

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.