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Integration in the Shadow of Austerity—Refugees in Newcastle upon Tyne

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Abstract: Newcastle upon Tyne, a post-industrial city in the North East of England, has long been committed to hosting refugees. Although the city has suffered drastic cuts in government funding and faces high levels of deprivation, Newcastle declared itself a city of sanctuary and participates in several dispersal schemes for asylum seekers and refugees. This paper shows how political support as well as the self-motivating ambition to be a city of sanctuary are driving forces behind the city's commitment to hosting refugees. This study then proceeds to explore the integration experiences of refugees in Newcastle, with a focus on housing, employment and the relations between refugees and local residents. While an overall positive picture emerges across these areas, language barriers, the refusal to accept refugees' previous qualifications and experiences of racism remain major obstacles to integration. Moreover, the gulf in funding and support between resettled refugees and former asylum seekers greatly aggravates the latter's access to housing and employment and contributes to a lower feeling of safety among this group.

Keywords: integration; refugees; austerity; community relations; employment; local politics; North East of England

1. Introduction

This paper explores the integration process of refugees in Newcastle upon Tyne (Newcastle), a post-industrial city in the North East of England. Having faced large-scale deindustrialisation and extensive government funding cuts, the city struggles with high poverty and unemployment levels. Yet, despite ranking among the most deprived 20% of local authorities in England, Newcastle has long been hosting refugees (Casla et al. 2018, p. 3). Newcastle City Council (NCC) was among the first local authorities to take part in the national dispersal scheme for asylum seekers introduced in 1999. Newcastle also participates in the Vulnerable Person Resettlement Scheme (VPRS), which predominantly focuses on Syrian refugees and, in 2014, NCC passed a motion in favour of becoming an official City of Sanctuary.

Against this background of welcome and economic deprivation, this research will explore how refugees have adapted to the city, especially with regards to employment and housing. We will also examine the attitudes and interactions between local residents and refugees, as well as the role of refugees' own communities in helping newly arrived individuals settle in Newcastle. In the process, language skills, age, and experiences of racism will be identified as key factors that either obstruct or facilitate refugees' integration experience. It will further be shown how the gulf in support between resettled refugees and former asylum seekers impacts negatively on the latter's integration process. This discussion will be preceded by two background sections on refugees in the United Kingdom (UK) and in Newcastle in particular. The latter section will offer a few explanations for NCC's commitment to hosting refugees.

2. Research Focus and Rationale

In light of increasing refugee movements around the world, there is an urgent need to better understand the integration experience of refugees in their various host environments. Since 'integration takes place primarily at the local level', empirical studies at the city level are particularly well suited to foster such understanding ([Pastore and Ponzo 2016](#), p. 3). This paper attempts to contribute to these efforts by exploring the integration experience of refugees in Newcastle. The following questions guided our research:

- What are refugees' experiences with accessing and succeeding in employment and housing in Newcastle and what factors facilitated or obstructed their experiences?
- How do refugees and local residents view and interact with each other and what factors play a role in facilitating or obstructing such interaction?
- How does the integration experience differ between resettled refugees and former asylum seekers?
- What accounts for NCC's commitment to participate in the dispersal system and the VPRS?

While several studies have been written on the integration of migrants in the North East of England, very little research exists on the integration of refugees in the city of Newcastle. Moreover, existing studies tend to focus on the integration of refugees into Newcastle's labour market (see: [Vickers et al. 2016](#)) and education system (see: [Whiteman 2005](#)). Yet, refugees' position in the local housing market and relations between refugees and local residents have not been researched in any great detail. Our paper aims to fill this gap, by analysing qualitative data from refugees, as well as from local residents. Furthermore, unlike existing work on refugee integration in Newcastle, this paper will distinguish and compare between the experiences of resettled refugees and those of former asylum seekers. In what has essentially become a two-tier asylum system, we aim to highlight how each route impacts the integration of refugees at the local level. As such, this research may inform ongoing policy debates on the future of the asylum dispersal system and the VPRS. Lastly, since local government is increasingly recognised as a key actor in the integration of refugees (see: [Dekker et al. 2015](#)), this paper will attempt to explain the stance adopted by NCC. As far as the authors are aware, no previous research has explored the role of NCC in the context of refugee integration.

3. Theoretical Considerations, Method and Limitations

Integration is a hotly contested term that is used to advance different and at times conflicting policies and agendas. [Berry \(1997\)](#) regards integration as an acculturation strategy by which newcomers seek the interaction with other cultures, while maintaining their own cultural identity. Others have understood integration as a two-way process that also requires a willingness of the host community to adapt and change ([Castles et al. 2002](#)). Moreover, [Bowskill et al. \(2007\)](#) pointed out how integrationist rhetoric, despite its emphasis on tolerance and acceptance, often carries assimilationist undertones. In this regard, [Mulvey \(2010\)](#) outlined how, in recent years, policymakers in the UK ceased to frame integration in terms of multiculturalism and increasingly rely on the notion of 'community cohesion'. He shows how usage of the latter term is often accompanied by the implicit assumption that too much diversity is a threat to such cohesion ([Mulvey 2010](#)). The burden to reduce diversity is then placed on the newcomers, who are expected to relinquish their culture and values, which are regarded as inferior to those of the host society ([Fekete 2008](#)).

Rejecting the conflation of integration and assimilation, [Ager and Strang \(2008\)](#) view integration as a two-way process, as well as a policy goal. The use of the term 'integration' in this paper will be based on their conceptual framework, which identifies the following key domains of integration: '[...] achievement and access across the sectors of employment, housing, education and health; assumptions and practice regarding citizenship and rights; processes of social connection within and between groups in the community; and barriers to such connection, particularly stemming from lack of linguistic and cultural competences and from fear and instability' ([Ager and Strang 2008](#), pp. 184–85). Ager and Strang further emphasise the need for both refugees and the host community to adapt and

accommodate the other group. However, apart from a ‘lack of conflict’ and a sense of ‘acceptance’, their model offers little guidance on how the host community’s willingness to accommodate refugees can be measured. Therefore, we will supplement Ager and Strang’s framework with Hynie et al.’s (2016) notion of ‘community welcome’, defined as positive discourse and attitudes toward refugees among the host community. By using Hynie’s concept to examine local residents’ attitudes toward refugees, we are able to better understand the extent to which the latter are willing to change and to accommodate refugees. Hynie’s concept was thus instrumental in shaping our interview questions with local residents, as will be further outlined below.

Ager and Strang’s framework is particularly valuable for empirical studies such as this one, as it enables research to identify correlations between objective markers of integration such as employment and housing and underlying factors such as feelings of safety. Yet, the full application of the model is beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, we identified key themes of the model around which to structure our research. Supported by the concept of community welcome, this paper will examine the social relations between refugees and the host communities, including the attitudes that both groups have toward each other. We will also focus on refugees’ access to and achievement in work and housing. These themes were selected based on data considerations. Since refugees enjoy health care, education, housing and employment rights equal to UK citizens, public authorities do not compile separate statistics on the particular group of refugees. Therefore, we had to rely on secondary sources to supplement our findings with quantitative data. As housing and employment featured most prominently in previous studies on refugee integration, we selected these themes as our focus areas.

The qualitative data for this paper was collected through semi-structured interviews with 20 local residents, 3 local government employees and 17 refugees (see Table 1). In a process of triangulation, these findings were then supplemented and compared to quantitative data in previous literature, reports and studies on refugee integration. The interviews offer several insights into how the figures and observations of quantitative studies play out in refugees’ individual integration experiences at the city level.

Table 1. Interview Sampling Chart.

Interview Sampling Chart	Category
N = 3 Sex (M = 0, F = 3)	Key Informants
3	Local Government Employees
N = 17 (M = 14, F = 3)	Refugees
9	Syrian
2	Sudanese
1	Libyan
1	Ugandan
1	Iranian
1	Eritrean
1	Pakistani
1	Afghani
N = 20 (M = 10, F = 10)	Local Community
20	Local Residents
40	Total

Local residents were approached on one of the main squares in Newcastle’s city centre. For the purpose of this study, we define residents as “local” if they currently reside in Newcastle and never claimed asylum or obtained refugee status in the UK. We aimed for a research sample that is roughly representative of the city’s adult population in terms of gender, age and neighbourhood. There was an equal distribution between men and women and an even distribution across an age range from 18 to 68, with interviewees residing in 10 different neighbourhoods in the city. Participants were asked six questions, the first of which explored local residents’ relations with refugees. Based on Hynie’s

concept of community welcome, the second and third question discussed residents' perceptions of refugees and how they view the latter's impact on the city. Again, relying on Hynie, the remaining three questions inquired whether residents perceive Newcastle to be a welcoming city for refugees and which obstacles they believe refugees face in the city.

Of the 17 refugees we spoke to, nine were recruited at NCC's drop-in session for Syrian families. The remaining eight interviewees were recruited at a charity in Newcastle called The Hub Drop-in for Asylum Seekers and Refugees (Hub), where both authors are currently working as Legal Advisers. As this study focuses on the integration experience of recently arrived adult refugees, interviewees had to be over 18 years old and must have obtained their refugee status within the last five years. We further aimed to include a broad range of nationalities and age groups, as well as single and family households, to roughly mirror the diverse refugee population in the city. Participants were asked 20 questions that were split into five sections. The first section enquired about interviewees' own understanding of integration and their feeling of integration in Newcastle. The second section discussed interviewees' employment experiences in the city with the third section exploring participants' relations with local residents. In the fourth section, interviewees were asked about their neighbourhoods, including their feelings of safety and experiences of racism.

We also interviewed three staff members at NCC who play a central role in the council's work with refugees. We spoke to the Coordinator for Migration, Refugee and Asylum, the Coordinator for the City of Sanctuary and a Supported Employment Officer. All of the interviews were loosely structured with several follow up questions inviting the interviewees to elaborate on their answers. The interview with the Supported Employment Officer focused on the support that NCC provides to resettled refugees in the areas of housing and employment. The other two interviews explored the reasons behind NCC's commitment to hosting refugees, changes in council policy over time, as well as the challenges that NCC faces with regards to hosting refugees.

The authors' "insider-position" as Legal Advisers at the Hub—where we advise refugees on a variety of legal matters, usually relating to welfare benefits—has been both an advantage and a disadvantage when undertaking this research. On the one hand, working for an organisation that is in frequent contact with NCC has helped us to gain access to council employees who were willing to be interviewed by us. Moreover, our position was crucial to gain the trust of the refugees we interviewed. On the other hand, the Hub interviews might have been impacted by underlying dynamics of a service provider–client relationship. To mitigate this risk, we predominantly interviewed persons that we had not personally advised at the Hub.

Two crucial limitations need to be mentioned here. Firstly, only 3 of the 17 interviewees with refugee status were women. Thus, female refugees' integration experiences in Newcastle are only marginally represented in this study. Secondly, by recruiting all but one interviewee at two advice services, this research might not reflect the experiences of the most marginalised refugees who do not have access to these services. Moreover, it might also not represent the experience of the most integrated refugees, who do not need any assistance.

4. Background on Refugees in the United Kingdom

The adjectives used to describe the UK's history of hosting refugees range from "proud" to "shameful", with much debate over whether the country did—and does—enough to help people fleeing war and disaster ([Rampen 2018](#)). From hosting Jewish and Polish refugees during the 1930–40s, Ugandan Asian refugees who were expelled by Idi Amin in the 1970s, Kurdish refugees escaping oppression in the 1980s, to Bosnian and Kosovan refugees in the 1990s, the UK has on many occasions become a new home for people who were forced to leave their countries ([Girvan 2018](#)). Today, the largest refugee resettlement programme in the UK is the VPRS with the aim of resettling 20,000 Syrian refugees by 2020. In addition to resettled refugees, who are granted refugee status upon arrival in the UK, many people make their own way to the UK and claim asylum at the border. Both groups will be discussed in the next sections.

4.1. Asylum Seekers and the Asylum Dispersal Scheme

According to the Oxford Migration Observatory, asylum claims in the UK represented less than 5% of the total number of applications made in European countries in 2017 (Blinder 2019). While the figures for those seeking asylum fluctuated over the last decade, there was an evident peak in 2015 during the “refugee crisis”. A total of 1,394,000 applications were made Europe-wide, but only 2.9% of these were submitted in the UK (ibid.). Moreover, first-time asylum applications are often refused with 68% in 2017, of which 35% were overturned on appeal (ibid.).

While waiting for a decision on their application, asylum seekers are dispersed across the country and hosted by various local authorities. The asylum dispersal scheme was introduced by the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999. Prior to that, the responsibility for support lay with the local authority for the area in which the asylum claim was made. London and the South East have historically attracted the largest numbers, which meant that the pressure fell most heavily on these authorities (HC-1758 2018). The dispersal scheme aimed to provide a more balanced and fair distribution system based on available and more affordable accommodation (Politowski and McGuinness 2016). However, participation in the scheme is voluntary and while the number of asylum seekers has steadily increased since 2012, ‘the number of local authorities which have agreed to participate in dispersal has not’ (HC-1758 2018, p. 24, para. 69).

Moreover, once a local authority agrees to host asylum seekers, they have very little control over how many people they will host, with the limit being ‘an assumption that there will be no more than one asylum seeker per 200 residents, based on the 2001 census figures for population’ (Politowski and McGuinness 2016). Even more problematically, in 2012, the government outsourced responsibility for providing asylum seekers with accommodation to private contractors (HC-880 2014). This left local authorities with next to no influence on how and where asylum seekers will be housed in their areas.

4.2. The Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (VPRS)

The VPRS was launched in 2014 with a focus on the most vulnerable and those most at risk. The Home Office works closely with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees to identify people for resettlement. In 2015, the government announced an expansion of the scheme to resettle 20,000 Syrian refugees by 2020 (Home-Office 2017). As of February 2018, 10,500 individuals have so far been resettled under the scheme (Home-Office 2018).

Like with the asylum dispersal system, it is voluntary for local authorities to take part in the VPRS. However, the crucial difference is that funding for the scheme is directly paid to local authorities who have full responsibility for housing and supporting resettled refugees. The funding is provided through a combination of government departments. During the first year of the resettlement scheme, local authorities received £8520 per refugee (HC-768 2017). The discernible difference between resettled refugees under the VPRS and newly recognised refugees who have gone through the asylum system, is the gulf in support. VPRS funding allows local authorities to provide resettled refugees with housing, employment advice and assistance, as well as welfare rights advice and language classes. Yet, no such council support is available for former asylum seekers who depend on the charitable sector and government-run job centres for employment and benefits advice. (Debbonnaire et al. 2017). According to the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Refugees, this gap in support essentially created a two-tier system for refugees in the UK (ibid.).

4.3. The Route to Citizenship

Both resettled refugees and former asylum seekers receive five years limited leave to remain (Home-Office 2016a). They are issued with a biometric residence permit which they will require as evidence of their right to work and access to benefits (Home-Office 2016b). They are eligible to apply for indefinite leave to remain (‘settlement’) within the last 28 days of their five-year leave (Home-Office 2016a). A hardening of the rules has made the prospect of obtaining settlement more difficult. The safe

return review, introduced in March 2017, guides Home Office caseworkers to consider the situation in an applicant's home country at the date of application and determine whether that person is still in need of protection (Home-Office 2016c). Many observers have highlighted the policy's negative impact on the integration experience of refugees. By reminding refugees that their temporary leave could be taken away, the policy created an atmosphere of uncertainty. Moreover, there is a risk that employers and landlords become less willing to employ and rent to refugees, as they can no longer be certain that a person will obtain settlement. There are also concerns that women who fled female circumcision and domestic violence will be disproportionately affected, as it can be difficult to prove that these threats persist after five years (Desira 2017). If an applicant is successful in obtaining settlement, they can apply for British citizenship after one year (Home-Office 2019).

5. Background on Refugees in Newcastle

5.1. The Socio-Economic Context

With an estimated population of 296,000, Newcastle is the largest city in the North East of England (ONS 2018a). Sitting on the Northern bank of the River Tyne, Newcastle was once home to a world-leading shipbuilding industry. Coal mining as well as glass and steel manufacturing were other significant parts of the economy. Yet, from the middle of the 20th century onwards, Newcastle entered a phase of deindustrialisation, leading to the decline of its economic prowess. By the end of the century, all coal mining had ceased, the ship industry had shrunk to a bare minimum and manufacturing jobs had decreased in significant numbers. Nowadays, the city's economy centres around service provision, higher education and commerce (Renton 2006).

In recent years, Newcastle has been hard-hit by government austerity policies, introduced after the financial crisis in 2008. The reductions in public spending for NCC between 2011 and 2018 amounted to £254 million, resulting in crucial council services being cut (Casla et al. 2018). Within the same period, public sector employment in the North East declined by 25%, adding to the job scarcity in the region (Raikes et al. 2018). Unemployment levels in Newcastle are well above the national average, as is the number of households relying on welfare benefits (ONS 2018b). The use of food banks drastically increased in recent years and more people had to rely on NCC for emergency financial assistance, thus putting further pressure on an already strained council budget (ibid.).

The lives and integration of refugees in Newcastle can only be understood within this challenging socio-economic context, which we shall return to throughout this paper.

5.2. The Response of Newcastle City Council

Despite drastic cuts in government funding and high levels of deprivation in the city, NCC remained committed to hosting refugees. The city was one of the first local authorities to take part in the asylum dispersal system starting in 1999. According to the Migration, Refugee and Asylum Coordinator, Rowenna Foggie, political support from both the leader of the Council Nick Forbes and his Deputy Cllr Joyce McCarthy has been key for the council's refugee-friendly approach. This support became even more crucial after government austerity reduced the council budget and funding for the asylum dispersal scheme was given to private contractors instead. Since then, "everything became more scrutinised" said Rowenna and allocating funding for refugees turned into political decisions.

In 2014, NCC reaffirmed its commitment to support refugees by declaring itself a city of sanctuary. The political support of the council leadership was again vital for this to happen. The City of Sanctuary (CoS) project in Newcastle was initially led by a group of volunteers, one of whom acted as the coordinator of the project. Yet, after officially endorsing CoS, NCC offered to coordinate the project and relied on its own budget to fund a paid coordinator position. Due to the presence of numerous refugee-supporting charities in the city, CoS does not focus on service delivery but on raising public awareness and on getting public and cultural institutions to become institutions of sanctuary. This exceeds mere symbolism and requires institutions to make a real contribution. For example, the local

Tyneside Cinema offers £1.00 tickets for asylum seekers to see any film. According to Rosie Tapsfield, the current CoS coordinator, the ultimate goal is “making welcoming refugees everyone’s business.”

Being an official city of sanctuary had a significant impact on NCC’s decision to take part in the VPRS in 2015—one of the first local authorities in the UK to do so. Rowenna Foggie told us, “The Council takes being a City of Sanctuary very seriously. It is an aspiration that motivates.” Having declared itself a CoS, Rowenna continued that “taking part in the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme just seemed like the right thing to do.” Moreover, signing up to the scheme meant that at least some government funding for refugee integration will return to Newcastle, which, Rowenna says “benefits everyone in the city.”

Another reason for NCC’s active involvement in welcoming refugees and asylum seekers has been the wish to maintain expertise in this area to provide an oversight of the private contractors who, since 2012, are tasked by the government with housing asylum seekers in the city. Over the last seven years, this contract was held by security company G4S and has now been awarded to the Mears Group.

5.3. Mapping the Refugee Population

At the height of Newcastle’s industrial boom at the turn of the 20th century, many Scottish and Irish migrants came to the city to work in its factories and mines (Renton 2006). However, since that time, the city and surrounding county of Tyne and Wear have been among the least popular destinations for migrants in the UK. Between the years 2004 and 2017, Tyne and Wear has consistently been the region with the third lowest number of foreign-born residents in the UK, totalling 92,000 in 2017. The rest of the North East hosts the lowest number, with a total of 68,000 foreign-born residents in the same year (Vargas-Silva and Rienzo 2018).

While the Home Office records the number of asylum seekers that are dispersed to Newcastle, no data is collected on the number of persons that remain in the city after acquiring refugee status. Yet, since NCC was among the first local authorities to sign up to the asylum dispersal scheme, the number of refugees in the city has certainly increased since the early 2000s. According to NCC, between January 2016 and September 2018, 482 Newcastle-based asylum seekers were granted refugee status and referred to the council’s Move-On Team, which helps newly recognised refugees to access housing after they had to leave their asylum accommodation. Of these 482 people, 40% were rehoused in Newcastle, 2% moved to friends and family in the city and 20% left the area. The remaining 38% either declined the support of the Move-On Team or did not maintain contact. It is not known whether these persons remained in Newcastle or left the city.¹

In addition to the asylum dispersal system, 71 Syrian families, comprising 295 individuals, have been resettled in Newcastle under the VPRS since 2015. Therefore, it is safe to assume that at least 500 people with refugee status have settled in the city in the last three years. This figure may well be higher, as no data exists on secondary migration to the city. It might also be lower, since people that have initially been rehoused by the council could have left the area by now.²

The refugee population in Newcastle is very diverse and includes a large Sudanese, Iranian and most recently a Syrian community. At the Hub, the authors have also supported refugees from Libya, Turkey, Afghanistan, Eritrea, Somalia and Pakistan. Many refugees live in the Western part of Newcastle, in areas such as Fenham, Benwell, Arthur’s Hill and Elswick, where housing and living costs are generally lower than in the city’s central and northern neighbourhoods. However, Syrians who came to Newcastle through the VPRS tend to be more evenly distributed across the city. According to the Coordinator for Migration, Refugee and Asylum, the council carefully selects suitable areas with a view to ensuring housing needs and community cohesion.

¹ This data was shared with the authors by Newcastle City Council but is not publicly available.

² Ibid.

6. The Integration Experience

6.1. Employment

Just over half of the 17 people we spoke to had come to the UK in the years 2015–2016. Four persons had arrived during the period 2017–2018 and the remaining four came in 2006 and 2010. Of the 17 interviewees, eight are currently in paid employment and all expressed the desire to be working in the future. Those currently unemployed are dependent on Universal Credit and other welfare benefits to survive. Three are unable to work because of health problems, with a fourth caring full time for his sick wife and their two children. The others mentioned the lack of language skills as a major barrier to finding employment. Likewise, those currently employed identified language skills as key for finding work. Although 13 of the 17 interviewees are currently enrolled in English language (ESOL) courses, many described interacting with colleagues and customers at work as the experience that has been most helpful in learning English. As one interviewee from Syria put it, *“The government should put refugees in jobs, because work helps much more to learn English than ESOL.”* This reciprocal relationship between language skills and employment is a good example of what [Strang and Ager \(2010\)](#) called ‘resource acquisition spirals’, whereby possession of one resource, such as work, can easily lead to the acquisition of another, such as language skills ([Strang and Ager 2010](#)).

Interestingly, the data suggests a correlation between the age of participants and their success in finding work. The three oldest interviewees are all unemployed, despite having worked for many years as a restaurant owner, a university lecturer and an electrician in their respective home countries. Two of the three youngest interviewees, on the other hand, are currently in paid employment with the third having recently been forced to stop working due to an injury. Language skills seem again to play a crucial role in this regard, with the younger interviewees speaking better English than the older participants. Moreover, all the older interviewees stated that it is ‘very difficult’ to learn the language. The oldest interviewee, who gained refugee status through the dispersal system, further criticised NCC for not providing enough support in finding employment and the absence of information in his mother tongue.

The data suggests that access to employment advice is indeed crucial for refugees to find work. Three of the eight interviewees who are currently working told us that they found a job with the help of the Supported Employment Officer at NCC. The latter helped the interviewees to develop their skills, gain practical experience and enhance their confidence. For example, NCC recently organised a public food-tasting session in one of the city’s libraries, at which refugees prepared food from their home countries. The event aimed to improve refugees’ employability skills with the ultimate goal of enabling participants to start their own food-truck or restaurant ([Tapsfield 2019](#)). However, the Supported Employment Officer is only funded to assist refugees resettled under the VPRS. Former asylum seekers have to depend on government-run job centres or on local charities for employment advice. In this regard, previous research identified job centres’ lack of experience in working with refugees, as well as incidents of wrong advice, as major obstacles to efficient service delivery ([Debbonnaire et al. 2017](#)). This may in part account for the high number of refugees who rely on charitable organisations like the Hub for benefits and employment advice. One of the interviewees who gained refugee status through the asylum system has recently found a job with the help of the Hub. However, as the charitable sector operates with limited funding, organisations in the city are often faced with a need for employment and welfare advice that cannot be met by the resources at its disposal. This is one of the many examples of how a lack of support for former asylum seekers, caused by a lack of government funding, is aggravating the integration process of this group of refugees.

Those who are employed tend to work in low-paid jobs in construction work, caring and service provision. This mirrors the findings of a larger study on the employment of migrants in the North East of England, which found that refugees were disproportionately working in low-skilled and low-paid jobs ([Vickers et al. 2016](#)). Furthermore, while employment often leads to enhanced language skills, working in low-paid jobs, which often requires employees to work for long hours to make ends meet,

may keep refugees from gaining formal language qualifications (Braddell and Miller 2017). This applies particularly to persons who have limited exposure to English at their job. One interviewee told us that he recently dropped out of his ESOL course as he was too busy with work. This may lead to what Braddell and Miller (2017) call the low-pay, limited-English trap, where a person, lacking the time to attend formal language courses, 'is left reliant on self-directed learning' (ibid., p. 313).

One of the main causes of the high proportion of refugees in low-skilled jobs seems to be that refugees' previous qualifications are not recognised in the UK. Four of the people we interviewed expressed frustration that their educational and professional qualifications were of little value to them when looking for work. One interviewee, who was a qualified nurse in Uganda but is now retraining and enrolled on a nursing course, told us, *"I already did all that in Uganda. I feel like I'm going back instead of going forward. Opportunities are being robbed of me."* One of the interviewees who voiced similar frustration is the only one working in a high-skilled role at the government's tax department. Having arrived in the UK in 2006, the university degree from his home country proved of little use, forcing him to retrain and work as a taxi driver on the side. Examples like these point to an unnecessary lose-lose situation, in which newcomers are prevented from achieving their full potential and society misses out on the contribution that refugees could make.

Employment is viewed as essential by all interviewees, not only for providing financial security, but also as a way to learn English and establish social connections. When asked about their own understanding of integration, "having work" featured prominently among the answers. One interviewee said that she only considers herself fully integrated once she feels *"fulfilled in my career"*. Interviewees also valued the daily routine that work provides and highlighted its importance for their emotional stability. As one person told us, *"Work is helping me to get myself together. It keeps me active and keeps me from sitting at home and worrying."* Employment was further described as enhancing interviewees' self-esteem. One person said, *"[my work] shows my potential and gives me confidence"*. Interestingly, refugees being employed was also viewed positively by local residents, despite the job scarcity of the region. When asked in what way refugees contribute to Newcastle, seven of the 20 local residents we spoke to said that refugees contribute by working, which supports the local economy.

6.2. Housing

Based on Ager and Strang's conceptual framework, housing is another key domain that influences an individuals' experience of integration. We identified three common themes: feelings about the city and residing neighbourhood, feelings of safety and experiences of racism, prejudice and discrimination.

All 17 persons we spoke to live in council owned social housing. The prevailing mood in terms of quality of housing and geographical location within the city was very positive, with 15 interviewees expressing a favourable opinion of their area and neighbourhood. The following reasons were mentioned: good relations with neighbours; people from one's own national community living close by; and proximity to Middle Eastern/halal food stores, the local mosque, health services such as the hospital and recreational areas. The small size of Newcastle and cheap housing and transport costs were also cited. Moreover, participants often mentioned the familiarity with their neighbourhood and knowledge of the local geography. As one interviewee said, *"We like the area because we got used to it."* Yet, two interviewees conceded that they would prefer to live in a house rather than a flat as this would enable them to have a garden.

Regarding feelings of safety, the data revealed significant differences in experience between those resettled through the VPRS and those who gained refugee status through the asylum system. From the 17 interviewees we surveyed, 13 felt safe in their respective neighbourhoods and within Newcastle. Looking at the two groups individually showed that all Syrian participants reported feeling safe. Yet, only four of the eight interviewees who did not arrive through the VPRS said they feel safe. Two of the participants from this group said they felt 'more or less' safe with one disclosing they had been a victim of a violent attack resulting in grievous bodily harm and the other experiencing previous racist and misogynistic abuse with additional threats of violence.

When we compare the perception of safety with experiences of racism and discrimination, we start to understand the contrast in results between the two groups. The Syrian participants reported no problems with racism and discrimination, except from occasional staring and sideways glances on public transport. As one person told us, *"My wife wears a hijab and sometimes I notice people looking at us in a strange way. This happened on the bus. But it doesn't happen too much."* However, these findings need to be treated with care. Unlike many former asylum seekers, most Syrians only arrived in Newcastle recently and their level of English is very limited. Therefore, they may simply not understand whether someone is verbally racist towards them. As one Syrian remarked, *"I never had any problems, but I also would not understand if someone said anything."* Furthermore, eight of the nine Syrians we interviewed were men with the only female interviewee not wearing a veil. Statistics of the local police force show that the overwhelming majority of faith-based hate crimes in the city is directed towards Muslims, with a total of 133 reported incidents in 2017/18 ([Northumbria Police 2019a](#)). Thus, it is safe to assume that Syrian Muslim women who are veiled are much more likely to have experienced racism. Despite these limitations, the key finding is that Syrian interviewees seem to face low levels of discrimination, which likely correlates to their strong feeling of safety.

This stands in stark contrast to the other group, as six of eight participants described experiences of some form of racism or discrimination, which likely accounts for their reduced feeling of safety. Half of them detailed verbal racist abuse on several occasions, with many incidents taking place in the city centre. This again supports hate crime data from the local police, with the city centre showing the highest proportion of reported incidents ([Northumbria Police 2019b](#)). The reasons for the high level of experienced racism and discrimination among the former asylum seekers will be numerous. However, one potential factor could be that five of the interviewees in this group are black and might thus be more readily presumed to be foreigners. This was also echoed in the observation of one Syrian interviewee who said, *"I never made bad experiences because I look more European. But some of my friends who have dark skin have faced some racist situations."*

The data further points to a correlation between experiences of racism and interviewees' place of residence. Half of the participants who passed through the asylum system currently live in the West End neighbourhoods of Elswick, Benwell, Arthur's Hill and Fenham. Another interviewee is planning on moving to the area in the near future. A recent report found that the West End neighbourhoods are the most ethnically diverse in Newcastle and have the largest proportion of non-English speaking languages with a third of people living in these areas being born outside the UK ([Know Newcastle 2018](#)). When asked what they like about the area, participants commonly mentioned the presence of other people from their national communities. While none of the five interviewees who live, or plan to live, in the West End explicitly stated that they chose the area to avoid racism, it is noteworthy that four reported to have experienced racism in other parts of the city. Moreover, interviewees often spoke positively about the West End by comparing it to other areas. As one interviewee told us, *"It is ok here. Better than Byker—that's a racist area."* This suggests that avoiding racism is certainly a contributing factor to interviewees' choice of neighbourhood. Similar conclusions were drawn by [Phillimore \(2008\)](#) who found that for refugees in Birmingham, the avoidance of racism was a 'key variable when deciding where to live' ([Phillimore 2008](#), p. 587).

Paradoxically, there is a risk that moving to the West End in order to avoid racism and discrimination might have the opposite effect. Although 73% of participants in the 2017 Newcastle Residents' Survey said they agree that people from different backgrounds in their neighbourhood get on well together, the concentration of refugees in the West End might negatively impact on local residents' perceptions of refugees ([BMG Research 2017](#)). Referring to the West End areas, one local resident told us, *"It's almost like ghettos."* Moreover, as Elswick and Westgate were ranked the third and fifth most deprived wards in Newcastle, refugees in these areas are likely to compete with other residents for strained resources and services (*ibid.*).

However, it must be stressed that refugees' move to the West End is often driven by economic necessity and lack of options, rather than individual preference. With social housing being scarce

in Newcastle, the housing costs in the Western parts of the city are generally lower than in other parts. Moreover, private contractors have increasingly housed asylum seekers in the area. After the government decided to outsource the provision of asylum accommodation to the private sector, NCC has had very little influence on this development. Furthermore, the previous contract holders G4S and Jomast operated a shared-room policy for asylum seekers which significantly increased the resident density in the area. Aware of this problem, NCC attempts to evenly distribute VPRS refugees across the city, with a view to ensuring the sustainability of the housing market (NCC 2018). The nine Syrians we interviewed live in different areas across the city and none resides in West End neighbourhoods. This again highlights the discrepancy in support between the two groups of refugees.

6.3. Social Relations

6.3.1. Residents' and Refugees' Perception of Each Other and Their City

While four local residents think that racism is a real problem in Newcastle, the majority views the city as a welcoming and friendly place. Many residents made comparisons between Newcastle and other cities to justify their answers. Interestingly, four local residents felt that the city is welcoming but not the people. It was not clear whether their use of "city" was referring to government institutions or the city as such. Residents' views are mirrored in Newcastle's national reputation for being a friendly city. In a recent report by Provident, Newcastle ranked second as the friendliest and sixth as the most welcoming place in the UK (PFG 2018). This seems to correspond with the positive view that the refugees we spoke to have of Newcastle and the local population.

However, a more complex picture emerges when we examine the way in which both refugees and local residents frame the occurrence of racism in Newcastle. The refugees we spoke to were reluctant to discuss racist experiences and tended to describe them as one-off incidents carried out by troubled individuals. One interviewee exclaimed *"Mostly people are friendly. But I did make bad experiences six times. Three times people shouted racist abuse at me in the city centre."* One of the female interviewees used similar wording when she said, *"I think people are very friendly around Newcastle. But I once went out on a date with a local English guy. I told him I just want to be friends, but he wanted to get intimate. When I refused him, he started to shout racist things at me."* Similarly, a Syrian interviewee concluded his account of a racist incident that his friend had experienced with the sentence, *"But it does not happen a lot"*. While these accounts start with the caveat that *"mostly people are friendly"*, they then proceed to reveal traumatic and multiple experiences of racism that stand in stark contrast to the initial claim that people are friendly. Kirkwood and others note that 'refugees may find themselves in a particularly difficult situation, as they are reliant on the host society for protection, so any accusations of racism may be taken as ungrateful as well as raising questions about the legitimacy of their claims of persecution in the countries they have fled' (Kirkwood et al. 2012, pp. 26–27). Thus, while the statement that *"mostly people are friendly"* may well be interviewees' opinion, it could also function as a way for participants to talk about their experiences of racism without appearing to be 'ungrateful' in the eyes of the host society.

The interviews with local residents point to a similar framing of racism in the city. The majority of interviewees perceived other residents to be welcoming toward refugees and assigned racism to *"a small minority on the margins"* of Newcastle's society. One person referred to *"uneducated poverty-stricken residents"* as the main perpetrators of racism. The phrase *"mostly people are friendly"* was also frequently used in their answers. Yet, local residents will employ this particular framing of racism for different reasons. Augoustinos and Every (2010) have argued that the downplaying of racism amongst majority groups attends to their positive self-presentation. This was evidenced in the interviews, where the framing of racism as a minor problem was often accompanied by descriptions of a positive self-image,

such as, “*we Geordies are friendly*”³ or “*we don’t give in to fear-mongering—this is a leftist city*”. However, the portrayal of Newcastle as a welcoming place for refugees could also be seen as a conscious ‘city branding’ effort that aims to marginalise more hostile voices (Dekker et al. 2015). Thus, local residents’ assignment of racism to a small fraction of society may not necessarily be rooted in a denial of racism in the city. Yet, locating racism exclusively at the margins of society risks minimising more entrenched problems of racial discrimination in Newcastle, as have been highlighted in the testimonials of the refugees we interviewed.

6.3.2. Relations between Refugees and Local Residents

Of the 20 local residents we spoke to, 14 voiced an overall welcoming attitude towards refugees. However, only four local residents have previous experience of interacting with refugees. Nonetheless, all but one interviewee had nothing negative to say about them. One interviewee held precisely that view when he said, “*I am yet to see a direct negative impact.*” Many residents valued refugees’ economic contribution and the diversity they bring to the city. Refugees were often referred to as friendly, grateful and more law-abiding than UK natives. Although the above outlined dynamics that may lead to a downplay in racism must be borne in mind, most refugees described the majority of the local population as friendly and helpful.

Although both groups view each other in a positive light, the interviews showed that there are very little personal relations between refugees and local residents. None of the local residents mentioned having friends who are refugees. Two residents said they know a refugee through a mutual friend but could not remember when they last saw or spent time with them. Another resident attends a drop-in for refugees but again only interacts with them within the confines of the project. Two further residents engage with refugees in a professional capacity, teaching English and music respectively, rather than on a personal level. Of the 17 refugees we spoke to, only six said they have English acquaintances and friends. The latter reported to have established these friendships with colleagues at work, with classmates in school, or by attending projects and events at charitable organisations like the Hub. Many also told us about being on good terms with their neighbours and having occasional small talk. One Syrian refugee had befriended his neighbour. Yet, others reported being avoided or ignored by local residents. One interviewee told us, “*My neighbour does not speak to me. I don’t know why.*”

Moreover, only three local residents voiced an interest in meeting or establishing friendships with refugees. The language used by many local residents further implied that the burden to adapt and change lies with the refugees. When asked what obstacles refugees are likely to face in Newcastle, one person said, “*Lack of integration in terms of customs. We may do things in a certain way that they may not understand.*” Another told us, “*The city is very English—I can imagine it’s not easy to integrate here.*” However, none of the interviewees mentioned a need for the host community to change and adapt, too. Thus, while positive attitudes toward refugees are prevalent amongst local residents, their view of integration as a one-way process, as well as the lack of interaction, show that the community welcome is limited.

In contrast, many refugees told us that they are eager to meet local people and establish friendships. As one refugee from Iran put it, “*Having contact to locals is important. It makes things easier, and it’s nice to connect with your neighbour.*” Two interviewees, who are also the youngest among the refugees we interviewed, explicitly stated that having English friends was an important part of feeling integrated. Of the six refugees who reported acquaintances with local residents, five were aged between 20 and 36 and constituted the youngest interviewees. This suggests that forging relations with locals is more important for younger people, who also appear to be more successful at it. One reason for this is certainly that the younger interviewees tended to speak better English. This corresponds to many older refugees identifying their limited language skills as a major barrier to establishing relations with locals.

³ Colloquial term that is used to describe people from Newcastle.

Cultural differences were cited as a further barrier to building relations with locals. This was again predominantly mentioned by older interviewees. As one older Syrian participant told us, *"Everything is different here. Everyone is busy. It's a different culture."* Another said that it had taken him a long time to discover that he must take the first step, *"If you don't talk to [people], then they will not talk to you."* While none of the younger interviewees described cultural differences as an obstacle to forging relations with locals, they too reported facing difficulties. For example, one younger interviewee described facing frequent prejudice from colleagues at work and fellow students at her nursing course. She told us, *"Making friends with local people can be hard, because they often look down on me and behave in a really patronising way. They have a lot of stereotypes. Even though I speak better English than some of the locals in my class."*

6.3.3. Relations with National Community

Besides forming social relations with local residents, interacting with other people from their respective home countries is of great importance to the refugees we talked to. Interviewees valued conversing in their mother tongue and sharing experiences about their life in Newcastle with other members of their national group. This applies to both the resettled refugees and those that came to the UK as asylum seekers. All but one of the 17 interviewees stated that they are in some capacity engaged with their national communities. The interactions range from socializing and sharing experiences to celebrating national festivities, as well as accessing support and advice on employment, education and immigration matters. Seven of the nine Syrian interviewees said that they frequently visit or are being visited by other Syrians. Two of the people we spoke to stated that they like their neighbourhoods, because other members from their community live close by. A third told us that he plans to move from his current home to the area where the Iranian Refugee Community Organisation (RCO) is based. Referring to his community, one person said, *"Nobody understands you as well as they do"*. This was echoed by an interviewee from Afghanistan who said, *"English people do not know about the challenges that refugees face. But the Afghani community can help."* Previous research has highlighted that based on their insight of what it means to be a refugee, RCOs are often able to design solutions for refugees that other organisations cannot offer (Williams 2018). The example of one Syrian interviewee, who has recently found employment as a construction worker through another Syrian, shows the positive outcomes of community relations on integration objectives like employment.

6.4. Attitudes toward the Future

Despite the upheaval inherent in uprooting their lives and the challenges they face in Newcastle, the refugees we spoke to are optimistic about their future. They all expressed dreams and ambitions they aspire to. All participants expressed the desire to be in stable and fulfilling work and five would like to set up their own businesses. A total of 13 interviewees can see themselves remaining in Newcastle, citing their children's education, work, friendships formed and a familiarity with the city as their reasons. One interviewee contemplates moving to Manchester or London for more job opportunities, with two others acknowledging they may move at some point for the same reason. Two of the Syrian interviewees would consider returning to Syria if the situation was stable. When asked where he sees himself in five years, one interviewee was clear when he said, *"I will be back home"*.

The majority of those we interviewed see naturalisation as a British citizen as something to aim for. When pressed upon why this was important to them, being able to travel and having better opportunities in the UK were the main reasons given. Of those that wish to travel, many specifically mentioned that they would like to visit their home countries.

Three interviewees strive to pursue higher education. As previously mentioned in the housing section, two interviewees hope to one day have a house with a garden. Tellingly, one declared, *"I want my kids' life to be better than mine. I'm 35, my life is not important, but the lives of my children are."* Whether it is the pursuit of employment, education, entrepreneurship or the wish to provide a better future for their children, the outlook is a positive one for all the people we spoke to.

7. Conclusions

After decade-long austerity policies, Newcastle faces high levels of deprivation, a lack of social housing and above average unemployment rates. Despite these challenges, the city has remained committed to hosting refugees by taking part in the asylum dispersal scheme as well as the VPRS. Our research has shown that, besides political support from the council leadership, becoming a city of sanctuary has had a significant impact on Newcastle's adoption of refugee-friendly policies.

Overall, the refugees we spoke to hold favourable opinions of Newcastle and the local population and many are planning to stay in the city in the future. This was mirrored by local residents who voiced positive views of refugees, with the majority of interviewees recognising the contribution that refugees can make including supporting the local economy by working. However, the level of personal interaction between residents and refugees is very low, with language barriers and prejudice being named as major obstacles. Older refugees find it particularly difficult to forge relations with locals and cited cultural differences as one of the reasons. The fact that many local residents view integration as a one-way process, with the burden to adapt falling on the refugees, is likely to further obstruct the forging of relations between the two groups.

Moreover, experiences of racism and discrimination among large parts of the interviewed refugees is a major concern and negatively impacts on their feelings of safety. This paper observed that the exposure to racism is particularly high among former asylum seekers, especially those with darker skin colour. This was shown to result in a lower sense of safety among former asylum seekers, compared to resettled refugees. The analysis further suggested that both refugees and locals may downplay the occurrence of racism in the city, albeit for different reasons. There is thus a risk that problems of racism in the city will not be adequately addressed.

Those refugees who are working tend to be concentrated in low-skilled and low-paid jobs. A lack of language skills, age and previous qualifications not being recognised were shown to be major barriers for refugees attempting to find work and progress in their careers. Nonetheless, interviewees highly valued work as a way to improve their English, meet locals, follow a daily routine, enhance their self-esteem and support their families.

The areas of employment and housing further highlight the gulf in support between former asylum seekers and those refugees who came to Newcastle through the VPRS. While the latter group is evenly distributed across the city, the former tends to congregate in the Western and most deprived part of the city. Moreover, former asylum seekers often have to rely on an underfunded and overburdened charitable sector for housing and employment advice. Resettled refugees on the other hand are supported by designated staff at NCC. This discrepancy is a manifestation of what has essentially become a two-tier system of refugee integration in the UK. While local authorities receive funding for the integration of people under the VPRS, the integration of former asylum seekers continues to be aggravated by austerity policies. There is no good reason for this. The positive experience of Syrian refugees in Newcastle shows that the VPRS is working. It is time that the model of the scheme is adopted for all refugees in the UK.

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