

Breaking the Barriers: Optimising Refugee Resettlement

Parliamentary roundtable report

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Optimising refugee resettlement

INTRODUCTION

The successful integration of refugees into local communities is at the centre of political debates across Europe. New research shows, that to avoid the UK missing out on their full potential, more needs to be done to address the barriers refugees encounter when being resettled in the UK.

The research study *Optimising Refugee Resettlement in the UK* was led by academics Professor Michael Collyer and Dr Linda Morrice from the University of Sussex and is the first primary research of its kind to examine the long-term integration of resettled refugees within the UK.

While the report detailing the research was being prepared for release, the University of Sussex brought together parliamentarians, experts from key non-governmental organisations and individuals who came to the UK as refugees to share preliminary findings and to discuss how to improve the support available to help people build new lives in the UK.

This report sets out key themes from the roundtable discussion and recommendations that emerged from the meeting and the research study.

As the Government considers the development of post-2020 refugee resettlement programmes, we call upon them to make important changes, based on the findings of this new research analysing the long term prospects of refugees resettled in the UK. Implementing the recommendations outlined below and in the main research report will provide resettled refugees with the best possible opportunity to contribute to life here.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1. The Department for Education should develop a national strategy for English for Speakers of Other Languages**
- 2. The Department of Education should make free full-time education available to refugees up until the age of 25**
- 3. The Department for Work and Pensions should review the 16 hour limit that relates to the amount of time a person can spend studying, in order to be eligible for welfare benefits**
- 4. The Department of Work and Pensions should ensure guidance and training is provided to job centre staff on the challenges facing resettled refugees seeking employment**
- 5. Government should ensure all national departments and agencies with responsibility for overseeing different aspects of a refugee's resettlement in the UK are involved in the oversight and development of any future national refugee settlement programme**

DEFINITION OF RESETTLED REFUGEES

Unlike those who enter the UK as asylum seekers, resettled refugees have rights broadly similar to UK citizens on arrival and therefore have access to English language classes. The two main resettlement programmes in the UK are the Gateway Protection Programme and the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Programme.

Summary of roundtable discussions

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE OPPORTUNITY TO LEARN AND SPEAK ENGLISH

The roundtable panel highlighted that providing English language skills to refugees was crucial to all other aspects of a refugee's integration. A resettled refugee from Kenya, told the panel that when she arrived in the UK her English was very limited; she felt language was the most important aspect of support for refugees, because with good language skills you could integrate with other people.

The study, *Optimising Refugee Resettlement in the UK*, confirms that if a refugee has good language skills during the initial period after their arrival, they are more likely to interact with other members of the community and to secure employment, with benefits for their overall wellbeing.¹

However increased contact with English speakers alone was not found to help resettled refugees improve their English language skills in the longer term. Only with good quality language provision can this be achieved. The study also found that early entry into jobs that do not require language skills did not provide refugees with the opportunity to improve their English and did not lead to social mobility. This finding was reiterated by one of the resettled refugees attending the roundtable meeting, who agreed it is difficult for refugees to develop their English language skills at work.

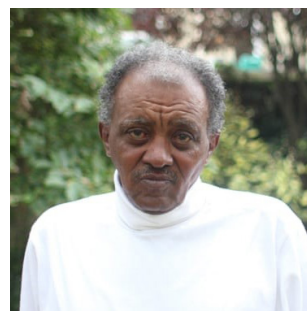
“You can't have a good integration when you don't have a good communication.”

Jacques, 43, male, Congolese

The research study highlights variations in English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes provided for refugees and the barriers they can face in undertaking these courses. The study warns that if refugees don't have access to intensive language support upon their arrival in the UK, they risk facing long-term social exclusion. Roundtable participants stressed the need to improve ESOL provision for resettled refugees, to maximize the potential to build their new lives in the UK.

“If you don't speak English it's hard to get a job, it's hard to communicate to people. The only thing you can apply for is cleaning and that kind of job, and that will never change your life.”

Aaron, 28, male, Ethiopian



Yared Asfan Teferi (pictured left) was a former high court judge in Ethiopia and fled his home country with his family as a result of community tensions. Having lived in a Kenyan refugee camp for a number of years, Yared and his family were selected to be resettled in the UK under the Government's Gateway Protection Programme.

When Yared arrived in the UK in 2006, he struggled to get a job. As his legal experience is not recognised in the UK, Yared has subsequently ended up working as a traffic warden in Brighton. He dreams of being a human rights lawyer, but has been unable to achieve this due to the need to continue working in his existing job in order to support his family financially.

THE LACK OF SECONDARY AND TERTIARY EDUCATION OPPORTUNITIES

Participants discussed how the successful integration of young refugees aged 13-24 is particularly problematic, with their aspirations to receive an education not recognised or met. The research study found that of those resettled refugees who arrived in the UK between the ages of 19 and 24, over two-thirds (69%) received either no education, or only received English language classes. Only 31% of resettled refugees in this age group received some kind of formal UK education.²

“I felt I had to choose between an education and receiving job seeker's allowance”

Roundtable participant

One resettled refugee, who came from the Democratic Republic of Congo and arrived in Norwich at the age of 21, explained to participants that he felt the authorities overlooked the fact young refugees may want to study.

He described how he wanted to learn more than just English language skills when he first came to the UK. He enrolled to study an Access to Higher Education course and Maths and English GCSEs, but subsequently found this exceeded the 16 hours of study a week he was permitted to do whilst claiming benefits. In order to go to university he needed these qualifications, but with no family support he was dependent on benefits, resulting in a catch-22 situation and undermining his ability to access the education and skills necessary for him to make the most of his new life in the UK.

The research study highlights that as young resettled refugees aged over 18 are not entitled to free education, it is difficult for them to gain skills and qualifications that could help them secure sustainable long-term employment. As a result, they can become trapped in low-income jobs, precarious employment, or may need to rely on benefits to survive.

Roundtable participants highlighted the need to address this trap, in order to give young refugees the opportunity to fulfil their full potential and to contribute to society in the UK over the course of their lives.

¹Optimising Refugee Resettlement in the UK, p.9, p.24
All names attributed to quotes used in this report are pseudonyms

²Optimising Refugee Resettlement in the UK, p.20

Summary of roundtable discussions

CHALLENGES TO GAINING APPROPRIATE EMPLOYMENT

One resettled refugee told the roundtable about the challenges he faced as a result of his existing qualifications not being recognised by employers in the UK. Having served as a high court judge in his home country of Ethiopia, he ended up working as a traffic warden in Brighton for ten years and felt he was 'stuck' in the role due to the lack of other long-term job opportunities and the need to support his family financially.

Four years or more after their arrival in the UK, resettled refugees are employed at less than half the rate of the rest of the population.

Optimising Refugee Resettlement in the UK (p.9)

Sussex academics shared with participants how their research had demonstrated that the most significant barriers to employment for resettled refugees were the lack of recognition of their existing qualifications and their English language skills.

"To change it's hard.I want to continue my education. But if I continue my education, I have to stop this job. So, from where do I get money? Who is going to help me and my wife? It is not easy, it is not easy."

Negasi, 47, male, Ethiopian

The number of resettled refugees working in the same profession or sector they did prior to coming to the UK is subsequently very low. **Only 3 out of 114 resettled refugees interviewed about their work had found employment in the same sector they had been working in before their resettlement.**⁴ The research study also found employment is directly related to a resettled refugee's level of education on arrival. Only 2.7% of those who arrived in the UK with no formal education were employed five years later. Of those who arrived in the UK with university-level qualifications, only 41.2% had a job five years later, but almost never one which correlating to their qualifications.⁵ The ability of job centre staff to understand and

"When you come from camp they put too much pressure to work. Even ESOL is hard for us to study. If you are working, what time you are going to ESOL?"

Amadi, 28, male, Ethiopian

respond to the distinct needs of resettled refugees was discussed by roundtable participants, who highlighted more training for staff was needed.

The roundtable heard job centre staff often expected resettled refugees to get a job quickly. Participants identified that this has led to a cycle where refugees undertake entry-level roles which require little English and provide no potential for progression. This often

"I am still on benefit now. Trying to find work. It's very, very, very hard... You find work maybe cleaners job, it's less than 20 hours a week. You cannot save money, still pay bills. It gives me stress all the time. I feel stress."

Hussein, 27, male, Ethiopian

comes at the expense of refugees developing their language skills and undertaking education and training that could help them secure sustainable, long-term employment.

One of the resettled refugees described to the roundtable the difficulties he faced in only being offered temporary work. The research study concurs that, despite the determination and persistence of resettled refugees to find stable employment, the majority of them are only able to access low-paid, insecure, casual work. This often involves anti-social hours and zero-hour contracts. **After an average of six years living in the UK, only 12 out of 280 resettled refugees interviewed had secured full-time employment.**⁶

"I have done a lot of different jobs, but temporary only. But I would be happy to find a full-time job, a permanent one, but that is difficult."

Rachel, 21, female, Congolese

A HOLISTIC AND COORDINATED APPROACH TO REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT

The need to ensure relevant government departments and agencies are involved in the oversight and delivery of support for resettled refugees, was highlighted by the International Organisation for Migration and the Refugee Council during the roundtable discussion. Other participants agreed this was a good approach. The importance of achieving a holistic framework to support the resettlement of refugees is also emphasised in the wider research study.⁷ Roundtable participants were in general agreement that the Government should seek to consolidate the most effective elements of both the existing refugee resettlement programmes in the UK when developing a post-2020 resettlement programme.

In addition, it was noted that resettlement experiences were more positive where local authorities and the community and voluntary sector worked closely together. Some local communities, such as Manchester, had developed particular expertise in settling refugees within their areas, with participants suggesting it could be helpful to learn from their knowledge and experience.

Systematically involving refugees in making decisions about the development of refugee resettlement programmes was suggested by the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) as a way of ensuring this support will meet their needs effectively. The research study also concludes that refugee volunteers and mentors have a lot to offer in terms of supporting current and future resettlement programmes.⁸

Recommendations to achieve a holistic and tailored approach to supporting the needs of resettled refugees are outlined overleaf.

⁴Optimising Refugee Resettlement in the UK, p.34

⁵Optimising Refugee Resettlement in the UK, p.9

⁷Optimising Refugee Resettlement in the UK, p.61

⁶Optimising Refugee Resettlement in the UK, p.31

⁸Optimising Refugee Resettlement in the UK, p.60

Key recommendations for Government for post-2020 refugee resettlement programmes in the UK

1) **The Department for Education should develop a national strategy for English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL)** including, a proper assessment of need and a joined up approach to meeting the wide-ranging learning needs of refugees. The strategy should ensure ESOL provision includes pathways to vocational training and university entry.

2) **The Department of Education should make free full-time education available to refugees up until the age of 25**, in line with that available for young people leaving care. This will help young refugees meet their full potential and develop the necessary skills to secure sustainable long-term employment.

3) **The Department of Work and Pensions should review the 16 hour limit that relates to the amount of time a person can spend studying, in order to be eligible for welfare benefits.** This inhibits the ability of refugees to access education and to develop skills that will support their long-term settlement in the UK, forcing them to choose between education and the need to meet their living costs. The Department should recognise the particular challenges refugees face are unique and different to those experienced by others in receipt of welfare benefits.

4) **The Department of Work and Pensions should ensure guidance and training is provided to job centre staff on the challenges facing resettled refugees seeking employment.** Job centre staff should be equipped with the necessary skills and strategies to provide tailored and individualised support and employment advice for each refugee they see.

5) To ensure a coordinated approach, the **Government should ensure all national departments and agencies with responsibility for overseeing different aspects of a refugee's resettlement in the UK are involved in the oversight and development of any future national refugee settlement programme.** There should be a 'one stop-shop approach' covering access to all relevant services for resettled refugees, while also ensuring individual and tailored support. Members of refugee communities should be systematically involved in the development and delivery of such programmes, to ensure their knowledge and experiences are taken into account.



Details of the full recommendations from the research study *Optimising Refugee Resettlement* can be found in the main report, which is available online <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/migration/documents/4375-resettled-refugees-report-web.pdf>

ROUNDTABLE PANEL

We are grateful to Vice Chair of the All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Refugees, Caroline Lucas MP, for chairing the roundtable and to Norwich South MP Clive Lewis for his input into the discussions.

We are also thankful to the three resettled refugees that shared details of their experiences with the roundtable panel, which included representatives from the following organisations:

- Refugee Action
- Refugee Council
- UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR London)
- International Organisation for Migration
- National Association for Teaching English and other Community Languages to Adults

NEXT STEPS

Work is now taking place within Government to consider the development of post-2020 refugee resettlement programmes. We urge the Government to consider the recommendations that have emerged from the roundtable meeting and the first study analysing the long-term prospects of refugees resettled in the UK, to ensure future resettlement programmes give them the best possible opportunity to contribute to life here.

FURTHER INFORMATION

For further information about the research study *Optimising Refugee Resettlement* and any of the information in this roundtable report, please contact Lenny Rolles, Head of Public Affairs, University of Sussex (l.rolles@sussex.ac.uk).

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