surveys were translated into 7 languages and interviews and focus groups were undertaken in 6 languages, with interpreters used where possible and appropriate. However, due to resource limitations, interpreters could not be used in every situation and some participants were not able to be interviewed as a result. Speakers of less commonly used languages are likely underrepresented in the research as a result.

3 Country Contexts

The aim of the research is to test practical applications of participatory approaches to integration of refugees, asylum seekers and host communities. To make it relevant for other contexts, the research attempted to focus upon the impact of participatory approaches, rather than unique contextual factors. However, it is impossible to ignore the context in which the projects were operating. Therefore, this section briefly outlines relevant contextual factors in each country in which the AVAIL project operated that may have affected the projects and the participants within them.

Ireland

The Irish Red Cross ran the Buddy Project from October 2018 – October 2019. The project involved 93 host community buddies, and 54 (as stated in the research) refugees. In the context of a lack of available housing (see below) most of the host Buddies pledged rooms in their homes for single male Syrian refugees to live.

Legislation and policy

Right to work: Yes, after 9 months asylum seekers have access to the labour market (IRC, 2019).¹

Right to access healthcare: Yes, asylum seekers in Direct Provision centres can access a Medical Card based on assessed income (IRC, 2019).

Right to housing: Yes, Direct Provision centres are used to house newly arrived asylum seekers. Asylum seekers are given 3 meals a day and a small amount of additional financial support. If an asylum seeker is granted some form of protection then they must leave Direct Provision and find new accommodation which can be either social housing or private accommodation (IRC, 2019).

Right to legal aid: Yes (IRC, 2019).

EU context: In 2015 the Irish government established the 'Irish Refugee Protection Programme'. The government committed to welcoming 4000 refugees to Ireland through both relocation and resettlement schemes (UNHCR, 2019). The majority of these are Syrians.

Key Social, Economic and Political Factors

Housing: A shortage of available private and social rental properties has led to rising costs of rent and increases in homelessness (O'Loughlin, 2019). This had subsequent consequences for housing refugees who are faced with long waiting periods for social housing or private rent levels unaffordable to many (IRC, 2017). After gaining their status, many refugees have had prolonged stays in Direct Provision.

Education: Schooling is free for children to age 18 whilst refugees can access university education on the same basis as Irish citizens. Asylum seekers and refugees have much more difficulty getting access to university education (IRC, 2019).

¹ In July 2018, Ireland transposed the recast Reception Conditions Directive following a decision of the Supreme Court that held that an absolute ban on employment was a breach of the right to dignity under the Irish Constitution. The Irish Refugee Council has received numerous reports of employers not recognising the official documents granting permission to work and not employing asylum seekers on this basis.

Latvia

The Latvian Red Cross ran the Buddy Project from August 2018 – August 2019. This involved 15 host community buddies and 43 refugees and asylum seekers. Activities ran until Feb 2020. The majority of the refugees and asylum seekers were family units from diverse countries.

Legislation and policy

Right to work: Yes, asylum seekers can seek permission to work 6 months after submitting their claim. They may work up until the final asylum decision is made (Latvian Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs, 2019).

Right to access healthcare: Yes, to state-funded healthcare services (European Commission, 2019a).

Right to housing: Yes, asylum seekers are housed in the Mucenieki accommodation centre until their claim is decided (European Commission, 2019b).

Right to legal aid: Yes, can apply for legal aid upon detention (European Commission, 2019a).

EU Context: As part of the EU Relocation Programme, Latvia agreed to accept 531 refugees in 2015, until 2019 374 persons have been relocated (LSM, 2019).

Key Social, Economic and Political Factors

State financial support: Payment procedure of benefits means that a refugee has the right to receive a state benefit for 10 months during the period of 12 months from the

day of acquisition of a refugee status and for a person with alternative status - for 7 months during the period of 12 months from the day of acquisition of alternative status. Amendments to the Asylum Law reduced the monthly support from €256 to €139 per one member of a family and €97 for all other family members (Lace, 2018). This negatively impacts upon refugees' capacities to afford accommodation or basic provisions.

Housing: There is no specialised provision for housing in either the municipal or state support system. This problem is still under discussion. After leaving Mucenieki, refugees must find their housing and pay the rent and utilities in full amount – if a person has no ability to do it, he or she can apply for support to cover some expenses at the local municipality.

Employment: Many positions require applicants to have A2 level Latvian, which is difficult for many to achieve in the short time and limited access to language courses (Lace, 2018).

Latvia as a transit country: Latvia is seen as a transit country by many who have sought asylum or been relocated there. Prior to taking part in the EU relocation programme, Latvia did not have any formal infrastructure in place to assist refugees and asylum seekers with their integration. (Amnesty International, 2018). Insufficient state support, and issues including housing and employment have led to high rates of 'secondary movements' of those who have achieved their status, with an estimate 85% leaving Latvia (Lace, 2018).

Italy

The Italian Red Cross ran the Peer Mentoring project in four locations from September 2018 – November 2019 – Lecce, Bolzano, Lana and Settimo Torinese. With 41 peer mentors and 371 mentees. A 25 strong refugee football team was located in Bresso, and refugee led radio station managed from Rome, with podcasts recorded across Italy.

Context

Legislation and policy

Right to work: Yes, asylum seekers may find employment 2 months after submitting a claim. This is not restricted to certain sectors, however, in practice there are restrictions to access (ASGI, 2019).

Right to access healthcare: Yes, to emergency healthcare (ASGI, 2019).

Right to housing: Yes, accommodation is provided to asylum seekers on arrival in reception centres whilst their claims are being determined (ASGI, 2019).

Right to legal aid: Asylum seekers are entitled to legal aid to appeal an asylum decision, but with difficulty (ASGI, 2019).

Key Social, Economic and Political Factors

Migration levels: Throughout 2016 and 2017, Italy experienced a large increase in arrivals, with 300,805 persons arriving in

Italy by sea during the two years (UNHCR, 2018). Various factors saw these numbers fall sharply, reducing the numbers of new arrivals during the period the AVAIL projects were active in Italy.² This impacted the Peer Mentoring project, which was focused upon more experienced refugees or asylum seekers mentoring those newly arrived.

Political climate: After a period without government at the start of the AVAIL project, a government was elected with promises to reduce the number of migrants in the country. Much of this focus from politicians and in the media was aimed at those seeking international protection. Under the so-called 'Salvini decree' humanitarian protection for migrants residing in Italy ended (Giuffrida, 2019). The law also impacted pending asylum seeker applications as services that help integration e.g. language courses, training and legal aid will be held back until an asylum decision has been made (Mixed Migration Centre, 2019). Funding for reception centres was also cut, forcing those administering the centres to reduce services. Many reception centres have been closed.

Employment: Asylum seekers are hindered accessing employment due to difficulties obtaining a residence permit (ASGI, 2019).

² 34,841 sea arrivals 2018/2019 (UNHCR, 2020)

United Kingdom

The British Red Cross ran the Life Skills project July 2018 – December 2019, VOICES Network July 2018 – Ongoing, and Chatterbox February 2020 – January 2021. 17 Peer Educators and 66 participants (Life Skills), 279 VOICES Ambassadors, and 278 Chatterbox Students and 31 Chatterbox Tutors. 3 Peer Researchers helped co-produce this report.

Legislation and policy

The UK government oversees immigration policy, however, devolved governments in Scotland and Wales have authority over many policy areas – children’s rights, human rights, safeguarding, social work response, education, legal aid, housing and health care –that affect asylum seekers.

Right to work: Asylum seekers have no right to work, however, if their claim has been pending for a period longer than 12 months they are eligible to apply for permission to work. There are strict rules regarding what type of employment asylum seekers can part take in (Refugee Council, 2019).

Right to access healthcare: Yes, to emergency healthcare (Refugee Council, 2019).

Right to housing: Yes, accommodation is available for asylum seekers in dispersal cities while having claim determined (Refugee Council, 2019).

Right to legal aid: Very few asylum seekers have access to state-funded legal aid prior to their screening interviews, except for unaccompanied minors.³ Legal aid can be accessed with difficulty for appeals (Refugee Council, 2019).

Key Social, Economic and Political Factors

Employment: While asylum seekers have the right to apply for permission to work after 12 months, the strict criteria effectively means the vast majority of asylum seekers are unable to legally access the labour market.

Asylum Decision Length: While figures for average times taken to receive a final asylum decision are difficult to access, there has been an increase in the numbers waiting 6 months for an initial decision, with less than 25% receiving a decision in Q4 2018, down from 55% in Q4 2016 (Migration Observatory, 2019).

Detention: The UK has some of the largest detention centres in Europe and uniquely within Europe, there is no time limit on the maximum period an individual can be detained for (The Migration Observatory, 2019). Research on the issue has reported significant negative impacts to the mental health of those detained (British Red Cross, 2018; von Werthern, et al., 2018)

Key Figures by country

	Ireland	Latvia	Italy	UK
Total number of refugees (end 2018)	6041 (UNHCR 2019)	670 (UNHCR 2019)	189,243 (UNHCR 2019)	126,720 (UNHCR 2019)
Total number of asylum seekers (end 2018)	7194 (UNHCR 2019)	58 (UNHCR 2019)	105,624 (UNHCR 2019)	45,244 (UNHCR 2019)
Number of new asylum seekers in 2018	3673 (IPO, 2018)	175 (Eurostat, 2019)	53,596 (ASGI, 2019)	37,295 (Eurostat, 2019)
Number of new asylum seekers in 2019	2235 (IPO, 2019)	55 (Eurostat, 2019)	27,934 (UNHCR, 2019b)	36,560 (Eurostat, 2019, latest figures including October 2019)
Top 3 asylum claimant countries of origin in 2018	Albania (12.5%), Georgia (12%), Syria (9%), Zimbabwe (7.5%) and Nigeria (7%) (IRC, 2019)	Russia (28%), Iraq (11%) and Azerbaijan (8%) (Eurostat, 2019)	Pakistan (15%), Nigeria (10%), and Bangladesh (8%) (Eurostat, 2019)	Iran (11%), Iraq (10%), and Pakistan (7%) (Eurostat, 2019)
Initial decision grant rate (2018)	23% granted refugee status, 6.73% granted subsidiary protection (IRC, 2019)	24% recognition rate for protection status in 2018 (UNHCR, 2019)	7% granted refugee status, 5% granted subsidiary protection, 21% granted humanitarian or special protection (ASGI, 2019)	30.4% granted refugee status, 5.1% granted humanitarian protection (ASGI, 2019)

³ This applies to England and Wales. Legal aid is easier to apply for in Scotland and Northern Ireland.

4 Research Findings

This section highlights the findings with the strongest evidence base. While the focus is upon findings that are prevalent across interventions, some of the outcomes e.g. policy change, are specific to one intervention. The findings are a result of thematic analysis of the mixed methods data incorporating the integration framework.

Findings are considered 'strong' or 'good' if there is reoccurring evidence across data types (qualitative and quantitative), across interventions or contexts e.g. in two countries, or there is a particularly high occurrence in one context. For qualitative evidence alone to be categorised as 'strong' or 'good' there needs to be a majority agreement across respondents or a sizable minority (<20%), for whom the finding is of high import.

'Limited' evidence is evidence that does not reach the criteria for 'good' or 'strong', but was identified as worthy of inclusion. Where there are instances of a phenomenon, but further research is required to prove or disprove it, the evidence will be referred to as 'emerging'.

4.1 Skills Development and Knowledge Exchange

'Well it's helped me actually to organise workshops, to speak in front of people and to manage the small groups. It gives you sort of transferable skills, so it was really good, and it's helped me in helping people.'

(VOICES Ambassador, UK)

The research identified that the adoption of participatory approaches within service design had a positive impact on skills and knowledge development for participants. Skills and knowledge are enablers of integration in the Integration Framework.

There were different mechanisms at work, but the two primary methods participants reported developing new or existing skills/knowledge through were role-specific training and the practical application of skills through participatory activities. Active project roles, where power and responsibility was shared with participants, including Peer Educators (Wales, UK), Peer Mentors (Italy), VOICES

Ambassadors (UK), or Chatterbox Tutors (UK), offered participants the opportunity to develop and use these skills or gain knowledge. Peer-to-peer exchange mechanisms of knowledge exchange also developed.

Skills and Knowledge Development

When asked what they had gained from their role, 27% of VOICES Ambassadors surveyed specified skills and/or knowledge development. This was supported in the interviews and focus groups with VOICES Ambassador consistently emphasising the benefits of their role for gaining skills and/or knowledge. While Peer Educators were not surveyed due to their small number, all Peer Educators interviewed (5) indicated skills and/or knowledge development as a result of their role.

The impact of role-specific training was reported as an important factor for participants. For example, one VOICES Ambassador emphasised the impact of training on knowledge useful for advocating for change from the Welsh government:

'So now I have more understanding, not just in that area of having access to other people's information and experiences, but also education wise. I can tell you about the budget of Wales, how much they receive and how much goes to health and this and that. Then the structure of the Welsh Parliament, I also have a better experience of the structure, in that case through the training I have received with the VOICES network, so is quite well, is quite enlightening.'

It is through the practical application of skills and knowledge where the added value of the participatory approaches was most evident. Prior to leaving their previous lives to seek asylum, many participants had previous careers or endeavours. As doctors, engineers, educators, NGO workers or administrative staff, participants had a range of skills which had



been left unused due to their circumstances. In project roles where responsibility was shared with refugees and asylum seekers, there was good evidence of participants developing and building on these skills.

Speaking of the process of seeking asylum in the UK and not having the right to work, a Peer Educator spoke of the benefits of being able to coproduce the Life Skills course:

'I was working very early in my life ... when I came here and begin the procedures about asylum, after that I understood there no permission for work that is strange, I could not accept the idea completely ... I began to search for something else. I don't want to lose my skills. I don't accept to sitting between four walls which make depression for me, you know you have the desire and willing but there is no permission it is like a compulsory vacation ... the good thing is this [Life Skills] course that we did'

→ See Section 4.2 for more on mental wellbeing.

As outlined by these VOICES Ambassadors in Scotland and Wales, there is also the opportunity to develop new skills:

'I would actually suggest them to join it immediately because it's very good and it's going to expand your network, and then you can learn new skills by organising events and stuff. You're going to campaign for people and it's going to really help in changing your life.'

'I think it was a good opportunity to yeah, to improve my skills as writing how to give speech, how to talk to people.'

Due to limited data from the Peer Mentoring and Chatterbox projects, the research was unable to draw strong conclusions. However, on both projects, there was some evidence of the benefits for skills and knowledge development. In the Peer Educator projects in Italy (Bolzano and Settimo), the focus was primarily on practical skills such as cooking and hygiene.

Among Chatterbox Tutors, two of the three survey respondents reported developing or using skills as a result of their role. In an interview, a Chatterbox tutor reflected on whether he had developed skills or knowledge:

'Both, because I have a very close relationship with Chatterbox, the system, the platform, developing the Spanish curriculum, and then there is always space for improvement to add new stuff, you know. ... and also when I use my knowledge, my background, definitely ... they're very flexible'

Knowledge exchange

With an emphasis on more horizontal structures, some projects encouraged peer-to-peer mechanisms of exchange for knowledge and experience. Using peer-to-peer exchange mechanisms, Peer Educators and to a lesser extent Peer Mentors were able to share their knowledge gained from lived experience on health and legal systems, practical information, culture and education. The ability to use their experience and help others in similar situations was the most cited reason for Peer Educators and Mentors to take part in projects.

Table 1: what did newly arrived asylum seekers gain from attending Life Skills course?

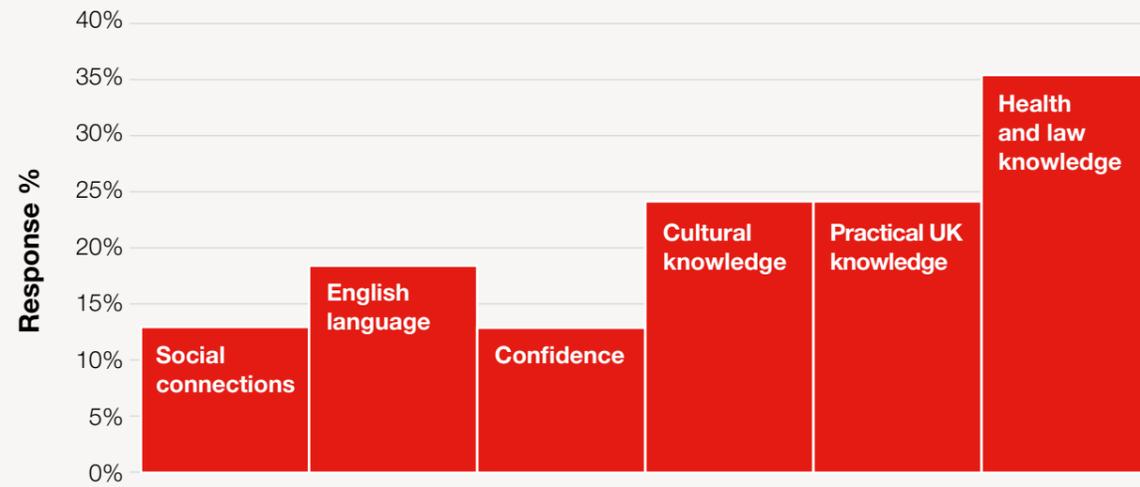


Table 1 outlines what newly arrived asylum seekers surveyed reported gaining from attending the course coproduced by Peer Educators. From the interviews, the added value of Peer Educators was evident in relation to cultural, practical, and health and law knowledge. Participants, Peer Educators and staff members highlighted the important role Peer Educators played in using their lived experience to guide and inform newly arrived asylum seekers.

Speaking of their experience of the course, one newly arrived asylum seeker highlighted the impact of having Peer Educators co-deliver the course:

‘They know everything about life here in the UK. We all have a different way of how we came here, also the different experiences we have shared on this course and we have learnt so much from those who are here for 6 or 8 years [Peer Educators]. I think it helps us a lot ... their experience is good for us. In my case, I only have four months of being here. It helps me a lot.’

(Life Skills Participant, Wales)

The value of having the lived experience in designing and delivering the course alongside Red Cross staff was also highlighted by this Peer Educator:

‘If you were born here and if you’ve lived all your life and if you drive your car you will never know how to find Caerleon or wetland using the bus for example. And the issues we’ve gone through, that the person who was born here will never know. So, it was nice like, it was a guidance from, it was A and L [Red Cross staff], it was guidance from them, and they took our opinions and we were preparing the course together, it was an amazing experience.’

This finding builds upon recent research by the UK Home Office, which purported ‘refugees placed significant trust in those who had been through a similar experience in integrating in a foreign country. Seeing the success of others provided encouragement and motivation to persevere through the challenges’ (Ndofor-Tah et al., 2019). The research from the Life Skills course indicated newly arrived participants appreciated a mix of advice from those with professional expertise and lived experience.



Case study

Peer Educator and VOICES Ambassador

Lora⁴ participated in the AVAIL project, first as a Peer Educator before becoming a VOICES Ambassador. Her experiences are emblematic of some of the best outcomes of participatory approaches to integration.

Involved in the initial co-design of the Life Skills course, she stated how, despite speaking English, she had difficulties accessing services:

'I've seen busses before, but I never had experience with all the same ticket, return ticket, coins change, how to save money. So, it was difficult for me and I couldn't understand the difference between GP and hospital, because in my language everything is hospital and that is where we go to.'

She used this experience in designing the course to be useful and relevant for newly arrived asylum seekers:

'There's no point teaching them about travelling by plane, train and blah, blah, blah, the far away land if they cannot go to Caerleon [local town] and see the free museum, which is kind of affordable for people, just pay the bus fare or to visit wetlands, or a lot of free places or events to do, but people cannot find them with lack of language, knowledge and lack of life experience here ... and I wish I could have that introduction to life in the UK when I just arrived, and somebody can tell me about it.'

A teacher before she had to flee conflict, she enjoyed being able to use her skills in delivering the Life Skills course:

'I love the course and you know it's related to my teaching as well, so I enjoyed it.'

She then took the opportunity to join the VOICES Network as an Ambassador and gave a speech in the Welsh Senedd (Parliament):

'Becoming an asylum seeker, I think I lost everything I had. Not only my property and my status, my identity, my relationship with people. So, I can say I lost everything physical and non-physical. I think we started with that event [in the Welsh Senedd], I overcame a lot of fears that I had before in my life, like the fear of public speaking, and like from the day one of my life, I was afraid of coming out and talking to people. I was a teacher, so I was fine with the students in the class, but never I could do it, because who am I to talk? I'm not smarter than them. I have to keep quiet and just listen, and I think that event just was like critical point for me. So, my life changed after that and I said 'now I want to talk, and I have a lot of things to share'. It was inspirational for me, and I think, after that, I was able to find myself, so I wasn't afraid of anything anymore, and I said, 'you know, what I've been through, none of them have been through that, so why shall I keep quiet?' I can talk and I can raise awareness.'

Advising others to join, she emphasised how for her, the VOICES project was open in its intentions:

'I said, "Oh my god you didn't want to join?" because a lot of places where people say "We will do big things," talking about big things and it's important when you are going through hard times, and then somebody gives you hope, and then, "I will do, I know how to do". So, it's like kind of marketing, and then at the end of the day nothing happens, and you think... So, I had a feeling after some that they're just using me to be getting their hand in, and that's all. Then what a good thing was about this project, nobody promises that we are going to change everything, life will be better, we will do this.'

She also witnessed the impact upon other Ambassadors:

'I came across a lot of things, like writing the narratives about your life, talking about your past, talking to people really helps the wellbeing. And believe me, I was watching our Ambassadors from because of my own interest, and I saw them crying and talking about the family matters and I saw them crying, I saw them being upset about it, and I think they feel happier now, because everything is like a storm in your heart. And when you release that storm, life still remains the same, it doesn't really change, but the way you perceive the life changes. So, the Ambassadors they still have the same problems, but I think they see those problems differently.'

Speaking during a meeting with her Member of Parliament, she reflected on how the VOICES project has supported her to raise her voice:

'Before I was screaming and nobody could hear me, now I whisper and people listen'

Speaking of a conversation with the UK Home Office, Lora outlined the impacts she feels she had:

'I know that some country policies, my country policies were changed by the Home Office, which I believe it was a result of the meeting that I spoke. Because I told the representatives about it is not presented in the country reports the way it is, and there are some issues. Then I noticed that they raised those issues in the project report, so it means that they didn't come just to listen, they did something ... We didn't go the lion's den, the lion came here. They were really nice. Not talking about the general policy of the home office, just some small points about communication.'

Through her role as a VOICES Ambassador, Natalia gave a speech in the Welsh Parliament, had consultations with the UK Home Office, met with her MP, gave an interview for Radio, and with the support of Red Cross staff wrote a funding application to facilitate engagement between the VOICES Network and universities that provide scholarships in Wales.

Alongside her VOICES Ambassador role Lora is studying a MA in Education: Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages.

⁴ Pseudonym

⁵ The report uses the phrase 'psychological and emotional wellbeing'

4.2 Improvements to Mental Wellbeing

‘It changes me to the best because there is activity, a chance to think that you are not alone you are with people that is very important, if I did not apply for this, I could be affected psychologically and did not feel comfortable’
(Peer Educator, UK speaking of her role).

As a key component of integration in the literature review, mental wellbeing is a signifier of integration in the framework for this research. Speaking of the importance of mental wellbeing⁵ to integration, a recent UK Home Office report specified that alongside a sense of belonging it is ‘embedded throughout the domains’ of its integration framework and ‘this reflects their core role across all aspects of integration’ (Ndofor-Tah et al., 2019, p.16).

The research found consistent reports of improvements to mental wellbeing and associated feelings of confidence, self-esteem and self-worth from those who were given responsibility and power in projects. This finding was strongest in VOICES Ambassadors and Peer Educators, and evident but limited for Peer Mentors.

Shared Safe Space

There were various and often interconnected processes indicated in the research, which led to these improvement for participants in the projects. For some, the space to share issues or emotions with others who can relate to, or support them, was a positive factor. This is partly linked to the formation of Social Connections (see section 4.4). The importance of a safe space was emphasised by this VOICES Ambassador:

‘At least we are together, we share a lot of suffering, our negative or positive things... we improve sometimes in some way. I think that’s very important project to give us a place to, to explain our feeling’
(Focus group)

Similarly, this Peer Educator speaking of why they enjoyed their role, highlighted the benefits for mental wellbeing of having a safe space to spend time with peers:

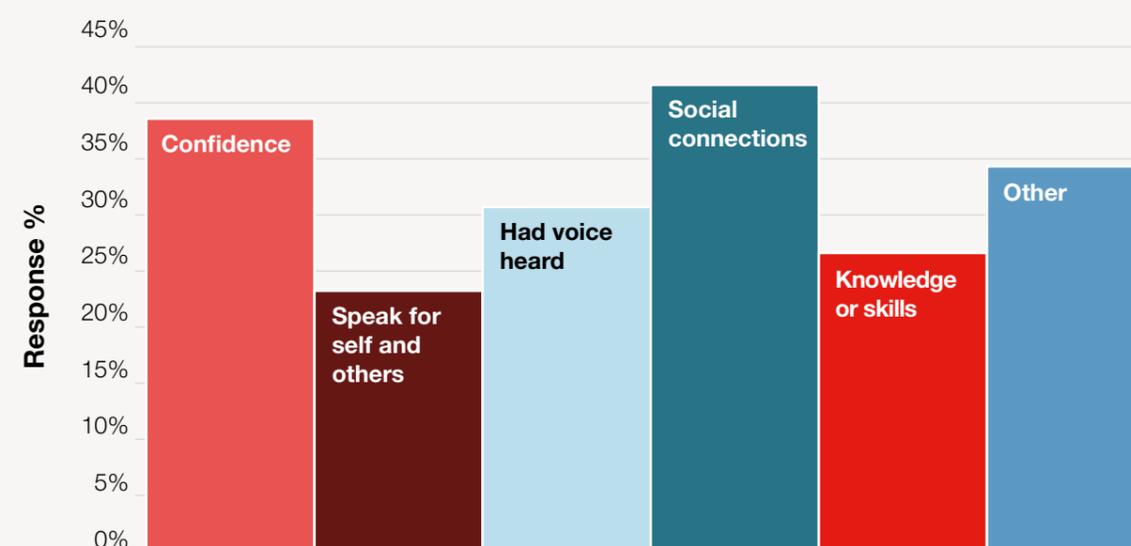
‘Just make myself busy every day and just mentally to come out from the Home Office, to real life and just speak to the people and just forget them [Home Office] for once in a while ... but at least for one or two hours, you can speak to friends and just a little bit relax or something, maybe to do some activities, make yourself busy.’

Having Agency and (Re)Gaining Confidence and Self-worth

Developing skills, feeling valued and having worth was also evident in the improvements to mental wellbeing. For example, this VOICES Ambassador in Scotland spoke of the benefits for their role for giving them more purpose:

‘It’s given me much more purpose, you know. So, I think, yeah, more focused in that aspect and I think clearly nowadays ... So, I like to say a bit more structure in my life now. I had it, but then kind of lost it because of what was happening, but now structure’s kind of coming back. We’re focused, we’re on route’

Table 2: Gained or achieved from being a VOICES Ambassador



Similarly, this Peer Educator in Wales spoke of the impact of undergoing training to perform the role:

‘Before taking the course with A [Groupwork Coordinator] I felt once that I lost my confidence, like I’m useless, but with the training the hope came back again to me’.

Being supported and trusted to take responsibility and agency in their role led to the development of confidence in participants. As can be seen in Table 2, 38% of Voices Ambassadors self-identified gaining or achieving confidence from their role. This VOICES Ambassador emphasised the confidence gained from speaking in a public event:

‘The confidence itself was amazing, like it’s supposed to be before. When you meet a lot of people, who are inspired to help, and who shared an experience too, or if you just benefit more from this movement, it was nice

again because seeing a lot of inspired people it builds hope and trust back. Something that it was before.’

Helping Others

For many across different projects, the ability to use their experience and help others to have better opportunities was influential. One Peer Mentor in Bolzano highlighted how they used their knowledge of destitution to support other asylum seekers:

‘I’m facing all kind of problems in Italy. Last 2 years. Firstly, I don’t know where is the project, where is the medical office, where is the legal office. So, one is spending maximum eight months, I live outside without home without any help. So, I’m understand everything and all the boys facing ... So, both of my friends and my brothers they are the same, so very enjoyable if I help the other persons and enjoy every moment.’

⁵ The report uses the phrase ‘psychological and emotional wellbeing’

Similarly, for this Peer Educator, helping others was important:

‘Since I started to be member team of Peer Educator, just see I’m very happy for that for us to help people, as we didn’t get that chance. But the ways that to help with people I’m enjoying, because myself the time I come, there was no one can help know that issue, but all people are coming now they’ve got a lot of chance.’

Raising Voice

Specific to the VOICES project, supported refugees and asylum seekers raised their voice to policy makers, the media or the public. From the interviews and focus group of VOICES Ambassadors, a number of them linked being able to share experiences with people in positions of power or authority with having a positive impact on their individual or collective mental wellbeing. One Ambassador in Scotland spoke of the positive impacts for refugees and asylum seekers who have been able to raise their voices through the project:

‘I know lots of them think that, “Oh nobody understands us, and we can’t do anything about it.” But when they participate in VOICES they think, “Yes there’s a way that we can say our things, our problems.” I think it’s a good way for them mentally more’

One Ambassador took this further and stressed the need for involvement to be purposeful and not merely a talking exercise:

‘Voices Ambassadors that they feel like their burden has reduced when they speak about their issues. So yeah, but I also feel that like any Ambassador we don’t get any policymakers to be involved in it, it will not make much difference if it’s just among us.’



4.3 Influencing Policy, Practice and Public Opinion

'I told them [VOICES Ambassadors] this is a really good impact and you are changing the policy. It's not maybe a big change but a small change, but it is an important change' (Participation Officer, British Red Cross)

Policy, organisational practice and public attitudes to refugees and asylum seekers, form the contextual factors of the Integration Framework. These shape the legal, social and economic realities of a society through which they must navigate. Changing these are longer term endeavours and are often difficult to measure, given the complex and often opaque nature of policy making (CIPPEC, 2011). The research indicated the potential of refugees and asylum seekers, being supported to speak directly of their own lives and experiences, to affect policy or practice change, or influence public opinion. This was apparent through some demonstrable changes to policy and practice as well as the creation of multiple opportunities that may yield results in the future.

Politicians and Policy Making

The power and potential of this method was evident in the response of politicians and policy makers who came into contact with VOICES ambassadors and their stories. This is best highlighted in the Case Study of Member of Parliament Ruth Jones.

→ See the case study on Ruth Jones, page 38

There were other positive indications of the scope for influencing policy development. For example, after a second meeting with the Cabinet Secretary for Equalities and Local Communities in Scotland (Aileen Campbell, MSP) her office approached the VOICES Network for Ambassadors to help shape the Scottish Government's Upcoming Anti-Destitution Strategy. This work is planned for 2020.

Having a supported network of participants with lived experience enabled a mechanism for consultation responses or representation at key meetings to draw on lived experience more easily. Speaking of the role of participation in policy making, a UNHCR report emphasised that for it to be effective, those involved in the process from outside traditional policy making processes 'have the capabilities needed to participate and discuss matters that affect them' (UNHCR, 2014, p.29). The ongoing support for VOICES Ambassadors enabled the VOICES Network to be more effective in this manner. A further element in the successes of the project was the role played by the British Red Cross in finding and screening opportunities for the VOICES Network.

→ See Section 4.6 for more information on support needs for participants

VOICES Ambassadors, having undergone training on policy making, advocacy and the media, and often with experience of similar events, were well placed to use their knowledge of the systems under discussion in the following ways:

- **VOICES Ambassadors co-produced** the British Red Cross's response to the UK Government's consultation on the 'Integrated Communities Strategy green paper'
- **Ambassadors held a workshop with the UK Home Office**, discussing ways to improve communications during the asylum process
- **Ambassadors attended roundtables** designed and chaired by IFRC and International Department of BRC on the Global Compact on Migration (GCM) and helped shape their reports, which will be used by different Red Cross and Red Crescent societies in 2020 to ask their governments for pledges made in the GCM
- **Ambassadors gave feedback** to several Red Cross reports, including Asylum Reform and Improvement Programme, and Hate Crime which were used at high level strategic engagement with Home Office and Crown Prosecution Service
- **Upon the suggestion of VOICES Ambassadors**, Wales Asylum and Migration Partnership at Wales Local Government Association has created a 'service user' place in their quarterly Wales Asylum and Migration Stakeholders Meeting and monthly Wales Asylum Forum meetings.
- **VOICES Network have established** formal links with the Scottish Government to have representation at quarterly New Scots Refugee Integration Strategy sub-group meetings.

Having a supported participatory infrastructure also created opportunities with both the UK Government and devolved governments to coproduce certain aspects of the Government's integration practice:

- **Ambassadors co-designed a course** on the asylum process in Scotland and co-delivered modules within the course using their lived experience
- **Ambassadors with the Welsh Government** co-designed the website for new asylum seekers in Wales
- **Ambassadors worked with local health authorities** to co-designed training for healthcare professionals working with asylum seekers in Wales

The impacts of these various inputs are difficult to accurately measure. Feeding into a strategy meeting or providing feedback on a policy increases the chance for impact, but it out the scope of this research to assess this adequately. However, there was evidence of tangible impacts of the work of the VOICES Network in this field.

Following the aforementioned workshop with the Home Office on ways to improve communications during the asylum process, the Customer Experience Improvement Team in the Home Office has incorporated some of the changes suggested by Ambassadors and in presentations given to stakeholders. After a similar consultation, input from Ambassadors was included in a Home Office Accommodation Induction Pack for asylum seekers. There is also anecdotal evidence of changes made to country reports used in assessing asylum claims following a meeting with Ambassadors.

Media and Public Events

VOICES Ambassadors contributed to articles in multiple national newspapers, wrote blogs featured on the British Red Cross website, gave interviews for external radio stations, and produced podcasts and videos. In terms of reach, the VOICES own blog was viewed 2,986 times by 1,278 visitors. The research did not have the capacity to focus upon media or public opinion analysis and is therefore unable to provide any meaningful conclusions of the external impact. The impacts for the Ambassadors' own integration are evidenced in the other findings of this report.

→ See sections 4.1 and 4.2

There were anecdotal reports of the potential impacts of refugees and asylum seekers speaking in the media. In one example, one Ambassador spoke of meeting a person a member of the public who had seen them give an interview about the asylum system, broadcast on BBC Scotland:

'One time I was at the bus stop, waiting for the bus and a random person said, 'hey man! You look familiar'. And I'm like okay I don't know you, but let's see where this goes. 'Where do you know me from?', 'TV somewhere ... oh yes, you were talking about the asylum system, is it really like that?' It shows me that still a lot of people, still have no idea of what actually happens when you're in the system ... It's kind of shocking, you know, we're in 2019 and people still don't know. And I'm like, 'yeah it's like that man and right now I'm working through the motions, but you know, but God willing' you know, 'oh good luck to you, I wish you get it man, wow 14 years is long time [waiting for getting status]'. 'Yeah man, still alive and healthy so we move forward' like 'Yeah. Good luck'

Additionally, one Ambassador who was a journalist in Syria won a media award for an article they wrote, which featured on the British Red Cross blog, reporting issues with the quality of their accommodation.

More tangibly, Ambassadors reported the responses of people at public events they contributed to. Mirroring the positive reactions from policy makers and politicians, Ambassadors and staff reported the positive reactions from members of the public at events where Ambassadors spoke of their own lives and stories. This sentiment was captured by an Ambassador in Wrexham, Wales:

After my speech, people came to me and was like, 'we never knew things like this was existing in Wrexham'. So, us talking through our experiences, is now making ... is now enabling people to listen to us and to know more about RAS.'



Case study

Rt Hon. Ruth Jones, Member of Parliament for Newport West

At an event in the UK Parliament, Ruth Jones MP met a VOICES Ambassador who lived in her constituency in Newport, Wales. After being influenced by his story she spoke of his experience in a speech in Parliament:

‘I commend the Red Cross for the drop-in event it held earlier this week, with refugees from various areas. I was able to meet up with one of my constituents, a young man called Ahmad⁶ who is a refugee. He does not sit around waiting for his status—he is helping other refugees and ensuring that they are not isolated. He is a brilliant young man and a brilliant example of how refugees want to get stuck in and involved in this country.’

(Ruth Jones MP, Speech House of Commons June 2019)

Within the speech, she also supported the right to work for asylum seekers, a key advocacy goal of the VOICES Network. Consequently, she agreed to meet more VOICES Ambassadors to discuss their stories. In an interview for the research, she highlighted the impact of refugees and asylum seekers speaking directly of their own lives:

‘I’ve obviously I’ve learned a lot about their direct situations in terms of housing, homeless hostels. You know, the fact that they only have five pounds a day to exist on. Things like dealing with children’s swimming lessons, you

know, all of that sort of stuff. School uniform, all the practical stuff. And that was really good for me to think, ‘Oh, yeah, actually, they have exactly the same need’. If their child wants to go swimming, they should be able to go swimming.’

Similarly, she emphasised the benefit of meeting with the group, rather than via a third party or reading about them:

‘It makes it much more real. Because I can remember, you know, there was the doctor sat over there, the solicitor over here, the business manager over there, you know, and the lady with the child, and, you know, all of these things, I remember better than say reading a paper. You can read a thesis, and that’s great, but it’s not real. These people are real. And just having met them, then it embeds it in my mind.’

Following the meetings, Ruth Jones MP has published a newspaper article in a Welsh newspaper, where she espoused her support for the VOICES Network and for their call for asylum seekers to have the right to work. She also supported an event in Parliament where VOICES Ambassadors met with 31 MPs and 1 member of the House of Lords.

⁶ Pseudonym





4.4 Fostering of Resilient and Supportive Social Networks

'I think he regards my wife as his Irish mother. So, I think there's a real affection there. So yeah, I see that as being an ongoing thing and hopefully his parents and sisters will be allowed to come to Ireland under family reunification. Decision pending. So, I could imagine meeting his family and all of that. So yeah, I see us having an ongoing relationship.'

(Host Buddy, Ireland)

Social Connections through Participatory Approaches

The benefits of social connections or networks for integration are well documented, as evidenced in the project's literature review (Cheung and Phillimore, 2014, Ndofor-Tah et al. 2019). They are enablers of integration in the Integration Framework. There was varying evidence of social connections forming as a result of involvement in projects. From the quantitative data, 10% of newly arrived asylum seekers on the Life Skills course self-identified gaining social connections as a result attending the course. On the VOICES Network, 42% of Ambassadors reported gaining social connections as a result of their participation.

For many of the interventions, it is difficult to directly link the engagement in the participatory elements of projects with the forming of social connections or networks. It is hard to isolate this from the effects of group activity in general. The higher rate of reported forming of social connections from the survey data for VOICES Ambassadors compared to Life Skills attendees could be an indication. The former are active participations,

given power and responsibility in their roles compared to Life Skills attendees, who are less active recipients of information, albeit from Peer Educators.

The qualitative research partly supports the link between involvement in participatory approaches and forming social connections. For example, speaking of making friends through the project, this Peer Educator highlighted the benefits for reducing social isolation:

‘It changes me to the best because there is activity, a chance to think that you are not alone you are with people that is very important.’

The link between these types of participatory approaches and forming of social connections requires further research.

Community Participation and Accessing Services

The added benefits for social connection was most apparent was in the community participation model employed in the Buddy projects (Latvia and Ireland). Through these interventions, social connections between host populations and refugees and asylum seekers was most evident with the associated benefits these types of connections bring. There were insufficient quantitative data to make strong claims, but from the qualitative data, there was evidence of host buddies acting as bridges into host society and using their own social networks or social capital to support access to healthcare and employment or gain skills.

There were 3 examples from the research of host buddies (2 in Ireland, 1 in Latvia) using their social networks to support their buddy to access employment. During a focus group, a host buddy in Ireland outlined the support they offered:

‘Ireland is extremely tribal ... our guy [refugee buddy] could not get a job in his chosen area until we actually got

on the phone and started using our social capital. So, he would never have gotten the job. That’s just the reality’

Another host buddy in Ireland reported using their network to support their refugee buddy to gain language skills:

‘When he arrived as well, I got a friend who’s retired to help him with language as well, just to provide language training’

In Latvia, a host buddy spoke of supporting their refugee buddy to access healthcare:

‘We were also helping her to solve her health issues ... and that’s why I was helping her to understand where she should go and with whom she should speak. I think this is the way how she’s getting integrated. And if she meets a doctor who is not willing to cooperate because she’s different then we were searching for somebody else who speaks in English, who she can rely on. And now she found a good doctor.’

Whilst not being large findings in absolute terms, they are anecdotal examples of situations when host buddies have supported access to healthcare, employment and skill development opportunities. Without the host buddy using their existing social networks, the RAS buddy would not have had access to these important enablers or signifiers of integration. The importance of this is highlighted when you consider the difficulties refugees face accessing the labour market (European Commission, 2016; Zane, Ruiz and Vargas Silva, 2019) or accessing healthcare (Lamb and Smith, 2002; World Health Organisation, 2019).

On the Chatterbox project, which employs a slightly different approach to community participation, there was anecdotal evidence of refugee tutors using their roles to establish social networks of a professional nature:

‘Yes, networking, you know, networking in a certain way, yeah. It’s finding my network, definitely, yeah, because young people start to see well my experience, my interest, my knowledge, and then well ... I’ve got a lady, she is doing the teaching training, and she wants to work with me. She’s developing a new project and I start to work with her, helping her to develop the initial stage of the project, the fundraising and all that. Yeah, in that sense, yeah, it start to open other doors.’

(Chatterbox Tutor)

Community Participation as a Bridge

In Latvia, due to the limited history of inward migration from non-European countries, there were not extensive existing migrant communities from similar linguistic or cultural backgrounds into which refugees and asylum seekers could access existing social networks. High levels of social isolation were evident for a lot of participants, especially pronounced in non-Latvian or Russian speakers. For some, their host buddy was their main opportunity for social connections, especially with members of the host community. One RAS buddy spoke of the impact of the project on her family’s connections:

‘When we didn’t yet have status, thanks to our ‘Buddy’ we were able to have a social life, to learn something new, to develop, to get to know Latvia. This helped maintain our human dignity.’

In Ireland, while there were some strong connections between Buddy ‘pairs’, most connections made with non-Syrians were through other means. However, there was some evidence of host buddies facilitating bridging into the wider community. One host buddy described her role in introducing

the family of her refugee buddy who had recently arrived through family reunion to their neighbours:

‘Yeah, I introduced them to the neighbours and the neighbours are quite good. The neighbours are good because they’re in an estate where they’re all Irish people, but their neighbours are very good; I think they’re a novelty here. I know they were afraid, they were anxious at the beginning when they moved in, but when they saw me and I got to know the neighbours as well, and they brought them in, they’d have coffee with them or whatever and I think it has [helped].’

Community Participation and Resilient Social Connections

Participatory approaches that embed contact with host communities displayed durable and strong social connections as evidenced within the Buddy projects. The majority of those interviewed in Latvia and Ireland after their involvement in the project had finished stated they had kept contact with their buddy. The research also highlighted how in some cases where the connections formed were strong, the host Buddies would act as a ‘safety net’ for their RAS Buddies:

‘I would hope that he always knows that we’re there ... if anything were to happen, that we are one of the people he would contact’

However, this was not uniform. In the Irish Buddy Project, not all pairings were successful and there was a breakdown in some of the buddy relationships (see section 4.6).

4.5 Cultural Exchange and Changing Perceptions

‘We wanted to integrate into Latvian society and the thing is, we should know about the culture because our culture and Latvian culture is two different cultures. That’s why, when we go to another city, visit a museum, or somewhere and we saw how do people behave and how the people look like because we just know Riga and the central market and home. We didn’t go anywhere. We didn’t know anything about Latvian culture but now we know a lot of things about Latvia and Latvian culture and we can better to integrate society’

(Refugee Buddy)

Cultural Knowledge and Exchange

A two way cultural exchange between host communities and refugees underpins various aspects of the integration framework. It increases the chances of making bridging social connections (enabler) between different cultural groups (Kane and Strang, 2008). Cultural exchange, the sharing of cultural norms, similarly can contribute to increased openness of host societies to migrants, due to the breaking down of barriers (Ndofor-Tah et al. 2019). Enhanced cultural knowledge about the host society also facilitates the attainment of wider knowledge about processes that are associated with integration (Ndofor-Tah et al. 2019).

For newly arrived asylum seekers participating in the Life Skills course (UK) 24% reported increased cultural awareness as a result of their involvement (see Table 1 in section 4.1). There was limited, but noteworthy evidence of this on the Peer Mentoring projects (Italy).



There was evidence from the Buddy projects (Latvia and Ireland) of transfers of cultural understanding between refugees and asylum seekers and host communities.

In Latvia, the Buddy project was designed around taking part in joint activities. While some were more social and focused upon developing the relationships of buddies, others were cultural such as trips to museums, theatres, the zoo etc. Speaking of how they had benefited from the course, one buddy focused upon gaining cultural knowledge:

'We meet many different people and we enjoy the places we visit and also learned about the culture of Latvia'

As illustrated by the quote at the start of the section, in the Latvian Buddy project, there can be a link between cultural knowledge to feeling more settled.

In Ireland, the cultural exchange occurred largely in the home or in family gatherings. From the perspective of many refugees on the Buddy project, the cultural exchange from their host buddies was diluted, as many had been in Ireland for at least one year and had developed other connections into Irish culture. However, for the majority of host buddies as this was their only or most significant contact with refugees. The impact on their cultural knowledge was substantial as outlined by this host Buddy:

'Well it reminds you how much you're approaching a relationship with your paradigms and your cultural expectations ... and that you need to be tuned into their worldview. And to begin to ask yourself now, what kind of context do they come from? What are their needs? What is the experience of coming from that culture to a place you didn't expect to be or planned to be? What might that be like? So, yeah, it just opens your eyes a little bit to relaxing your own cultural and other

assumptions and trying to be more tuned in to their context and way of viewing the world and how disruptive and dislocating that must be'

Similarly, this Irish host Buddy described how she gained cultural understanding from the project:

'It just opened my eyes to so much more politically and culturally. I learned so much more about Islamic culture and Syria, that I would never had the opportunity to learn.'

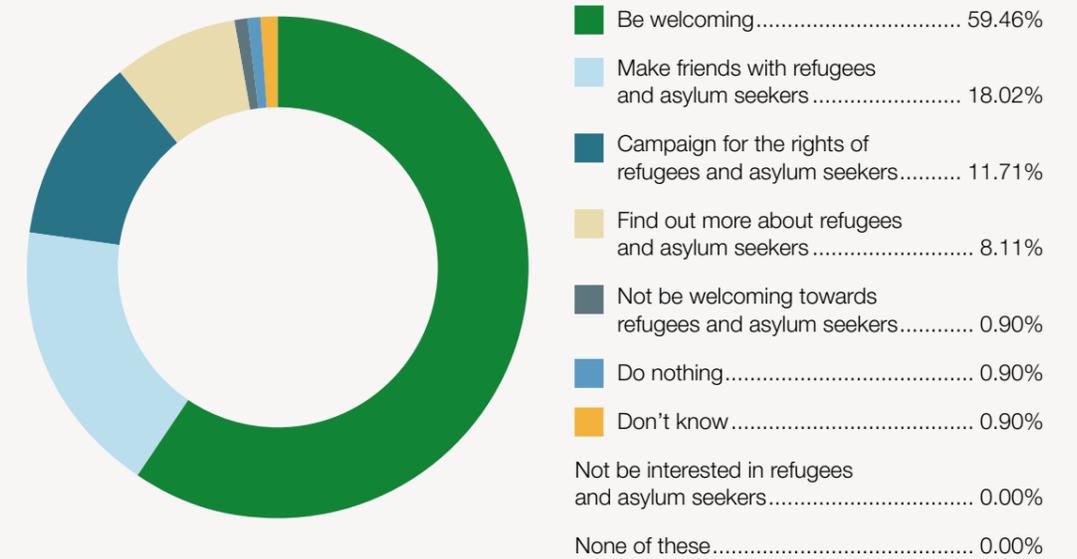
Changing Perceptions

Like cultural exchange, changing perceptions of refugees and asylum seekers in a positive direction can affect elements of the contextual factors of the Integration Framework.

For those projects with sufficient data on host society participants' opinion of refugees and asylum seekers at the start of the project (Chatterbox UK and Buddy Project, Latvia), the perception was largely positive prior to involvement. As can be seen in Figure 1 taken from basepoint surveys for Chatterbox students, when asked 'Which of the following, if any, describes how you would be most likely to act towards refugees and asylum seekers in your community? I would...'

59% responded 'be welcoming', while 18% responded 'make friends with refugees and asylum seekers'. Only 1% responded 'Not be welcoming towards refugees and asylum seekers'. Responding to the same question in Latvia, 60% of host buddies said they would 'be welcoming' and 20% said 'find out more about refugees and asylum seekers'.

How you would be most likely to act towards refugees and asylum seekers in your community



These positive perceptions of refugees and asylum seekers are somewhat to be expected given the profile of people who choose to take part in these projects. However, this does not exclude the possibility of attitude change on certain issues. The research highlighted that where data was available, the various participatory projects had a positive effect on the perception of refugees and asylum seekers.

After 5+ hours of lessons with refugee tutors, Table 3 highlights the positive effects on how students felt about refugees and asylum seekers. Despite the positive starting point, these findings emphasise the role personal contact with refugees and asylum seekers can have as a catalyst for positive change.

Table 3: Change in feelings to refugees and asylum seekers as a result of learning with Chatterbox



Taken from the free text answers in the end point surveys for Chatterbox students, the effects of these lessons are evident in some of the responses:

'I am so ashamed, that before my courses with Chatterbox I thought about refugees in general terms, did not see every person with his/her tremendous intellectual capabilities, world view. It is amazing.'

'It improved my feelings towards refugees and asylum seekers, not because I had any bad feelings before, but because it's the first time I actually interacted with someone who had that experience.'

This was echoed in the qualitative interviews, with students reporting enhanced knowledge and understanding of refugees from interactions with their tutors:

'I guess Chatterbox is really good because it really humanises these large scale numbers of migration and the issues surrounding it'

Across both Buddy projects (Latvia and Ireland) the research identified strong evidence from the qualitative interviews and focus groups of either enhanced perception of refugees and asylum seekers or solidification of the same position. There was not enough data to either counter or support this claim in the quantitative research. This Latvian host buddy underlined the greater empathy and understanding of the lives and perspectives of refugees and asylum seekers:

'I also have stereotypes about everything. So, meeting a person actually really ... I had this chance to explore my stereotypes, understand them, face them, and realise that maybe they are not true and for me,

refugee is just a word now. It's, there are more people behind them'

This sentiment was reflected by this Irish host buddy:

'I think I probably know more about what faces them, but I, I would have been benignly disposed, but I think it just allows you to know someone on a more personal basis'

In Ireland, there was also anecdotal evidence of the possible impact on changing perceptions of others in the social networks of host buddies. Friends or family members of the host buddies who met the refugee buddy or heard stories about them may have a more positive opinion of them as a result. For example, this host buddy describes the reaction of a family member a refugee living in their home:

'I think there was an older person in the family that was confused and nervous. 'Who was this person going to be?', 'Did you know anything about where they come from?' 'They're going to be in your own home', 'you're going to leave them'. That was all fear and I know with one person in particular, that very quickly broke down when you meet the individual, because you don't have those fears about something real, you have them about something you're afraid of in the abstract.'

These interactions can impact integration between different groups (Stolle et al., 2012). Exploring these links and connections further were not in the scope of this research.





4.6 Requires Time and Effective Support

‘It’s a nice feeling knowing that somebody really cares about you, and this is what vulnerable people like refugees and asylum seekers really need to know, that somebody believes in them.’

(VOICES Ambassador)

Time for Developing Effective and Authentic Participation

To enable the creation of participatory practices, there were challenges, or additional considerations, associated with these approaches. Where a more participatory approach was adopted, staff and participants stated the need to allow time for skills and confidence development at the start of participants’ involvement. This reflects the myriad challenges facing refugees and asylum seekers, which may affect their ability to contribute. Challenges encountered throughout the projects included language barriers, mental health issues, destitution, changes in legal status and detention. Furthermore, additional time was required to develop effective participatory power sharing mechanisms within a project at the outset of projects.

During the first 10-week Life Skills course, Peer Educators reported insufficiently confidence to take an active role co-delivering the course. While, they developed the lesson plans and provided some support during the class, the initial classes involved less active participation. Speaking of this, the Course Coordinator reflected upon how it took time to develop the co-delivery model;

‘I think you can’t do something participatory very quickly. So, I think initially, we didn’t have long to, like, implement the project. And that really held us back’.

The deadline requirements to start the classes came into conflict with the needs of Peer Educators to have more time and space to (re) gain confidence in their abilities, with classes initially starting with lower levels of participation:

‘With peer educators ... I guess we [staff] were doing too much because we knew we had to cover certain topics and ... and I think maybe we weren’t allowing enough participation’

(Caseworker, Life Skills)

It is important to note that as the project was new, all the resources, skills and knowledge had to be developed from scratch.

Supportive Relationships and Trust

Having staff or volunteers who can facilitate effective participation, provide emotional support and manage relationships was also seen as very important for successful outcomes by participants and staff across projects. For example, the role of caseworkers in supporting the relationships of Buddies in Ireland was repeatedly referenced by both host community members and refugees:

‘But I think it is also critical to have a case worker, absolutely critical. I would not do it if there was not a caseworker. Someone to go to with issues’

(Host Buddy)

‘For me, I’m trying to like not keep calling my caseworker all the time for small details, or for something really easy to do, something I can do myself. But, sometimes there are somethings really big, some stuff really, really complicated I can’t do it by myself’

(Refugee Buddy)

The need to build trust, both between participants and between participants and staff/volunteers, came to the fore in interviews. This is also something that required time to develop. Particularly in the VOICES network, where

participants often spoke openly of sensitive issues in the public domain, the need to have trust and effective support was important:

‘I was reassured that I didn’t have to speak about basically anything, I can choose to speak, or I want to speak, or I don’t want to speak. So, I had the reassurance and the support, the moral support from L and Y’

[Red Cross staff]

Without this support, there is a higher risk of negative consequences from involvement in projects of this nature. Potential negative reactions from the public, retraumatisation from reliving or retelling traumatic events, or legal implication to asylum claims, were all risks considered and ameliorated by staff supporting participation. Support staff also played an important role in finding and filtering opportunities for VOICES Ambassadors, as well as to provide feedback on the impact of their efforts:

‘I’ve come to understand that the more I show the impact that they have done, they become more involved in VOICES Network, and they become more confident in doing this’

(Participation Officer)

Not being made aware of the potential impacts of their efforts has the potential to be disheartening, with risks to mental wellbeing. Similarly, a lack of opportunities to raise their voice or taking part in engagements which were tokenistic or damaging, could have had negative consequences.

This finding aligns with recent research by Badran and Stoker, who in a review of migrant-led advocacy in Europe, highlight the need for migrants to ‘rely strongly on the support of external, mainstream civil society organisations’ (2019, p.4). This support provides a platform and resources for migrants, or in the case of the AVAIL project, refugees and asylum seekers, to effectively operate.

Lack of Effective Support

Where effective support is not available at key junctures, especially early on in a project, there can be negative consequences. For the community participation model, suitable pairing of, and preparation work with, RAS and host community members were reported to be important foundations for relationships that were beneficial for both parties. This was especially apparent in the Irish Buddy project, where there was evidence of the negative impacts of insufficient preliminary work around expectations, cultural awareness and mental health:

‘I think there could have been more preparation for the host families and for the refugees about what to expect. For example, and maybe a result of everything they’ve been through ... there’s a lot of sleeping late, getting out of bed at lunch time. I was worried whether they were low, down about stuff. I think some of that, if there was a way of exploring that, because I think it can be unnerving for the host family. Somebody, still in bed at the middle of the day. Are they depressed? Are they miserable?’

(Host Buddy)

‘To know more about Syrian society, whilst knowing more about their kind of life was like yeah you know their customers and their social interaction. We didn’t know enough about Syria or the Arabic world, you know, it’s quite different ...’

(Host Buddy, Focus Group)

This was a finding in both ‘successful’ pairings, where both parties involved reported an overall satisfaction with their involvement in the project, as well as cases where there were difficulties. While the majority of pairings in the research were broadly successful, there were issues, likely caused from insufficient work managing the relationships at the outset:

‘The guy who I lived with really helped me a lot but at the same time he’s up and down, up and down, up and down, you know? And, it’s not healthy for a relationship to be up and down up and down all the time; you’ve got to be, you’ve got to talk about the things you want to talk about first, instead of being up and down, up and down, you know?’

(RAS Buddy)

The key concerns surrounding to the inadequate matching of refugees with host community members were relating to age differences and location of accommodation:

‘It’s healthier to make them live with somebody that’s closer to their age than somebody that they’re a lot older than them you know, then they will feel like a child at home ... they have to be with someone that are closer to their age and they have to be in a very active place as well, they have to be in some city’

(Refugee Buddy)

Compared to the Latvian Buddy project, as the Buddy pairs were cohabiting, there were heightened emotions involved. This was likely an important factor.

5 Conclusions

The findings demonstrated a wide range of impacts and benefits of the use of participatory approaches to integration as evidenced in the various projects. Through various mechanisms, the participatory approaches impacted elements of the Integration Framework.

Through taking part in projects where responsibility and agency were shared with participants, refugees and asylum seekers developed skills and knowledge. As doctors, teachers, NGO workers or administrative staff, participants had a range of skills which were often left unused due to their circumstances. Active project roles, including Peer Educators (Wales, UK), Peer Mentors (Italy), VOICES Ambassadors (UK), and Chatterbox Tutors (UK) offered the opportunity to utilise some of these skills. Adopting participatory approaches within service design enabled skill development through training and to practice these skills in activities such as public speaking, writing media articles, and course delivery.

In the Peer Educator and to a lesser extent, the Peer Mentor models, peer-to-peer knowledge exchange mechanisms developed, allowing for the exchange of knowledge and experience of information important to integration.

Skills and knowledge development contributed to the improvements to mental wellbeing reported across projects. The research found consistent reports of improvements to mental wellbeing and associated feelings of confidence, self-esteem and self-worth from those who were given responsibility and power in projects. This finding was strongest in VOICES Ambassadors and Peer Educators, but was identifiable for Peer Mentors.

The ability to help others was a strong factor in supporting improvements to mental wellbeing. Being able to use experience, often of hardships, to help others going through similar experiences on the integration journey and to try and improve their chances, was repeatedly cited by participants as a positive for their mental wellbeing. Having space to share issues and gain solutions with others who listen and can relate, was also connected to improvements mental wellbeing. The VOICES Project's facilitating of Ambassadors raising their issues and concerns to people in positions of power was also a benefit of that approach.

Through the VOICES Network (UK), VOICES Ambassadors received media and advocacy training. They spoke in the UK, Scottish and Welsh Parliaments, met with policy makers, and spoke to the public either at events or through the media. Politicians reported the impact of enabling participants with lived experience to contribute, bringing credibility and insight, to the issues.

Having a supported network of participants with lived experience enabled a mechanism for consultation responses or representation at key meetings to draw on lived experience more easily. From the many representations with organisations and different levels of government, there was evidence of direct impacts to policies and practices associated with the asylum. For example, work with the UK Home Office resulted in changes to a Home Office Accommodation Induction Pack. Having a supported participatory infrastructure also created opportunities with both the UK Government and devolved governments to co-design certain projects, which led to tangible changes such as the Welsh Government's website for newly arrived asylum seekers.

While, there was evidence of the positive impacts for social connections on some projects, it was difficult to isolate the impacts of participatory approaches, from general group activity. More research is required to investigate this potential link. In the community participation model, employed in the Buddy projects (Latvia and Ireland), there were demonstrable impacts on social connections between host populations and refugees and asylum seekers. There was evidence of host buddies acting as bridges into host society and host buddies using their own social networks or social capital to support access to healthcare and employment or gain skills. Social connections formed on the Buddy projects were largely durable, with indications of host Buddies forming a safety net.

Cultural knowledge development and exchange was evidenced across projects. For newly arrived asylum seekers participating in the Life Skills course (UK) there was good evidence of increased cultural awareness. There was evidence from the Buddy projects (Latvia and Ireland) of transfers of cultural understanding between refugees and asylum seekers and host communities. In the Chatterbox (UK) and Buddy Projects (Latvia and Ireland), there was good evidence of the positive benefits for enhancing host society perceptions of refugees and asylum seekers.

Participatory approaches to integration are not without their challenges. Where participants took on responsibility, staff and participants stated the need to allow time for skills and confidence development at the start of participant's involvement. This is a reflection of multiple challenges facing refugees and asylum seekers.

Having staff or volunteers who can facilitate effective participation, provide emotional support, built trust and manage relationships was also seen as very important for successful outcomes by participants and staff. The importance of this support was highlighted in the Irish Buddy project, where insufficient preliminary work around expectations, cultural awareness and mental health, likely affected some of the Buddy relationships. Counter to this, the support of caseworkers was viewed as imperative by many participants.



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Appendix 1

The Use of Participatory Approaches in Refugee and Asylum Seeker Integration: A Literature Review

Executive Summary

- There has been a growth in use of participatory methods in projects focused on integrating refugees and asylum seekers with host communities. This is underpinned by a shift from a needs based approach to one focused on the rights and assets of refugees and asylum seekers (RAS).
- Participatory methods can take many forms from a consultation to co-design.
- The use of a participatory approach in projects and policies reflects a need to move away from a top-down, policy-driven method to an inclusive, horizontal form of decision making.
- Through participation and engagement, RAS' unique knowledge of their circumstances and the systems they come into contact with, can be used to improve integration policy and practices.
- The key aspects to consider when addressing integration are housing, employment, education, language, social connections, skills, knowledge of rights and process, access to state support, rights and asylum process, health, mental wellbeing, resilience, rights, asylum process, safety, economic conditions and openness of host society.
- These measures can be divided into signifiers of integration, enablers of integration, and contextual factor.
- There are risks and limitations associated with participatory methods that need to be taken into consideration. These include tokenism and perceptions of it as resource intensive.

- To enable empowerment, meaningful engagement with RAS needs to be accompanied by evaluations of power relations in a community and the development of skills and knowledge to enable informed decisions.
- Many of the projects evaluated in the literature are small in size, often temporary, and therefore limited in their impact.

Introduction

The aim of this review is to provide an overview and evaluation of the existing evidence relating to the use of participatory methods in integrating refugees and asylum seekers (RAS). This evidence can be used to inform programme design and delivery as well as future research. Hopefully, the development of evaluated good practice will ultimately support more effective integration of RAS.

To be able to analyse 'successful integration' it needs to be defined. Therefore, previous attempts at defining and measuring RAS integration will be analysed and synthesised. This will be followed by an evaluation of the benefits, limitations and risks of employing participatory methods in RAS integration available in the literature.

Research Questions

- How is successful integration defined and measured?
- What benefits, limitations and risks have been identified for using participatory methods in the integration of asylum seekers and refugees?
- What types of participatory methods have been employed?

Research Scope

Due to the recent rapid changes in the social and policy landscape in Europe, the literature search was limited to a 10 year period 2008-2018. Electronic literature database searches were conducted in Refworld, Web of Science, Psychinfo and Google Scholar. Searches were conducted for the following terms: integration; participation; refugee and/or asylum seeker. Materials included research articles, reviews, reports or investigations published either in journals or grey literature. Requests to relevant stakeholders and searching from reference lists of documents meeting the inclusion criteria were carried out to retrieve additional sources.

Review Findings

Integration

Integration is a contested concept without an agreed definition. Ager and Strang point to the conception of integration as 'a chaotic concept: a word used by many but understood differently by most' (Robinson, 1998, cited in Ager and Strang 2008, p.167). In an attempt at simplification, the Scottish Refugee Council focuses upon its conceptual difference with assimilation and the need to separate the two ideas (2010).

From the literature, the most comprehensive definition is employed by UNHCR which describes integration as 'the end product of a dynamic, multi-faceted two-way process with three interrelated dimensions: a legal, an economic and a socio-cultural dimension' (UNHCR, 2016, p.15). The two way process – separate from the one way process of assimilation – implies obligations on the part of RAS and host communities. Integration, while a community-level project with multiple social, economic and political factors, also occurs on an individual level and is approached by each person differently (UNHCR, 2016).

Measures of Integration

While the exact labels, methods of measurement, and ways they interlink vary amongst the literature, the key elements associated with integration are relatively consistent. These are housing, employment, education, language, social connections/networks, openness of host society, rights and asylum process, health and wellbeing. These all fall within the three interrelated dimensions of integration outlined by UNHCR.

Frameworks developed to measure integration provide useful tools for the task. Ager and Strang (2008; Strang and Agar, 2010) in their 'Indicators of Integration Framework' aim to provide a comprehensive model for measuring successful integration, with a particular focus on social bonds (within an ethnic/linguistic community), social bridges (with other ethnic/linguistic communities), and social links (with institutions). An alternative model is proposed by Cebulla et al., (2010) who in their summary of factors associated with refugee integration adopt a narrower approach focusing only on language, employment and housing.

This review has synthesised different models to produce a three-stage system of measuring integration. This is broken into: **signifiers of integration, enablers of integration, and contextual factors:**

- **Signifiers of integration** include employment, housing, mental wellbeing and health. These are generally easier to measure than other indicators and are likely to feature further along the integration journey. They still play a significant role in facilitating integration.
- **Enablers of integration**, while similar to signifiers of integration, play an enhanced role in facilitating integration. These include language, social connections, education, skills, resilience, and knowledge of rights and process. They are also measures which

assist RAS in responding to contextual factors to achieve more positive outcomes in relation to signifiers of integration.

- **Contextual factors** include the rights of RAS, the asylum process, safety of RAS, access to state support, economic conditions and openness of the host society. These are the legal, social and economic realities of a society through which RAS must navigate.

Integration is by no means fixed and any model for measuring integration has to acknowledge the inherent fluidity of the process. For example, having higher levels of wellbeing (signifier) while applying for asylum is likely to impact the chances of improving social connections or learning a language (enablers). Dividing the process of integration in this manner allows for easier measurement and conceptualisation.

The measures of integration from the literature are more applicable to the RAS than to host communities. This likely reflects the reality that while integration is a two-way process, it is methodologically easier to measure from the perspective of RAS than from that of the host community. However, research should reflect both perspectives where possible.

Rights-based and Capacity-based Approaches

There has been a conceptual shift from ‘a needs-based approach to a rights-based approach’ in many organisations working with RAS (UNHCR, 2014, p.9). UNHCR purport this approach not only adds a level of accountability, but also implies ‘legal and moral obligations’ (UNHCR, 2014, p.9). Part of this change has been moving away from viewing beneficiaries or service users as ‘vulnerable persons’ to agents of change in the integration process, who possess ‘human capital and resources, through education, language skills and personal and professional experiences’ (UNHCR, 2016, p.88).

This new approach also forces those involved in programme design to recognise

that refugees and asylum seekers are not a homogenous group. While new RAS ‘will face common structural obstacles’ in a country, each will have their own unique history with educational and professional capacities as well as challenges rising from their backgrounds (UNHCR, 2014b, p.61). This approach has been adopted and supported by UNHRC and demonstrated in reports on refugee integration in the Baltic countries of Finland, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia (UNHCR 2014, 2014b, 2015, 2016).

Similar evidence of its application is in the Holistic Integration Service Model, a partnership of NGOs working with refugees on a participatory model launched in Scotland, 2013. The evaluators of the project highlight it is:

underpinned by an empowerment and rights based approach that has aimed to ensure that ... refugees are effectively integrated into Scottish society and able to exercise their rights and have their needs met (Strang et al., 2016, p.5).

Also in Scotland, this approach can be seen to have informed government policy. One of the key tenants of the New Scots Strategy (2018-2022) is ‘a rights based approach’, which seeks to:

empower people to know about their rights and to understand how to exercise them. People should be able to live safely and realise their human rights ... on the basis of principles of decency, humanity and fairness (Scottish Government, 2018, p.12).

The accountability and empowerment elements of this approach require engagement and discussion with those involved in the process. On this, UNHCR argue for ‘partnership with persons of concern, engaging in processes that allow their voices to be heard and enabling their capacities to develop’ (2014, p.9). From this arises the proposed need for a participatory approach

in programmes and policies which deal with integration. Emphasised by Pittaway et al, ‘participation is fundamental to a rights-based approach’ (2010, p.243).

Participation and its Benefits

There has been a growth in the use of participatory methods in the development and delivery of programmes designed for RAS. While not a new phenomenon, there has been a growing appreciation of the importance of incorporating the views and experiences of RAS through meaningful inclusion (Pittaway et al, 2010). As identified in a study in Finland, participation can take many forms ‘from one-off consultation and active engagement, to participation and collaboration through co-design and co-delivery’ (UNHCR, 2014, p.11). Described by Duarte et al. (2018, p.33), participatory methods are often used to ‘develop projects with vulnerable communities’ and work on the premise that ‘people are all experts about themselves and their actions’. UNHCR expand further, explaining participation requires the ‘full and equal involvement’ of those affected in the decision-making process (UNHCR, 2014, p.9).

The drive for participation in integration is highlighted in much of the literature as a need to move away from a top-down, policy-driven approach to an inclusive, horizontal form of decision making. For example, Strang and Ager (2010, p.601) stress the need for ‘more research that approaches integration from refugees’ perspectives’, identifying the ‘value of marginal accounts in contesting dominant discourse’. Similarly, UNHCR (2014, p.68) highlights ‘the unique expertise many refugees have about their communities, their knowledge of gaps in service delivery, and how it feels to be at the receiving end’. Discussing engaging RAS in programme design the Scottish Government suggests ‘their [RAS] lived experience has been invaluable’ in developing integration strategy (Scottish Government, 2018, p.12).

With the emphasis on the assets and rights, rather than needs, the link between empowerment and participation is underlined in the literature. Pittaway et al. (2010, p.243) suggest, through the enhancement of skills and allowing their voices to be heard, participation ‘has the potential to empower refugees and IDPs and build capacity, resilience and agency’. More than just involving beneficiaries in the process, effective participation ‘aims at augmenting their knowledge and promoting competencies’ (Duarte et al., 2018, p.37).

Empowerment, like integration, cannot be a top-down exercise. As suggested by Pittaway et al. (2010, p.246) in their study of participatory ethics, empowerment ‘is not something ‘done to’ individuals or communities’, but rather is encouraged through programmes that ‘work with communities to create the environmental and social conditions that build community capacities and enable self-determination to grow and flourish’. In order for these projects to be successful, they need to adhere to the principals of participation. UNHCR (2014, p.27) created a checklist to evaluate participatory approaches on the basis of these principles:

- ‘Does the practice encourage the free and voluntary participation of women, men, girls and boys of concern regardless of their age, gender and diversity?’
- Is the participation of PoCs [persons of concern] meaningful? Do women, men, girls and boys of concern perceive the participation as meaningful to them?
- Do PoCs have a sense of ownership of the decisions and actions? Does the practice aim at the empowerment of PoCs?
- Does the planning, implementation and monitoring processes of the practice apply a participatory and collaborative approach?
- Does the practice have some influence on the decision-making process at national or local level or by the NGO?’

Limitations and Risks of Participation

There are limitations to this type of approach. UNHCR, in their assessment of participatory integration projects in Finland, highlight that due to their limited scope they only impacted upon a small number of beneficiaries (UNHCR, 2014). This is an issue that affects project work in general and could be overcome if the mechanisms of the projects are embedded in policy or general practice. Otherwise, the ‘piece-meal’ project-based approach only provides ‘short-term and limited responses to what is actually a long-term issue’ (UNHCR, 2014, p.21).

Preventing the embedding of these methods is limited uptake by commissioners and policy makers, due to perceptions of their cost. In the same study in Finland, among those funding or commissioning services targeting integration of RAS, there was the impression that participation is a resource-intensive investment (UNHCR, 2014). These fears can be especially acute when resources are already stretched, as is often the case in this sector.

There are also potential risks in the use of participation. One example is the use of participation in a tokenistic manner, where there is the appearance of engagement with those affected, but in reality their views are ignored. Pittaway et al. (2010) and Block et al. (2012) further this critique, arguing that if affected communities are not engaged in a genuine manner and their concerns and ideas ignored, it can negatively affect these communities.

Similarly, Block et al. (2012, p.72) warn it cannot be assumed that participatory programmes are ‘necessarily an empowering experience for participants’. Empowerment through participation is a process that acknowledges the power relations in a community and enhances the knowledge, skills and decision making of those involved (UNHCR, 2014). Participation that does not do this can be disempowering, either through further marginalisation of members

of a community or forcing groups to make decisions that affect them without giving them the resources to do so effectively.

Taking these into consideration, Block et al. (2012, p.71) highlight that any programmes of this nature ‘need to ensure that the benefits of participation outweigh any potential risks’. They also need to take steps to ensure participation is genuine or meaningful. In order to develop a genuine participatory, rights-based approach, Strang et al. (2016, p.12) argue, ‘service providers should ensure that refugees are effectively included in decisions about service design and delivery’.

Examples of Participatory Approaches

There are numerous examples of projects that utilise a form of participatory approach in integrating refugees. These are employed by governments, NGOs and academics. They cover a wide range of levels of participation from consultation to co-design.

Here are some examples of participatory approaches in the literature:

- Consultation or Engagement: a method of seeking the views of those with lived experience through interviews or information sessions (University of Sussex, 2014; UNHCR, 2016; Scottish Government, 2018).
- Experts by Experience or Peer Educators: RAS who are further along the process of integration use their experience to support newer arrivals (UNHCR, 2014; Strang et al., 2016)
- Community Gatherings/Clubs: An informal gathering where RAS can take responsibility for organisation of projects and events in a space where people feel more at ease (Strang et al., 2014; Sorgen, 2015)
- Peer-Researchers: RAS draw upon personal experiences to design and carry out research with refugees, asylum seekers and the wider community (Pittaway et al, 2010; Block et al., 2012; University of Sussex, 2014).

In the literature search, the majority of projects had little evaluation as to their effectiveness in terms of integration for individual projects. Where there has been evaluation it has found positive results, but the research often cites the small-scale of the project and/or insufficient evidence to reach conclusions above the anecdotal.

Conclusion

There has been a growth in the use of participatory methods in projects focused on integrating refugees and asylum seekers with host communities. This is underpinned by a shift from a needs based approach to one focused on the rights and assets of RAS. In this model, RAS are viewed as active agents of change rather than passive recipients of support. Through participation and engagement, their unique knowledge of their circumstances and the systems they come into contact with can be used to improve integration policy and practice.

To analyse the impact of participatory methods on integration, the latter concept needs to be defined and measured. This can be achieved by outlining a framework for integration which defines different factors that both signify and facilitate the process of integration. The key aspects when looking at integration are housing, employment, education, language, social connections/networks, openness of host society, rights and asylum process, health and wellbeing.

Participatory approaches are not without limitations or risks. Many of the projects in the literature have made little impact due to their scope and temporary nature. Furthermore, their use in a tokenistic manner can be detrimental to target groups. To enable empowerment, meaningful engagement with RAS needs to be accompanied by evaluations of power relations in a community and the development of skills and knowledge to enable informed decisions. Effective planning

through scoping of power relations and trainings to inform and empower those with lived experience is a vital precondition to employing participatory methods. Employing checklists to evaluate the authenticity of a participatory approach, such as that employed by UNHCR, is also a useful way to mitigate some of these risks.

What is evident in the literature is a lack of sufficient evidence on the impact of participatory methods on RAS integration. While there has been anecdotal evidence of their success, it is limited to small projects and insufficient to convince funders to invest significantly in the importation of these methods into everyday practice. If a strong evidence base highlighting their success develops, this should be used to influence policy. While projects in several countries have made demonstrable impacts, it is only through the large scale introduction of participatory methods into policy and practice of governments and large organisations that sustainable, meaningful change can be achieved.

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