

Where is integration in the refugee crisis?

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What is lost in the debate about refugees, which has hitherto focused on numbers, is a proper discussion about integration. In this article, [Jenny Phillimore](#) examines the steps that might support a two-way integration process.



The focus for the media and politicians responding to the European refugee crisis has largely been upon numbers and the debate about how many refugees each country can, will, or should take. Policymakers have responded reactively rather than proactively with limited attention paid to the integration policy and practice that will be needed to help refugees to settle in their countries of refuge.

While it is unclear yet exactly how countries will house refugee arrivals it is highly likely that at least some will be dispersed to wide ranging towns, cities and even rural areas many of who have little experience of diversity and none of refugee resettlement. Getting integration policy right before refugees are dispersed is imperative. This article focuses on the types of actions that might support a two-way integration process. The ideas are based upon 15 years of research into refugee integration including [a recent study](#) for the KING project which looked at integration practice across Europe. In thinking about integration practice we might focus on three phases: *reception*, *orientation* to a new social reality and *social mobility*.

The welcome signs that greeted refugees walking across borders into Germany and Austria are not representative of the reception that most receive when they arrive as asylum seekers having to prove their “genuine” claim to sanctuary. The assumption that all asylum seekers are bogus unless proven otherwise and lengthy determination processes have been demonstrated to contribute to the onset of mental health problems in refugees, many of whom are already traumatised.

They also experience what has been described as bereavement as they leave behind everything that was familiar to them. Reception needs to be humane and positive. Determination processes should be fair, consistent and transparent. Refugees need time to recover from their journey combined with offers of care and support: food, clothes, and medical attention. Fear and uncertainty should be reduced through careful explanation of determination procedures and processes. Access to communication technologies should be made available to help them reconnect with family and friends left behind.

In order to encourage a positive reception work is needed in dispersal destinations to help local people understand refugee experiences, to encourage them to understand the “bereavement” associated with migration and to develop skills to communicate sensitively and interculturally. Local institutions and agencies need training to understand how to access and work effectively with interpreters, how to explain the way that the host country’s systems differ from country of migration and to adopt a flexible approach to service provision.

The scale of arrivals means it is inevitable that individuals will be dispersed, frequently on a no choice basis, if they are to be accommodated. [Analysis](#) of the UK’s Survey of New Refugees showed that dispersal had long-term detrimental effects on refugees’ health and employability. Where feasible, individuals should be offered a choice of destination enabling them to live near friends or family who can offer support.

Once refugees are housed, support is needed to help them orientate to new institutional cultures. Explanation about “how we do things here” is frequently lacking leaving refugees anxious about breaking rules or causing offence. Information should be provided explaining how and when to use the health service, enrol in college, meet and greet local people etc. Provision of mentors matched by age and gender can be a very effective way of helping someone to orientate quickly.

Social networks are important to help refugees access integration resources. In general the wider the social network the more opportunities it provides for integration. Access to wide networks is [not constrained](#) by having strong peer networks which themselves are important for providing emotional support. Faith hubs are [important](#), offering settlement assistance and enabling individuals to retain some aspects of their identities. Social media too is of great importance in ensuring refugees can secure some kind of presence with those from whom they have been separated. Refugees need to be helped to identify the facilities they need for network building and space provided for group activities.

In the longer term resources are required to help refugees achieve social mobility. These include access to high quality language classes with vocational language, volunteering positions in institutions and businesses commensurate with pre-migration occupations, and employability mentoring. Countries such as Sweden, Germany and Australia offer comprehensive courses in which refugees access hundreds of hours of free language training and vocational training. Given that many refugees have [high levels](#) of qualifications and skills many of which are in shortage it is important to establish programmes that enable skills and qualification recognition. [Evaluations](#) of European Refugee Fund supported initiatives have shown that supporting women refugees into community-based language classes enables them to help their children to engage with their schooling.

Finally, programmes such as HACT's Reach In project in which refugees were offered high quality volunteering places combined with training [have been shown](#) to enhance employability and help institutions to utilise the insider knowledge that refugees offer to reshape their services to be more sensitive to diverse needs. The KING project demonstrated that engaging newly arrived communities in local partnerships focusing on regeneration and community development can [help foster](#) strong networks and social cohesion.

There are [many examples](#) of successful and unsuccessful approaches to refugee integration that we can learn from (see [Humphries](#) for a full review). However, most integration initiatives tend to operate at local level and receive short-term funding. If Europe is to make a genuine effort to provide high quality reception, orientation and social mobility for refugees then a comprehensive strategic and well-resourced approach is necessary which supports refugees, and the communities and institutions in which they live, to adapt to the inevitable demographic changes arising from what has been described as the biggest refugee crisis Europe has encountered since World War II.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

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