

Understanding the stranger – final report

Executive summary

ICAR's *Understanding the stranger* research examines ways to manage the arrival of asylum seekers into anxious local communities across the UK. The research has a practical purpose. It intends to find out what ICAR and others can do to stop tension rising. Its starting point is the belief, based on evidence collected through ICAR's work, that information can make a fundamental difference to levels of understanding between asylum seekers and their local neighbours. The research seeks to record what local people affected by the arrival of asylum seekers want to know about their new neighbours and the arrangements to support them, who they turn to for information, and who is best able to answer their questions. In addition, the research aims to record what asylum seekers want or need to know about their local community.

This research report, which draws on *case study findings*¹ published by ICAR in July 2003, presents the results of research into six areas of England – Bicester, Dover, Leeds, Leicester, Newcastle and Oakington. ICAR will use these findings to create a toolkit of strategies and activities to forestall or reduce hostility to asylum seekers and refugees by answering the questions that local people have about them and by encouraging local people and asylum seekers to meet and talk to each other. The toolkit will draw on the experience of the areas in which the research took place and on good practice across the country and from Scotland and Wales. It will be available for use in local situations across the UK.

Main findings

- Local people are affected by the arrival of asylum seekers and have anxieties, fears, and concerns. They express a desire for information that answers their questions and are frustrated by neither being consulted in advance, and provided with clear facts, nor being kept informed about profound changes to their neighbourhoods.
- Local people and asylum seekers are strangers to each other in many areas of England. Both groups are anxious about each other to the point of concern for their personal safety. This can result in a climate where myth and rumour can take root very quickly.
- National media coverage of asylum and asylum seekers is generally considered to be provocative, inflammatory, and unconstructive by local people, asylum seekers, and those who work with them. This adds to the general climate of mistrust, fear, and ignorance in which local people and asylum seekers have to attempt to understand and live alongside each other.
- Local people fear that the arrival of asylum seekers in their area will mean a further strain on already overstretched services, a neglect of their needs over those of asylum seekers, and erosion of their cultural identity.
- The fears of local people increase in line with the number or proposed number of asylum seekers. This is particularly the case when asylum seekers are housed or are due to be housed in self-contained centres. Where asylum seekers are accommodated in centres, they are likely to be seen as an anonymous group and therefore as threatening; in dispersal areas, they are more often viewed as individual people.
- Local people are more likely to associate asylum seekers with criminal activity and to be frightened about an increase in crime in their neighbourhood when asylum seekers arrive or are due to arrive in large numbers. This is also the case when opportunities for meeting them are or will be scarce, for example when they live or will live in self-contained centres. These concerns diminish when local people and asylum seekers live and meet as neighbours.

¹ D'Onofrio, L. and Munk, K. *Understanding the stranger: Interim case study findings* ICAR 2003 <http://www.icar.org.uk/pdf/uts001.pdf>

- Asylum seekers are overwhelmingly preoccupied with the outcome of their asylum claim, but they are also concerned about being inaccurately and negatively portrayed in the media and the resulting impact that this can have on local opinion and, consequently, on their own safety.
- Local people's concerns and understanding of asylum seekers vary to some extent across rural and urban, mono and multi cultural, wealthier and less wealthy areas of England. Concerns are also somewhat different in dispersal areas as opposed to areas where asylum seekers are housed or are due to be housed in self-contained centres. In all areas researched, local people express some concern about national asylum issues, for example the numbers of asylum seekers entering the UK; however, they are most concerned about how the arrival of asylum seekers into their neighbourhood will affect their local community, their access to local services, and their way of life.
- Providing accurate and comprehensive information and listening and responding to the concerns of local people can help to reduce the anxiety that the arrival of asylum seekers can cause and thus forestall or reduce community tension and the risk of harassment of asylum seekers. However, it may not be able to change deeply held attitudes towards asylum seekers, particularly in the short term.
- Providing accurate and timely information does not necessarily mean that people will absorb it, believe it or subscribe to it. Information is selected, decoded and used by those receiving it in complex ways.
- Those who know the local community well and who have an even-handed responsibility to protect the interests of all within it are best placed to answer local people's questions, to reassure asylum seekers, and thus to encourage understanding between the two. Included in this group are local authority representatives, GPs, police, schoolteachers and faith and other community leaders. Equally, the views and actions of these "key" individuals can greatly inflame community tensions if they are misinformed about or hostile towards either group.
- Consultation with local people about the arrival of asylum seekers, whether by central or local government, refugee or other agencies will only help to allay fears if it genuinely involves listening and reacting to their concerns as opposed to simply providing them with information.
- Services that are set up specifically for asylum seekers thus excluding local people with the same needs are likely to cause resentment towards asylum seekers among their local neighbours.
- Information that presents asylum seekers as people and asylum seeking as a process experienced by individuals is most likely to encourage understanding by local residents. Asylum seekers are often best placed to answer the questions that local people ask about them. One of the most effective ways of encouraging understanding between local people and asylum seekers is for them to meet each other.
- There is evidence of a great deal of success and ingenuity in using information to promote understanding between local people and asylum seekers across England. However, the impact of this work is hampered by lack of resources and of networks through which to transfer lessons learnt to other areas in a rapid and timely manner.

Recommendations

General

- National and local authorities should recognise that local people are affected by the arrival of asylum seekers in their neighbourhoods and that effective local arrangements should be made for respecting and responding to legitimate local concerns. Local people should be provided with information and explanation that they can trust and need to have their questions and concerns treated seriously.

- Information should be provided before the arrival of asylum seekers and should explain local arrangements made to support them. Consultation with local people should mean answering the questions that they actually ask as well as addressing the questions that government and advocacy groups think are important.
- Information and explanation is best provided by statutory organisations and those whose role it is to provide even-handed support to both local residents and asylum seekers, for example, the police, local officials, teachers, and social workers. The information should be as accurate and transparent as possible about the numbers involved and the local support arrangements and services provided. Advocacy on behalf of asylum seekers and myth-busting have a role to play, but are not an adequate substitute for independent explanation and may sometimes even be counter-productive.
- Even-handed information and explanation provided in advance of the arrival of asylum seekers needs to be combined with a well publicised information source available to deal with questions and concerns which may arise after their arrival.
- Those who need even-handed information in advance include not only local residents and future neighbours, but also, for example, those working in housing offices, local GP surgeries and hospitals, schools and further education colleges, and recreation facilities.
- Provision of services to asylum seekers needs to be, and be seen to be, even-handedly available to their local neighbours.
- Arrangements need to be made for local residents and asylum seekers to meet as neighbours. This need not be through specially convened meetings - existing cultural, sporting or community activities can provide good opportunities.
- Strategies are needed to assist the local media with access to accurate and balanced sources of information on refugee and asylum issues and for local journalists to meet asylum seekers as individuals.

Government

- The Home Office should provide accurate and transparent information to local areas and residents likely to be affected by asylum policy and support arrangements in order to forestall the development of misconceptions and inaccurate rumours.
- Dispersal of asylum seekers in new ways and to new areas needs to be accompanied by reasoned and judicious political statements about asylum seeking and support arrangements. Policies which marginalise asylum seekers and political statements about large numbers of asylum seekers abusing the system induce hostile reactions and a fear of crime among those who have not met asylum seekers, a concern which is not expressed by those who have met them.
- The government should give serious and rapid thought to the community relations aspect of its accommodation centre policy. Building large accommodation centres in rural areas risks serious community tension unless a concerted effort is to be made to help the local people and asylum seekers involved to meet and live as neighbours.

Media

- National media needs to be made aware that unbalanced and inflammatory reporting can create a climate of hostility and fear of asylum seekers that has an impact on day-to-day relations in local communities. The media should be encouraged to approach the asylum issue from all angles to portray a balanced view.

ICAR's *Understanding the stranger* research records what local people and asylum seekers want to know about each other and what helps and what hinders understanding at a local level:

Why are they all young and male?

Why are they always hanging about in the street?

Is my daughter safe going up the road?

Why are they always crowding round the phone box?

Why do they squeeze the children's cheeks? [it makes me anxious and the children don't like it]

(examples of questions asked by local residents in Dover)

[Local] people are sceptical as why they [asylum seekers] all have mobile phones and leather jackets [...] They don't seem to think that nobody will give them a landline anyway... And that they don't mind going to a second hand shop.

(a community worker in Leeds answering local people's questions about why asylum seekers wear leather jackets and have mobile phones)

They need to understand the situation they [asylum seekers] have come from better. They need to understand better why they have come in the first place. People need to know the individual story – what they get now is that the country has been flooded by numbers. But when people get to know the story behind them, they become individuals and there can be affection. Especially when people find out the real stories of people living close to them.

(a police officer in Leeds)

In my country, actually as a Hindu, we must use jewellery. Now, my daughter she is a teenager. Especially teenagers they need it. She must use it; they say that when you look at a girl, it should be precious. She needs something gold [...] I try to care for her. I mean, we sacrifice and try to control things so we can get gold for my daughter.

(a woman asylum seeker from Sri Lanka answering a local person's question about how they managed to give their young daughter gold from 'wrist to elbow')

When the Kosovans came, we had a map on the wall with Kosovo on it and we explained to the children what went on there and how they would feel if that would happen to them. It was all about creating understanding. Making them feel empathetic towards the newcomers. As a result the children are more aware of what is going on in the world. Are more aware of different cultures.

(a head teacher of a school in Leeds explaining how she managed the sudden arrival of a significant number of Kosovan children to her school)

One of the things we started doing was walking groups. Encouraging refugees to participate and local people come on those as well. So that is their chance to break down a few of those barriers so they can get to know each other.

(community centre volunteer in Leeds)

The best place to meet the English people [...] is in the pub [...] when I get in the pub and buy my pint of lager, have a seat, directly they come to me ask me a lot of questions. Sometimes it is just they want to know you. 'Where you come from? Oh, Cameroon! Football! Good footballers! Roger Mila!' Sometimes they are very, very happy to meet me. But they say 'Why you come here?' Well, sometimes when I don't want the discussion go very far I say 'Oh, I come here to study' and they say [...] 'Oh, you have no university in Cameroon?' and I say 'There are lots of universities, but the British are studying in Cameroon as well.' 'But why you chose to study here?' 'Because I love Newcastle.' 'Do you love Newcastle team?' and I say 'Yes Alan Shearer is the best player in the world!' then we joke and finally we be friends.

(an asylum seeker from Cameroon and now living in Newcastle)

Full report available at <http://www.icar.org.uk/content/proj/uts.html>

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