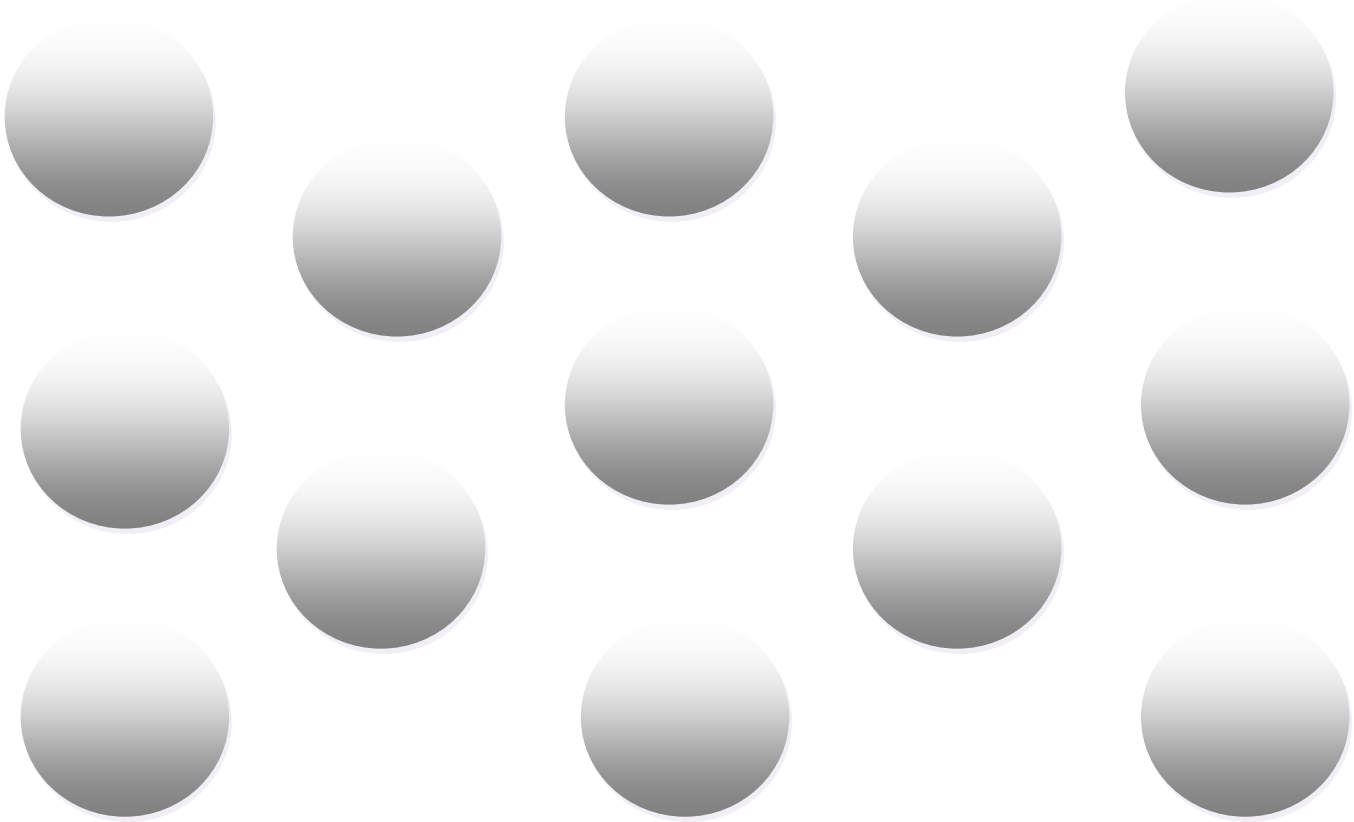

Information Centre about Asylum and Refugees

# Local Experiences of Migration: consulting Coventry Executive summary

Kim Ward



The Information Centre about Asylum and Refugees (ICAR) is an independent information and research organisation based in the School of Social Science at City University, London.

Address:
School of Social Science
City University
Northampton Square
London, EC1V 0HB

Tel: 020 7040 4596
Fax: 020 7040 8580
Email: icar@city.ac.uk
Web: http://www.icar.org.uk

# Local experiences of migration: consulting Coventry
# Executive summary

**February 2008**

The Welcome Project, a partnership between Coventry City Council and Coventry Refugee Centre, commissioned a consultation with local residents on community relations and integration issues. The research explored attitudes and relations amongst and between the host population, asylum seekers and refugees and other new migrants. The findings aim to inform integration strategies at the neighbourhood and city levels.

**Key findings and conclusions**

- Negative **attitudes** amongst the host population towards asylum seekers and refugees had a basis in concerns over resource competition and perceived cultural threat not always misinformation. New migrants had more positive attitudes about the host community than asylum seekers and refugees who also predicted a higher prevalence of negative attitudes towards them from the host community than was actually found by the research.

- Racial harassment or violence was **experienced** first-hand or through family and friends by over half of the asylum seeker and refugee respondents, primarily in more deprived areas. This experience was less prevalent amongst new migrants. Contact between members of the different groups was generally limited, with asylum seekers and refugees the most isolated, and did not necessarily facilitate more positive attitudes.

- The **information needs** of asylum seekers, related to employment, housing and local context, were not as well satisfied as those of new migrants who benefited from links with more informed social networks. The host population were keen for more statistical information on new arrivals to be provided by the Council; most relied on (local) media or friends and family for information regarding asylum seekers, refugees and new migrants.

- For **improving community relations**, the research illustrates some limits of contact theory and suggests that information provision and positive image campaigns are not sufficient. Common concerns, such as crime and employment, were identified amongst all groups suggesting that community development approaches that work across communities may be more beneficial.

- The report **recommends** that: perceptions among asylum seekers, refugees and new migrants that their complaints are ignored by police should be further investigated; host community concerns over resource competition should be engaged with directly; information provision about demographic change and service provision needs to improve; to address community cohesion in a holistic manner, community development should attempt to mobilise individuals around issues of common local concern.

## Background

This research was commissioned by the Welcome Project, a partnership between Coventry Refugee Centre and Coventry City Council. During its operation the Welcome Project aimed to facilitate the integration of newcomers into the neighbourhoods of Coventry and to learn lessons that can be applied to other parts of the country by working in partnership with agencies already working on integration activities and by helping with planning and evaluation. The Welcome Project team worked on multicultural events, awareness-raising and training on refugee and asylum issues. This research was commissioned to meet a further aim of the project which was to consult the host community and refugees on integration issues so that their views and experiences can be used to inform integration strategies at the neighbourhood and city level.

*Aims and objectives*

ICAR was commissioned to interview refugees in order to identify their needs, perspectives and experiences and local residents in order to identify their concerns, perspectives and information needs. The following objectives were identified:

- to explore how respondents perceive Coventry and their local neighbourhood
- to explore whether, and if so how, respondents perceive change in their local neighbourhood
- to explore with respondents how well people get on in their neighbourhood
- to explore the quantity and quality of contact between the host population and refugees, asylum seekers and new migrants
- to explore with the host population the perceived impacts of 'newcomers' on Coventry and their neighbourhood
- to explore with refugees, asylum seekers and new migrants their perceptions of the host population
- to identify ways in which respondents felt that their neighbourhood can be improved
- to identify ways in which respondents felt that community relations can be improved
- to explore the information needs of the host population, refugees, asylum seekers and new migrants

## Method

Initially, ICAR's brief was to conduct research among two groups of people: local residents or the host community and refugees resident in Coventry. However, as the research progressed the scope was broadened to include additional categories of new arrivals to achieve a more holistic picture of the situation of newcomers in Coventry. The study was carried out in two phases: a literature review on the main themes and topics raised in the research brief, specifically public attitudes and the improvement of community relations; a qualitative study on the experiences and attitudes of refugees, asylum seekers, new migrants and the host community towards their local neighbourhood.

Individual interviews were chosen as the most appropriate method for eliciting the views and experiences of respondents. A total of 72 people were interviewed for this research: 28 refugees and four asylum seekers from 11 different countries [17 male and 11 female]; 14 new migrants from three different countries [nine male and five female]; and 30 local residents [15 male and 15 female]. Respondents lived in a variety of areas across the city. A range of ages were represented in the sample, although no respondents in the age range 18-24 were interviewed among the host population.

A varied and flexible method of recruitment was employed so that a diverse range of people could be included in the research. The aim was to obtain a maximum variation sample which enabled the researchers to purposefully select a set of individuals that exhibited maximal differences in terms of area of residence, age and gender and a range of nationalities among asylum seekers, refugees and new migrants. A number of agencies were contacted to facilitate recruiting respondents followed by snowballing to recruit friends and acquaintances of individuals that had already been interviewed. Finally, a couple of refugees were interviewed as a result of spontaneous recruitment.

Recruitment amongst the host population also utilised a variety of organisations that act as gatekeepers, including local community groups working on regeneration and involved in advice work, Citizens Advice Bureaus, Age Concern and the Muslim Resource Centre. Other respondents were recruited spontaneously from the street for interviews in libraries at three different locations. It was acknowledged that the size of the host community sample would not be large enough to allow comparisons on the basis of age or social class for example. However, it was felt that the efforts made to ensure a diverse range of interviewees included in the research meant that a snap-shot of attitudes towards asylum seekers in Coventry could be achieved.

Interviews were transcribed by the author and the data charted for thematic analysis according to the principles of the Framework method. Data arising from the interviews with the host population, refugees and asylum seekers and new migrants were analysed separately, though the resultant frameworks developed for charting and interpreting data were compared.

## Summary of findings

*Attitudes*

Attitudes of the host population respondents towards refugees and asylum seekers were found to be mostly negative. Reasons for this can be grouped under two main underlying beliefs or value systems: that UK resources should go to those who are perceived as deserving either through contributions to the country [usually in the form of taxes] or through perceived membership of the British nation-state; and that the arrival of different cultures threatens the British way of life. Of particular concern to respondents was the perception that refugees and asylum seekers received preferential treatment relating to social housing provision and health care.

The research also found that negative attitudes were prevalent amongst host respondents who were themselves first or second generation immigrants, illustrated by the reaction of existing communities to several of the new arrivals, such as the Poles and Africans.

Nearly three-quarters of the host sample conveyed an understanding that asylum-migration was *only* a form of economic migration and imparted very general comments about migration and foreigners, whilst the remaining respondents expressed an awareness of the concept of asylum and the difference between an asylum seeker and other types of migrant. Of the latter, half had positive attitudes towards refugees and asylum seekers, illustrating that knowledge about asylum does not necessarily lead to positive attitudes. It is of note that the majority of the host sample was able to demonstrate some knowledge of asylum issues by citing a number of countries from which asylum seekers in Coventry originate. A minority cited countries which are not currently producing any [or only very few] asylum seekers.

Less than a fifth of the host sample demonstrated a proactively positive attitude towards refugees and asylum seekers. A smaller number demonstrated a passive tolerance of refugees and asylum seekers, with no clear positive or negative association. These opinions seemed to be guided by values such as 'not judging a book by its cover', 'giving everyone a fair chance' and 'taking people as you find them'. Over a quarter of respondents were best characterised as having ambivalent attitudes which means that they expressed a roughly equal amount of both negative and positive associations with refugees and asylum seekers.

The new migrants from Cote d'Ivoire and Tanzania had mixed perceptions in relation to the attitudes of the host population. Some had never heard of any complaints about new migrants or refugees and asylum seekers and did not feel that there was a problem, whilst others felt that on the whole attitudes were positive and welcoming. Another respondent felt that attitudes towards refugees were more negative than towards migrants in general. All of the new migrants from Poland felt that 'the English' had positive attitudes towards them or, at the very least, were not hostile or negative towards them.

A large majority of the refugee and asylum seeker respondents felt that local residents were more likely to have negative attitudes to asylum seekers and refugees although some of these stated that some people had positive attitudes. The most common reason given for the negative attitudes was that local residents did not like foreigners or strangers and that they were racist. It is of note that such a high proportion of respondents from the refugee and asylum seeker sample predict negative attitudes amongst the host population, much higher than the new migrant sample. It is also interesting that only half of the host population displayed overtly negative attitudes.

*Experiences*

Over half of the refugee and asylum seeker respondents reported that they had either experienced racial harassment or racial violence first-hand or knew a friend or family member that had. In the majority of cases such behaviour was attributed to young people. The victims were predominantly black African. Half of those who had experienced racist abuse, harassment or damage to property felt that the police were ignoring them or not taking their complaints seriously. These incidents seem to have been occurring in deprived areas of Coventry such as Wood End, Willenhall and Manor Farm, perpetrated by local teenagers. Refugees have been moving to these areas, which, until recent years, were historically populated by white, working class or low-income residents because of the readily available stock of social housing.

Reports of racism in the workplace were given by over a quarter of the refugee respondents. A notable assertion was that Polish migrants received preferential treatment from employers, which had, in some cases, led to tensions between employees at work. African new migrants had also experienced racial harassment when they first moved to the area but felt that things had improved. In contrast, none of the Polish new migrants described any negative experiences with local residents. Host population respondents who mentioned Polish migrants contrasted them with other migrants and praised them as hard-working. It is of note that Polish migrants are more likely to live in private accommodation and have a greater degree of choice over where they live than many refugees who are placed in social housing in deprived and less diverse areas.

In terms of degrees of meaningful contact between groups, most of the refugee and asylum seeker respondents had little or no contact with the local population. Of those that did socialise in some way with local residents some had a single contact with a mentor, their neighbour or someone they met at the church or at the mosque, whilst others mixed with a variety of local residents. There was no evidence of a positive correlation between the existence of meaningful contact with local residents and the perception of host population attitudes. Some of the respondents with meaningful contact still felt that host population attitudes were negative and some respondents who did not have meaningful contact perceived the attitudes of the host population to be positive.

The Polish new migrant respondents could be said to have more meaningful contact with the host population than the African new migrants, but this was confined to those who spoke English.

Among the host population, positive contact for those with negative attitudes towards asylum seekers and refugees was considered the exception to the rule whilst negative contact served to confirm their negative attitude. All but one of the local residents with a positive attitude towards asylum seekers and refugees had contact with them as clients through community work and not in a social capacity.

Respondents also indicated that some tensions existed between refugee, asylum seeker and migrant communities in Coventry, illustrating that conflict is not confined to dynamics between the host population and new arrivals.

*Information needs*

Significant differences were observed in the views of respondents regarding their perceived information needs. Most of the refugee and asylum seeker respondents felt that the provision of more and diverse types of information would have been useful on first arrival in Coventry, particularly in relation to employment opportunities, housing and the reputation of different areas in Coventry. In contrast, half of the new migrants felt that their information needs had been met by their friends and family living in the area. Others stated that information about jobs, the history of Coventry and the 'laws of the city' would have been helpful.

This observed discrepancy may reflect the fact that new migrants are more likely to have come to Coventry voluntarily based on existing social networks whereas many of the asylum seekers and refugees interviewed had been dispersed to Coventry by the Home Office and were therefore more dependent on information from outside sources.

Over half of the host population respondents indicated that they would have benefited from more information about asylum and refugee issues, particularly statistics of refugees, asylum seekers and new migrants settling in Coventry. Many respondents were concerned about the pace of new arrivals settling in Coventry and the implications of this for the distribution of local resources. Some respondents wanted the council to provide a clear strategy addressing this issue, suggesting that the provision of statistical information is not enough to mitigate the concerns of the host population.

The host population respondents stating that they did not need any more information on refugees and asylum seekers gave a variety of reasons for this with some feeling sufficiently educated and others uninterested in finding out more about the issue. Some stated that they did not need any information on asylum seekers and just wanted them removed from the country.

Half of the host population respondents stated that the media was an important source of information for them. Local papers were the most common source cited, followed by national papers and television, with the BBC singled out as a particularly reliable source by two respondents. For the other half, family, friends and acquaintances were the main source of information with a fifth also indicating that they relied upon their own observations in order to formulate their opinions. Much attention has been given to the impact of media on public attitudes towards asylum. The high proportion of respondents in this research relying on the media for their information on asylum suggests that this plays a significant role in attitudinal formation. Yet it should be acknowledged that people's existing views are likely to impact upon which source of information individuals choose to rely upon. Accordingly, when looking at the provision of information to the host population with the intention of improving community relations between the host population and refugees and asylum seekers it is also necessary to consider how that information will be received by the target audience.

*Improving community relations*

Previous research suggests that the two most common approaches to the improvement of community relations are: the use of information provision and awareness-raising activities to inform and educate the host population; and the promotion of contact between the host population and refugees and asylum seekers. The provision of information about new arrivals in order to generate more positive attitudes amongst the host population raises many questions about selection, neutrality and evaluation. For example, an individual may have a positive commitment to diversity and multiculturalism but continue to have concerns about competition for resources in the local community and rising unemployment levels, both of which they associate with migration.

This research questions the appropriateness of campaigns which have not sufficiently addressed these specific concerns. At least half of the host population respondents expressed a sense of powerlessness in relation to the perceived negative impacts of immigration and asylum, particularly when coupled with the feeling expressed by some individuals that they were unable to speak out for fear of being labelled a racist. In this context it is easy to see how information campaigns and awareness-raising activities need to be thought through very carefully if they are not to be dismissed as propaganda or affect only audiences that are already likely to be receptive to the message.

One method used to improve community relations in the UK involves facilitating contact between members of the host population and refugees and asylum seekers, with the aim of reducing prejudice, stereotyping and tensions between the groups. 'Contact theory' has emerged from social psychology to explain how, given certain conditions, people's attitudes towards each other might improve. Some problems with this approach emerging from the evidence gathered in this research are that contact between groups does not guarantee that opinions and experiences are exchanged or attitudes modified; individuals tend to extrapolate negative experiences based on one-off contacts with individuals to entire groups but not to generalise positive experiences in the same way; and the idea that attitudes can be transformed from negative to positive ignores the fact that attitudes are often contradictory or ambivalent, requiring a more nuanced approach to address specific issues.

Additionally, community development theories have been applied to community relations in order to try to deal with some of the shortcomings of contact theory-inspired interventions. These interventions bring groups together to address common issues, such as housing, public transport and anti-social behaviour, issues highlighted as important by respondents across the entire sample. The approach eschews differentiating groups and rather builds understanding through mobilising individuals around what they have in common. Community development work across communities is only likely to be effective if the mixing of people is not treated as an end itself but instead leads to a common goal that benefits all members of the community.

**Conclusions and recommendations**

The recommendations of this report relate to key areas identified in Coventry City Council's Community Cohesion Strategy.

Black African refugees reported a relatively high level of racial harassment and violence in the more deprived areas of Coventry. Half of those who had experienced such incidents felt that the police were not taking their complaints seriously or were actively ignoring them on the basis of race. This perception needs to be investigated further. Also a clearer picture of reporting levels should be established and strategies for improving links between the police and local refugee populations should be developed.

In measuring local attitudes towards community cohesion, it should be borne in mind that attitudes can be contradictory or ambivalent. It is therefore necessary to consider separately the impact that hostile attitudes towards particular groups of migrants has on community cohesion in Coventry and to distinguish this from attempts to measure the toleration of difference in an abstract sense. Furthermore, concerns relating to resource distribution need to be engaged with directly and not automatically dismissed as a form of racism or hostility towards new arrivals. To this end, open debates should be facilitated to discuss issues such as housing.

In order to ensure equality of opportunity for Coventry's citizens, it is crucial that refugees and new migrants have access to information and advice in key areas such as employment. An increase in the number of refugees, asylum seekers and new migrants over the last decade has changed Coventry's demographic profile resulting in new challenges in relation to community cohesion. There is a need to obtain a clearer picture of the numbers of refugees and new migrants in Coventry in order to better understand the level of need in relation to service provision. A mapping exercise which looks at numbers of service needs may be useful in this regard. A more diverse population requires recognition of diverse needs in terms of service provision and the complexity of attitudes amongst the host population and all groups needs to be recognised.

The level of contact found in the research between the host population and refugee and asylum seeker communities was strikingly low. Community development approaches were highlighted as an effective method of improving community relations through bringing groups together to mobilise around issues of local concern, focusing on commonality rather than the differences between groups.

This report shows that in order to address community cohesion in a holistic manner it is necessary not only to look at the attitudes of the host population towards asylum seekers and refugees but also towards other migrants, established BME groups and the attitudes of all these groups towards each other, as individuals have a tendency to confuse these very categories. It is also important to recognise that tensions and conflict can exist within groups and similarities in backgrounds or experiences do not necessarily produce a harmonious co-existence.

The perception of competition for scarce resources in the context of visible and perceived changes resulting from migration is likely to continue to fuel social tensions. The challenge is to address these tensions in a manner that is timely, effective and sensitive to the complexity of the attitudes explored in this report.

For further information:

Information Centre about Asylum and Refugees
School of Social Sciences
City University
Northampton Square
London
EC1V 0HB

e: icar@city.ac.uk
t: 0207 040 4596.

The full report, *Local experiences of migration: consulting Coventry* by Kim Ward, is available at www.icar.org.uk/Coventry