

the INFORMATION CENTRE *about* asylum *and* refugees IN THE UK



ICAR

Understanding the stranger
Interim case study findings

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About ICAR

ICAR exists to raise the level of public debate and to increase understanding of UK refugee and asylum issues in the interests of all. It collects, records, collates and disseminates accurate and comprehensive information to the public and to those who need it for their work. It is an independent organisation and publishes information without fear or favour.

ICAR undertook this research because it is concerned about the lack of public understanding of asylum and asylum seekers at a local level. It believes that listening to local people's concerns and providing information that addresses those concerns can ease community tension and enable an acceptance of newcomers who might otherwise be met with hostility, prejudice and fear.

About the researchers

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They have previously collaborated on a research project funded by the Home Office examining facets of voluntary assisted refugee return.

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Use of terms

- **Asylum seeker:** a person who is in the process of applying for asylum.
- **Refugee:** a person who has been granted permission to stay in the UK under the terms of the 1951 Convention or because of other protection needs.

- **Local community/local people:** people who are/will be affected by the arrival of asylum seekers in their area. ICAR acknowledges the complex nature of 'communities' and of defining them and uses these terms for ease of expression.
- **Key players:** organisations, agencies and individuals who can have an effect on levels of understanding, who are key to flows of information and who represent or have the capacity to shape opinions.
- **Accommodation centres** for asylum seekers awaiting decisions on their applications were introduced in the White Paper on Nationality, Immigration and Asylum (February 2002) and confirmed in the Act (November 2002). The government plans that accommodation centres will be self-contained communities with a capacity for 750 people – a mixture of single men, women and families with children, built in rural areas and designed so that asylum seekers do not use local health, education and other services. Asylum seekers will be required to sleep in and report regularly to the centres but they will not be detained and will therefore be allowed to go into local villages and towns. Early in 2002 three sites were selected as the locations for the trial of accommodation centres, one of which was a Ministry of Defence (MoD) site just outside the town of Bicester in Oxfordshire. The accommodation centre trial will initially operate alongside dispersal policy.
- **Dispersal policy** was introduced by the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 and began in April 2000. The aim of dispersal is to house asylum seekers outside of London and the South-East so as to relieve pressure on services. The 1999 Act established 12 dispersal areas and since April 2002 any asylum seeker who is not able to accommodate themselves is offered housing on a 'no-choice' basis in one of these areas, other than in exceptional circumstances. The areas chosen for dispersal are meant to take account of criteria such as whether there are existing multicultural communities, appropriate housing and the scope to develop voluntary and community sector support. Dispersal is implemented through a dedicated Home Office department, the National Asylum Support Service (NASS).

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Preface from ICAR

ICAR's *Understanding the stranger* project examines the role of information in creating understanding between local people and asylum seekers in cases where a significant number of asylum seekers are moved into an area for the first time, or when there are plans to do so. "Understanding the stranger" does not mean advocacy for the rights of asylum seekers, but rather a well-informed and balanced grasp of what asylum is, who asylum seekers are, what their arrival means for a local community, and the local impact of their arrival.

This interim report draws on 28 interviews:

- 13 in Bicester where the Home Office proposes to build an accommodation centre for 750 asylum seekers awaiting decisions on their asylum claims on a disused Ministry of Defence (MoD) site in a rural area made up of villages with populations of about 400 people, and
- 15 in Leeds which hosted Kosovan refugees from the Humanitarian Evacuation Programme in 1999, and has since received a steady stream of asylum seekers from a wide range of countries under the dispersal programme.

This stage of the research is designed to explore the role of information and the issues involved in improving understanding, and is part of a broader study which will report in September 2003. Those interviewed in Bicester have taken on a public role in the response to the proposed accommodation centre, and those in Leeds have been professionally involved with the arrival and support of asylum seekers. The interviews are illustrative rather than representative, and the findings are published now because of the contribution they may make to the implementation of accommodation centre and dispersal policies. This stage of the research did not involve interviews with local individuals without a public role, nor with asylum seekers and refugees themselves. The final report will put these findings in a more systematic research context, will explore the issues raised in more detail and in other areas of the country, and will collect examples of initiatives which have improved understanding.

The interviews recorded in this study illustrate both the power and the limitations of information to promote understanding. Information can do little to change attitudes once they are formed. People may close their minds to information if they think they know enough. Others use it selectively to support already held opinions. But the interviews suggest that local people in Bicester and Leeds have not generally been given the information they need to address their concerns and fears about asylum seekers and their impact on the local community and that this failure has hindered their understanding of the 'stranger'.

The words of those interviewed for this report require recognition and a response. Their message is that the arrival or dispersal of asylum seekers is not just about asylum seekers and the local systems for supporting them and processing their claims. It is about whole communities. It involves and effects local people. The government, policy-makers on asylum issues, and those implementing these policies need to take local people into their confidence, and treat them with respect.

The research reveals legitimate local concerns and fears which are not in themselves prejudiced or xenophobic. It suggests that if concerns are not listened to, and questions are not answered, then attitudes harden. These two case studies show that informing and consulting with local people can fill the vacuum which may otherwise be exploited by tabloid newspapers and extremist political parties. Once formed, negative attitudes are difficult to shift.

'Changing attitudes is longer term, changing behaviour is fairly short term. Changing behaviour is making sure what people do and what the standards are. So you can get them to behave like you want them to, but that does not necessarily mean that their attitudes have changed. My idea is that the attitude has to change as well. And that takes a lot of time and a lot of positive attitudes from the other people in the field.' (a police officer in Leeds)

What appears to be missing from recent events in Bicester and Leeds is information about asylum and asylum seekers that is based on respect for local concerns. In Leeds there was a favourable reaction to the Kosovan Humanitarian Programme in 1999, but the dispersal of asylum seekers raises different issues which need to be listened to and addressed. It was disastrous that inhabitants of the Bicester area first heard about the proposal to build an accommodation centre on their doorstep from the national media. This report is not about the pros and cons of a policy of establishing accommodation centres for 750 asylum seekers in rural areas, although it is difficult to separate the local protest entirely from the numbers. The complaint relevant to this report is that the Home Office failed to provide adequate information about its plans and their possible impact on the local community from the outset. It has subsequently tried to correct the early damage by organising information road shows and by appointing a Communications Officer.

Local people need to be engaged in discussions about matters that affect them. Explanations need to be provided: why people seek asylum, what they are fleeing, why the government supports them, what the arrangements are, how their cultural, social and religious practices may differ from those of local people, and what these practices mean. The curtain of defensiveness needs to be raised. Community relations are being put at risk by a fear or failure to explain fairly simple matters. For example, in Leeds it appears that local people may want to know why asylum seekers wear leather jackets and have mobile phones:

'[Local] people are skeptical 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)

While the situations in Leeds and Bicester are completely different, local concerns are surprisingly similar: large numbers, fear of uncertainty and the unknown and threats to security, local services and local identity. Common to both studies is the sense from local people that they are being cheated and being taken for a ride. Both in Bicester and in Leeds local people feel that asylum seekers have access to a quality of services, housing and healthcare that is denied to them, and that they are putting too great a strain on local services. Clear information about the levels of and reasons for support being provided to asylum seekers would encourage understanding. Listening to local people's concerns would also highlight the desirability of making some of that support available even-handedly to them as well as to asylum seekers.

'What they do object to is finding that the government are prepared to build an asylum centre of that size with all the facilities that it had, but wouldn't even give the village a bus service. It's just extremely poorly handled, more than anything else probably' (a parish councillor in Bicester)

Asylum seekers and refugees need to play their part in the process of engagement and explanation. Local people in Leeds understand about the general conditions that produce asylum seekers - in Kosovo, Afghanistan and Iraq for example - but they need to be reminded by hearing individual stories. Like understanding, information has to involve both sides. Asylum seekers are naturally preoccupied with the fate of their asylum claims, but they nonetheless need to be educated about their local communities and learn that there are people

in deprived and difficult circumstances in the UK, often living on the same estates. In this way they can come to understand their new local community better.

All interviewees in both places single out the national and local media as central to the debate. Most maintain that the role of the national media is crucial and that the tabloids have played the most influential role in forming negative opinions. Regional and local press are viewed mainly as trying to offer a balanced picture and to be more in touch with local people's concerns.

The stories of Bicester and Leeds are complex. They show that promoting understanding between local people and asylum seekers is not easy and is a process that is vulnerable to political and media scaremongering. But they also point out the way forward. They show that the efforts of certain players are key to achieving understanding and that common to all their efforts is a respect for local people and their concerns as well as for the needs and situation of asylum seekers.

Executive summary

ICAR's *Understanding the stranger* project

This project is about how to manage sudden and apparently unmanageable arrivals of asylum seekers into anxious local communities. It is concerned with promoting understanding between local people and asylum seekers by identifying and meeting the information needs that arise when a significant number of asylum seekers are moved into an area for the first time. It is about recording these local concerns and information needs, respecting them and devising ways in which information can promote real understanding.

The project has two stages:

- the research phase, which aims to uncover and examine what has worked and what has not worked in terms of promoting understanding between local people and asylum seekers in areas of the UK with experience of this process (February to September 2003), and
- 'finding local lasting solutions,' in which ICAR will act on the research findings to devise practical initiatives for promoting understanding (from September 2003).

Interim case study findings

This document reports the interim case study findings of the research phase and is designed to identify important issues that will be explored further in the final research report to be published in September 2003. The research was commissioned by ICAR, carried out by two independent researchers between March and June 2003, and funded by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation.

Research objectives, outline, and methods

This research looks at the role of information in creating understanding between local people and asylum seekers when a significant number of asylum seekers are moved into an area for the first time or when there are plans to do so. It explores this idea through two case studies of recent events: Bicester, one of the areas where an accommodation centre may be built and Leeds, a dispersal area city with some experience of refugee settlement.

In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with individuals and representatives of organisations considered to be important to flows of information and called 'key players' for the purposes of this report e.g. local authority and refugee agency staff, the police, community workers and the local media. The findings of this report are based on 15 in-depth semi-structured interviews in Leeds and 13 in Bicester.

Common findings

Leeds and Bicester differ profoundly from each other both as places and in terms of their experience of asylum seekers. Yet this research shows that the main concerns of local people identified by key players and the information that they need in order to understand asylum seekers better are surprisingly similar.

Key concerns

The key concerns of local people in Bicester and Leeds over the arrival of asylum seekers as perceived by the interviewees are not only similar but seem to cross social and ethnic lines. The main concern is: perceived large numbers of asylum seekers 'overwhelming' and changing the identity of the locality, with effects on housing, health services, education, and crime levels. Whether or not such perceptions or fears can be substantiated, they are fundamental to the formation of people's attitudes and directly influence their level of understanding of asylum seekers. Perhaps even more importantly, local people are both anxious and angry that their concerns and fears are not listened to and that they are not properly consulted about an issue that will impact significantly on their local community.

The role of information and information needs

This study illustrates the need for information that promotes understanding of asylum seekers in contrasting settings and examines some aspects of the role it can play. Bicester provides an opportunity to draw tentative conclusions about the information needs of local people in an area where asylum seekers have not yet actually arrived but where they may arrive in large numbers. Leeds gives an opportunity to assess information needs over time, when the presence of asylum seekers has become a fact of daily life.

What both studies show is that information needs to be made available quickly and continuously to local people about changes that involve them and that this information needs to be based on initial consultation that identifies local concerns.

In Bicester, local people felt that information about the government's plans should have been available to them from the time of the announcement that their local community was to be one of the trial sites for an accommodation centre. In the absence of clear and timely information specifically geared to their concerns, and influenced by reports in the media, local people began to draw their own conclusions and went on to form pressure groups to represent their interests. Once opinions had been formed, it became more difficult to challenge them.

The Leeds case study shows that information provision needs to be on-going and needs to be about asylum in general as well as about the specific groups of asylum seekers that become local people's new neighbours.

Key players

Key players are organisations, agencies and individuals that can have an effect on levels of understanding. They may either be key to information provision, influential locally or both. The key players identified by interviewees in the two locations were very similar. The key players most likely to be successful in promoting understanding between local people and asylum seekers were those with an even-handed professional or personal responsibility to both groups.

In Leeds local authorities and refugee agencies provide the basic organisational structure for supporting asylum seekers and these groups were identified by most interviewees as playing a key role. However, organisations working with both asylum seekers and local people at the grass-roots level and on a day-to-day basis were seen by the interviewees as best placed to

influence attitudes and promote understanding. They include religious organisations, schools, sports clubs and the police.

In Bicester there is no organisational structure for asylum seekers as so far hardly any have arrived in the area. All interviewees identified the same group of key players and their lists also tallied with those interviewed in Leeds. In addition, both local action groups set up by local residents in Bicester to oppose the accommodation centre were identified by others and saw themselves as being key players. These two groups foresaw that their role would remain key if and when the accommodation centre is finally built.

The majority of interviewees in both locations identified the local and national media as having a key role; national media mainly negative and the local media more likely to be balanced.

What has promoted and what has hindered understanding between local people and asylum seekers?

Evaluating changes in behaviour and attitude is clearly outside the scope of these case studies, especially across a city as large as Leeds, but even within a smaller town such as Bicester. Understanding can vary within households and also does change with time and events. This report is based on a small number of interviews with key players, but nonetheless certain messages are clear. Genuine understanding is more likely to occur when local people are listened to and feel part of the process of hosting asylum seekers. Understanding is also more likely to occur when local people and asylum seekers meet each other, because then opinions are based on actual experience and not on media stories or myths.

In Leeds, refugee agencies, local authorities, local police and community organisations have taken pro- and re-active steps towards 'myth-busting' by holding local meetings and distributing literature. In addition, some local community organisations in Leeds have set up events and projects to try to put local people in contact with asylum seekers. The main purpose of these activities is to make local people aware that there is a human face and story to each asylum seeker and that they are not an impersonal phenomenon to be feared. In Bicester similar activities, including joint sporting events and cultural evenings, have been proposed by local people for if and when the accommodation centre is built.

Those key players with a professional role in asylum issues, for example local authority housing officers, are often also local residents and their personal views about asylum seekers may determine whether in the course of their work they help or hinder the process of understanding. In Leeds, some interviewees spoke of how the personal prejudices of front line workers have contributed to the difficulties of overcoming entrenched attitudes towards asylum seekers.

Government behaviour and policy can play a major role in promoting or hindering understanding. In Bicester, the Home Office has been accused of doing little to promote understanding. Key players say that local people feel that the Home Office withheld crucial information from the time of the initial announcement about the accommodation centre right through to the public inquiry, and that this has led to deep mistrust of their intentions and of the information that they have provided. In the absence of any official information from the government, local people were 'left with no choice' but to seek out information by themselves, in some cases from the media. There was no opportunity in this stage of the research to

explore the effect of government asylum policy pronouncements on local people's attitudes to asylum seekers in Leeds.

The national media very often fills the information gaps. A strong feeling amongst those interviewed was that the national press serves more to hinder understanding rather than to promote it. On a local level, interviewees in both locations reported that the local press generally covered asylum issues in a balanced and accurate manner. In Leeds, a representative of an organisation working with refugees stated that *'no negative publicity is more important than positive publicity'*.

The limits of information

Even well researched information can fail to encourage understanding if the systems are not in place to make sure it reaches the people who can use it to make a difference. Some front line workers interviewed for this report said that the information they needed for their everyday work did not always reach them from those higher up in their own organisation or from other organisations higher up in the organisational network.

It has to be recognised that sometimes even well-timed information can have a negative effect. A police officer in Leeds commented *'You might talk to people before asylum seekers arrive, and they might feel better about it, but it might have the reverse effect, it might be inflammatory'*. It is clearly much harder to try to use information to change opinions once they have been formed, as the Home Office is discovering in Bicester. However, the two local action groups in Bicester, one of which mainly advocates for the interests of local people and the other for the interests of asylum seekers, are now talking to each other and exchanging information. This is evidence that it is never too late for information to increase understanding.

Conclusion

Ultimately, if something is unwelcome then it will be difficult to couch it in acceptable terms. But this research suggests that if local people are consulted and their concerns are acknowledged, if key players are well informed, open and communicative, and especially if local people and asylum seekers meet as individuals, then harmonious relations between local people and asylum seekers can be achieved.

Recommendations

On the basis of these interim findings, ICAR makes the following 10 recommendations:

- The responsibility to offer protection to people fleeing persecution is not a matter for apology, but needs to involve and engage the local communities in which asylum seekers are to be accommodated.
- Local community concerns and fears should be heard and addressed. It is not necessarily racist to have fears and concerns. Information campaigns in local areas should be based on initial consultation that identifies need.
- Local people should be informed about plans concerning asylum seekers in advance of their arrival as well as afterwards.

- The type of information provided needs to address *local* concerns (e.g. how will asylum seekers affect you?) as well as the nature of the asylum process and why people seek asylum.
- Key players and information providers need to recognise that asylum seekers cannot be treated in isolation from local people's every day concerns about money, housing, and health for example. Local people want to know how the arrival of asylum seekers will affect local services.
- Initiatives and projects which help asylum seekers need to be offered even-handedly to their neighbours, who although not fleeing persecution may often be suffering from serious deprivation of other kinds.
- Local service providers (schools, housing providers, police etc.) working directly with both asylum seekers and local people should be equipped with information and resources which encourage understanding.
- Government policies should take into account that sudden decisions and large numbers of arrivals of asylum seekers are difficult for local people to accept.
- If accommodation centres are to be accepted by local people ways need to be found of encouraging rather than discouraging interaction between local residents and asylum seekers.
- The national media should be encouraged to approach the asylum issue from all angles to portray a balanced view. Refugee support agencies should encourage them to do this by helping to arrange interviews, with appropriate support, with asylum seekers and refugees, so that they can tell their personal stories.

Introduction

These interim case study findings are part of ICAR's *Understanding the stranger* project. Although the project is in its early stages ICAR is publishing these findings now in order to raise a number of issues of concern for policy and practice and to identify factors which need to be further explored and assessed by the researchers in their final report. The research was commissioned by ICAR and carried out by two independent researchers between February and June 2003. ICAR is very grateful to the Paul Hamlyn Foundation for a grant that made this work possible.

The final research report will be published in September 2003.

The *Understanding the stranger* project is about how to manage sudden and apparently unmanageable arrivals of asylum seekers into anxious local communities. It is concerned with promoting understanding between local people and asylum seekers by identifying and meeting the information needs that arise when a significant number of asylum seekers are moved into an area for the first time. It is about recording these local concerns and information needs, respecting them and devising ways in which information can promote real understanding.

The second stage of the project, 'finding lasting local solutions,' will build on this research to devise and develop practical ways in which information can promote real understanding within local communities.

Research aims and methods

ICAR commissioned two researchers to look into the following main questions:

- What has happened in two areas of the UK that are due to or have recently received asylum seekers in significant numbers for the first time?
- What are the key concerns and issues raised by the arrival of significant numbers of asylum seekers for the first time?
- What information is needed to promote understanding between local people and asylum seekers?
- Who are the 'key players' in providing information that promotes the process of understanding and how do they see their role?
- What has helped promote understanding between local people and newly arrived asylum seekers?
- What has hindered understanding between local people and newly arrived asylum seekers?
- What are the limits of information in terms of promoting understanding on this issue?
- How transferable to other areas of the UK are the lessons about what has already gone well and what has not worked in promoting understanding between local people and asylum seekers?

Methodology

Choice of locations

ICAR aims for this research to draw out the key factors that enable local communities to understand the arrival of asylum seekers. ICAR is interested in local experiences and how these compare or contrast with each other and what actions work well or badly and why. Locations were therefore chosen (and will continue to be chosen for the final report) to represent a number of variables. For example:

- Type of area e.g. urban or rural, multi-cultural or largely mono-cultural; experience or not of asylum seekers and/or refugee settlement
- Type of housing of asylum seekers e.g. accommodation centre, reception centre, induction centre, dispersal area
- Geographical location e.g. England, Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales
- Experience of arrival of asylum seekers e.g. proposed arrival, currently receiving, previous reception or settlement area

Bicester was chosen because of the current public and political debate about housing large numbers of asylum seekers in centres in mainly rural areas amongst small communities with little or no previous experience of them. Bicester also provides an insight into an area suddenly faced with the prospect of the future arrival of asylum seekers in large numbers: very few asylum seekers (if any) have arrived in the area and they are not due to (if they arrive at all)¹ until the end of 2004. In contrast, Leeds was chosen as an urban area, which is more diverse and multi-cultural, and has experience of dispersal as well as a history of refugee settlement dating back to at least the 1970s, including the Kosovan Humanitarian Evacuation Programme in 1999.²

A number of other possible locations were considered. Several of these will be included in the final research report which is due in September 2003.

Choice of interviewees and methods used

ICAR's initial scoping exercise suggested that there were certain organisations, professionals and individuals who play a particularly important role in providing information to local people and asylum seekers and in promoting understanding between these groups.³ These 'key players' are the main focus of this research and the main interviewees. Key players can have an effect on levels of understanding, are key to flows of information and represent or have the capacity to shape opinions.

Who these key players are can vary in different locations, but are likely to include:

¹ Whether or not the accommodation centre goes ahead depends on the outcome of a planning inquiry. The case is currently with the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister.

² In April 1999 the UK government participated in a Humanitarian Evacuation Programme to airlift more than 4,000 Kosovans to the UK from the refugee camps in Macedonia. The refugees were received and supported by refugee agencies and the local authorities in northwest England, Yorkshire (including Leeds) and Scotland.

³ In 2002 ICAR carried out informal scoping research into the experiences of Dover, Glasgow and Leicester to inform the development of this research.

- Front-line professionals: e.g. health and education professionals, local police, local authority staff, local politicians, religious figures, refugee agency and community organisation workers
- Civil society groups: both refugee and asylum related and others
- The media: both local and national, print and broadcast
- The Home Office
- Individual asylum seekers
- Local residents

In Bicester interviews took place with 12 key players plus the Home Office and in Leeds with 18 key players representing 15 organisations. The focus of the research for the interim stage was on interviewing those key players with a professional capacity or who represented groups within local communities, rather than individual asylum seekers or local people. This was due to time constraints as well as the need to identify and to consider the roles of those responsible for managing local concerns. The sample is by no means representative but reflects the desire to collect data for detailed qualitative analysis: the overall purpose of the research is to gain data that can be used to develop local solutions. Therefore, the emphasis is on a small number of in-depth interviews which elucidate the experience and allow for analysing the complexities apparent at the local level.

Interviewees were initially identified by contacting the relevant local authority for suggestions of key players, and from then on 'snowball sampling' was used with all interviewees asked to suggest other potential participants. Interviewees were told that they would not be named in any subsequent report but that their role might be mentioned and that this might lead to their identification. All interviewees consented to this. As a result no list of interviewees has been appended to this document but Appendix 1 provides a description of the types of organisations and the roles of those interviewed.

The researcher working on the Bicester case study also attended the third party and public evidence day of the planning inquiry into the accommodation centre and through this identified further potential key players. Twenty-nine people gave evidence that day including: official representatives of the local community e.g. parish councillors, those representing family, friends and neighbours as well as those providing their personal views. This evidence is also drawn upon in the report. The researcher working on Leeds attended a multi-agency meeting which involved 69 people representing a wide range of organisations and through this she similarly identified potential key players and gained further research evidence. The interviews in Bicester took place during March 2003 and at the beginning of April 2003, starting the same week that the war began in Iraq. The interviews in Leeds took place at the end of April 2003 and at the beginning of May 2003. Information was also obtained from relevant websites, reports and literature provided by interviewees, press cuttings and other relevant literature as well as from questions and observation at meetings.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted, based on a questionnaire consisting mainly of open questions (see Appendix 2) completed by the researcher. This allowed the interviewees to express their opinion on specific issues and also to describe their experiences in their own words. The interview schedule was divided into seven sections relating to: organisational role; community relations; information needs of local people, asylum seekers and the interviewee; the role and limits of information; other key players and lessons learned. Each interviewee was provided with a project information sheet (see Appendix 3), in most cases prior to interview, and a statement of ethics (see Appendix 4). Interviews lasted between 45 minutes and 2.5

hours. The majority of interviews were recorded, with permission from the interviewee. This enabled the researchers to draw out nuances and quotes on subsequent hearings.

The study is mainly based on qualitative research methods and analysis. It was not feasible to provide an overview with quantitative data in this report. Apart from the fact that the sample was relatively small, the interviews were carried out on a semi-structured basis. A consequence of this was that some questions were not asked to certain interviewees, whereas in other cases statements may have been prompted to elicit opinions. Finally, in some cases more than one interviewee was present during the interview, which may have led to interviewees either representing or contradicting the other(s) without the interviewer being able to detect this.

The study was carried out by two researchers who each focused on one location. The subsequent write-up of each case study was accompanied by a collaborative exercise to draw out both the similarities and differences between them, and assess the possibilities of developing a framework to be used in these and other locations.

Recommendations for the next stage of the research

- Provide a literature survey of relevant research, including from Europe, in order to provide a research context.
- Explore these issues in more detail in other areas of the country which have recent or longer experience of asylum seekers.
- Examine in greater detail what is meant by information and its role, how information is derived and received, and the significance of incomplete information, and evaluate different forms of communicating information from leaflets to sports projects.
- Examine in greater detail the idea of key players used in the case studies, and the role of local or community leadership.
- Explore the attitudes and perceptions of local people who do not have a professional or public role in relation to the arrival of asylum seekers.
- Explore what asylum seekers need to know about their local community and what role they could and would like to play in promoting understanding about themselves and their situation.
- Collect examples of initiatives which have improved understanding.
- Make recommendations for further research beyond the scope of this project.

Bicester timetable of events

DATE	EVENT
January 2002	Home Office informally consults Cherwell District Council about the possibility of using disused MoD land in Bicester for an accommodation centre
January 30 th 2002	Article in <i>Bicester Review</i> confirms Bicester as one of eight proposed sites
February 2002	The idea of housing asylum seekers in accommodation centres while their asylum applications are being processed is proposed in the government White Paper <i>Secure Borders Safe Haven</i>
Early February 2002	First national media coverage of the accommodation centre proposal appears
March 21 st 2002	First meeting of local residents and beginning of campaign against the accommodation centre
April 15 th 2002	<i>Bicester Review</i> is notified that the BNP are distributing leaflets in the area
April 16 th 2002	Letters from local residents countering BAG's stance appear in <i>Bicester Review</i>
April 16 th 2002	Tony Baldry MP submits petition with 10,000 signatures to the Home Secretary requesting that he examine alternate and more suitable sites
May 14 th 2002	Home Office reduces the number of potential sites for accommodation centres from eight to three; Bicester is one of the remaining three
May 15 th 2002	Official planning notification is received by Cherwell District Council
May 18 th 2002	Silent vigil to oppose the accommodation centre is led by Tony Baldry MP
June 10 th 2002	Home Office holds information exhibition in Arccott
June 11 th 2002	Home Office holds information exhibition in Bicester
June 19 th 2002	Home Office Minister Beverley Hughes visits Bicester
By July 2002	2, 397 written objections about the accommodation centre received by Cherwell District Council
July 11 th 2002	Cherwell District Council unanimously rejects the proposal on planning grounds
November 8 th 2002	Accommodation centre policy is confirmed with the passing of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002
December 10 th 2002	Public inquiry begins
December 11 th 2002	BNP announce plans to open an office in Bicester
Early 2003	Members of BAG and BRS establish a dialogue, mediated through Asylum Welcome
February 20 th 2003	Cherwell District Council vote to pursue judicial review of the accommodation centre proposal
February 26 th 2003	Residents groups and members of the public give evidence at the public inquiry
March 3 rd 2003	Public inquiry ends
May 1 st 2003	Local elections are held - BNP candidate is not elected
May 2003	Report of the public inquiry is submitted to the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister. A decision on whether to proceed with the accommodation centre is still awaited at the time of this report's publication.

Bicester: Lisa D'Onofrio

Section 1: The story of Bicester

Bicester and its surroundings

The town of Bicester is situated in Oxfordshire, three miles off the M40, an hour each from London to the south and Birmingham to the north. An old market town with its origins in agriculture, Bicester 'has grown steadily from its market origins to become a major focal point for the area's business communities while preserving its historic centre'.⁴ This growth is reflected in the current population of a little under 30,000. It is a small English town with a pedestrianised high street and a shopping precinct leading to the market square.

Census statistics for Bicester were unavailable at the time of writing. However, relevant statistics on the district of Cherwell within which Bicester is located are helpful as they are indicative of certain characteristics of Bicester such as its mono-cultural nature and its socio-economic situation.⁵

The percentage of the population of Cherwell defined as 'White' is 96.1. Comparing this to England's average, which is 90.9%, indicates the relative racial homogeneity of the Cherwell population. 75.6% of the population of Cherwell is Christian, with the second largest group of religiously aligned people being Muslims at 1.2%. Almost 5% of Cherwell's residents were born outside the EU, although statistics relating to countries of birth were unavailable at the time of writing. 75% live in owner occupied homes, 13% live in social rented housing and the remaining 12% live in private rented accommodation. All categories of crime occur less often than the average for England and Wales. Bicester is an area of low unemployment. According to a local councillor interviewed for this study, the unemployment rate is 0.81%, and indeed Cherwell census statistics show that employment levels are higher than the national average.

Bicester is surrounded by several small villages. Four of these - Arncott, Ambrosden, Blackthorn and Piddington form the locality of the government's planned accommodation centre for asylum seekers.

Each of the four villages has a population of approximately 400. Much of Ambrosden is taken up by Ministry of Defence (MoD) housing for army personnel and their families, whilst Piddington appears to be more of a commuter village. Arncott is made up mainly of 2 housing estates, on opposite sides of the main road through the village. The largest one is mostly ex-council, built in an open-plan style and forming a circle around the local shop, the Arncott Emporium. There are a few houses around the village green, a football pitch, a community centre, a pub and a hotel. The village is dominated by MoD facilities. Many of the local people work for the MoD but a large number are also retired. It is apparent that this is a small community, where everybody knows everybody else; the local shop owner says that it is a family village, where watching over children playing outside is a shared responsibility.

⁴ Bicester Official Guide 2002

⁵ See National Statistics Online Census 2001 *Population Report - Cherwell District and Neighbourhood Statistics - Cherwell*. Available at www.statistics.gov.uk/census2001/pop2001/cherwell.asp and www.neighbourhood.statistics.gov.uk/areaProfileFrames.asp?theArea=38UB&searchType=7&origText=Cherwell respectively.

The local population is used to 'strangers' arriving in the area to live in institutional settings: as well as the military installation, Bullingdon Category 'B' prison is nearby. But this area has little experience of asylum seekers. ICAR has found no evidence of a history of refugee settlement in Bicester, and various sources consulted by ICAR believe that there are probably very few if any refugees and asylum seekers there at present.

The accommodation centre

During February 2002 the Home Office publicly announced eight potential sites for trialing its new policy of accommodation centres to house asylum seekers. One of these was MoD land in Bicester. By May 14th 2002 this number had dropped to three, with Bicester, Throckmorton near Worcestershire and RAF Newton in Nottinghamshire remaining. Throckmorton was subsequently dropped later in the year, and the site at RAF Newton has, like Bicester, recently been the subject of a public inquiry.

The proposed accommodation centre at Bicester will be able to accommodate up to 750 people for a maximum of six months while their asylum claims are being assessed, in accordance with the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002. The centre will be self-contained so as not to impact on local services, and will comprise accommodation, self-catering facilities, on-site schooling and healthcare facilities, recreational facilities, as well as immigration services for processing claims for asylum. The accommodation centre will not be a detention centre, and asylum seekers will be free to visit local villages and towns.⁶

The fallout from breaking news

The mainstream media published articles about the planned accommodation centre at the end of January 2002, although it is clear that the Home Office had already been in contact with local authorities before that point.⁷ The news reached people interviewed for this research at different times and from various sources, some of which were based on rumour or incomplete reporting. What is apparent is that the way people first heard about the proposal continues to be a source of irritation, and is consistently referred to as a factor in their opposition.

Box 1: How the news of the accommodation centre proposal reached interviewees

A representative of the District planning department described the beginning of official discussions: *'The announcement was first made to us one year ago, insofar as the Home Office approached us informally to explain the whole philosophy behind it to senior council members, because the Act wasn't even published as a Bill at that point - what is an accommodation centre and how it sat in between induction centres and removal centres. We were one of eight possible sites and therefore we might not get an application, but what was our reaction? We sat on the fence in the absence of information, we didn't want to start causing concern for the public if no application would be forthcoming. Two weeks later Bicester had moved to one of four, they gave us layout plans and more information about what it was. Then there was a "formal consultation" at which the government was keen for us to process [a response] in eight weeks, to get right through to say what our view was. With a major project it was very short notice. They had said at the first meeting they were contemplating using an urgency procedure which would only have given us two weeks to respond, which we said was totally unacceptable. When the application was made we had much information to assimilate and disseminate to the public, through parish councils etc. To help us with that process the Home Office ran exhibitions in two villages, which were relatively poorly attended in spite of the publicity.'*

⁶ For a fuller description of the rationale and plans for the proposed accommodation centres, see the government White Paper *Secure Borders, Safe Haven: Integration with Diversity in Modern Britain* (2002): paras 4.28 to 4.41.

⁷ See for example "Asylum centre plans spark protests" *The Observer*, February 10th 2002.

A local parish councillor recounted how he remembers the process:
'The first thing was gossip, and then the newspaper articles, and then the TV. And finally through the parish council receiving the planning, which confirmed everything. But yeah, I guess initially it's gossip, [...] it started with the national press and then down to local press I believe. I think it was probably the Daily Express that came out with the proposed sites.'

Representatives of the local action group, Bicester Action Group (BAG) said that the way the news was first announced provided the impetus for their organisation:

'BAG was founded because of the way the announcement came [...] in the local paper, a very small announcement, in a local paper, two or three lines [...] And from that we felt that these [local] people needed to have a platform to, you know, air their views and find out information, so that's how, primarily, BAG was formed. It was formed for local people, not for any other reason, simply so that local people could get together and air their views, and hopefully find out what was happening.'

A local resident and member of BAG described how she first heard about the proposal:

'First we heard rumours, so we went to see Tony Baldry [MP for Banbury]. The first official info was when it came on the news, then the newspapers, Telegraph, Express, Ecologist all turned up on the doorstep.'

A representative of another local group, Bicester Refugee Support (BRS), described how she first heard about the planned accommodation centre:

'The first I heard about this was when a group called the Bicester Action Group, or BAG for short, sort of captured a few headlines locally and in conjunction with the local Tory MP Tony Baldry, they, well I don't know if they broke the news or whatever, but that was how I heard about it, through their campaign. And they raised awareness locally of the fact that there was a plan being submitted to build this accommodation centre between their two villages.'

It is interesting that there are varying versions of the way the news broke. Most interviewees were acting on incomplete information, and many of them blame the Home Office for the way the news was broken, particularly for not clarifying the situation from the beginning. However, a Home Office representative interviewed for this research claims that the way the news first came into the public domain was not within their control, as the information was leaked to the press after initial meetings with the local council.

As time went on, the Home Office became the target of all criticism of the proposal. Much of this criticism revolved around their failure to provide information, a point discussed further below. It should be noted that while all interviewees now have the benefit of hindsight, most people were acting in an information vacuum when the news broke and this should be taken into account when seeking to understand their reactions.

The development of opposition to the accommodation centre proposal

The formation of Bicester Action Group (BAG) was a key event in the opposition to the proposal and provided a focus for local people, mainly in the villages affected, who were keenly opposed to asylum seekers coming into the area. BAG's stance was immediately hostile towards the accommodation centre and the group set about raising awareness locally of the issues involved, becoming very vocal and attracting substantial local and national media interest.

Box 2: The formation of local groups

A local parish councillor's version of how and why BAG was formed provides insight into the organisation and its views:

'So there was a huge interest in what was going on. It may not have all been negative, but there was a huge interest. It was probably 95% negative. We called a second meeting,⁸ and there it was agreed that representatives from each village, and NOT the parish council, should form an action group to fight the plan. Or that each village should put representatives together to form an action group, and that consisted then of about 3 or 4 people from each village making 16 people, which became Bicester Action Group [...]. [W]hat the parish council did was to say we represent the community, and within that community there may be a certain percentage of people that support the asylum centre being here so we said it would be better if we could elect a committee from each of the villages and which formed the action group eventually [...] [P]eople were voted in by people who all believed the same thing, and that protected the people in the parish council from misrepresenting people in the village perhaps.'

In their interview BAG claimed their initial aim was to delay the building of the accommodation centre, and to get a public inquiry:

'[W]e felt that it was necessary for people to know what was being proposed, and initially we wanted to be sure that we had a public inquiry [...] we felt at the time that this actually, OK, might be a good idea, but we wanted to hear all the arguments. We felt that it was important that everybody could have a platform in which to [...] not necessarily voice their opinions, but just so that every group, every organisation and every individual could have somewhere to raise their questions or their concerns [...] For all of the people that were going to be affected by a centre such as this we felt that it was important there was a public forum, an open debate that views could be aired publicly, and THEN a proper decision arrived at, rather than being thrust upon us.'

BAG were active in their opposition, and campaigned to alert local people to their cause. They wrote letters to the local newspapers, put posters up in the villages and in Bicester, designed and delivered leaflets, and organised fundraising and awareness events. Their campaign also benefited from the support of local politicians and extensive media coverage. But some local residents in Bicester felt that the opposition of residents towards the accommodation centre was verging on prejudice and racism, and in response these individuals wrote letters to the local papers disagreeing with the stance of BAG, and subsequently joined together to form Bicester Refugee Support (BRS). BAG organised a silent vigil to protest against the accommodation centre, and BRS members attended in order to provide information about asylum seekers, but the mood of most of the protestors was hostile to BRS.

Box 3: Campaigning by BAG and BRS

A Bicester resident explained how BAG's methods were offensive to other local people:

'I was really appalled by the tone of their campaign as were other people locally [...] a few of us locally had started writing in to the local papers, saying that we objected to the tone of the campaign.'

From *The Bicester Advertiser*:⁹

'About 700 men, women and children took part in a silent vigil to protest against Government plans to house 750 asylum-seekers near Bicester. Protestors stood behind a large banner which read "We want to be heard" during the one-hour event at Pingle Field, off Pingle Drive, Bicester from 4-5pm [...] Led by Bicester's MP, Tony Baldry, people stood silently for nearly an hour.'

Perceptions of the same vigil by a member of BRS differ:

'[T]here was a supposedly silent vigil on the fields just out the back here held by Bicester Action Group to protest against the centre. And the first sort of public thing we did was go along to that vigil and try and give out some of our early leaflets, which were developed with the help of the Close Campsfield Campaign, and basically the leaflets were got together quite quickly, but it was basically trying to dispel some of the myths about asylum seekers and refugees. But we found, well I think we would all say that

⁸ The first local residents meeting about the accommodation centre was held in Arncoth village hall on the 21st March 2002.

⁹ "700 protest over asylum centre" *Bicester Advertiser*, May 20th 2003.

at that campaign we felt personally unsafe and under attack. The mood was extremely hostile, it wasn't a silent vigil. Tony Baldry got up on his soapbox and spoke, and the leaflets were screwed up and thrown back at us. They weren't read. We were told that we were communists and should go to Russia, they were shouting that they would jump ahead in the housing queues, take up our resources, that we're a soft touch, all that kind of thing.'

Although BAG had strong local support there were dissenting voices. A local vicar who spoke out early on in the debate became a target for those who subscribed to or had adopted anti-asylum attitudes, and it is clear that views were becoming inflamed.

Box 4: BRS as an alternative point of view

BRS also opposed the accommodation centre, but for different reasons:

'[W]e oppose the asylum centre, but for [...] a concern of the needs and rights of asylum seekers. So whereas, if the centre went ahead, BAG would want more isolation, and for the asylum seekers to be contained within the centre, one of our main concerns about the centre was that it's too isolated, that asylum seekers wouldn't have enough opportunities to integrate into the community [...] We were just concerned more about the type and quality of the facilities that would be provided at the centre [...] so we were just very worried that this would be a detention centre in all but name, with inadequate facilities to cope with a varied population, who would be greeted with nothing but hostility from the local community, and that there wouldn't be adequate provisions locally for their needs.'

Both groups publicised their actions as much as possible through articles in the media and both groups developed websites.¹⁰ BRS made contact with Oxford-based charity Asylum Welcome, and BAG made links with other groups around the country involved in campaigns against accommodation centres for asylum seekers.¹¹ BAG got the lion's share of press coverage, with articles appearing in many of the national newspapers, as well as several Australian newspapers, and TV stations in Spain and the Czech Republic. In April 2002, their support from local MP Tony Baldry resulted in him handing in a petition with 10,000 signatures to the House of Commons urging the Home Secretary 'to look for more suitable sites for asylum accommodation centres from the perspective of both asylum seekers and local residents.'¹²

Box 5: Support from the local media

BAG representatives listed the media support they had received for their campaign:

'[W]e've also got the local media, they're unbiased but 100% behind us, both the TV, radios, local papers, so we've been able to use those [...] the local TV took us to Sangatte last year, and for me that was a great insight.'

Over 2,100 written objections from the public and commercial organisations were received by Cherwell District Council in response to the government's plans.¹³ The Council ultimately unanimously rejected the proposal on planning grounds,¹⁴ as a result of which a public inquiry was arranged. This inquiry concluded on March 3rd 2003. A final decision from the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister as to whether the centre will go ahead was expected at the beginning of June, although a judicial review is also in progress. At the time of writing, there had been no outcome of either process.

¹⁰ Bicester Action Group's website is available at www.bag2002.co.uk. Bicester Refugee Support's website is available at www.bicesterrefugeesupport.org.uk

¹¹ See for example Hemswell Cliff Action Group at www.hemswellcliff.tripod.com, Newton Action Group at www.newtonactiongroup.com, and Daedalus Action Group at www.action4lee.org

¹² Hansard, April 16th 2002.

¹³ "Reject hostility to asylum seekers" *Bicester Advertiser*, July 5th 2002.

¹⁴ "Council rejects bid for asylum seekers' camp" *Bicester Advertiser*, July 12th 2002.

How has the community changed?

To define Bicester and its surrounding villages as a single 'community' is misplaced: there are clearly many different 'communities' within the area, both in the geographical and social senses. It is apparent that as local people's views became more polarised, a schism developed between those involved in the debate.

Box 6: Changes in the community

BAG representatives described the initial animosity between themselves and BRS:

'There was a lot of ignorance on both sides in the early days, and they felt that we were anti-asylum seeker and racist and we felt that they were totally for asylum seekers [...] but as time has gone on we've realised that actually we're not that far apart. In lots of ways we should have been working together from day one, but I do think that in the beginning, that it was gut reaction, on both sides. [...] We didn't want an accommodation centre, we didn't feel that an accommodation centre was right, and they were saying exactly the same thing. But what they were saying was they weren't right for asylum seekers and what we were saying was they weren't right for asylum seekers nor were they right for us, but that just wasn't getting picked up at all.'

One local resident described how she and her next-door neighbours no longer have the relaxed relationship they used to have, when the children played in each other's houses and the parents talked over the fence. Instead, as one house opposed the proposal by joining forces with BAG, the other sympathised with asylum seekers. Now, they avoid each other. The woman who sympathises with asylum seekers said:

'It was the same at the time of the Countryside Alliance march: you had to keep your head down if you weren't going.'

On the other hand, others say that the issue has united local residents in the villages:

'I've spoken to people in the last six months I've never spoken to before [...] It has brought people together on a united front, even in a small community like this I would have passed them in the street apart from exchanging hello, but now I know them by name'

The profile given to the accommodation centre proposal and the opposition to it attracted the interest of the British National Party (BNP), who decided to set up an office in Bicester and get involved in the debate locally. Their stated aims were to recruit locally for the party and to field candidates for the local elections in May 2003.¹⁵ In the event they fielded one candidate in Bicester, who failed to be elected. Some local residents were shocked at the fact that the BNP were present locally, and publicly distanced themselves from this element of the anti-accommodation sentiment.

Box 7: The far right

BAG representatives described their reaction:

'The organisation that's popped up in the middle of all this which is the real shame, is that we've now got the National Front [sic.] here, we've never ever had the National Front [sic.] here before [...]. [E]xtremism's not really very well tolerated here. I don't think it's going to be a major problem but it does stir it up a bit and there are one or two who will go with him [the local BNP representative] [...] I mean in the early days they tried [...] to make it appear that we were all together.'

The Bicester Review of March 20th 2003 said:

'Concerns and views over the changing shape of Bicester have been aired at the annual town meeting. Among the points raised at the meeting was the emergence of the National Front [sic.] being in the town.'

¹⁵ "Far right group increases profile" *Bicester Advertiser*, January 4th 2003 and *Bicester Review*, February 18th 2003

By the time the public inquiry into the proposed accommodation centre began, members of BAG and BRS had established a dialogue, mediated mainly through Asylum Welcome, and have now informally agreed, should the accommodation centre go ahead, to work together to make the best of the situation. It is hoped that this will minimise any damage to the community, provide a better environment for asylum seekers should they arrive, and serve to counter any involvement of extreme right-wing groups.

Box 8: Dialogue between BAG and BRS

The initiation of the dialogue was described by BAG:

'To be fair the dialogue itself didn't come until very late in the day, certainly not really until the public inquiry when we were there at the same time and were realising that quite a lot of arguments were the same [...] The differences weren't aired publicly and when we got to the inquiry and we [...] talked, you know, normal people, normal conversations took place and we realised that we've got a lot of common ground and then we exchanged telephone numbers.'

The changes within these communities are perhaps a measure of the reaction that the proposed accommodation centre has provoked, especially considering that no asylum seekers have yet arrived in Bicester as a result of the proposal.

Section 2: Key concerns

The following key concerns about the proposed accommodation centre were identified from the proofs of evidence submitted to the public inquiry:¹⁶

- The potential of the accommodation centre to destroy the rural way of life
- An increase in local traffic
- Increased pressure on village services (transport, amenities, police), which are already perceived as being inadequate
- Increase in population
- A threat to local security, and particularly to women
- No incentives for asylum seekers to integrate
- Sub-standard quality of life for asylum seekers
- Proximity to military installation which may be distressing to asylum seekers
- The perceived impossibility of self-containment and the resulting impacts on local services
- How to staff the accommodation centre without enticing workers from other local businesses
- The fact that the establishment of an accommodation centre may be a forgone conclusion, resulting in it being a permanent fixture even if the idea is proven unworkable¹⁷
- The Home Office has ignored advice from agencies working with refugees and asylum seekers that accommodation centres in rural areas are unsuitable

These and other concerns were repeatedly mentioned during interviews with respondents.

¹⁶ Available online at www.cherwell-dc.gov.uk/planning/Accommodationcentre.cfm

¹⁷ The Home Office was questioned at length about this during the public inquiry and did concede that this could be the case.

Box 9: General concerns of local people according to interviewees

'To put 750 young men who might have come from traumatic backgrounds in an area where services are already stretched is asking for trouble.'

'I think on a local level in the villages the concern is that overnight there will be more than double the population of the two villages. Now [if that was] asylum seekers or anybody else, that in itself, would be life-changing.'

'[T]hey feel threatened by asylum seekers generally because of the impression that they get, and more so by the massive number. There are 310 people in Piddington. I personally think if they'd have said we're going to use some of the barracks, maybe not even build a completely new facility, but we're going to modify some of the barracks for 50 or 100 people, they wouldn't have had anywhere near the outcry that they've had. It was the sheer numbers that really shocked people more than anything else, because nobody talks about the asylum centre, they talk about 750 asylum seekers, so the number sticks.'

'I think the one that I've heard most of is of young men wandering around, and I think that is the one that people are frightened of [...] it is fanciful but I think there is real fear. And I think there's real anger about the fact that the government doesn't consult, it just tells people what they should think.'

'Misinformation I guess really. I suspect that they envisage that they're going to be swamped by criminals, that the crime rate's going to go up, that the policing will be stretched, that they'll be at risk, that house prices will drop and I guess like any arrival of a community of strangers that some of that will be true. It's a fact of life that amongst 750 people there are going to be some bad people. My view is that the majority will be good.'

'Why not consider the health and well-being of the people who are here, who are genuinely scared, justified or not? People will be hiding in their homes because they're too scared. People here live here because they choose to live this way. It's not fair for the government to say that we have to live a different way. We couldn't move even if we wanted to....'

From the interviews it is apparent that over the year or so since the proposal to build the accommodation centre was made public there has been a process of education amongst interviewees about the issue of asylum generally and accommodation centres in particular. It seems that over time, as new information has been received, the various groups and individuals have either modified their stance, or had their opinions reinforced. In many cases there is a strongly held opinion about the asylum issue, which is compounded by local concerns on other issues, such as frustration with the inadequacy of local transport and health facilities.

Box 10: The background to concerns

A local police officer gave his view:

'It's fear of the unknown really isn't it? Fear of the unknown for the asylum seekers and fear of the unknown for the local community [...] we live in a pretty rural, middle class, middle-England type of area, and the majority of people here will not have come into contact with many asylum seekers. We're not like Oxford or any other sort of local town, where we've taken our quota of people who are waiting for their decisions to be made on asylum. Bicester isn't like that really. By and large we've got a sort of white British population, so most people will have only heard and seen what they've seen in the media, which I think is why people are concerned, because [...] what gets reported on in the media is negativity really.'

A representative of the local authority told of how much local people have learnt:

'At the beginning very little, but over the last 12 months it [asylum] has not only been the focus locally but nationally it has been the front page of the newspapers almost every day until we went to war with Iraq [...] by the time of the public inquiry there was a fairly high level of understanding of the process.'

A local journalist:

'There's a danger of knee-jerk reactions as asylum seekers are demonised in people's minds, often on false premises but then when you're confronted with the unknown people have strong reactions. It's a very emotive issue, [...] BAG are very well informed, very dedicated, have done their homework, been over to Sangatte, but come from a particular viewpoint [...] Apart from the minority [people are] fairly balanced, but some inflammatory language...definitely due to ignorance.'

A secondary schoolteacher:

'Some welcome an influx of friendly strangers and are happy to accept and promote the idea of the UK as a country to escape intolerance. That is the significant minority. The significant majority have a Nimby¹⁸ view, based upon uninformed prejudice.'

BAG:

'I think given the lack of information throughout the last year it's made people's fears and concerns worse, 'cos if that [information on TV and in the newspapers] is the only information we're given then people are going to believe it whether that be the truth or not unless we're given information to say otherwise [...] we are very rural, and most people who live here have lived here for most of their lives. There is without question a way of life here [...] we're more worldly than some, but you know people in London or Birmingham where there are different groups, different backgrounds, they're all getting on together nicely every day, without any problems whatsoever. But people in Britain in small villages in the middle of nowhere just don't have that understanding, they don't understand different backgrounds, and that's not because they're stupid or ignorant or thick, that's just because the way in which we live we don't have the means to find out.'

A local parish councillor:

'People say that OK, they come over here, they get free accommodation, they get free this that and the other. I think that annoys them but they also understand that some people have to go somewhere safe. I don't think they're that cold-hearted that they don't understand that. Part of the concern here, I believe, is because it's, although it's the middle of the country, it's a garrison area. What you find is, you've got troops from here, friends, relatives from this village and the surrounding villages going out there to save somewhere, and making safe areas, so why is there a need for them [asylum seekers] to be over here? Shouldn't they be over there, not helping out troops in fighting even, but helping them in rebuilding what are now safe areas? And that really does annoy people generally I think. It's not the fact that they wouldn't want to help, and I think if the government sent financial aid to help improve safe areas I don't think people would object. What they do object to is finding that the government are prepared to build an asylum centre of that size with all the facilities that it had, but wouldn't even give the village a bus service. It's just extremely poorly handled, more than anything else probably. The Home Office PR is absolutely appalling, in fact there isn't any.'

A list of typical questions posed to those working on a Saturday morning stall disseminating information about asylum seekers shows that many people base their opinions and 'facts' on what they have heard through the media:

'They say to us things like, why do they come to Britain? Why don't they stop in the first country they come to? A lot of people have latched on to that now, that's a government thing, they should stop in the first safe country they get to [...] why do they jump queues, hospital waiting lists [...] why do they get better treatment than us? Why don't they stay in their own countries and their own government help them? People ask why we have the views we have, why are we a soft touch, why do we want to be over-run [...] We do find that a lot of people, they'll say their piece and they'll go off, they don't want to have a dialogue, whereas we do try to listen to people, and to be fair a lot of the concerns seem to

¹⁸ Acronym for 'Not in my backyard'

come from people's own misery. You know they all have a horror story, of someone who's been waiting a lot of years for housing and is in a really dire situation, or someone's been waiting two years for an operation, [...] a lot of them are speaking from genuine unhappiness and dissatisfaction [...] the vast majority of complaints are where asylum seekers are being scapegoated to explain people's problems like long waiting lists.'

Section 3: Information needs

It is clear from the interviews that there are misconceptions about asylum and asylum seekers and that some views have become deeply entrenched over the issue of the accommodation centre in Bicester. Once information and misinformation have been digested and opinions have been formed, it is difficult to challenge them. It can also be difficult even to initiate dialogue, as people may feel that their arguments are fully justified, and that they are not in need of further information.

When asked what information might be useful about asylum, asylum seekers and the accommodation centre, most interviewees said that the Home Office needed to be more open, although there seemed also to be a general feeling that the Home Office staff do not give out clear information because they do not possess the necessary information themselves. It is clear that there is deep dissatisfaction with the way the Home Office have handled the accommodation centre issue, right from the beginning. However, this may be indicative of the underlying fact that the accommodation centre is not wanted. The *Bicester Review* reported that Home Office Minister Beverley Hughes said: 'I believe that there is a great deal of misunderstanding locally about accommodation centres', to which a BAG campaigner responded 'It is insulting to local people to say we misunderstand. If there is any misunderstanding then it comes from the fact that the Home Office won't answer any of our questions or address any of our concerns'.¹⁹ A Home Office employee interviewed for this study said the real problem seems to be that the answers coming out from the Home Office are just not those that people want to hear. The Home Office has published answers to some frequently asked questions concerning accommodation centres,²⁰ which provide information about accommodation centres and how local people will be kept informed about them.

Box 11: Criticisms aimed at the Home Office

A member of BRS said:

'The Home Office aren't good at giving information about the accommodation centre but I think that's just because they don't know. They seem to change their minds every five minutes, and their policy does seem to have been vastly influenced by public opinion. That's how it seemed to me anyway. [...] So that obviously doesn't help local concerns [...] I think the biggest problem's been about the lack of information from the Home Office, the lack of clarity from the Home Office.'

A local councillor:

'Aside from the Home Office, we are not missing bits. The lack of information was because the Home Office didn't know [...] the Home Office hasn't done their homework.'

A local journalist:

'The government needs to be more open. We found in the early days that the government wouldn't tell us a thing. We knew something was going on and they just [...] get these press officers, and they feel

¹⁹ *Bicester Review*, August 6th 2002.

²⁰ *Accommodation centres for asylum seekers: Your Questions Answered*. Initially published in February 2002 and updated in November 2002. Available online at www.asylumscotland.org.uk/briefings/accommodation_centres_factsheet.pdf

it's their duty to act as a sort of gatekeeper for information and they make these decisions not to tell you and not to take your questions to the higher authorities that can answer them [...] I think information's the key to understanding really.'

Other interviewees gave constructive suggestions about how the situation could be improved, but also stressed the limitations of their own positions with regard to receiving and disseminating information.

Box 12: Information needs

A local youth worker:

'We need to start talking, doing research [...] giving correct information. They [local people who attend the youth centre] are very badly informed [...] If the accommodation centre comes, it is a component of youth work [...] I will actively encourage asylum seekers to come to the youth centre, but will probably do work first in the accommodation centre to get their confidence.'

A local schoolteacher expressed sentiments that schools are not able to make much difference to local attitudes:

'Schools make a 3% difference. All media make up the remaining 97%. It isn't our job to change the world, I'm not sure what influence we as a school have. We take local issues seriously but are at the mercy of the appalling attempts of organisations and individual groups who whip up racism [...] The government in its broadest sense, both national and local, should have thought about it beforehand.'

A local police officer:

'[T]hat's what our Community and Race Relations Officer (CARRO) is working on very much really, about local community informing [...] striking a balance, not necessarily saying you have to be pro-asylum, but [...] these are the facts and figures. It's a bit like Asylum Welcome really, [...] the message they're putting across is, don't listen to all the sensationalism, just read the facts and figures. So I think there will be a lot of information in the public domain, to try and address the negativity. We are part and parcel of that really [...] A public information day if and when the centre goes ahead [...] at some public building in the town where people can go and talk about their concerns, either pro- or anti-, information gathering, just a one-stop shop really.'

A BRS member:

'I've often directed people towards the Refugee Council website because that has, I mean you can get so much information from that. I mean clearly the Refugee Council have an agenda, but any site you go on has an agenda [...] these things are there for people to look at, so I try to encourage people to look at things like that, just to try and tool them up.'

It was suggested during interviews with the local police, the Home Office and BRS members that, should the accommodation centre be built, local people and asylum seekers be brought together in social situations, such as cultural evenings and sport events, and contact between them should be made through local churches or even the military, in an effort to break down barriers. The Home Office representative suggested that sport would be particularly useful in places where there is a large proportion of young men, which may be the case in Bicester, as well as in the proposed centre in Gosport.²¹ It is however somewhat of a contradiction for the Home Office to suggest such measures when the arguments put forward by them for the accommodation centre stress minimal interaction between local people and asylum seekers.

²¹ MoD land at HMS Daedalus near Gosport has been proposed by the Home Office for an accommodation centre for single male asylum seekers.

Box 13: Barriers to integration

A local youth worker described the drawbacks of teaching the children of asylum seekers inside the accommodation centre:

'If asylum seekers are educated in the accommodation centre they become isolated, and won't come out because of bad experiences. In that case, how can local key players build relationships when one community is set up to be invisible? This community would have to have an investment in building bridges, or it's a recipe for disaster.'

Both local and national press were identified as an important source of information, and some interviewees felt that the manner of reporting asylum needs to be changed. This is further discussed in section 5.

The interview material shows that, in addition to animosity towards the proposed accommodation centre, there was also a deterioration in relations between local people. A source within Asylum Welcome²² intimated that they are in discussions with BRS about the possibility of offering an asylum awareness training course for BAG members in the event of the accommodation centre going ahead. They consider that this could help heal rifts created within the community over this issue, meet the information needs of a sector of the community largely unaware of issues facing asylum seekers, and promote understanding of any asylum seekers who do arrive in the area. But it may also be the case that providing well intentioned information at this stage will have little effect on attitudes formed over a year ago.

Box 14: Resolving differences

Representative of BAG:

'There's got to be some sort of mediation. They [can] talk to the community alongside us [...] to try to make sure that if the centre goes ahead then at least make people realise there is a way forward [...] but it's not going to stop the community fragmenting, we can only make sure that the fragmentation is as small as it possibly can be [...] the information that they've [BRS] got is far more than we've got and what it comes down to is that what this community needs is a greater understanding.'

Section 4: Key players and their role in promoting understanding

Most interviewees identified a core group of key players who might be able to promote understanding between local people and asylum seekers:

- Organisations with experience of asylum seekers
- Schools
- Youth centres
- Politicians
- Councillors (at district and parish level)
- Local groups: BAG and BRS
- Local police
- Churches
- Press
- Social services (at county level)

The key players who were interviewed suggested that local people such as publicans and village shopkeepers, the local Chamber of Trade, the contractors in charge of the accommodation centre, and local people themselves were also influential.

²² This conversation consisted of an informal discussion and not a full interview.

There were some dissenting voices amongst interviewees about the role of some of those in the above list, most notably regarding the police. Three interviewees said that the police should not have a role, either because they should only get involved when a problem arises, because they do not have the resources to deal with asylum seekers, or because they might be frightening to asylum seekers. The police representative interviewed however saw a significant role for his local force in building bridges, acting as a community liaison point, and promoting contact between asylum seekers and local people. With regard to schools, it was acknowledged that they have a role to play, although this can be limited, as described above.

If the accommodation centre does go ahead it is unclear which individuals and groups will continue to be key players. Systems are likely to be put into place, national organisations may move into the area, and the role of local service providers may be expanded. However, to date it is apparent that both BAG and BRS have been key to flows of information and have also been significant in shaping the opinions of local people.

The role of BAG in particular is the focus of differing opinions. They see their own role as key. It is interesting just how much attention BAG has received, and how it has been perceived as being the 'voice of the people,'²³ more so than BRS. This may be in part due to the fact that the campaigning stance of BAG has more closely reflected some of the tabloid media representation of asylum and asylum seekers, and therefore the media have tended to favour them. Other key players also mention the influence of BAG more frequently than BRS. During the recess period of the public inquiry the Home Office published a leaflet, entitled "Inquiry into proposed Bicester accommodation centre", which said 'Wednesday 26th February has been programmed as the day Bicester Action Group and members of the public will give evidence to the inquiry', with no mention of other local groups.²⁴ It seems that BAG has been listened to by the local authority, although how much, if any, influence they had over the District Council's rejection of the proposal is unclear.

Box 15: The role of local groups

How BAG see themselves:

'It's really difficult 'cos the other side of it is what the asylum seekers will want when they realise they will have a small local community. If you speak to an asylum seeker who has landed anywhere in England he or she thinks they're in London most of the time 'cos that's where they think they're going. You know to try and explain Arncliffe to somebody who's expecting somewhere like London is going to be a major task and that's got to be done as well and of course the whole thing with that is this unwillingness to encourage integration [...] We'd have to be involved...'

A BRS representative said:

'The ambition would be for us to take over the leadership in the community and BAG would cease to have a role. BAG is dangerous because it has had that far-right, the far-right are interested in it and it has played to that...They've not been careful with the company they keep.'

A representative of the local authority:

'Local communities need foci for their activities and involvement - BAG and Asylum Welcome have done that.' and on BAG specifically: *'They'll always represent the articulate middle classes rather than a complete cross-section.'*

²³The *About Us* section of the BAG website expresses 'a wish to be and to be seen to be the voice of the people.' See www.bag2002.co.uk/about_us.htm

²⁴ This is however not the case on the Home Office website concerning the accommodation centre, which mentions all three relevant organisations. See www.bicester-centre.info

Section 5: Lessons learned and examples of promoting and hindering understanding

There is no doubt that the provision of information has contributed to knowledge of the asylum and accommodation centre issues as they affect Bicester, but whether this information has increased understanding of asylum seekers in general is less clear. In fact it seems apparent that some information has served to reinforce the attitudes of those who are opposed to the arrival of asylum seekers. Information therefore has both helped and hindered understanding. This section will attempt to analyse what information has been distributed actively by key players and what effects such information has had with regard to increasing understanding. It is important to remember that understanding in this context does not mean advocacy for the rights of asylum seekers, but rather a well-informed and balanced grasp of what asylum is, who asylum seekers are, and what their arrival means for a local community.

Information from the Home Office

Over the first few months following the announcement that Bicester was to be the site of a proposed accommodation centre, the Home Office ran an information campaign. There were exhibitions in the villages and at the Bicester library with Home Office staff on hand to answer questions. Leaflets were put through doors explaining how an accommodation centre might work, and a website was created specifically about the Bicester accommodation centre.²⁵ Home Office Minister Beverley Hughes visited the town, presenting an opportunity for the local authority, local groups and individuals to put questions to her directly. This information campaign was not perceived as particularly helpful by some interviewees, and contributed to the general feeling of dissatisfaction with the Home Office. The original proposal had already raised the ire of many local residents, and this information campaign was simply felt by some interviewees to have been too little too late.

Box 16: Reactions to the Home Office information campaign

A local parish councillor:

'There was a comprehensive report from the Home Office with the planning application. Then the Home Office held exhibitions in each village. The poor thing about that was that the Home Office reps seemed not to have a clue. Each rep stood in a different corner of the room answering the same questions, which was wasting time. We asked them to sit together at the front and they refused as they didn't want to be seen giving a joint answer – no surprise there. They were extremely evasive. They were the same people who were present at the public inquiry. They'd obviously formed a team of people to see what happened. But the standard of people they sent from the Home Office was extremely poor, and that worried people even more.'

BAG representatives:

'[O]ver the course of a year, so many people have posed so many questions and STILL we're not getting any answers. I mean the Home Office came down here last June for their roving road show and their posters and their men in grey suits to answer all our questions [...] and their answers were scripted and they couldn't deviate so the real questions weren't answered, and that left people even more frustrated and infuriated than even before they came [...]'

The Home Office representative interviewed for this study agreed that their information campaign could have been improved. For example, it was recognised that the exhibitions could have been better organised so as to avoid repetition. But it was felt that the public

²⁵ Available at www.bicester-centre.info

meetings, on the other hand, had proved useful. The Home Office interviewee said that the Home Office have learned from this, and that in future exhibitions would be set up alongside any public meeting, so that questions could be addressed to a panel of representatives.

Certain pieces of information provided by the Home Office were even used in the campaign against the accommodation centre, most notably information about the number of asylum seekers due to be housed there and the proportion of single men.

Box 17: Learning from information

BAG representatives expressed their dissatisfaction with the details of the proposal:
'At least 500 of those residents will be young guys, under 30, with no money, nothing to do, nowhere to go because they've got to be back in for curfew, not allowed to work because they're not allowed to work for the first 6 months which means they can't earn any money to go out and do the things they want to do. We've already got a light problem in Arncoth with teenagers now. So just think about it. And the other thing is they're more transient, with them living there for a maximum of six months according to the Home Office, so there's going to be absolutely no incentive to integrate anyway. If somebody put me out there and said look we're moving you on in six months why would I want to settle down? [...] The other thing is that some of it will be the truth, because human nature isn't any different in Afghanistan than it is here, and [...] to put that many people would be a problem anywhere. It's just been handled so badly. This is a very caring community and it's quite a tolerant community most of the time, and if it had been handled properly, in reasonable numbers, well I just think it would have been a case of accepting, it would have been a case of we want to help. But this is just going to create a problem.'

Similar sentiments came from a local parish councillor:
'Whatever the Home Office had told people it wouldn't have made any difference, because of the 750. If it had been 75 or 100 they could have explained the situation, not only that, but with 75 or 100 people it's far more easy to vet and understand who you have living next to you, because there IS the fear element, of terrorism.'

The public inquiry

The public inquiry provided each attendee with all available information on the proposed accommodation centre and gave them a platform to air their views. One day was put aside for submissions from third parties and members of the public. In all, 29 individuals spoke on their own behalf, and representatives from BAG and BRS/Asylum Welcome also put forward their cases. Tony Baldry MP, a District councillor, and a local businessman also spoke.

The District Council's view of the Home Office's performance was less than complimentary:

Box 18: The Home Office's performance at the public inquiry

'It is unfortunate [...] that a number of the HO [sic.] witnesses were so unwilling, or unable, to answer questions clearly, or be forthcoming in important information. Much time appeared to be spent in elaborate explanations which avoided addressing questions head on. There was a degree of reluctance, if not prevarication, in oral evidence which did not live up to what might be expected in terms of transparency from central government or from a department seeking to honour its Minister's clear commitment to the Parliament.'²⁶

On the day of third party evidence where local groups and members of the public were invited to speak, those who had been regular attendees were probably at the apex of their knowledge

²⁶ Closing Statement on behalf of Cherwell District Council, page 4.

concerning the accommodation centre. But public discussion forums can foster an atmosphere in which individuals feel that their views and opinions are confirmed and encouraged, and they therefore feel safe to be more outspoken and extreme than they would be in a more isolated environment. This effect seemed to be at play on this day: concerns raised at the beginning of the day were articulate and thought out, but by mid-afternoon reiteration and encouragement meant that arguments had become intolerant, racist, and extreme.

It is important to consider that the public inquiry attendees can in no way be considered to represent a cross-section of the local population, but only those who were sufficiently motivated to participate by their opposition to the accommodation centre.

Box 19: The power of repetition

A local journalist covering the accommodation centre described a meeting:

'I've been to a few public meetings about it in Arncott [...] and in public meetings like that you get the people who are running the show, and they obviously realise they've got to be realistic about the situation and tone down any sort of racist ideas, which I wouldn't accuse the people I've come across of, but in public meetings you do get people shouting out "Well I've heard this and I've heard asylum seekers did this", and it's these sort of wild stories people hear about and asylum seekers can get tarred with the same sort of brush.'

On the issue of public safety, a speaker early in the afternoon said:

'On the footpaths where families and females walk, they are threatened, justified or not'

Later on a local man asked:

'What will the young men be doing, selling drugs on your doorstep, raping your daughter?'

And later still, a woman explained to some laughter:

'I am neither willing nor able to help out with their sexual needs.'

On the issue of public security near a military base, an Arncott resident asked:

'With the current security situation, is it wise to have 750 people of unknown origin near to a military installation?'

And a woman from Piddington village said:

'Since 9/11 we are no longer in a peace-time situation. Many asylum seekers will be from the Near or Middle East. The accommodation centre could be used as a base for an attack or for spying.'

Other quotes from local people:

'Economic migrants are to get the benefits of this, who have never paid any taxes. One thousand foreigners are to be dumped on our back door.'

'There are already people of that creed and colour moving into our area.'

And one of the final speakers of the afternoon:

'The fundamental issue here is human rights. Our rights should supersede those of asylum seekers.'

Bicester Action Group and Bicester Refugee Support

Information collected by BAG has clearly given its supporters material to justify initial gut reactions. It also seems that, over time, their arguments against the proposed accommodation centre have broadened to incorporate views on what is best for all concerned parties, including asylum seekers.

Box 20: Information from local action groups

BAG on BAG:

'It was a two way thing wasn't it as well. There were a lot of people out there who were giving us information [...] and as I say we became sort of a focal point, and even just for people to talk to, to air their worries or their concerns to, not necessarily that we would do anything with that or take it any further but it was just that we knew more, then people trusted us and relied upon us. If we felt that we could use the information or whatever they'd sent us then we would [...] A lot of it was getting it off their chests, because a lot of the time people were confused.'

BRS on BAG:

'[W]e also do think that over time the BAG campaign has modified its stance. We think perhaps it's because people like us have spoken up, and with the threats by the British National Party to have a candidate in the local elections they've been more concerned to distance themselves from extreme groups like that, but my personal opinion is that actually they've got a hell of a lot to answer for, in terms of working up hysteria in the local community.'

And BRS on themselves:

'I think we're really the only group that is thinking about what next? If the centre goes ahead, then we don't know what will happen to the BAG campaign, I guess it'll just become more and more negative. They have said that they will continue opposing it, even if it gets through this stage [...] we've always had a pragmatic campaign, which is that this is fairly likely to go ahead, and if it does, then this is what needs to happen to reduce hostility [...]. There are lots of people in the group who would have a very positive contribution to make to go into the centre, visiting, befriending, holding religious services there, trying to maximise opportunities to invite asylum seekers out of the centre [...] we're really the only group that's got any ideas like that, and I think the Home Office are pleased about that.'

A local journalist on action groups:

'If you've got interest groups they're formed to further their own interests and I would imagine [...] that they'd tailor the information that they get to suit their needs basically. It's a partisan thing really. It's selective perception, selective exposure, all this sort of thing, you know.'

Information via the Internet

The Bicester experience offers a good example of the usefulness of the Internet to campaigns. It allows campaign organisers to circulate information about their views and activities to a large number of people, and to foster a sense of community and support through links to other websites dealing with similar issues and likeminded opinions. BAG's website has a 'solidarity' section²⁷ where links to other campaigns are provided, suggesting that anti-accommodation centre groups are learning from and sharing with one another, and that a network of resistance to asylum seeker accommodation is growing in various parts of the country. On the Home Office's website for the Bicester accommodation centre, there are links to BAG, BRS and Cherwell District Council, and BRS's website provides a large number of links to other organisations involved in refugee and asylum seeker issues.

Box 21: Information via the Internet

A planning officer described how, because of the accommodation centre issue, the website for the District Council has been updated:

'This issue has prompted more interest in our website [...] it brought home to us how unfriendly our website was, and we have made it more easy to get to the planning section. It went up from 30 to 40 hits per day to 300 to 400. Now it's decreased, but we get more from other planning authorities that are worried about having similar proposals [...]. Websites are good at getting information to people, as they

²⁷ See www.bag2002.co.uk/Links.htm

are far more accessible than previously when people had to walk into our office. They can be accessed at home and are far more digestible.'

The media

Most interviewees felt that local media coverage on the whole had been balanced, despite the fact that BRS was formed as a result of the view that some local articles were racist in tone. There are two main local newspapers in the Bicester area, the *Bicester Advertiser* and the *Bicester Review*.

Box 22: The role of the local press

One local schoolteacher described the role of the local press as:
'[T]o sell papers and to appeal to the lowest common denominator.'

BRS found more sympathy with one of the local newspapers than the other:
'[W]e managed to get a fairly high profile in the press. There are two local papers, as well as the Oxfordshire ones, [...] we really struggled to get any coverage with one of them. I never read them normally, apart from wanting to know what's going on with this issue, but one is particularly concerned with tabloid, sensationalist headlines, [...] and we've had difficulty in getting coverage in their pages. The other has been more fair, they've always tried to get an opinion from us, and we've always been quoted and given equal space, pretty much, not entirely.'

That newspapers have an agenda is clearly illustrated by the difference in coverage of the public inquiry by the two local papers: the day after third parties gave evidence at the public inquiry one newspaper focused on the submission of Tony Baldry MP, while the other published an article with the headline 'Women "fear asylum centre"'.

The local journalist interviewed for this research gave insight into the constraints that journalists work under when they are expected to produce to deadlines.

Box 23: Constraints on journalism

'The Home Office tried to keep a lid on it to begin with, denied all knowledge to begin with and then we would get sort of bits and pieces out of them over the coming months, then we sort of sensed there was a story there whether or not they're turning us away, so it gets our interest going as well [...]. There's always the Home Office and I'll always have a grudge about that, because it's Thursday morning, ten to ten and you've got to file your copy, it's deadline and they're giving you the run-around [...] they should trust us to know what we can and can't publish, and say things off the record.'

Most interviewees criticised some tabloids for being inflammatory, although many nonetheless subscribed to the viewpoints expressed in them. As mentioned earlier, information can serve to bolster already held views, and the media is no exception: most people who take a regular daily newspaper take one with the editorial line that most closely reflects their own views. It is interesting that some interviewees acknowledged that presenting alternative views in the press may be a helpful way to encourage more balanced coverage of the asylum issue, but yet continued to cite evidence that backed up their own arguments.

Box 24: Attitudes towards the national media

A local police officer:
'[I]t all gets sensationalised, and the only people that we hear are people who are negative, we never hear people who have had good experiences do we, good news isn't newsworthy, [...] people want to hear about bad news.'

A local businessman:

'The national press – it depends on which paper you read. There are some elements of the press which do the issue no favours at all, but probably reflect the opinion of 90% of the population. You get more bad press from other towns, like Dover – only the bad side is shown on TV, you never get the good side. They [local people] see the three villages being turned into mini Dovers, being overwhelmed.'

A supporter of BRS:

'Politicians need to be more outspoken about what their strategy is [...] the press are hugely important. Local press are handling the story in a pretty hostile manner. What everybody needs, at the local level as well as the national level, is to have more stories about individual people with which people can identify, so that is what is needed, but the problem is few people are prepared to be interviewed amongst asylum seekers [...] you have to get people actually meeting asylum seekers, even if it gets to the stage of them saying, "Oh well you're alright, it's the other lot who aren't", just lead people in that way. But before you get to that stage there is quite a lot needed in the community about numbers, about why they are coming, about the war in Iraq.'

Some did not subscribe to the opinion that a balanced view should be reported in the press, if it did not reflect the reality of the situation. Local campaigners against the accommodation centre said:

'I think the problem is so huge in this country now, that there isn't a way of dealing with it that isn't negative at all. I think if the system was in place where the majority [of asylum seekers] were being dealt with in a way that was acceptable to the whole of the country, then one or two negative stories [wouldn't matter], but there isn't anything, it's such a shambles, such chaos that there isn't anything positive to report [...] I think the negative stories are trying to highlight the shambles that the system is in [...] If it was positive the system would never change. Something's got to be done now, and to report nice stories won't help that at all.'

Section 6: The limits of information and the dynamics of information provision

Many of those interviewed emphasised the impact that the early provision of accurate information could have had on local responses to the proposed accommodation centre, as well as indicating the manner in which informal and formal information gathering and dissemination processes, whether accurate or not, shaped local debates. However, although it is clear that information does have a role to play in increasing understanding of asylum issues, this case study and existing research on other relevant issues also suggest that the provision of information and its uptake is not a straightforward or unproblematic process.

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, and isolating the impact of particular information-based interventions can be difficult due to the variety of external variables that shape opinion and influence the assimilation of accurate information.

The final report to be published in autumn 2003 will provide a fuller discussion of the broader issues relating to information flows and the processes of opinion formation by providing a literature review. However, at the interim stage it is still useful to make some initial comments on the limitations of information and the dynamics of information provision in relation to the Bicester story.

Access and selectivity

The Bicester case study raises important issues relating to access to information and user selectivity in identifying and assimilating information.

Firstly, access to factual information is a significant limitation, particularly because much of the information available through the media may be distorted or inaccurate.

The Internet has clearly proved useful for most of the key players interviewed about the Bicester experience, both in terms of identifying material to inform their work or campaigns and in their efforts to disseminate information about the proposals and their responses to these. However, in practical terms, not everybody has access to the Internet, whether by choice or for financial or other reasons. Therefore, in identifying appropriate channels of information dissemination, it is important to remember that reliance solely on the Internet may exclude some of those key players with information needs.

Moreover, further research needs to be conducted to investigate whether people search the Internet for general information, or whether they log on to sites that they know will reflect their own stance. Most people view information through their own lens that selects, filters and absorbs material according to their pre-existing beliefs or interests and their use of the Internet is likely to reflect this.

Limits of written information

The limits of disseminating written information were acknowledged by several interviewees, who suggested other ways of communicating information and promoting understanding. Suggestions included theatre, education strategies, and interpersonal contact between local people and asylum seekers through organised activities.

Box 25: Other methods of communication

A BRS representative said:

'People need to be confronted by the evidence. House prices haven't decreased.'

And a local youth worker:

'Young people should get stuck into the issues and wider implications [...] through theatre and education.'

And another supporter of BRS:

'People need to interact [with asylum seekers], talk to each other.'

Others promoted contact with asylum seekers, through sporting and cultural events, to break down barriers. A local police officer cautioned:

'But I think there's an onus on the Home Office to provide good facilities, recreational facilities as much as anything else because, you know, the recreational facilities should be used by the local community as well.'

The fact that some people were not aware of written information that had already been disseminated and that others had not absorbed the information delivered in written formats, also suggests the limitations of this type of information. For example, despite the door-to-door

distribution of information leaflets produced by the Home Office,²⁸ certain interviewees still identified the need for more information of this type, suggesting that the Home Office leaflets may not have been seen by everyone and that the information contained in them may not have been assimilated.

Box 26: The limits of written information

A local parish councillor said:

*'If the Home Office intends to build any centre there should be an information booklet available for everyone or sent to everyone [...] by now the government should know what the FAQs are.'*²⁹

Trusting the source

A major factor in information consumption is the extent to which people trust their information sources. The image of the Home Office, the local and national media, local government and that of non-governmental organisations, as well as the relationship of these bodies with the local community in Bicester, seems to influence the perceived credibility of the information they provide.

Unintended consequences

Information provision can also have unexpected and unintended consequences. Information intended by one party to make their case can be turned around to serve those with an opposing view. For instance, some local people opposed to the arrival of asylum seekers in the area cited the fact that the Red Cross oppose accommodation for asylum seekers being situated in the vicinity of military installations.

The broader context and external influences

It is difficult to promote a balanced view in a climate of hostility. Opinions and news-flow in Bicester concerning asylum seekers pre-dated the announcement of any plans for an accommodation centre, and therefore provided parameters for the ensuing debate. The discussions in the Bicester case, while focused on local contexts, are therefore intimately connected to the national debate on asylum. Within this context the bottom line was, and is, that local people do not want the accommodation centre to be built, because asylum seekers are perceived as threats. Further research would need to explain the extent to which this perception can be attributed to particular media and political portrayals of this group, but it is clear from the Bicester case that opposition to the centre was based on a perception of asylum seekers that was influenced by wider debates predating the proposals.

A key issue of the Bicester experience has been that the information campaigns of some of the key players, most notably the Home Office and BAG, have focused on the accommodation centre rather than on asylum and asylum seekers, in that they have attempted to either minimise (in the case of the Home Office) or maximise (in BAG's case) the potential of the accommodation centre itself to affect the local community. If the main intention of the Home Office and local key players had been to promote information-based understanding of asylum

²⁸ See *Accommodation centres for asylum seekers: Your Questions Answered*. Initially published in February 2002 and updated in November 2002. Available online at www.asylumscotland.org.uk/briefings/accommodation_centres_factsheet.pdf

²⁹ Since Bicester, the Home Office has developed this technique further by tailoring the FAQ sections of their information materials to specific locations. See for example www.gosport-centre.co.uk

and asylum seekers generally it may have changed events. This is a policy increasingly being adopted by local authorities elsewhere in the country, including Stoke-on-Trent, Barnsley and Bath.³⁰

This suggests two paths for further activity: more timely and context-sensitive information dissemination regarding planned local developments, coupled with more systematic national information on asylum.

³⁰ See *Asylum Seeking in Stoke-on-Trent: The facts*, a report of the Elected Mayor's enquiry into Asylum Seekers in the city of Stoke-on-Trent prepared by Paul Emms for the enquiry committee; the *Barnsley Star*, February 27th 2003; and the *Bath Chronicle*, March 13th 2003 respectively.

Leeds: Karen Munk

Section 1: The story of Leeds

Composition of the Leeds population

Leeds is situated in northern England in the Yorkshire and Humberside region and according to the Statistical Survey 2001 has a population of a little over 700,000 inhabitants.³¹ In this census just over 90 percent of the people of Leeds identified their ethnicity as 'white' with Pakistani and Indian people forming the largest black and minority ethnic (BME) communities. The census also showed that over two thirds of the people of Leeds categorised themselves as Christian. The next largest group was those who characterised themselves as having no religion. Only a small percentage identified themselves as Muslim, Jewish, Sikh, Hindu or Buddhist. With respect to employment, nearly two thirds of the working-age population in Leeds were in full or part-time employment and 13% were retired. The unemployed and long term unemployed account for 4% of the working population.

Situating the asylum issue in Leeds

In the 1950s and 1960s large numbers of West Indian and Asian immigrants arrived and settled in Leeds, resulting in an alteration of its ethnic mix.³² Between 1970 and 1999 asylum seekers and refugees arrived in Leeds from Iran, Vietnam, Bosnia, Chile, and Sudan amongst other countries. Before 1999, approximately 3,000 asylum seekers, refugees and people given temporary protection were living in West Yorkshire, 2,000 of them in Leeds.³³

At the beginning of 1999 several hundred refugees from Kosovo were flown to Leeds from refugee camps in Macedonia under the Humanitarian Evacuation Programme and were given leave to remain in the UK for one year. The majority of them were received and housed in five different emergency accommodation locations, one of which was a former old people's home. During the remainder of 1999 and 2000 most returned to Kosovo as part of a government sponsored programme, but a small number have stayed in West Yorkshire and have applied for asylum.

The Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 established the National Asylum Support Service (NASS), under which destitute asylum seekers are dispersed to various regions across the UK, thus relieving the pressure on local authorities in London and the South East. The government requested local assistance in managing dispersal, and in response regional consortia were established across the UK. In October 2000 the Yorkshire and Humberside Asylum Consortium was set up by 10 councils in order to support and accommodate people seeking asylum in the UK who had been dispersed to their region. The Leeds Asylum Support Service was established in the same month and provides accommodation and support mainly to those asylum seekers who are dispersed to Leeds under the Yorkshire and Humberside NASS

³¹ See *Census 2001: Leeds The Big Picture* available online at www.leeds.gov.uk/downloads/200358_59103030.pdf

³² See *Thoresby Society: The Historical Society for Leeds and District* available online at www.laplata.co.uk/thoresby

³³ See also Ruth Wilson (2001) *Dispersed. A study of services for asylum seekers in West Yorkshire. December 1999 – March 2001* and the Leeds Council website at www.leeds.gov.uk

Contract.³⁴ Once relocated, asylum seekers are accommodated by one of the West Yorkshire local authorities or by a private housing provider. The former old people's home that used to house Kosovan refugees was converted to a reception centre with 65 beds in June 2003.³⁵

Home Office figures³⁶ show that as of the end of March 2003 1,780 asylum seekers had been dispersed to Leeds supported in NASS accommodation and 280 were in receipt of NASS subsistence only.³⁷

Section 2: Key concerns

Since the arrival of the Kosovans and the beginning of the dispersal of asylum seekers to West-Yorkshire at the end of 1999, many people living in Leeds have witnessed the arrival of asylum seekers in their neighbourhood. This section looks at what influence these changes or perceived changes in daily life have had on attitudes towards and relationships with asylum seekers.

From Kosovans to asylum seekers: changing attitudes

Some interviewees reported that when the Kosovans arrived in Leeds under the Humanitarian Evacuation Programme, the local population saw them as a clear example of victims of conflict in need of protection. As a result most people in Leeds received them very warmly and public opinion was in general very sympathetic about both their status as refugees and the fact that Leeds was being used as a safe haven for them. The attitudes of people in Leeds towards the Kosovans were generally seen as a model of good practice, or as one interviewee who works for a refugee agency stated: *'A lot of people would like to use the Kosovans as an example of how people can like asylum seekers.'*

According to interviewees who were in some way involved in the reception of the Kosovan refugees, most people did not perceive them as 'bogus,' as a burden, as adversely affecting their living standard, or as a threat. But the interviews for this research reveal that since the dispersal scheme came into place and more asylum seekers have arrived and settled in Leeds, attitudes seem to have deteriorated. The changing face of Leeds and the realisation that asylum seekers and refugees are part of the daily reality seems to have had an impact on public opinion. Some interviewees pointed out that at the time of the Kosovans' arrival, media attention raised awareness of the situation in Kosovo, which promoted an acceptance of their need to flee. Another possible reason for the warm welcome may be that people in Leeds felt somehow more related to Kosovans as fellow Europeans than they do to asylum seekers from the Middle East, Africa and further afield. Finally, the physical appearance of Kosovans made them less identifiable as asylum seekers, which may have helped in the integration process.

³⁴ For more information about NASS dispersal in Leeds visit the City of Leeds (UK) Refugee and Asylum Seekers Team website at www.leeds.gov.uk/pageView.asp?style=&view=&identifier=200249_403362453

³⁵ 'Reception centre' is a generic term used to describe the initial emergency accommodation provided to asylum seekers on their arrival in the UK or once they have made an asylum application. 'Induction centres' were introduced in a government White Paper in 2002 and are designed to formalise the initial reception period. They will provide a comprehensive service to asylum seekers including briefings on the asylum and support procedures and what is expected of them in terms of reporting and their obligation to leave the UK if their application for asylum is refused. Induction centres may include health screening.

³⁶ *Asylum Statistics: 1st quarter 2003 United Kingdom*. Home Office (2003). Available online at www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs2/asylumq103.pdf

³⁷ Asylum seekers can apply to NASS for accommodation and subsistence or for subsistence only.

Box 1: Changing attitudes towards Kosovans and asylum seekers

Public opinion towards the arrival of Kosovans in 1999 was both sympathetic and empathetic. As a refugee agency representative explained:

'As far as the communities are concerned, the Kosovans were shipped straight out of refugee camps by the UN straight into our communities. There wasn't the slightest hint that some of them tried to gain immigration status through the back door. [...] As a result the perceptions were very, very different [than today]. There was a huge welling of human compassion at the time. And the difference with asylum seekers is that people are simply far more suspicious of their motives.'

According to some interviewees, other factors ensured that attitudes towards the Kosovans were generally compassionate. A woman working in the reception centre where Kosovans were housed explained:

'[The reception centre] used to be an old people's home and they had decided that it was not suitable for living anymore. The elderly people moved out and soon after the Kosovans arrived. So when they moved in, nobody complained. It was not suitable for our people, so the Kosovans weren't seen as getting special treatment.'

The fact that the Kosovans arrived from a European country may also have had a positive influence on reception and integration as one community worker said:

'People can't necessarily recognise a Kosovan refugee, but you can recognise for example an Afghan refugee. And that is part of the thing. If you are black then the racism is likely to be worse than when you are white. [...] In most of Leeds, the numbers of asylum seeker and refugees is very small, but the perception may be completely different.'

A communications officer explained how the perceived change in the type and number of people seeking asylum and living in the area of Leeds had an impact on the Kosovans who remained in the city:

'A Kosovan family came here on the evacuation programme. When they came on the programme, this country was saying no negative things about them. Newspapers were saying 'Welcome these families, they had a horrible time, etc. etc.' and she [the Kosovan woman] said that strangers would come up to her in the streets and give her teddy bears and gifts. [...] But now, three years down the line, her neighbour is really horrible to her. Because now she is an asylum seeker. 'How dare you be in this country?!' So she [Kosovan woman] has seen a complete shift. She has gone from this extreme welcoming to this extreme hatred. She has gone from being a positive humanitarian evacuee to being a negative burden asylum seeker.'

An interviewee working for a refugee agency described the change in attitude as:

'[Leeds] has become a very multi-cultural area in a very rapid space of time. And a lot of people don't like that.'

A primary school teacher noticed a shift as well in attitudes towards Kosovans:

'The word 'Kosovar' is now sometimes used in a negative way to describe asylum seekers in general. A bit like the word Paki.'

This observation was later confirmed by a taxi driver who said there were still a lot Kosovans around in Leeds. When asked if he was sure they were from Kosovo he replied:

'Oh yes, and more and more are coming. [...] You recognise them. They group together, their hair is different and they have a different skin colour.'

Perceptions in the area of Leeds towards asylum seekers and refugees

Although perceptions towards people seeking asylum in the area of Leeds may have changed since the arrival of the Kosovans, many interviewees stressed that it is neither fair nor possible to generalise about views of asylum seekers. *'You have to see each one on an individual level. Different people have different needs and perceptions.'* When asked, however, about the concerns of local people regarding asylum seekers and refugees, the majority of the interviewees agreed that *'most [people] don't want to see asylum seekers in the regions'*. As an interviewee from a refugee organisation estimated: *'I would say that about 80 to 90 percent are against having them here.'*

According to all interviewees, concerns of local people are mainly concentrated on the number of asylum seekers, and the impact these newcomers may have on the economy, health services, and education. Some respondents also mentioned the threat to national security and the perceived degradation of living standards as further possible explanations for local reactions to the arrival of asylum seekers in Leeds.

Those interviewees who work directly with local people in Leeds were more likely to mention tensions in the contact between asylum seekers and local people than those working on the asylum issue at a policy level. While the latter did describe some tension, it was not central to their concern. A respondent working hands-on in 'a problematic area' said: *'well, but they [local policy makers] don't live or work on the estates, do they?!'*

Box 2: Typical concerns expressed in the local community

A respondent working with both local and asylum seeking children mentioned:

'People see and perceive that a lot more asylum seekers are coming in. Lots are coming in illegally. At least, that is the perception.'

A person working for the regional consortium said:

'Concerns are also indirectly focused at the Home Office, which, according to many people, is not able to deal with the situation.'

Another community worker added that this will lead to the perception that:

'In their [people's] mind, everybody is bogus, until they have proven they are innocent.'

Another interviewee working for a refugee agency explained that:

'They will say 'it is all taxpayers' money.' It nearly always has to do with numbers coming into the country. 'We can't deal with it, the NHS, the schools.' And a growing concern is health; 'They will bring in AIDS, TB and other diseases.'

Other concerns of local people were reported by a respondent working for the police:

'[They are] jumping the queue for housing and health, benefits and people who have been here for generations are suffering here from poverty.'

A community worker mentioned:

'People are afraid of [...] groups of asylum seekers [...] standing around the street corner talking in a language they don't understand. 'They might be talking about us...!' That is difficult. It can be intimidating, especially for older people, any group of men can be intimidating, but more so if they don't understand the language and they are black.'

An interviewee working on asylum policy noted:

'The problem is that asylum seekers can't win. The comments will be 'they come here and they don't even work!'; So then we tell people that actually they can't work, they are not allowed to work. But then

when people do start to work [after they get a positive decision] they still can't win, because then people will say 'oh, but now they are taking our jobs'.

About one third of the interviewees emphasised the fact that the views and concerns of many people in Leeds do not differ significantly from those of the general public across the UK, suggesting that the arrival of asylum seekers to the area had not greatly changed their opinions. But half of the respondents noted that some political groups in Leeds have been playing on people's fears and creating social tension, inventing myths about asylum seeking, exaggerating the range of available services, and inflating the number of asylum seekers in the area.

Box 3: Myths about asylum seekers

A refugee agency representative explained some of the myths going around in Leeds:
'[People are told that asylum seekers are] being given second hand car vouchers, [that] luxury flats are being built for them with DVDs and stereos and all those sorts of things. These kind of myths are circulated by nationalist parties who try to show what asylum seekers get and what hard working British citizen don't get.'

A police officer mentioned that the perceived number of asylum seekers was often exaggerated by people opposed to their arrival in the area:
'A lot of propaganda from the right wing groups was going on. So they handed out leaflets saying that a whole block of flats was dedicated to and full of asylum seekers and that they were flooded. The reality was that there was one floor that was dedicated to asylum seekers. So that means you will have 3 or 4 people living in each house of that floor. People in the area would say 'look, we are flooded, they are everywhere!' and that was really played on.'

Reasons behind opposing attitudes towards asylum seekers

When asked for possible reasons behind commonly held attitudes against asylum seekers, most individuals interviewed agreed that ignorance was the main explanation. When considering the background of people who oppose the arrival of asylum seekers, interviewees came up with a variety of factors which might influence attitudes. The majority of interviewees identified social deprivation as the main factor. Interviewees active in the local community mentioned specifically the lack of a 'community feeling,' combined with the fact that most asylum seekers are housed in areas where local people cannot count on much support – either emotional or financial. They identified the support given to asylum seekers as a potential trigger of jealousy, fear and hostility. Four respondents stressed that opposing sentiments were also expressed among members of BME communities, as well as among those not directly housed near residences designated for asylum seekers. This illustrated according to them that fears and concerns about asylum seekers appear to cross class and racial lines.

Box 4: Reasons for concerns

According to some interviewees the perception that asylum seekers get equal or superior levels of support to that received by British people is mainly expressed by people living on the estates where asylum seekers are being housed. As a community worker explained:
'Local people want support for themselves. There is no support for community groups, there are no community activities going on. And [there is] a high turn over of tenancies, which leads to a very unstable kind of community.'

Another person active in the community added:

'If you are right at the bottom of the pile, it is useful to have somebody to scapegoat and blame for things. So when people are on NASS and come in and get a furnished property, local people will see the furniture go in and say 'Bloody hell! They have got a better sofa than I have!'

A primary school teacher suggested that the vulnerability of asylum seekers is often targeted: *'[It is] not only about being racist. Also ignorance and fear for the unknown. There is a lot of bullying going on in the estate. Adult bullying. They go for the most vulnerable. It does not have to be their colour, or where they are from but obviously they [asylum seekers] are disadvantaged because they can't speak the language, they don't know anybody else and they [some adults in the estate] tend to seek out anyone that is different. If they are quiet and respectful they go for them, if they are black and from another country they go for them. They just go for a weak spot.'*

But opposing attitudes are not limited to the more impoverished members of British society: *'Posh people can be racist too.'*

Or, as another community worker explained: *'White middle class families are worse. [Their] children can be exceptionally cruel and more likely to do things like throw rubbish or harass people. Chanting in front of doors and things like that.'*

Interviewees noted that bullying and discrimination was not only practiced by members of a single ethnic group. As a housing officer noted: *'Some people in BME communities also feel that people who come to the UK will get more than they get. [...] All ethnic groups around the city have similar views on this.'*

A refugee agency representative suggested that this reaction might be a way for BME communities to distinguish themselves from newly arrived asylum seekers: *'Part of the problem is that in today's society, if your English isn't that good you are almost automatically assumed to be an asylum seeker. [...] The Asian community is complaining as well about the asylum seekers. They will say 'well, I have been here for 20 years. I have worked hard to become accepted. All of a sudden I am not accepted again anymore.' Because if their English isn't great, the white English community is assuming they are asylum seekers. And they too are getting the negative effect.'*

Concerns of asylum seekers about the local community

To distinguish 'local people' from 'asylum seekers' is misleading, because neither the former nor the latter can be seen as a clearly defined or homogeneous group. The concept of community is also problematic, as was made clear at the beginning of this report. Asylum seekers, like local people have a variety of backgrounds, experiences, languages and cultures. They also have very individual responses to life in the UK, and their attitude both to their neighbours and to other asylum seekers may vary considerably. Just as local people can have concerns about asylum seekers, newly arrived asylum seekers may also express concerns relating to the community and the local people they find themselves living with.

The organisations interviewed for this report, however, did not report on asylum seekers' perceptions of the local community in any great detail. This may be due to the fact that they are primarily concerned with the welfare needs of those seeking asylum (see sections 2 and 4). But two interviewees did point out that most asylum seekers are chiefly concerned with their immigration status and are probably less preoccupied with the community that may one day become their home.

Box 5: Concerns of asylum seekers

A member of a housing agency expressed:

'When the asylum seekers get here, all they want to know is the outcome of their [asylum] application; will they get it or not? How can you expect them to worry about the local community, before they even know if they are ever going to be part of that community?!

Successful experiences of interaction

It is worth stressing that interviewees emphasized that not all local people express concerns about asylum seekers. But, as is often the case, those who scream loudest get most attention: *'Most of the people living here are lovely. But you have some nutters and they are just horrible. That is only a minority, but still...they ruin it for the asylum seekers and the rest of the estate.'*

A number of encouraging stories were recounted by interviewees, proving the ability of both the newcomers and the local people to adapt. Six respondents mentioned that at schools and in some estates relationships have been built up between local people and asylum seekers, showing that hostility can be overcome.

Box 6: Stories of successful interaction

A primary school teacher described good relationships at her school:

'Tensions between asylum seeking children and the rest of the population is not a problem here. We celebrate differences. We have some children here who are more disadvantaged than the asylum seekers that come. We have some terrible situations. So the majority of the children know what suffering is and can empathise with the asylum seekers. [...] And it just isn't an issue anymore where people are from. [...] We had one [asylum-seeking] girl at school and after a few months she was chosen by the rest to be the May queen. And that was wonderful.'

A police officer recalled:

'We had an asylum seeker moving into the estate. A lot of people thought it would not be a success, they thought it would be a disaster, but no. Of course there were some incidents, but overall it has been going okay.'

That relationships between asylum seekers and local people are not superficial was proven by an interviewee who reported:

'An asylum seeker man had to leave. He was to be deported. There was a lot of negativity about asylum seekers, but the whole town was in uproar about that, because they had been able to integrate well into the estate and the people just did not want them to leave.'

Section 3: Information needs

Good relations between asylum seekers and local people depend on each group being able to understand the other. This section deals with the sort of information that is needed to stimulate and promote understanding and discusses who it should be directed at.

All the interviews carried out for this research were with organisations who work on a policy level or hands-on with asylum seekers, local people or both. It should be made clear that there is a subtle but obvious distinction between the actual information needs of local people and asylum seekers, and their needs as perceived by the key players interviewed for this report and others working in this area.

Information needs of local people

There is a clear difference between what local people want to know and what organisations working with asylum seekers want them to know. An interviewee working for the regional consortium exemplified this by saying: *'What people want to know is when the asylum seekers stop getting in. They want to know when they are going home. But that just isn't going to happen. We need to make people aware of that and hopefully make them see the positive sides of a multi-cultural society.'* Almost all organisations interviewed felt that their main information aim should be to try to make people aware of the root causes leading to the arrival of asylum seekers in the UK. Half of them also stressed the importance of addressing local concerns relating to the life style and cultures of the newcomers.

Box 7: Issues local people need to understand better

An interviewee working for the local authority explained:

'[T]here are obviously concerns about immigration and national identity. A lot of issues will need to be addressed. A lot of them are based on dis- and misinformation and ignorance. You can try to challenge the information that is floating around. [...] It is not so much that they need to know more, because they simply don't want to. But on the level that people do know, we have to make sure they know correctly.'

A police officer mentioned:

'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 community worker expressed how important it was to make people aware of the practical daily concerns of asylum seekers:

'[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 spend all their money on drink and cigarettes and dope. And that they don't mind going to a second hand shop. And that they do have more community links that are different from the white community links. That sort of information is needed. That is what they need to know.'

Perceived information needs of asylum seekers

Most respondents perceived the concerns of asylum seekers as mainly relating to their asylum applications, as was briefly mentioned in section 2, but there was no opportunity to test this out with groups of asylum seekers within this stage of the study. The second stage of the research to be published in September 2003 will address this.

Interviewees considered that the most relevant concerns of asylum seekers were: asylum status, admission to education, legal advice, health facilities, access to a local library, job opportunities and English courses. The many organisations working with asylum seekers in Leeds seem to be well equipped to offer solutions or advice in these areas. The Refugee Access Project, a website for asylum seekers and refugees in the Yorkshire and Humberside area, was set up especially to address the information needs of asylum seekers,³⁸ and aims to

³⁸ See www.refugeeaccess.info

reach as many people as possible by translating the site into several languages. The majority of interviewees from asylum support organisations felt that being able to speak English was fundamental to asylum seekers establishing themselves successfully in the community. However, most English courses in the area are full and long waiting lists make it impossible to meet short-term needs.

The general consensus among interviewees was that it is the local population who are in most need of information and not asylum seekers. However, some community workers, three of whom work with both asylum seekers and local people, confirmed that asylum seekers were also often ignorant about their new surroundings. Increased knowledge of the UK and of local people's culture, habits and of benefit systems might be essential to promoting workable relationships between local people and asylum seekers.

Box 8: Issues asylum seekers need to understand better

A community worker actively working with asylum seekers and the local community suggested: *'Potentially asylum seekers need to understand that in our country there is also sometimes deprivation. It may be helpful for them to know, in order to understand the situation better. Some asylum seeking families have a rich background and they are not used to being somewhere down the status ladder. Whereas others may have heard that everyone is leading a good life in the UK. I think for them to understand those issues, could potentially enhance the understanding.'*

A community volunteer stressed that asylum seekers need to realise that they have an important role to play towards mutual understanding as well:

'If a refugee comes to an estate and that refugee is going to close its doors saying 'this is our religion, this is our belief,' that will cause a lot of problems. Asylum seekers are not only the victims, they are [...] [an] active partner in the integration process as well.'

Information needs of organisations

Organisations working with asylum seekers and local people may also find themselves in need of information in order to fulfil their role. Broadly speaking, there are three categories of organisations involved in the asylum issue: organisations working at the policy level, asylum support organisations, and those working directly within the community with both local people and asylum seekers. These different organisations have different roles and, consequently, different information needs (see section 4).

Most organisations working at a policy level felt that they have sufficient information about issues of interest and importance to them. Through newsletters, meetings, and well-established networks they keep themselves up-to-date with legal changes, country of origin information, useful contacts in the region, and funding possibilities. But those working in the local community, and not exclusively with asylum seekers, identified an information vacuum that limited their ability to do their job.

Box 9: Information needs of organisations

A woman working for social services and not in day-to-day contact with asylum seekers shared her concerns:

'I got these kids [girls] from Somalia. And they have been circumcised. Now, how am I to know what to do about that? I mean, both practically and emotionally. Where can I get the information? Yes, I know where to find country information, but that is just a summary of what is going on. We have all the general information; it is more the specific information we are lacking. There is a gap.'

A primary school teacher described how the lack of information could influence her work: *'They [asylum seeking children] come with a little card from the Home Office and they've all got the same birthday, January 1st. I don't understand that [...]. They don't give any more information. But if you don't even have anyone that speaks their language [...] we don't know anything about their circumstances. As to why they are refugees. That would be a lot more helpful if you would know. Sometimes we find out they are Roma children. And it would have been better to know that from the beginning, because of extra help we can get for that. But nobody ever told us about that.'*

The interviews make it clear that 'information need' is a diffuse concept and that information provision is not a straightforward process. Each organisation has its own agenda and associated perceptions of the information needs of its staff and clients. As a member of the regional consortium stressed: *'Information provision in an ongoing process. It never stops. You have to update it all the time.'*

Section 4: Key players and their role in promoting understanding

This section identifies the potential key players in promoting understanding and creating possibilities for establishing and maintaining contact between local people and asylum seekers. Although both groups themselves must be central to the development of understanding, organisations and agencies can also play an important role. Since the arrival of Kosovans as part of the Humanitarian Evacuation Programme and of asylum seekers as a result of dispersal policy, many new asylum related organisations have started up in Leeds, while existing organisations have opened Leeds offices and have launched local projects and programmes for the newcomers. But who are the main individuals and organisations responsible for or in a position to address concerns, answer questions, and stimulate dialogue between asylum seekers and local people? More specifically, what do they have to offer and how do they see their role?

Identifying key players

Most interviewees agreed that key players at a policy level serve an important purpose in the promotion of understanding, as they are thought to be in a position to influence long term policy and planning and create strategic links between other key players. Important organisations in this context included the Home Office, local authorities and refugee support organisations.

However, policy and planning organisations were not perceived as being equally powerful in terms of creating better understanding. Many interviewees thought that understanding is most effectively encouraged by setting up contacts and establishing links between local people and asylum seekers. As a result, groups working at the community level were most often mentioned when interviewees were asked which organisations were responsible for or able to provide the opportunity to create and enhance understanding. Almost two thirds of the interviewees mentioned religious organisations, schools, and community centres as being able to make a difference and to function as the most important institutions for establishing good relations between local people and asylum seekers. The police were mentioned by four interviewees, although two stressed that special care had to be taken as the police may have negative connotations for both asylum seekers and local people and thus potentially work against the development of understanding. Sport clubs, health organisations and housing officers were each mentioned twice as potential key players. It was stressed, however, with all three of these groups that a lot of work needs to be done to make the organisations and their employees aware of and able to fulfil that potential.

The only key player mentioned as influential by all interviewees was the media. Although the role of the national media was generally viewed as being provocative, inflammatory, and unconstructive, the local press in particular were credited with making positive contributions towards promoting understanding. Four respondents suggested appointing more media and communications officers dedicated to asylum and refugee issues, who would be in a position to play a crucial role in encouraging more balanced and accurate media coverage (see also section 5).

Box 10: Current and potential key players

An interviewee working with asylum seekers on a daily basis said:

'Obviously organisations that are set up for the asylum seekers. The regional consortium, Refugee Council and Refugee Action, they are all important.'

Key players include well-established, mainstream refugee and asylum organisations, but also smaller, community based ones. As one asylum support worker said:

'You don't have a community system in place anymore like you used to have 50 years ago. But still, housing, education, youth clubs, sport clubs, libraries, local organisations, Refugee Council...Any organisation really, that brings together people.'

As a community volunteer added:

'Not just the agencies and organisations working with asylum seekers, but anybody. A sports team or whatever. They may not be playing in it, but watching it. Encourage people to be more diverse.'

Another community worker added:

'The housing office. They could play a role. The police as well. They talk to a lot of people. And what they say to older people, can make a lot of difference.'

The police themselves recognised their role, but also acknowledged that:

'A lot of people [asylum seekers] are afraid of the police. They don't come to us straight away, because they fear they might be deported. So although they are a victim of a crime, they won't come.'

And a person active in the community also added that involvement of the police may be helpful, but that extreme care has to be taken:

'Maybe a community police man in plain clothes, but not a uniformed presence. That would not do any good around here. [...] There are drug users and wife beaters and burglars and paedophiles and they don't like people in uniform. That is an extreme minority, but it is an estate of extremely disadvantaged people. The unemployment is very high. [There is] deprivation and poverty.'

Some interviewees mentioned schools, although one respondent stated that:

'It can be difficult to integrate children. They do not understand what is going on, and some children can be extremely racist'

A schoolteacher, however, thought that schools present the rare opportunity for the parents of local and asylum-seeking children to meet:

'People will come if it involves children. If it involves their children.'

An interviewee who provided English classes for asylum seekers also considered that well-established community organisations could be mediators:

'There are plenty of voluntary groups, like church groups who try to make people feel welcome in the area'

Most organisational representatives interviewed thought that the national tabloids adversely affect inter-cultural understanding, whereas local press was thought to be balanced. A person working for the local authority said:

'Locally the press are doing a good job in easing the community tensions. But talking to [my] friends who read national newspapers and watch national news, they have a very negative view on asylum seekers.'

The role of key players

The organisations identified in this study as key players can be roughly divided into 3 categories: those who work for and with asylum seekers, those who work with local people, and those whose efforts are intended to reach both the local and asylum-seeker populations.

The aim and mandate of many asylum support organisations is primarily focused on welcoming and settling asylum seekers and familiarising them with the community they find themselves in. Their main activities include language provision, assisting with asylum applications, identifying suitable GPs and colleges, and introducing asylum seekers to other people from their own region or country of origin. It is these organisations which assist with the main information needs expressed by asylum seekers themselves.

Another, relatively small group of organisations approach the issue of the arrival of asylum seekers from the local community angle. They see their role mainly as providing correct information to local people in order to give them a balanced view about asylum and asylum seekers in the hope that this will enhance understanding.

A few organisations also exist to assist both local people and asylum seekers. These organisations were particularly highlighted by interviewees as having the potential to diminish misunderstanding and provide a platform for initial contact.

Box 11: The role of key players

A representative of the regional consortium noted:

'Most asylum seekers seem to be concerned about education for kids, but we also tell them where ESOL classes are, where the dentist is, how to register with a GP, how to lock housing, safety instructions, where their nearest religious organisation is.'

A local community worker said:

'Trying to get people involved. Make sure people know what is happening and make people see the positive side of diversity.'

The head of a school also viewed the school's objectives in broader terms:

'I see our role as giving asylum seekers a comfortable environment, to make them feel safe. But also making other children at school aware of why asylum seekers are here and where they are from and how best we can set them in school. And to educate them, but that seems a later aim...'

A police officer explained the role of the police towards asylum seekers as:

'We would like to inform them [asylum seekers] and help people from becoming victims of crime. About letting them know what sort of crimes they are likely to encounter, how best to avoid those types of crimes. Also letting them know that the police can help them. But also that the police can arrest them as well. So it is about two sides.'

Some interviewees mentioned that agencies specifically set up for refugees and asylum seekers may not necessarily help the integration and understanding process, because of their name and presumed role in the community. The perception people have about an organisation can influence their credibility and the work they carry out. Some refugee orientated

organisations mentioned that they do not advertise their existence, out of fear that it will create hostile and jealous reactions from the public.

Box 12: Perceptions about refugee organisations

A community worker mentioned:

'The problem is that although only 5 percent of our work consists of working with refugees and asylum seekers, the gossip in the community will be 'oh, they are an asylum seeking organisation.' And people will view us like that.'

A teacher raised the potential problem of linking the nametag 'asylum seekers' to an organisation aimed at promoting integration and understanding:

'There is a problem. There is quite a lot of funding available for refugees and asylum seekers work of one kind or another. And people are sick of that, because they will go 'well, there is another pot of funding for them and we are not getting anything.'

The role of volunteers

Many local community and asylum support organisations make use of volunteers. By teaching English to asylum seekers, providing meals, or assisting in healthcare related activities, volunteers learn about asylum seekers and asylum seekers learn about local people. Interestingly, most organisations reported no difficulty in finding volunteers. Volunteers are recruited by promoting the positive experiences to be gained from the work and the interaction with other cultures, rather than by soliciting sympathy for the plight of asylum seekers. By taking this approach, the stereotyping of asylum seekers and refugees as dependent and helpless people is avoided.

Box 13: The role of volunteers

A respondent from a community organisation said:

'We have a lot of volunteers working for us and it works on political commitment. [...] if we want people to be more active in the community, if we want people to be inclusive as opposed to exclusive, then we have got to employ people from the local community. One of the positive things I think we have managed to do is, by using local volunteers is getting them to know some of the refugees and understand a little bit of their story.'

An interviewee who provides English classes to asylum seekers said:

'The 'Welcome to Leeds' project has been successful, with a drop in centre. They also work with volunteers. Of course you get local volunteers who think it is a good idea. You are not going to get people who are anti asylum seekers, but still...'

Another person working with local volunteers reiterated the benefits of volunteering:

'From the local community, that is where volunteers come from. I am sure it does have an impact on the rest of the community. It is a positive thing.'

Employee versus inhabitant

People working for refugee or for community agencies are of course not only employees, but are also themselves members of the community in which they work and live. In some interviews it became apparent that these two roles do not always match seamlessly. As will be discussed below, people bring their own backgrounds and concerns with them to work, and this fact can on occasion hinder the organisation's role in promoting understanding. But the reverse is also true, and employees take their work and organisational ideologies home with

them as well. Some respondents were asked to what extent they felt that their role as key players in the promotion of understanding did or should spill over into their private lives. For many, whether or not they involve themselves in a private discussion concerning asylum seekers depended on the particular circumstances; in some situations interviewees thought it was better to avoid the asylum topic as it may prove inflammatory rather than contributing to improved understanding.

Box 14: Being a key player after work

A head of a community organisation said:

'We need to equip the volunteers [working for us]. We need to train them, especially those who live on the estate. And if they are nice about asylum seekers, they need to know what to say [...] when they get comments from local people.'

An interviewee working with asylum seekers was asked what she said when people asked what sort of work she did:

'Well, it depends on the person. But if it is someone on the bus or whatever, I sometimes say that I work with homeless people [...] somehow people are more sympathetic to them than to asylum seekers'

Knowing the neighbour

Half of the organisations interviewed stressed the importance of good communications with the 'community next door.' Although it is acknowledged by many respondents that personal contact and daily life experiences can create understanding between the two groups, little work seems to have been done to help asylum seekers and local people establish contact with their new neighbours. Two respondents thought that housing providers should be the ones to deal with neighbour relations, whereas the rest thought that establishing relationships with neighbours is up to the people themselves and could not be imposed by agencies.

Box 15: Contact with the neighbours

A community volunteer said:

'If you don't know your next door neighbour, you are not going to know what is going on. But if you at least start off by saying 'good morning' and 'how are you?' you are going to know each other much better. If I talk to you, you will talk to me. It is all about good communication. Having the appropriate agencies in place who can facilitate this contact in order to make it easier to integrate.'

Out-reach workers from housing agencies often do not have a mandate to take newly arrived asylum seekers to visit their neighbours. One housing agency mentioned:

'It is very difficult to say 'well, we get the neighbours to greet them' and [the] expectations attached to that.'

Another housing provider tried to put it in perspective by saying:

'Well, I don't know my next door neighbours either...'

Someone working for the police, however, said:

'I am not aware of any organisation who actually introduce asylum seekers to their new neighbours. I do think that may be useful. But it is all about individuals and their individual needs. Some people will need it, holding their hand and meeting the neighbours, some people won't. It would be great if that would be an option!'

Section 5: Lessons learned and examples of promoting and hindering understanding

Interviewees were asked what they saw as the way forward for creating better understanding between asylum seekers and local residents. Many suggested: *'creating more contact possibilities between the groups', 'making people feel welcome', 'tackling the myths and making people more aware of the people behind the stories.'* But how can these be achieved? This section examines the examples and suggestions put forward by the interviewees and considered by them to be 'good practice' and explores the hindrances to improved understanding and lesson learning.

Examples of promoting understanding

During the interviews two main areas of good practice were identified. These were activities aimed at addressing local people's concerns and tackling the myths surrounding the issue of asylum seekers, and activities that provide a platform for local people and asylum seekers to meet and become acquainted.

Both proactive and reactive information projects aimed at local people have tried to address concerns relating to asylum seekers. Some organisations try to address the misunderstandings on a small, individual level by talking to people and ensuring that their voice is being heard. Other initiatives have taken place in larger settings and have involved the use of community meetings and the provision of myth-busting leaflets.

Box 16: Examples of tackling misunderstanding

A representative from the police described how they dealt with tensions in the community:
'We had some problem in the area a few years ago. And with residents in the area we arranged regular meetings with them to break down the sort of myths about asylum seekers. Because one of the issues in the council estate is that those houses [where asylum seekers live] are all nicely painted up and decorated and that was a big issue. 'Why should they get all these free things that we don't get?' So it is a matter of sitting them all down at a table and explaining 'these are the reasons why they are here. This is where they come from. They don't actually get money they get vouchers' Just talk through all the myths that they are having. And you found that at the end of it, the community where the actual asylum seekers were living were actually very positive towards them and did not want them to leave. It was very effective in the end.'

When asked if it could be possible to inform people in advance of the arrival of asylum seekers a police officer said:

'The difficulty is that the communication has to be improved with Asylum Support [NASS] and the housing agencies. It is very difficult if asylum seekers move in somewhere and they have not told us [police] about it.'

Addressing concerns and possible sources of tension on a personal level has also helped, as a community worker recalled:

'It is difficult to address people's fears. It is not just a thing of telling them 'well, you can't say this or you can't say that.' or 'that is not true', because we have been ingrained in deeply-rooted, into that kind of racism and prejudice. The main way we would do it is to challenge people. We don't challenge them in any kind of confrontational way. It is more likely we say 'yes, they do have a leather jacket, but they got that from the second hand shop.' You know, some of the locals will go 'I won't go there, because it is cheap and nasty!, whereas asylum seekers will go 'Oh, blimey, a leather jacket for two quid, I love that!' But it is mostly by getting to know each other and people mixing with each other.'

In order to address concerns and tackle misunderstanding, another person working with local people as well as asylum seekers stressed the importance of listening:

'We are there to listen to what people have to say. I am not only listening to people I agree with, but you also have to listen to people you don't agree with. For example, if you meet a person from the extreme right, what would you do? I don't agree with his vision, but I would still talk to that person. You have to open up the dialogue, get into the community, to the people on the streets, find out what the issues are. Not just the community leaders. They may present themselves as representing the community, but maybe they are not.'

Concerns are not only to be addressed when they are raised. Avoiding the promotion of myths and misunderstanding is seen as a major challenge as well. A head teacher of a school explained how she dealt with the sudden arrival of many Kosovans:

'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. And hopefully [we] educate them as children which will pay off when they are adults and they are not going to be racist.'*

A respondent involved in the transition of the old people's home from a reception to an induction centre also mentioned the use of pro-active information flows:

'We told the press [in advance] about the induction centre. We said that the reception centre had been up and running for a few years and that it was all going very well. [The change to an induction centre] was more an internal change, nothing major, so they did not have to make a big deal out of it.'

Many respondents mentioned the information sheets provided by the regional consortium as a positive example of providing information:

'The consortium has created myth-busting sheets.³⁹ They are published on the Internet. I think it can be useful. Probably people who are not interested in asylum seekers [...] won't read it, but it is useful for us [organisations working in the community], so we can see how we can tackle racism when people make stupid comments or ask questions about the refugees.'

A writer of the myth busting information sheet agreed:

'Myth busting has to happen again and again and again, as they [myths] will crop up all the time.'

Another important role that organisations can play is in bringing local people and asylum seekers together. In particular community based organisations who work directly with asylum seekers and local people were mentioned by interviewees as having tried to set up projects and events where personal contact can be established and maintained. Such efforts included activities aimed at children and parents, walking tours, communal dinners and cultural events. In the case of the latter, however, some interviewees expressed their concern that by displaying asylum seekers as 'exotic' they will always be viewed as 'strangers'.

Box 17: Bringing local people and asylum seekers together

A person active in a community centre gave other examples:

'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 change to break down a few of those barriers so they can get to know each other.'

A possible suggestion made by a health worker:

³⁹ See the 'Asylum Seekers – Mythbusting' section of the City of Leeds (UK) Refugee and Asylum Seekers Team website at www.leeds.gov.uk/pageView.asp?style=&identifier=200226_261943996

'Trying to get people to work together collectively in groups, which will influence their daily lives as well as their community.'

An individual working in the community centre mentioned:

'We also did a residential, trying to see what people can do in terms of working in groups and trying to see what you can do for your community and some refugees came along to that as well, which I think is great. But you have to keep in mind that it will take about a year to get a residential together.'

Some organisations felt that cultural events can be a way to create understanding between the various groups. As a teacher said:

'We do encourage things that have anything to do with multi-cultural activities. Music, that sort of thing. Multi cultural dances or any kind of theatre thing.'

Another person, from the policy arena, expressed doubts and concerns at seeing cultural events as a means to stimulate integration:

'I am uncertain of the value of some of the community events. One of the things I don't like about things like refugee week is what strikes me as a sort of triteness and falseness of the sort of refugee community activities. I mean, on the one hand we are saying 'oh, people who are coming to this country are teachers and managers and doctors and nurses; skilled professional people. They have a lot to contribute to our lives.' And on the other hand, along comes refugee week and we stick them in some colourful ethnic costume and ask them to dance a bit. It is like me seeking asylum in Kenya or somewhere and on refugee week I am asked to put on a green Shamrock hat to do jigs and wheels and do Leprechaun impersonation [...] [refugees] just want to get on with their lives instead of being 'professional refugees' for the rest of their stay in the country. And the way that they will make their way is by building individual relationships with people, interact with them, work with them.'

Another interviewee mentioned examples from her hometown Bradford, where other attempts are made to get asylum seekers and local people together:

'[Asylum seekers] might see fruit or vegetables that they don't know. That is a way into talking to people [...] Local people were suggesting things like 'corn beef hash' or something and people [asylum seekers] would suggest recipes from their own culture. So there was a little bit of interchange in there.'

She continued:

'There is a monthly meal, where people from all nationalities can come and [there are] interpreters for all language groups. That is how people can get involved.'

Examples of hindering understanding

Interviewees were also asked what events, projects or circumstances may have hindered understanding, and what lessons have been learned. The majority of asylum support agencies mentioned that Leeds was still relatively new at hosting asylum seekers, and that a lot of experience still had to be gained and put into practice. But despite this relative lack of experience, nearly all respondents felt that they were managing well. The most common examples of hindrances to promoting understanding were housing policy and the media, although both were also seen as containing the potential to enable positive change. Waiting lists for English courses, racism within organisations, and a lack of funding were also cited as factors working against understanding.

The location of houses and the manner in which they are allotted to asylum seekers was considered a problem by a quarter of the respondents, who felt that the management of the housing issue contributed to negative images of asylum seekers.

Box 18: Housing policies as a hindrance for understanding

A community worker explained that the placement of the asylum seekers in areas with pre-existing tensions and problems has a negative impact on understanding:

'Unfortunately, where they put asylum seekers on the estate, it tends to be a problem area. So they come with their own baggage. And they are bullied.'

A teacher confirmed:

'If they are going to re-house asylum seekers to an estate where there is trouble, they are going to get it. It is never going to change.'

According to a refugee agency staff member the problem persists when the asylum seeker leaves the NASS support system and moves into new accommodation:

'The housing system is such that you have to bid for a house. And many asylum seekers won't understand the system, so it works in a very discriminatory way. They don't stand much of a chance.'

Many of the organisations currently working with asylum seekers have only been doing so since the introduction of dispersal policy in 1999, and are still adapting to the needs of this new client group. As mentioned in section 4, staff bring their own history, views, concerns and opinions to work, and these can sometimes limit levels of understanding and create hostility. Although interviewees felt that most organisations and employees are committed to providing services and in some cases to welcoming asylum seekers, seven respondents mentioned how people's prejudices can impact upon their work.

Box 19: Prejudice at work

A person working for the police said:

'The police force itself also has to deal with myths. And if the police has these kinds of myths, then they are not going to challenge those once they are on the streets. So internally we also have to create an environment of positive images and understanding.'

A health worker mentioned that:

'[...] Volunteer agencies can be racist as well. You will have these clothes provided for free for fairly poor people. A woman working there would come up to me and say 'well, this asylum seeker! He has been here three days in a row! You don't even see that with our people!' Well, just because that man is black, he will stick out and people are more likely to remember him.'

And a policeman explained the problems with trying to tackle prejudice at work:

'It is very difficult. Changing attitudes is longer term, changing behaviour is fairly short term. Changing behaviour is making sure what people do and what the standards are. So you can get them to behave like you want them to, but that does not necessarily mean that their attitudes have changed. My idea is that the attitude has to change as well. And that takes a lot of time and a lot of positive attitudes from the other people in the field.'

The Yorkshire and Humberside Consortium is working to decrease the impact of these attitudes in frontline organisations through various information campaigns and training sessions.⁴⁰

Key players are clearly in a position to have inspired and informed ideas about how to improve and promote understanding of refugee and asylum seeker issues. But interviewees working at

⁴⁰ See for example *Police, asylum seekers and the media: Strategy and best practice guidelines for police forces in Yorkshire & Humberside*, Yorkshire & Humberside Regional Consortium (November 2002). Available online at www.leeds.gov.uk/downloads/200317_40034121.pdf

the community level confirmed that the lack of money, time, and staff often means that these ideas cannot be put into practice.

Box 20: Money, time and staff constraints

A head teacher described:

'If you want relationships to change and profiles to be raised, you have to put money behind it and they don't so it is only [through] good will that things will run smoothly. It [the enrolment of asylum seekers] does nothing for our figures in the school. Our results are less than satisfactory. And having people go in and out of school does no good. We like having them. But we are skint. We have got no help with the language. You have to use your own resources. [...]. And the support is not being put into schools. [...] If we could have a [community] centre here, we could involve the families. We do have the will to do it, but not the resources.'

The community organisation behind the local walks and residential meetings said: *'They were very successful, but none of them happened often enough. We don't have the funding.'*

Lessons learned

Some respondents reported that important lessons have already been learned from their work with asylum seekers in the areas of community relations, cooperation between agencies, the allocation of housing, and the maintenance of an optimistic mindset despite difficult working conditions, and attempts have been made to share this learning with the sector (see section 6).

Box 21: Gained experiences

A respondent from the regional consortium mentioned:

'Community relations is something, I have to admit, we need to improve. That is what we are working towards now. [...] Having more time in certain communities, to work with community centres, more time with the clients. To be more of an open shop.'

An employee of a community centre:

'We try not to do things for asylum seekers and refugees in isolation. Because that will just create hostility.'

A person from the police force thought that creating linkages between organisations is the way forward:

'More co-operation between the various organisations to be able to respond more pro-actively instead of re-actively.'

A community volunteer said he had learned to stay optimistic:

'It takes some time for people to integrate, but it will happen eventually. 50 years ago, you had the Pakistani community. After a while they integrated. The area they live in are used to them now. That will be the same with asylum seekers.'

The media

As mentioned above, all interviewees perceived the media as a key player as regards community relations and asylum seeker issues in Leeds. But the question that must be addressed when analysing their role is to what extent the media voices and to what extent they influence local opinion. Most respondents felt that, with regard to the national tabloids, the latter was usually the case. Furthermore, many accused them of being key players in the promotion of *misunderstanding*. The local and regional media, on the other hand, were felt to offer balanced coverage and were not perceived as being responsible for the inflammation of fear and distrust toward asylum seekers. The regional consortium has provided guidelines and

strategies for the regional media to ensure balanced views and representation of asylum seekers.⁴¹

Box 22: The media's influence on people's perceptions

A communications officer explained:

'Interestingly enough, after September 11th, it has been easier to convince people that people [asylum seekers] are escaping persecution, war, conflict and horrific human rights abuses; first of all because we now know what went on in Afghanistan and Iraq. In this country [UK] we are really anti foreign news. [...] Since September 11th there has been tons of international news that we never had. That has made a lot of difference. People on the street [who] said there is nothing wrong in those countries, they simply can't say that anymore. 'Cos it is obvious that something is wrong. But the post war argument is coming soon 'they are liberated now, isn't' it time that they go back?'

A community worker saw the role of the media as the main reason for people's concern:

'The media has highlighted a lot of the negativity and played on people's anxiety. That is why most people object to them [asylum seekers].'

An interviewee from the local authority also highlighted the role of the printed press in relation to asylum seekers:

'Asylum still has this madness about it. We assume people know why people have come here. But I think often they don't. It depends on what paper you read and on what you choose to read'

A community volunteer mentioned the local media:

'The local press here [in Leeds] has been good. In the winter they had this article about an asylum seeker, a child, who had never seen snow before. So they had a photo of a child being hit by a snowball with a text saying something like 'I had never seen snow before, and then it hit me!' That was great. That is the sort of news you want.'

One local journalist explained that many members of the media would like to write more positive stories about asylum seekers but that it proved very difficult to gain access to them. Refugee and asylum support groups have an important role to play in providing these opportunities in order to ensure that coverage is balanced.⁴²

Box 23: The relationship between the media and asylum support organisations

A journalist working for a regional newspaper said:

'We would like to write more articles on asylum seekers. It all comes down to personal stories. That is what we want to tell. Make a human being of the term 'asylum seeker' [...] But it is difficult to get in touch with asylum seekers.'

A representative of a refugee agency agreed, and added:

'A lot of asylum seekers are distrustful of the media because they judge the media by the hostile tabloids, which isn't an appropriate way of viewing the vast majority of newspapers. Particularly not the local and regional press, who [have] been quite balanced.'

And as the journalist continued:

'The refugee agencies are very protective of their clients. They try to keep them out of trouble. And I understand that, but it takes away the opportunity for positive publicity as well.'

⁴¹ A media and PR strategy for asylum seekers in Yorkshire and Humberside (1999). Available online at www.leeds.gov.uk

⁴² A recent report came to the conclusion that there are ineffective working relations between the media and refugee support groups *The challenge of reporting refugees and asylum seekers: ICAR report on regional media events organised by the PressWise Refugees, Asylum-seekers and the Media (RAM) Project*. Nissa Finney for ICAR (April 2003).

A person working for a refugee agency acknowledged that:

'Yes, maybe we should be more pro-active in that sense and make use of the press. But it is scary...'

Another interviewee acknowledged that because of the separate spheres of work of refugee support workers and media workers, there is a limited understanding between the media and agencies working with asylum seekers:

'I think many authorities don't take a systematic approach to dealing with the media when it relates to asylum seekers. I think a lot of the stuff that some local authorities do in the public relations field is hampered by the fact that the professionals occupy an entirely separate field of discourse than those working for the press.'

Section 6: The limits of information and the dynamics of information provision

This final section deals with the potential obstacles to information flows and the complexities of information provision and reception. It will consider flows to local people and asylum seekers, as well as between and within organisations.

The limits of providing information to local people and asylum seekers

Assuaging fears and changing minds is not an easy task, and many respondents emphasized how difficult the identification and circulation of relevant information can be. They stressed the importance of being realistic and of realising that some people resist the introduction of new information, as they feel they have all they need and they see no gaps in their knowledge about the asylum issue. Both community workers and local authority staff members suggested that asylum is not most people's top concern: personal, financial and health issues are likely to preoccupy people more than newly arrived asylum seekers.

Box 24: Limitations of providing information to the public

One health worker summarised that:

'People know as much as they feel they need to.'

A woman working on an estate where both asylum seekers and local people are housed said:

'It is difficult, if not impossible, to include all people in the information provision process. Asylum seeking women are difficult to reach, especially if they can't read. Although a lot of attempts are being made to translate useful information and to provide information in various ways, you can't always get them all. For the local community, those who do not have any interest in asylum seekers and refugees will be less likely to pick up anything positive, because they will not be looking for it.'

'You have to be realistic. There will always be people who don't like strange things [...] [E]ven in events like this [organising meetings with asylum seekers and local people], there will be people who recognise the needs of that specific refugee and will say 'well yes, you are okay, but the next one won't be.'

A representative of the regional consortium agreed with that vision:

'A lot of people feel the solution to all life's problems is mounting a few information campaigns. There are so many competing issues that need national attention; food safety, public services[...] there are so many issues and when it comes down to it, people just don't want to be given all this information about asylum. People have got lots more issues going on in their lives than wanting to know about what happened to the latest asylum seeker. They want to pay their mortgage and get their kids educated through school.'

Limits of information flows between and within organisations

Different organisations require different information in order to perform their role in trying to promote understanding between asylum seekers and local people. All interviewees agreed that establishing and maintaining relationships with various organisations in the sector and exchanging information, tips and advice can be useful. In Leeds and in the broader region of Yorkshire and Humberside, many attempts have been made to create opportunities for professional and voluntary organisations to exchange information and to create networks: agency meetings, conferences and workshops take place, allowing for formal and informal contacts to be established and maintained. However, constraints do exist. Some respondents from the more hands-on organisations felt that many of these activities chiefly benefited the more policy-focused agencies and were not very accessible to people working at the grassroots level. Interviewees from the local authority and asylum and community organisations mentioned time and money constraints as a limiting factor in their efforts to keep in touch with the sector. Finally, processing and distributing useful information is similarly limited by organisational constraints. If there is no person or structure in place to deal with incoming information and communications, an effective system of transferring knowledge will be difficult to achieve.

Box 25: Limited information flows between organisations

A community worker expressed her disappointment:

'[W]e went to a big meeting [...] and they did not allow a good role for us. It was more policy level. You had to table out an agenda before the meeting in order to be able to speak. They are not very friendly meetings. It is all 'press the button on your microphone and speak' so it is not even easy for let's say volunteers from here to go. Because they have to have their confidence built before they can go.'

Information links are not always accessible or present as a person working on an estate explained:

'We have looked for good practice, but we haven't found any community group that is dealing with both asylum seekers and the local community. Except for Bradford'

A teacher confessed:

'We don't do enough about good practice, write articles about it, make exchange visits, but we don't have the funding and we don't have the time.'

A woman working for a community organisation said:

'We looked last week about what sort of forums we were part of. And it turned out I was part of like seventeen different ones. I can't go to all of them'

The ability to deal with all incoming information was mentioned as yet another challenge by a police officer:

'You have to have a system in place to deal with it. Make sure the communication is in place. If you have all the organisations involved in refugees and asylum seekers in Leeds, and you have them all send one email a week, that is a lot of information coming in a week. So you have to have a system in place to deal with that information.'

Of course information needs exist not only between organisations, but also within them. Information provided at external meetings still has to travel a long way before it reaches people working further down the ladder of the organisation. Some interviewees, especially those working in hierarchical organisations such the police or health institutions, mentioned this as a problem.

Box 26: Limited information flows within organisations

A community worker described the problem symbolically:

'Do you know that game that kids play? [Chinese Whispers] One kid whispers a sentence in the ear of another kid and that kid then continues to do the same with the next one. After 6 or 7 it turns out that the sentence has completely changed! That is the danger when you transmit and try to transfer information.'

A police officer explained this with an example of information flows in a hierarchical organisation:

'You can have an inspector there [at an agency meeting], working on a different level [than the community based police force]. But that inspector would not then go to the local meeting. So in the end, we would not know what has been said there, and it might have been useful...'

An interviewee working for a health organisation explained that just informing GPs about asylum seekers was not enough:

'[A]ssistants [of GPs] for example. They are like the gateway to the health services. But they don't always know what to do and what to say. I guess they are just not used yet to the asylum seekers with their specific needs and the GPs don't have the time to sit around and talk to them about it either.'

Clearly the process of providing and communicating information is complex and not without pitfalls. Using information to promote understanding of asylum and asylum seekers is a challenge and requires creativity. Leeds with its experiences, projects and plans has many lessons to offer other areas of the UK which have received or will receive asylum seekers in the future.

Common findings and recommendations

Leeds and Bicester differ profoundly from each other both as places and in terms of their experience of asylum seekers. Yet this research shows that the main concerns of local people identified by key players and the information that they need in order to understand asylum seekers better are surprisingly similar.

Key concerns

The key concerns of local people in Bicester and Leeds over the arrival of asylum seekers as perceived by the interviewees are not only similar but seem to cross social and ethnic lines. The main concern is: perceived large numbers of asylum seekers 'overwhelming' and changing the identity of the locality, with effects on housing, health services, education, and crime levels. Whether or not such perceptions or fears can be substantiated, they are fundamental to the formation of people's attitudes and directly influence their level of understanding of asylum seekers. Perhaps even more importantly, local people are both anxious and angry that their concerns and fears are not listened to and that they are not properly consulted about an issue that will impact significantly on their local community.

The role of information and information needs

This study illustrates the need for information that promotes understanding of asylum seekers in contrasting settings and examines some aspects of the role it can play. Bicester provides an opportunity to draw tentative conclusions about the information needs of local people in an area where asylum seekers have not yet actually arrived but where they may arrive in large numbers. Leeds gives an opportunity to assess information needs over time, when the presence of asylum seekers has become a fact of daily life.

What both studies show is that information needs to be made available quickly and continuously to local people about changes that involve them and that this information needs to be based on initial consultation that identifies local concerns.

In Bicester, local people felt that information about the government's plans should have been available to them from the time of the announcement that their local community was to be one of the trial sites for an accommodation centre. In the absence of clear and timely information specifically geared to their concerns, and influenced by reports in the media, local people began to draw their own conclusions and went on to form pressure groups to represent their interests. Once opinions had been formed, it became more difficult to challenge them.

The Leeds case study shows that information provision needs to be on-going and needs to be about asylum in general as well as about the specific groups of asylum seekers that become local people's new neighbours.

Key players

Key players are organisations, agencies and individuals that can have an effect on levels of understanding. They may either be key to information provision, influential locally or both. The key players identified by interviewees in the two locations were very similar. The key players most likely to be successful in promoting understanding between local people and asylum seekers were those with an even-handed professional or personal responsibility to both groups.

In Leeds local authorities and refugee agencies provide the basic organisational structure for supporting asylum seekers and these groups were identified by most interviewees as playing a key role. However, organisations working with both asylum seekers and local people at the grass-roots level and on a day-to-day basis were seen by the interviewees as best placed to influence attitudes and promote understanding. They include religious organisations, schools, sports clubs and the police.

In Bicester there is no organisational structure for asylum seekers as so far hardly any have arrived in the area. All interviewees identified the same group of key players and their lists also tallied with those interviewed in Leeds. In addition, both local action groups set up by local residents in Bicester to oppose the accommodation centre were identified by others and saw themselves as being key players. These two groups foresaw that their role would remain key if and when the accommodation centre is finally built.

The majority of interviewees in both locations identified the local and national media as having a key role; national media mainly negative and the local media more likely to be balanced.

What has promoted and what has hindered understanding between local people and asylum seekers?

Evaluating changes in behaviour and attitude is clearly outside the scope of these case studies, especially across a city as large as Leeds, but even within a smaller town such as Bicester. Understanding can vary within households and also does change with time and events. This report is based on a small number of interviews with key players, but nonetheless certain messages are clear. Genuine understanding is more likely to occur when local people are listened to and feel part of the process of hosting asylum seekers. Understanding is also more likely to occur when local people and asylum seekers meet each other, because then opinions are based on actual experience and not on media stories or myths.

In Leeds, refugee agencies, local authorities, local police and community organisations have taken pro- and re-active steps towards 'myth-busting', by holding local meetings and distributing literature. In addition, some local community organisations in Leeds have set up events and projects to try to put local people in contact with asylum seekers. The main purpose of these activities is to make local people aware that there is a human face and story to each asylum seeker and that they are not an impersonal phenomenon to be feared. In Bicester, similar activities, including joint sporting events and cultural evenings, have been proposed by local people for if and when the accommodation centre is built.

Those key players with a professional role in asylum issues, for example local authority housing officers, are often also local residents and their personal views about asylum seekers may determine whether in the course of their work they help or hinder the process of understanding. In Leeds, some interviewees spoke of how the personal prejudices of front line workers have contributed to the difficulties of overcoming entrenched attitudes towards asylum seekers.

Government behaviour and policy can play a major role in promoting or hindering understanding. In Bicester, the Home Office has been accused of doing little to promote understanding. Key players say that local people feel that the Home Office withheld crucial information from the time of the initial announcement about the accommodation centre right

through to the public inquiry, and that this has led to deep mistrust of their intentions and of the information that they have provided. In the absence of any official information from the government, local people were 'left with no choice' but to seek out information by themselves, in some cases from the media. There was no opportunity in this stage of the research to explore the effect of government asylum policy pronouncements on local people's attitudes to asylum seekers in Leeds.

The national media very often fills the information gaps. A strong feeling amongst those interviewed was that the national press serves more to hinder understanding rather than to promote it. On a local level, interviewees in both locations reported that the local press generally covered asylum issues in a balanced and accurate manner. In Leeds, a representative of an organisation working with refugees stated that '*no negative publicity is more important than positive publicity*'.

The limits of information

Even well researched information can fail to encourage understanding if the systems are not in place to make sure it reaches the people that can use it to make a difference. Some front line workers interviewed for this report said that the information they needed for their everyday work did not always reach them from those higher up in their own organisation or from other organisations higher up in the organisational network.

It has to be recognised that sometimes even well-timed information can have a negative effect. A police officer in Leeds commented '*You might talk to people before asylum seekers arrive, and they might feel better about it, but it might have the reverse effect, it might be inflammatory*'. It is clearly much harder to try to use information to change opinions once they have been formed, as the Home Office is discovering in Bicester. However, the two local action groups in Bicester, one of which mainly advocates for the interests of local people and the other for the interests of asylum seekers, are now talking to each other and exchanging information. This is evidence that it is never too late for information to increase understanding.

Conclusion

Ultimately, if something is unwelcome then it will be difficult to couch it in acceptable terms. But this research suggests that if local people are consulted and their concerns are acknowledged, if key players are well informed, open and communicative, and especially if local people and asylum seekers meet as individuals, then harmonious relations between local people and asylum seekers can be achieved.

Recommendations

On the basis of these interim findings, ICAR makes the following 10 recommendations:

- The responsibility to offer protection to people fleeing persecution is not a matter for apology, but needs to involve and engage the local communities in which asylum seekers are to be accommodated.
- Local community concerns and fears should be heard and addressed. It is not necessarily racist to have fears and concerns. Information campaigns in local areas should be based on initial consultation that identifies need.

- Local people should be informed about plans concerning asylum seekers in advance of their arrival as well as afterwards.
- The type of information provided needs to address *local* concerns (e.g. how will asylum seekers affect you?) as well as the nature of the asylum process and why people seek asylum.
- Key players and information providers need to recognise that asylum seekers cannot be treated in isolation from local people's every day concerns about money, housing, and health for example. Local people want to know how the arrival of asylum seekers will affect local services.
- Initiatives and projects which help asylum seekers need to be offered even-handedly to their neighbours, who although not fleeing persecution may often be suffering from serious deprivation of other kinds.
- Local service providers (schools, housing providers, police etc.) working directly with both asylum seekers and local people should be equipped with information and resources which encourage understanding.
- Government policies should take into account that sudden decisions and large numbers of arrivals of asylum seekers are difficult for local people to accept.
- If accommodation centres are to be accepted by local people ways need to be found of encouraging rather than discouraging interaction between local residents and asylum seekers.
- The national media should be encouraged to approach the asylum issue from all angles to portray a balanced view. Refugee support agencies should encourage them to do this by helping to arrange interviews, with appropriate support, with asylum seekers and refugees, so that they can tell their personal stories.

Appendix 1: Profile of interviewees

Bicester

Police	1
Journalists	1
Local community and/or residents' groups	3
Local authority staff	1
Local politicians	2
The Home Office	1
Youth workers	1
Schoolteachers	1
Local residents	2
Total number of interviewees:	13

Leeds

Police	3
Journalists	2
Local community groups	2
Local authority staff	4
Refugee/asylum seekers organisations	3
Schoolteachers	2
Local health professionals	1
Housing providers (not local authority)	1
Total number of interviewees:	18

Appendix 2: Questionnaire for key players

Interviews with key players are supplementary to any report they may wish to make available to UTS researchers.

Interview recorded? Yes/No

Ethics statement given to interviewee? Yes/No

Any supplementary documentation from interviewee? Yes/No

Date: _____

Name: _____

Organisation: _____

Position: _____

What has happened in your local area since the arrival of/announcement of the impending arrival of asylum seekers? How have you been involved in this?

Your organisational role

1. What is your role as regards members of the local community or local community issues?
2. What is your role as regards asylum seekers or asylum issues?

Community relations

3. What are the main issues/concerns that have arisen amongst local people since the arrival of/announcement of the impending arrival of asylum seekers?
4. What are the main issues/concerns of asylum seekers about the local community they now find themselves living in?
5. How do local people and asylum seekers inter-relate in your local community?
6. What role could members of local communities/asylum seekers play in helping to achieve good community relations?

Information needs

7. How much do people in the local community understand about asylum seekers, the asylum process etc.
8. What information do you think local people need to better understand the asylum seekers in their area/the asylum seekers that will arrive in their area?
9. What do asylum seekers understand about the local community?
10. What information do you think asylum seekers need to better understand the local community?
11. What kinds of questions do you get asked by local people/asylum seekers?
12. How do you deal with local people's concerns/fears?
13. How do you deal with asylum seekers concerns/fears?

The role of information

14. How do you contact local people in your area of responsibility?
 - 14.1 What information do you pass on to them?
 - 14.2 How is this information further disseminated?
15. How do you contact asylum seekers in your area of responsibility?
 - 15.1 What information do you pass on to them?
 - 15.2 How is this information further disseminated?
16. What information do you require to fulfil your role with regards to local people?
17. What information do you require to fulfil your role with regards to asylum seekers?

18. Do you think that you receive all the information you need to be able to fulfil your role to local people/asylum seekers?
 - 18.1 If not, what other information would be useful
 - 18.2 Where could you get that information from?
 - 18.3 Can you easily access that information?
 - 18.4 If not what would help?
 - 18.5 How would you get it to them?
19. Is there any group (local people or asylum seekers) that you feel does not have access to information they need/would find helpful?
20. If yes, how could this be improved?

Lessons learned

21. What examples are there of good practice in your area (regarding the use of information) to promote understanding between local people and asylum seekers?
 - 21.1 What has been done with this good practice?
22. What examples are there of things going wrong in your area (regarding the use of information) to promote understanding between local people and asylum seekers?
 - 22.1 What has been learnt from this?
23. If you could go back to the beginning, is there anything you would do differently?
 - 23.1 Please explain.
24. What would you want others to do differently?

Other key players and networks

25. Who in your opinion are the other local key players in managing relations between local people and asylum seekers?
26. What contact (if any) do you have with them?
27. How do you share the information you receive with other key players in the region?
28. How does information flow within these networks?
 - 28.1 Could this be improved?
 - 28.2 How?
29. Is there any group you feel is not part of the process and who should be?
 - 29.1 Who?
 - 29.2 What would be the best way to get them involved?
30. How does information flow into the network from central government, or other networks?
 - 30.1 How could this be improved?
31. What has been/is the role of the local/national media?
 - 31.1 Do you think this has been helpful?
 - 31.2 In what ways?
 - 31.3 How do you think this could be improved?

The limits of information

32. What are the limits of information?
33. What else is needed?

Further information

34. Is there anything else you think it might be important for us to know?
 - 34.1 Please explain.

Do you consent to ICAR including details in our report concerning your professional role, which may lead to your testimony being identifiable? Yes/No.

Thank you for your cooperation.

Appendix 3: Project information sheet

ICAR's *Understanding the stranger* project

Background

The issue of asylum and where and how asylum seekers should live whilst their claims for asylum are being processed is becoming increasingly important at a local as well as at a national level. The government plans to build large accommodation centres in rural areas and to create a national network of induction centres for asylum seekers mean. This means that areas of the UK which may until now have had little contact with asylum seekers will be host to significant numbers during the procedure to determine their claims. Experience to date shows that the arrival of this group of 'strangers' raises concerns and information needs amongst local people and asylum seekers including those who find themselves involved in asylum issues in a professional capacity.

The research project 'Understanding the Stranger' is about recording these local concerns and information needs and about finding out who needs what information in order to promote understanding between these two groups. We will do this by talking to: local people including those involved in a professional capacity e.g. local Authority staff, health and education professionals, the police, religious leaders; civil society groups and asylum seekers.

What's it for?

We want to record experiences from different communities in the UK, and see if there are some useful lessons that could be learned. An interim report will be published in June 2003 and a final one in September 2003. The research findings will lead into a larger project through which ICAR will devise ways of providing information to those that need it in areas of the UK where significant numbers of asylum seekers are being or are due to be housed in order to promote understanding between local people and asylum seekers.

Who are we?

ICAR is an independent information centre based at King's College London. We aim to use information to raise the level of public debate and to encourage evidenced-influenced policy-making on all aspects of refugees and asylum as they affect the UK. We are dedicated to increasing understanding about asylum and refugee issues. We are neither a pro or anti asylum pressure group, we advocate solely for the use of information in public debate and/or policy-making.

Ethics

ICAR adheres to widely held principles governing ethical social research and this project is governed by a specific ethical statement which you may request to see. ICAR will store information you provide in a secure manner and will anonymise all interviews. However, because of the centrality of the professional role of some interviewees to the project's findings, ICAR may ask you to consent to details about your professional role being included in the report which may lead to your testimony being identifiable. ICAR may request to tape your interview. This will be solely to assist ICAR with the research and it will not be passed on. You may of course ask for your interview not to be recorded. You may withdraw from an interview at any time.

The project is funded by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation – a charitable trust.

If you have any questions regarding the research or the ethics governing it, please contact the Project Manager – Beth Crosland at ICAR beth.crosland@kcl.ac.uk tel: 020 7848 2731

Appendix 4: Ethics statement

All ICAR staff and consultants involved in the '*Understanding the Stranger*' project agree:

To adhere to widely held general principles governing ethical social research recognising that this may involve balancing potentially conflicting interests. Especially:

- That they have a responsibility both to safeguard the proper interests of those involved in or affected by their work, and to report their findings accurately and truthfully.
- That consideration must be given to the effects of involvement on research participants and to the consequences of their work or its misuse for those they study and other interested parties. As far as possible they should guard against predictably harmful effects.
- That the interests of research subjects should be protected. Particular concern should be taken to ensure that informed consent has been gained and that participants are aware that they can withdraw at any time. They should be aware of the intrusive potential of their work and have respect for individual values and a sense of privacy. All participants will be provided with a one-page summary of the research explaining its purpose and how their testimony will be used.
- Confidentiality of records will be maintained and all data will be stored in a secure manner fulfilling obligations under the Data Protection Act. Where it is considered helpful to use recording equipment the participant must be informed and consent sought.
- All data will be anonymised but considering the centrality of some of the research participants' role in the community (e.g. local authority staff, religious figure) to the research, some participants may be asked if details of their professional role may be included which could potentially make their testimony identifiable.
- In observation study situations where behaviour patterns are observed without the subject's knowledge, they must take care not to infringe what may be referred to as the "private space" of an individual or group. This will vary from culture to culture. Where practicable, they should attempt to obtain consent post hoc. In any event, they should interpret behaviour patterns that appear deliberately to make observation difficult as a tacit refusal of permission to be observed.
- That there is a responsibility to pursue objectivity and to be open about known barriers to its achievement. There should be transparency about methods as well as findings. Attention should be drawn to the limits of the data's reliability and applicability.

(For more detail see 'Social Research Association Ethical Guidelines' and 'Statement of Ethical Practice of the British Sociological Association' ICAR gratefully acknowledges the use of these documents in drafting this paper)

For further information about the project or the ethics governing it please see the 'project outline' or contact the project manager Beth Crosland at ICAR beth.crosland@kcl.ac.uk, tel: 020 7848 2731.

March 2003