



About ICAR

The Information Centre about Asylum and Refugees in the UK (ICAR) is an independent information centre that exists to promote understanding of UK asylum and refugee issues, to change the tone and terms of public debate about this subject, and to collect evidence for policy-making. We are committed to providing the best available information on any aspect of refugee and asylum issues as they affect the UK to those who ask for it and to those in positions of influence and to making data and lessons learnt widely available throughout the UK. We are particularly interested in the information needed by host communities at a national and local level in order to understand asylum seekers/refugees, in the media and political images of refugees and asylum seekers, in how attitudes towards these groups are formed and changed, and in associated community relations and safety issues.

ICAR was founded in March 2001 and is part of King's College London.

ICAR's response to *Integration Matters: A national strategy for refugee integration*

ICAR welcomes this opportunity to comment on *Integration Matters: A national strategy for refugee integration*. In line with our mandate, our response concentrates on the section of the strategy that aims to help refugees **contribute to the community as fully as possible**.

ICAR welcomes the cross-departmental and intra Home Office departmental approach which this strategy begins to set out and would encourage the strengthening of this. We also consider that the involvement of regional and local government as partners in this strategy will be crucial to its success.

Community links and ICAR's *Understanding the stranger* research

ICAR welcomes the strategy's reference to the findings of its recent research report *Understanding the stranger* (paragraph 4.36, page 15). This report looks at how best to manage the arrival of asylum seekers and/or refugees into local communities so as to create understanding and links between the new arrivals and the resident population. In response to the government's commitment to addressing this aspect of integration we would like to make the following points:

- ICAR's research on combating asylum-related community tension and promoting understanding of asylum seekers/refugees at a local level shows that while well-targeted one-off interventions can reduce tension temporarily, promoting understanding and building links is a long-term and multi-faceted project with considerable resource needs requiring the participation of local, regional, and national

government, other statutory bodies, and the voluntary and community sector. The strategy will need to respond to this if it is to make progress on this issue.

- As the strategy states, host communities need to be consulted in advance about the impending arrival of asylum seekers/refugees and to be continually supported with reliable information about what is happening. However, it is crucial that those leading the consultation are clear about what they are consulting on (most often not *whether* asylum seekers/refugees will be settled in their area, but *how* they will, *who* they are, and the implications of their arrival) and are prepared to act on the results of the consultation and to make the necessary changes to policy and/or practice in order to facilitate better understanding and links between the two groups. Often these changes will have resource implications.
- ICAR's research shows that locally based groups and individuals are one of the most effective means of promoting understanding and building links between asylum seekers/refugees and local people, as they understand and have access to the local community. But it is also crucial that the national policy framework creates an environment in which this can happen. ICAR's *Understanding the stranger* research concluded that accommodation centre policy as it currently stands works against the creation of such a climate. On a positive note ICAR welcomes the *social bridges* section of *Indicators of Integration* as it responds directly to the two-way nature of integration. The inclusion of the indicator 'Number of European Refugee Fund/Challenge Fund and related projects featuring explicit multi-ethnic involvement' is a positive example of national policy creating a climate conducive to good community relations, and responds constructively to considerable research evidence from the UK and the US¹ and the dearth of projects of this type supported by major UK funders. ICAR also recommends that the government enables the collection and circulation of strategies, ideas, and resources that increase understanding and decrease tension in a way that ensures their accessibility to locally based groups.
- While ICAR also welcomes the greater drive towards the evaluation and monitoring of integration projects, it also hopes that the use of 'hard indicators' and pressures to provide evidence of impact and change in order to secure funding will not inhibit innovation and the proliferation of projects that seek to address public opinion, which are notoriously hard to evaluate.

Use of evidence and indicators of integration

ICAR welcomes the emphasis in the strategy on the available research base and the commitment to the regular publication of progress reports in relation to the *Indicators of Integration*. ICAR encourages the government to make its research findings available in a timely manner and particularly hopes that the as yet unpublished *Literature Review – What works in improving the community relations of refugees, asylum seekers and other recent immigrants with host communities?* (Clery, L. and Daniel, N., IRSS, Home Office, February 2004, cited on page 43 of *Integration Matters*) will be made widely available in the very near future. As recent literature reviews conducted by ICAR suggest, the evidence base on this issue is limited and this report has the potential to make a very valuable contribution.

ICAR would like to take this opportunity to comment on both the high-level indicators of integration detailed in the strategy document and also the Ager and Strang study that underpins the Home Office's approach to integration, which offers a more detailed framework for understanding refugee integration.

¹ Bach, R. (1993) *Changing relations: newcomers and established residents in US communities*. New York: Ford Foundation; Baumann, G. (1996) *Contesting culture. Discourses of identity in multi-ethnic London*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Cantle, T. (2002) *Community cohesion: a report of the independent review team*. London: Home Office; Jeffers, S., P. Hoggett & L. Harrison (1996) 'Race, ethnicity and community in three localities', *New Community* 22.

High-level indicators

ICAR queries the interpretation that an increase in the proportion of refugees reporting racial, cultural or religious harassment necessarily indicates greater integration into UK society (paragraph 6.6, page 40).

ICAR welcomes the government's commitment to improving systems in order to enable better collection of data against which to measure progress on integration (paragraph 6.9, page 41) but encourages them to collect qualitative as well as quantitative data. Well-being indicators could measure optimism or pessimism, sense of purpose, human flourishing or lack thereof.

Ager and Strang indicators

The domains of 'social bridges', 'bonds', 'links', 'language and cultural knowledge', and 'safety and stability' in particular would benefit from in-depth qualitative data and the use of case studies. ICAR's handbook *Doing case studies for the refugee sector: A DIY handbook for agencies and practitioners*² may be useful in this respect.

ICAR recommends that the use of 'reported' experiences in the domain of social bridges are complemented by research methods that look at lived practice. This could include participant observation for example, and would take into account any discrepancies that may exist between the respondent's daily practice and the responses they express to issues considered at national levels. The same technique could be used when dealing with reported attitudes on asylum seekers.

ICAR observes that the 'attitude surveys', suggested as data sources in the domains of social bridges and bonds need to take into account the geographical differences in attitudinal cultures that have been highlighted in a recent research review by ICAR. Accordingly, we recommend that 'local attitude surveys' would most accurately reflect the diverging local opinions and practices.

In relation to both the practice and policy level indicators for social bonds, ICAR observes that while research does point to the importance of community development in integration (particularly in the development of social capital), we also need to recognise that lack of contact with members of the same ethnic or national group may not necessarily represent an absence of integration. Some refugees may avoid contacts with their ethnic group due to reasons for persecution in country of origin, or due to preference for contact with other populations.

ICAR notes that the role of refugee community organisations (RCOs) in integration is still undetermined by research. ICAR looks forward to the publication of ESRC-funded research on this issue, conducted by a team at Oxford Brookes University. A recent article based on research amongst the Vietnamese population argues that long-term dependence on community groups cannot be a good sign of successful integration and suggests that what is needed most is culturally appropriate mainstream services and that 'community organisations have a crucial but limited role to play in the settlement and integration of refugees'.³ Accordingly, ICAR observes that using refugee involvement with RCOs as a clear indicator of integration is not necessarily appropriate and that more complex dynamics may be at play. More research needs to be conducted on this issue and the data sources and research instruments used to measure social bonds need to be sensitive enough to capture the complexities and ambiguities that may emerge.

² Esterhuizen, L. (2004). *Doing case studies for the refugee sector: A DIY handbook for agencies and practitioners*. London: ICAR. Available at <http://www.icar.org.uk/pdf/mbu004.pdf>

³ Behlic, Z. (2002) 'Community at a crossroads: the Vietnamese in the UK' *InExile* September – October 2002.

ICAR observes that many of the social bridges indicators rely on data generated from local government surveys. However, government surveys do not usually collect data on immigration status. Therefore, in assessing the utility of these sources and the viability of proposed indicators, ICAR would wish to know how data relating to the refugee population will be disaggregated from the wider population, what combination of proxy demographic indicators (ethnicity, country of birth) will be used instead, and how the data will be weighted to account for the well-discussed problems in using these categories to identify local refugee populations.⁴

Media and political images

ICAR welcomes the recognition that the way in which refugees are portrayed in the media has an impact upon integration. But research demonstrates that a blurring of distinctions between refugees and asylum seekers takes place in the media and that the two labels have become confused. As a consequence, it is necessary to also look at how asylum seekers are represented in the press and not just refugees.⁵

ICAR's *Media Image, Community Impact* research showed that unbalanced and inaccurate media images of asylum seekers are frequent and powerful and have the potential to increase community tension. Tensions are mitigated by a skeptical reading of the reports on asylum seekers, but amplified by an uncritical reading of newspapers, a sense of resentment and injustice rooted in deprivation, and by low appreciation of diversity.⁶

The research also found that politicians are the most commonly cited sources in newspaper articles on asylum seekers and refugees. As a result, ICAR observes that it is important to recognise the way in which political images contribute to, and overlap with, media images. More research needs to be carried out on the precise relationship between political and media images.

Research also needs to be carried out on how the negative portrayal of asylum seekers in the political arena affects community relations and on the possible contributions that politicians could make in countering the negative attitudes towards asylum seekers, refugees and immigrants.

ICAR welcomes the recognition that the lessons learnt from the media briefings organised by the Refugee Council and MediaWise (then PressWise) can be used to develop channels of communication between journalists and RCOs. ICAR's evaluation of these briefings included the following lessons:

- Local media are more responsive to (positive) stories from refugees and asylum seekers than was anticipated by refugee and asylum sector respondents.
- Feature articles rather than news stories are more likely to meet the needs of the media, refugee and asylum sectors.⁷

⁴ Robinson, V. (1998) 'The importance of information in the resettlement of refugees in the UK', *Journal of Refugee Studies* 11(2): 146-160; Bloch, A. (1999) 'Carrying out a survey of refugees: some methodological considerations and guidelines', *Journal of Refugee Studies* 12 (4): 367-383; Stewart., E. 'Deficiencies in UK asylum data: practical and theoretical challenges', *Journal of Refugee Studies* 17 (1): 29-49.

⁵ Article 19 (2001). *What's the story? Sangatte: a case study of media coverage of asylum and refugee issues*. London: Article 19.

⁶ ICAR (2004). *Media Image, Community Impact: Assessing the impact of media and political images of refugees and asylum seekers on community relations in London*. London: ICAR. Available at <http://www.icar.org.uk/pdf/mici004.pdf>

⁷ Finney, N. (2003). *The challenge of reporting refugees and asylum seekers: ICAR report on the regional media events organised by the PressWise RAM project*. London: ICAR. Available at <http://www.icar.org.uk/pdf/pubram001.pdf>

ICAR encourages the development and provision of media training for refugees, asylum seekers and workers in this sector so that they have the resources to engage with journalists confidently and effectively.

Racial harassment and community safety

While the integration strategy notes the development of good practice in the recording and monitoring of racist incidents affecting refugees and asylum seekers, and the results of existing research on this, ICAR's research for the GLA and research conducted for the North East Consortium for Asylum Support Services suggest that significant and ongoing government resourcing is needed in order to systematise data collection and monitoring procedures across the UK so that aggregate and comparable data that allow asylum seekers and refugees to be disaggregated from other populations may be produced. These data will help inform the development of targeted services and initiatives and asylum seeker dispersal and refugee resettlement policies. However, on the basis of existing research, ICAR would suggest that resources also need to go into addressing underreporting amongst asylum seekers and refugees so that the data collected may accurately reflect the extent and nature of harassment amongst these populations. If reporting of harassment is to be a headline indicator of integration, as suggested in chapter six of the strategy, then the establishment of robust monitoring systems and sensitive and accessible reporting procedures are of particular urgency.

Securing community safety for refugees is fundamental to ensuring successful integration. Research completed by ICAR last year on behalf of the Greater London Authority (GLA) references the findings of a study in one London borough. This study indicates that incidents of harassment occurred disproportionately against asylum seekers and refugees.

The persistent harassment of refugees is a cause for concern, not only because it makes it difficult for them to find the safe haven to which they are entitled and to integrate successfully into UK society, but also because of the wider effects on local communities. There are gaps in evidence which could be addressed by more extensive and detailed research which seeks to identify what individual refugees and refugee communities understand by the concept of community safety; the extent, nature and causes of harassment against refugee communities and its effects; and what good practice exists among refugee communities, housing providers and those responsible for community safety to counteract such threats. Further consideration and implementation of practical measures to improve the capacity of individuals, families and refugee communities to counteract harassment is also required.

Specific refugee populations and groups

Whilst recognising the need for an overarching refugee integration strategy, ICAR encourages the government to incorporate provisions for responding to the needs, aspirations, and assets of specific refugee populations and even sub-groups of specific refugee populations within this strategy.

In June 2004 ICAR published a report entitled *The Somali community in the UK – What we know and how we know it*. This report reveals the specific needs of this population and suggests that they may be a particularly marginalised refugee population who could benefit from tailored integration support. It identifies Somali youth as especially in need of such support.⁸ ICAR thinks that similar evidence reviews on other refugee populations are needed to increase our knowledge and our ability to respond appropriately.

⁸ Harris, H. (2004). *The Somali community in the UK – What we know and how we know it*. London: ICAR. Available at <http://www.icar.org.uk/pdf/prs001.pdf>.

Other populations, such as elderly and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) refugees, also receive scant attention within the strategy, and their needs may be different from other demographic groups. ICAR's navigation guide to LGBT refugee populations suggests that the focus on community development as a conduit for integration may not be appropriate for them, as prejudices suffered in countries of origin may also exist within the diaspora population in the UK.⁹ There is limited research evidence on the needs of elderly refugees in relation to integration, and further investigation into this area may shed light on how integration strategies and initiatives need to be adapted to cater to the specific needs faced by this population.¹⁰

Home Office refugee integration website

ICAR welcomes the idea that the Home Office Refugee Integration website will showcase examples of good practice in integration but urges the government not to duplicate the efforts of other national and regionally focussed websites. ICAR supports the creation of an advisory group to advise the Home Office on the development of the refugee integration website and has offered to be a member of this.

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⁹ de Jong, A. (2003). *Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) refugees and asylum seekers*. London: ICAR. Available at <http://www.icar.org.uk/pdf/ng006.pdf>.

¹⁰ One of the only studies in this area is Northern Refugee Centre (1995) *Elders in Exile*. Sheffield: Northern Refugee Centre.