Institute for Public Policy Research

IPPR

JUMP STARTING INTEGRATION

SUPPORTING COMMUNITIES TO RECONNECT AND THRIVE

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ABOUT THIS REPORT

This report contributes to IPPR's charitable objectives of relieving poverty, advancing mental health and advancing the voluntary sector and the efficiency of public services, by making recommendations for investing in social infrastructure, developing national, regional and local integration strategies, and reforming the immigration and asylum system to promote the integration of migrant communities.

ABOUT IPPR

IPPR, the Institute for Public Policy Research, is the UK's leading progressive think tank. We are an independent charitable organisation with our main offices in London. IPPR North, IPPR's dedicated think tank for the North of England, operates out of offices in Manchester and Newcastle, and IPPR Scotland, our dedicated think tank for Scotland, is based in Edinburgh.

Our purpose is to conduct and promote research into, and the education of the public in, the economic, social and political sciences, science and technology, the voluntary sector and social enterprise, public services, and industry and commerce.

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SUMMARY

Over the past 18 months, the Covid-19 pandemic has reshaped the nature of our communities. Much has been said about how it has done so. Typically, narratives have focussed on the pandemic as a potential catalyst for a heightened sense of connection and neighbourliness – as social distancing measures kept households isolated to their homes and brought many closer to those with whom they shared their neighbourhood. On the other hand, there are growing concerns about the potential for division and disunity as a result of increasing inequality, entrenched deprivation, and the spread of rapid-fire conspiracy theories.

Research has also pointed to the ways in which the effects of the pandemic are unevenly distributed. The ability of communities to respond to the pandemic has been shaped by pre-existing regional and place-based inequalities (APPG on Social Integration 2021), and areas with greater deprivation and lower social capital have tended to face greater difficulties in weathering recent challenges. For people in the immigration system in particular, restrictions on access to support and services have left many vulnerable to the health, economic, and social impacts of the crisis.

With this research, we set out to understand how the pandemic – which represents a scale of change which before spring 2020 perhaps could not have been imagined – affected people's experiences of migration and integration in their local area. We spoke with communities living in Cardiff, Oldham, and Sandwell to explore how they understood the pandemic to have affected relationships within their communities, how they maintained social connection, and what tensions or challenges were emerging locally. We spoke to people who had lived in these areas most or all of their lives, as well as to newer arrivals – people seeking asylum, refugees, and EU citizens – to build up a picture from various perspectives.

KEY FINDINGS

While asking about how the pandemic has impacted communities, it is impossible not to foreground the severity of the loss, isolation, and hardships that people have experienced at the individual and family level. But this is intimately related to how communities are faring. We found that often there was insufficient social infrastructure to support individuals facing issues such as social isolation, poor mental health and wellbeing, domestic abuse, bereavement, and destitution. While these issues are largely experienced at the individual level, the solutions to them are often communal and social ones.

The pandemic made participants acutely aware of inequalities within and across their local area. Participants recognised that, if they were living in a deprived area, they and their neighbours were more likely to experience financial hardship as a result of the pandemic, or that people living in the centre of disadvantaged towns and in overcrowded housing were more likely to face infection from the virus. Participants quite often compared their own experience to that of others and displayed compassion and empathy for those they judged to be in worse circumstances than themselves. Perceived inequality was also a cause of frustration for participants, who believed the scale of the problem had not been matched in terms of the response from government – and we heard evidence of growing distrust with politicians and the establishment.

The pandemic has pressed pause on opportunities and occasion for social contact between migrant and receiving communities – as the spaces in which these groups might meet had closed and the need for social distancing and lockdowns saw more people relying on established family and friend networks. This caused some to feel that the sense of community locally was declining – although often this was part of a longer pattern of reduced trust and neighbourliness within their community. For those more recently arrived that we spoke to, this lack of opportunity to connect with the wider community was felt particularly acutely as they tended not to have such established family and friend networks close by, and they perceived they had been set back in settling into their new home.

In some cases, the pandemic has exacerbated pre-existing tensions within communities – particularly where participants from the receiving community perceived that some migrant groups had breached lockdown and social distancing rules. Participants from ethnic minority communities also described facing racism and discrimination related to the pandemic and the circulation of conspiracy theories and misinformation.

People who had originally migrated to the UK faced challenges during the pandemic that were a direct result of or amplified by their immigration status and related inequalities. These included the following.

- Heightened feelings of social isolation and disconnection – particularly for people seeking asylum – as a result of dispersal policies that saw them dislocated from their support networks and due to digital, technological, and language barriers that made it difficult to access services for support or home-school their children.
- Dangerous living conditions that increased their exposure to the virus, particularly for asylum seekers living in initial accommodation such as hotels or housed in former military barracks.
- Challenges finding work – even in cases where asylum seekers had been granted a work permit, they were unable to find work on the shortage occupation list that matched their skills or was available in the local area.
- Participants from the Romanian Roma community faced heightened insecurity and precariousness as they were concentrated in gig economy work and were concurrently facing uncertainties brought about by the settlement scheme deadline and concerns that their future may not be secure in the UK.
- As a result of social isolation and language barriers, some were at particular risk of exposure to Covid-19 conspiracy theories. At the same time, participants in the immigration system also faced experiences of discrimination and prejudice over accusations that they were more likely to be spreading the virus.

Finally, we also saw an abundant amount of hopefulness from participants as the pandemic afforded people the opportunity to evaluate their lives as they were and reimagine their communities for the future. Some saw that there was an increased sense of togetherness as a result of the pandemic and that informal support networks were a tangible way in which this had played out. Many wanted to take this forward as communities recover from the pandemic – and indeed for some it was vital, as they saw an absence of support from the government.

Drawing on the views of participants and stakeholders, we set out three overarching recommendations for supporting communities to recover from the pandemic.

1. The government should support communities through investment in social infrastructure that holds communities together. This should include setting out a strategy for delivering a 'social stimulus' that revitalises civil society as the UK recovers from the pandemic; bringing forward plans to make a significant long-term investment in social infrastructure as part of the 'levelling up' agenda; and incorporating social cohesion and integration within the priorities of the upcoming Shared Prosperity Fund.

2. The government should set out reforms to those areas of the immigration and asylum system which have been shown to be unfit for promoting public health and social cohesion during the pandemic. We recommend that the government facilitates the integration of spontaneous asylum seekers on an equal footing with those who arrive via resettlement routes. We also propose that concessions to lift the NRPF condition are extended to individuals on all forms of temporary leave and that applications for lifting the NRPF condition are streamlined and simplified.

3. Local authorities should adopt the principle of sanctuary in order to create the conditions for integration. This includes challenging immigration policies that would create further destitution, ill health, or other harms within their local communities; committing to joined up working on integration which supports the key role of voluntary and community groups in promoting integration and cohesion; and proactively tackling community tensions where they find them. Finally, we underline that each of these policies should be designed with coproduction at their heart, so that local residents are meaningfully included in key decision-making that affects their community.

INTRODUCTION

It is beyond doubt that the pandemic has reshaped the nature of our communities, our connections to one another, and posed serious challenges for integration and social cohesion. The extent to which the pandemic has brought about a new age of community spirit – or, conversely, has triggered a decline in cohesion and amplified fractures in society – has been the basis of much discussion over the last 18 months. With this research we set out to see what communities themselves thought, and the answer is, unsurprisingly, more nuanced than either of these positions would suggest.

This research has taken us, virtually and physically, to diverse areas across England and Wales. The places that we visited are towns and cities that people migrate to, and increasingly so. This is for many reasons: to work, to study, or simply to find a safe home for themselves and their families. We are interested in telling a rounded story of communities – as such, this research includes the experiences of people who have lived in the UK most or all of their lives, as well as the experiences of those who have more recently migrated.

In previous research, we looked at how neighbourhoods were changing and how people living in them experienced and responded to migration locally (Mort and Morris 2020). In the context of the pandemic, which has radically changed our communities, we thought it important to revisit this question. It is an interesting and important time to do so. There are signs that, for some, immigration has become a pressing concern once more (Smith 2021). And, as the nationality and borders bill makes its way through parliament, there are serious concerns about what the impact will be on people seeking asylum and refuge in this country and how this will affect their integration journey (Qureshi and Mort 2021).

While the Home Office focusses on the national picture, we want to emphasise the importance of looking to the local level too. This report helps us to understand how migration is experienced in neighbourhoods across the country and suggests some ways forward that will support integration and cohesion within our communities. More than that, these suggestions are about tackling the inequalities faced by so many – regardless of immigration status – so that we might build stronger and more resilient places as we recover from the pandemic. Places in which people, no matter their background, can thrive.

A NOTE ON METHODOLOGY

This was a qualitative research study, that saw us speak to around 70 people about their views and experiences. Shaping our research were these three questions.

1. How has the Covid-19 pandemic shaped community relations and integration in diverse neighbourhoods?
2. How have communities maintained social connection and what tensions or challenges have emerged locally as a result of the pandemic?
3. What steps need to be taken to ensure communities are able to reconnect after the pandemic?

We visited three places to conduct the research: Cardiff, Oldham, and Sandwell. There are a number of similarities across our research sites, but also some notable differences. On similarities, each of these areas has seen a growth in

ethnic diversity and migration in recent years and, due to their socioeconomic standing, have faced additional challenges as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. And on differences, by visiting both Wales and England we were able to look at different political contexts that are subject to the same immigration legislation, but which have taken different approaches to integration at national government level. Visiting neighbourhoods in towns and cities we were also able to look at experiences in varying geographical contexts – which our previous research suggests is an important factor in shaping views of migration and experiences of integration (Mort and Morris 2020).

In each location, we held a series of focus groups with residents living in these areas to discuss the above questions. Participants were recruited from the 'receiving' community (that is, people who have lived most or all of their lives in the UK and who would not consider themselves to be recent migrants) and from more recent migrant communities living in the local area. Roughly two-thirds of participants were from the receiving community and the remainder from asylum-seeking, refugee, and migrant communities. Conversations with community groups, charitable organisations and local authority officers in these areas have also informed our understanding and our recommendations. (See appendix A for more details about our methodology).

1.
WHAT WE ALREADY KNOW ABOUT THE IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC ON COMMUNITIES

HOW HAS THE PANDEMIC IMPACTED OUR SENSE OF COMMUNITY?

Prior to the pandemic, there was a general view that the UK was socially divided and that many were experiencing low levels of cohesion in their local area. This was thought to be a result of myriad factors, including (among others) Brexit, growing spatial and socioeconomic inequalities, austerity, the closure of civic spaces, and polarised views on immigration (Morrison et al 2020).[1]

A number of studies earlier on in 2020 observed that the pandemic had, in some cases, brought with it an increased sense of community and neighbourliness. Research by More in Common (Juan-Torres et al 2020) studied a representative sample of just over 2,000 people over the course of 2020 to understand core beliefs and values in the British population, and how these shifted over the year. They found that most people felt that their communities had become more caring, connected and kinder during the pandemic, and that Covid-19 had "reinforced the way in which local community is uniquely important in a time of crisis" (ibid). Similarly, right at the beginning of the pandemic, national polling of 2,032 people by Hope Not Hate pointed to an increased sense of community and solidarity (Carter 2020a), with actions such as buying shopping for family or neighbours and volunteering for the NHS noted as symptomatic of this rise in community.

However, over time it appears that this community solidarity subsided. By September 2020, the sense of unity and cohesion had returned to just slightly higher than pre-pandemic levels, and just 15 per cent of people thought that the UK was becoming more united (British Academy 2021). Research by British Future on behalf of the Together Coalition was optimistic about the unifying effect of the pandemic, signified by the 'clap for carers' phenomenon, as well as increased volunteering. However participants in their study saw this sense of unification was unevenly spread, and the authors note that "neighbourliness and community spirit was weaker in areas of high deprivation" (Rutter 2020) – with contributing factors including wealth inequalities and transient populations.

An eight-wave survey study from the Belong Network (Abrams 2021b) reports that in May 2020 43 per cent of people thought that the UK was becoming more united and 32 per cent thought it was more divided. By July 2021, however, perceptions of growing unity had dropped to just 16 per cent, and perceptions of disunity rose to 64 per cent. The authors strike a more optimistic tone about the local level – finding that while perceptions at the national level are much

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1   However, it is worth noting that polling tracking attitudes towards immigration also shows that there has been a positive shift in views in recent years. Research by British Future and Ipsos MORI found that in 2021, 46 per cent of respondents held broadly positive views towards immigration and 28 per cent held more negative views, compared to 36 per cent and 40 per cent respectively in 2015 (Rolfe et al 2021).

more polarised, people tend to be more positive and constant in their view of unity in their local area.

Another major study from Borkowska and Lawrence (2020) found a significant decline in the perception of social cohesion during the pandemic. They surveyed 40,000 households using the Household Longitudinal Survey, with respondents asked to rate cohesion across a number of dimensions (such as perceptions of neighbourliness, neighbourhood trust, the extent to which people get along locally, and the extent to which people see themselves as similar to others in their neighbourhood). The research found that declining perceptions of cohesion were not equally felt, and that these fell most sharply for residents of disadvantaged communities and for people from Black, Pakistani, and Bangladeshi communities. Possible explanations for this include that economic and social vulnerabilities within these groups may have led to greater negative changes in other aspects of their lives – including their perception of cohesion locally, and that the pandemic may have increased inter-ethnic divisions within communities as a result of negative rhetoric about particular groups spreading the virus.

HOW HAVE COMMUNITIES RESPONDED TO THE PANDEMIC?
The latest report from the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Social Integration (2021) reports on the groundswell of volunteering and community-level relief efforts, as well as the active role of businesses in contributing to their communities – for instance, through the provision of donations, support to customers and vulnerable people, and through enabling employees to volunteer and contribute to the pandemic response.

One of the most visible forms of community response to the pandemic, however, was the rise of mutual aid efforts that sprung up in many neighbourhoods. These were local-level informal responses, led by and for local volunteers to support one another – typically through providing food, medicine and other supplies to those in need and creating opportunities for social connection (Tiratelli and Kaye 2020; Benton and Power 2021).

However, some have highlighted that there has been an uneven spread of mutual aid groups across the country. A report from the APPG on Social Integration (2020) found that certain areas tended to experience lower levels of mutual aid, and these areas were characterised by:
- higher population churn
- fewer community assets
- lower levels of neighbourhood trust
- higher levels of social isolation
- a local population with lower skills and a lower proportion of graduates
- marked income or ethnic divides, and
- lower levels of civic participation.

Similarly, the Bennett Institute for Public Policy (Felici 2020) found that networks of support – such as mutual aid – are more likely to be present in communities that were already relatively better off. Tiratelli and Kaye (2020) found too that the presence of greater social capital and the capacity of people to volunteer had a huge influence on the performance of mutual aid groups. They note that increased numbers of working-age people who were furloughed, or who were self-employed and who suddenly had less work, meant that more people could get involved in local volunteering efforts. They find, however, that in less wealthy places these responses were less possible and that existing community groups and institutions – such as faith-based groups and food banks – were more visible.

More recent research from the Local Trust (McCabe et al 2021) emphasises that sustaining community action has become more challenging as the pandemic has gone on, as energies have waned, volunteers have experienced burnout and people have returned to work following the winding up of the furlough scheme.

Where spontaneous mutual aid groups may have struggled to get off the ground, the voluntary and community sector have played a vital role in supporting communities to weather the pandemic (see Common Vision 2021). For more marginalised groups, including migrant communities, smaller charities and community-based advocates have been a vital lifeline when other organisations 'shut their doors' (The Racial Justice Network 2021:10).

HOW HAVE SOCIAL COHESION AND INTEGRATION BEEN IMPACTED BY THE PANDEMIC?

As well as the disproportionate health and economic impact of the pandemic on migrant communities (Morris 2020a; Migration Exchange 2020) – a result of longstanding structural barriers and inequalities faced by these groups (Mukumbang 2021) – there have also been serious challenges posed by the pandemic for their integration and broader social cohesion.

"The measures taken to slow the spread of the virus, namely social distancing and lockdown, transformed how people could connect with others"

The measures taken to slow the spread of the virus, namely social distancing and lockdown, transformed how people could connect with others. While virtual efforts, seen in the enormous rise of platforms such as Zoom, enabled family and friends to stay in touch – these have been far less able to reach across difference. While bonds may have, in some ways, strengthened – as people relied on close social networks, the bridges between disparate communities weakened (Broadhead 2020; Broadhead et al 2020; Banulescu-Bogdan and Ahad 2021).

In part, virtual modes of connection are less accessible for some groups – including migrant, refugee, and asylum-seeking groups – who face digital exclusion by way of lack of connectivity, access to devices, and tech literacy (Roscoe and Johns 2021).

However, more than that, repurposing integration support (as well as support services more broadly) for the virtual sphere has been challenging – and not always successful. Banulescu-Bogdan and Ahad (2021) note also that institutions that support integration were slow to translate their offerings into virtual spaces and – regardless – were hampered by the fact that it is difficult to replicate programmes based on face-to-face relational work into the virtual world.

Public opinion polling on migration is one proxy for assessing how social cohesion was impacted by the pandemic. A survey conducted by Hope Not Hate (Carter 2020b) found that public support for migrants in low-paid jobs had increased – likely to be a consequence of the 'key worker' narrative and greater awareness of the contribution of migrants in essential services (Fernández-Reino et al 2020; Foresti 2020).

On the flipside however, there have also been significant concerns raised about heightened xenophobia, racism and discrimination directed towards minority and migrant groups. Mukumbang (2021) notes that the Covid-19 pandemic has continued a "long established pattern of linking minorities, racial groups and specific communities to disease". Further polling from Hope Not Hate (Carter 2020c) with minority ethnic communities found that 54 per cent of Chinese respondents listed Covid-19 as the most important issue to them, compared to 47 per cent of respondents overall – researchers surmise that this might

be linked to the impact of anti-Chinese sentiment following reportage of the Covid-19 outbreak in China (see also Fernández-Reino 2021).

The role of social media and internet forums as a facilitator of discrimination and far-right extremism towards migrant, Muslim and East-Asian communities has been noted by researchers (Rutter 2020; Institute for Strategic Dialogue 2020; Moonshot 2020). Research undertaken on behalf of the Anti-Muslim Hatred Working Group, for instance, found that Islamophobic hate language proliferated during the pandemic period, with Muslim communities portrayed in social media posts as "super-spreaders" (Awan and Khan-Williams 2020). Concerns have been raised about the likely impact of this within local communities, particularly following the easing of restrictions (ibid).

WHAT CAUSED SOME COMMUNITIES TO BE MORE RESILIENT THAN OTHERS?

Some studies of communities in the pandemic have looked at the factors that make places more resilient than others in the face of crisis. As described in earlier sections, the level of deprivation in an area and the extent of social capital locally both have a significant impact on the ability of communities to weather challenges. Research from the Local Trust (McCabe et al 2020) found that areas with stronger community infrastructure were able to respond to the pandemic more effectively and with a richer variety of responses (such as through signposting information, developing creative and arts-based responses, providing technological support, reducing social isolation etc), as opposed to areas with more limited infrastructure, where responses have been primarily food-focussed.

"areas with stronger community infrastructure were able to respond to the pandemic more effectively and with a richer variety of responses"
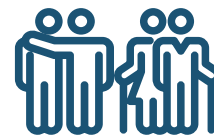
One significant piece of research demonstrating the power of integration investment for community resilience has been a study from the Belong Network (Abrams et al 2021a, Abrams et al 2021b). The researchers surveyed 3,000 people in a series of eight surveys between May 2020 and July 2021 and undertook focus groups and interviews to understand how the pandemic has reshaped social cohesion and political trust. In addition, they found that people in these six areas reported warmer feelings towards migrants in comparison to the rest of the UK.

2.
POLICY CONTEXT

The Covid-19 pandemic has led to a radically transformed policy context for cohesion and integration in the UK. In the early period of the pandemic, the government in Westminster and the administrations in England, Scotland, and Wales took extraordinary measures to impose strict social distancing and self-isolation rules across the UK. This meant that for large swathes of 2020 and early 2021 households were only allowed to leave their homes for essential purposes and could only meet in large groups for limited reasons.

Alongside these restrictions, the government introduced new support systems for individuals who were unable to work as a result of the closure of hospitality, non-essential retail and other venues, as well as other temporary Covid-19 measures. The job retention scheme allowed employers to furlough their employees while covering 80 per cent of their normal wages – in total supporting more than 11 million jobs (Pope and Shearer 2021). A parallel scheme was introduced to provide equivalent grants to self-employed people, though some individuals – including those who were newly self-employed or freelancers with less than half of their income from self-employment – were unable to apply (Treasury Committee 2021). The government also introduced a temporary uplift of £20 a week to the standard allowance of universal credit, as well as suspensions on 'conditionality' rules, such as the requirement to look for work and attend jobcentre interviews (Mackley and McInnes 2021).

New policies were also introduced at the level of local government. Most ambitiously, in England the government introduced the 'Everyone In' scheme to protect homeless people from the transmission of Covid-19. The scheme asked local authorities to offer emergency accommodation to all rough sleepers and those in accommodation where it was difficult to isolate, such as night shelters (MHCLG 2020). Emergency funding was also provided to local authorities to help rough sleepers, though it tended to be short-term and piecemeal. By January 2021, just over 11,000 people were being housed in emergency accommodation and around 26,000 were in 'move on' accommodation (Cromarty 2021).

While the government measures during the pandemic have provided considerable support to many, some individuals have been excluded as a result of their immigration status. Most people who only have temporary leave to remain in the UK are subject to the 'no recourse to public funds' (NRPF) condition – that is, they are not eligible for mainstream benefits or housing support. Likewise, people without immigration status (undocumented migrants) are also barred from accessing most support. This meant that many non-EU citizens – as well as EU citizens who could not demonstrate a 'right to reside' in the UK – were ineligible for universal credit and so could not benefit from some of the easements introduced at the start of the pandemic. Unlike universal credit, the job retention scheme and the parallel scheme for the self-employed are not classified as public funds, so people with NRPF have not been excluded, but many who were not working in formal employment would have been ineligible regardless. Finally, while the government initially called on local authorities to use alternative powers to support people with NRPF who needed shelter as part of 'Everyone In', mixed messaging from central government and limited resources has meant that over time many individuals were in

practice excluded from local authority support (Morris and Qureshi 2021a; HCLG Committee 2021).

Over the course of the past 18 months, central and local government have also taken steps to support local volunteering and community efforts. In March 2020, NHS England partnered with the Royal Voluntary Service and the social enterprise GoodSAM to launch the NHS Volunteer Responders Programme, which aimed to recruit volunteers to support people during the pandemic, including providing help to people who were self-isolating or staying at home. By February 2021, more than 600,000 people had been approved as NHS Volunteer Responders and more than 1.5 million voluntary tasks had been completed (Royal Voluntary Service 2021).

At the local level, councils have helped voluntary organisations and newly formed mutual aid groups to provide critical support to vulnerable groups, such as food and medicine supplies to those in self-isolation (Tiratelli and Kaye 2020). While many of the voluntary efforts to support people during the pandemic have emerged organically and independent of state involvement, in some cases local authorities have played an important role in providing logistical support, networking between different groups, and offering advice and guidance (ibid). More recently, the government has provided funding to councils and voluntary groups across England through the 'Community Champions' scheme, in order to share Covid-19 advice and boost vaccine take-up among vulnerable and hard-to-reach groups (MHCLG 2021).

As the UK emerges from the pandemic, there is the prospect of the government developing a wider agenda on integration and cohesion. The government has centred its policy platform on the idea of 'levelling up' the country by spreading opportunity to all parts of the UK and has rebranded the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) as the new Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC). In late 2020, the prime minister asked the MP Danny Kruger – now a minister at DLUHC – for proposals on how to take forward the boom in volunteering and community activities during the early stages of Covid-19. Kruger's report called for a new 'social covenant' with civil society, focussed on providing greater social and environmental purpose to public and private spending, bringing power down to local communities, adopting 'strength-based' approaches which recognise people's self-efficacy, and renewing the UK's social infrastructure. Specific recommendations included introducing a national 'Volunteer Passport' to help match volunteers to relevant tasks, creating a 'Levelling Up Communities' fund to support long-term community projects, and designating new powers to certain 'Community Improvement Districts' to experiment with community-led initiatives (Kruger 2020).

Alongside these developments on 'levelling up', there have been a range of changes to immigration policy over the past 18 months which have major implications for integration and cohesion.

In some respects, recent developments have shown a willingness within the UK government to support the integration of new arrivals. In particular, in January 2021 the government opened a new migration route for BN(O) (British national (overseas)) status holders from Hong Kong, in response to the Chinese government's crackdown on pro-democracy protestors. Alongside this new route, the government announced a generous package of integration measures under its Hong Kong BN(O) 'welcome programme' in order to support BN(O) visa holders and their families to settle in and contribute to the UK. This has included support for English language learning and people who are destitute or at risk of becoming destitute (in England only), voluntary, community and social enterprise funds for

community-led activities, and a hate crime reporting service for people from East and South-East Asian backgrounds (DLUHC 2021).

More recently, the government has launched Operation 'Warm Welcome' to support Afghan nationals arriving through its ARAP (Afghanistan Relocations and Assistance Policy) scheme and Afghanistan citizens resettlement scheme as a consequence of the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan. As part of this effort, the government has committed £200 million for the first year of the resettlement scheme, as well as an additional £12 million in funding for school places, £3 million in NHS funding to support people on the ARAP scheme to access healthcare and register with a GP, and £5 million for local authorities in England, Wales and Scotland to help people coming through the ARAP scheme, including support with housing. The government has also recently announced that all those coming via these routes will be granted automatic indefinite leave to remain (or will be able to freely transfer to indefinite leave if they had already been relocated before the announcement was made) (Home Office 2021a).

Yet while these funding announcements indicate a political commitment to supporting Afghan refugees, there is a risk that given pressures and backlogs in parts of the mainstream support system, individuals on these routes could still face barriers to accessing key services. (See ICIBI 2020 for examples of how resettled refugees have previously faced difficulties accessing mental health services).

Other developments in immigration policy over the past 18 months also pose substantial risks for the integration of newly arrived communities. First, the end of freedom of movement and the introduction of the new points-based immigration system has left some EU citizens and family members at risk of the 'hostile environment'. While the government introduced the EU settlement scheme to protect the rights of EU citizens living in the UK before the end of the transition period (31 December 2020) and their family members, those who did not apply by the deadline at the end of June 2021 and who have no other form of leave to remain now face barriers to getting work, renting properties, and accessing the benefit system (Morris and Qureshi 2021b).[2]

Moreover, the government's efforts to respond to recent worker shortages by introducing a new temporary scheme for HGV food drivers and poultry workers could further undermine integration efforts (Home Office 2021b). Temporary schemes of this type are known to pose particular risks for labour abuse and exploitation, particularly because it is hard to switch employers or move on to a pathway to permanent residence (FLEX 2019). IPPR's previous research has also highlighted how temporary migration and higher rates of population turnover can contribute to weaker social networks (Griffith and Halej 2015). A study of temporary farm workers on Canada's Seasonal Agricultural Workers Program (SAWP) found that many were isolated and had little connection with wider Canadian communities (Hennebry 2012). Finally, short-term schemes run the risk of visa holders overstaying and subsequently facing the impacts of the 'hostile environment' – such as becoming barred from working, renting, accessing free healthcare, and claiming benefits.

A third important immigration policy development has been the increased use of contingent asylum accommodation due to pressures in the asylum system. In particular, over the past two years hotels have been used in greater numbers for initial asylum accommodation, in part due to a switchover in contracts for accommodation provision and an increase in the number of applicants needing

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2   Late applications are possible for those with 'reasonable grounds' for missing the deadline and individuals are protected while they wait for a decision, but it is expected that some will still not have applied.

to be housed as a result of the pandemic (Sturge and Gower 2020). Some people have also been accommodated in repurposed military barracks (Penally Camp and Napier Barracks). According to the government, this is a result of Covid-19 pressures, as well as the increase in people in small boats crossing the Channel to seek asylum in the UK (ibid). Concerns have been raised about the quality of this accommodation and the implications for the longer-term integration of asylum seekers. In particular, a report by HM Inspectorate of Prisons (HMIP) on Penally Camp and Napier Barracks found evidence of decrepit, filthy and wholly unsuitable accommodation and highlighted significant concerns over poor mental health and risks to personal safety (ICIBI 2021).

Finally, the government has introduced new primary legislation to reform the asylum and immigration system, which is set to have major consequences for the integration of refugees in the years ahead. The nationality and borders bill – which at the time of writing is proceeding through Parliament – is set to make widespread changes to current asylum rules, in part as a response to the rise in small boats crossing the Channel. From the perspective of integration, one of the most significant changes in the bill is a new distinction between refugees based on their mode of arrival to the UK. The bill will give the government the scope to treat differently those who have not come to the UK 'directly' from a country or territory where their life or freedom was threatened, who have not presented themselves without delay to the UK authorities, or who have come to the UK unlawfully without good cause (Nationality and Borders Bill 2021). This will allow the Home Office to introduce a new limited protection status for this cohort if their asylum claim is successful, which only offers temporary protection and does not allow for recourse to public funds (other than in instances of destitution) (Home Office 2021c). The bill therefore risks undermining the integration of these refugees by inhibiting a pathway to settlement and restricting access to welfare support.

3.
WHERE WE DID OUR RESEARCH

CARDIFF / CAERDYDD

Cardiff, as a capital city, is a diverse and metropolitan area – and the most densely populated area in Wales. It has suffered from deindustrialisation and like many such cities, inequality is a concern, and some areas in the city experience some of the highest deprivation in Wales. Cardiff has a growing population – due to being an economic centre in Wales and one that attracts migrants and large student populations (Cardiff Public Services Board 2018). In 2011, 15.3 per cent of the Cardiff population were from a minority ethnic background, and data derived from the Annual Population Survey[3] shows that since 2011 the share of the non-UK born population has increased 0.6 points to 13.2 per cent in 2020 (though the highest share was seen in 2017 with 15.6 per cent of the population from non-UK backgrounds) (ONS 2021).

Our research focussed on neighbourhoods slightly outside the city centre, which are characterised by their historical relation to the steelwork industry and close-knit terraced housing that once housed steelworkers. These areas tend to face economic challenges yet have attracted an increasingly diverse population.

The local MP in the area that we visited is Stephen Doughty (Welsh Labour), reflective of the wider political makeup in Wales, in which Welsh Labour have a working majority. Unlike our other two sites, Cardiff voted to remain by a 60 per cent majority in the EU referendum.

Cardiff Council is committed to delivering 'safe, confident and empowered communities' as part of their strategic wellbeing plan (Cardiff Public Services Board 2018). Recognising the importance of proactively engaging with changing neighbourhoods, they commit to listening to communities, co-designing services, being responsive to differing demographics, and 'community-based collaboration', which brings public and third sector support together in convenient locations 'at the heart of some of the city's most deprived communities' (ibid). In addition, they are a founding member of the Inclusive Cities network – a knowledge exchange initiative that supports UK cities to develop effective approaches to integration that promote the inclusion of newcomers (Lewis et al 2021).

More broadly, it is important to note that the Welsh government is distinctive in its approach to integration compared to Westminster. Immigration is a reserved matter, and as such the Welsh government have little control over the macro level of immigration to the country (Bevan Foundation 2020). However, they do take a much more proactive approach in terms of integration policy and have adopted a more welcoming rhetoric in relation to migrant, refugee and asylum-seeking communities in Wales (ibid). For instance, in their *Nation of Sanctuary* report, the Welsh government set out their vision for refugees and asylum seekers to be 'provided with the information and advice they need to begin to integrate into Welsh society from day one' (Welsh Government 2019).

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3   It should be noted that 2020 figures are provisional given disruption to the collection of migration statistics as a result of Covid-19.

OLDHAM

Oldham is a post-industrial town located in the Greater Manchester region. It is typically understood as an area with a proud working-class history, but also as an area that is economically deprived – rates of income poverty in the area are 30 per cent (Koch et al 2021) and according to the 2019 indices of multiple deprivation Oldham is the 19th most deprived local authority in England (based on the weighted average of the neighbourhood scores within each local authority area). In terms of diversity, in the 2011 census Oldham had a higher proportion of minority ethnic residents (22.5 per cent) than Greater Manchester as a whole (16.4 per cent), the North West (9.8 per cent), and England (14.3 per cent) (Oldham Council 2019a). Minority ethnic groups, particularly South Asian communities, typically live nearer the centre of Oldham, which maps onto broader trends that show the centre faces more poverty (Oldham Council 2019b; Koch et al 2021). The share of non-UK born residents in Oldham has increased from 9.9 per cent to 11.9 per cent in 2020. However, the share was highest in 2015 (14.9 per cent), and in recent years the non-UK population appears to have stabilised or slightly fallen (ONS 2021). Conversations with council officials suggest that recently Oldham has also seen growing numbers of Eastern European Roma communities settle in the area.[4]

Oldham West and Royton has been a Labour seat since the constituency was formed in 1997, and Jim McMahon is the current MP receiving 55 per cent of the vote share at the last election, though the Conservatives saw gains too (30 per cent of the vote), alongside smaller parties such as the Brexit Party (7 per cent of the vote). Questions of fairness in the asylum dispersal scheme have been raised by McMahon, who – commenting on local government finances in 2017 – spoke of "towns such as Oldham [having] 700 asylum seekers, while the prime minister's constituency has not a single one" (HoC 2017). Oldham voted to leave in the EU referendum by 61 per cent. At recent local elections, there was an emergence of hyperlocal anti-establishment politics which saw the council leader lose their seat (Al-Othman 2021). During the pandemic there was significant reporting that focussed on Oldham, as it saw some of the highest infection rates and persistent lockdown measures kept in place (Williams 2021).

Research from HOPE not hate (Carter and Clarke 2021) identifies Oldham as one of 52 local authorities across England and Wales that are at risk of more pronounced community tensions in the wake of the pandemic. This is based on three key factors: an especially negatively impacted economy as a result of the pandemic, lower economic resilience more broadly, and historically less positive attitudes to migration (based on previous Hope Not Hate polling). Specific data points used to assess this identify that Oldham is in the top 20 per cent of local authorities for a rise in benefit claimants once the pandemic struck, as well as the fact that it was slower than average to return to pre-2008 GVA levels. It is also in the top 20 per cent of places for the proportion with no qualifications.

As well as these factors, we were also aware of a proactive engagement with issues related to integration and social cohesion in the borough, which made Oldham a particularly interesting case study - for instance, through their establishment of an 'emerging communities team' which undertakes specific work with migrant communities, asylum seekers and refugees in areas that have seen higher rates of inward migration.[5] Part of this project included the recruitment of outreach workers from the Roma community, to engage with and support migrant Roma communities in the area.

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4   Personal communications with Oldham Council officers, October 2021.
5   See: https://committees.oldham.gov.uk/mgIssueHistoryHome.aspx?IId=39383&Opt=0

SANDWELL

Sandwell is a metropolitan borough in the Black Country, West Midlands and is made up of six towns: Oldbury, Rowley Regis, Smethwick, Tipton, Wednesbury, and West Bromwich – as such, it is a densely populated area. Birmingham lies directly to the east of Sandwell and is easily commutable for residents. The 2019 Indices of Multiple Deprivation saw Sandwell ranked as the 12th most deprived local authority In England (based on the weighted average of the neighbourhood scores within each local authority area). While deprivation is spread across the borough, it is around Smethwick, Tipton, Wednesbury, and West Bromwich that some of the worst deprivation occurs (Sandwell Trends 2019). Sandwell is a very diverse area; in the 2011 census, around two-thirds of the population identified as white British and 30.1 per cent identified as from minority ethnic backgrounds – prevalent groups include Indian, Pakistani, Black British, and Polish communities. Sandwell has the highest share of non-UK residents of our three case study areas. In 2011, 15.3 per cent of the population were non-UK born, rising to almost one in four people in 2020 (23 per cent) (ONS 2021).

The neighbourhoods that we visited fall under the West Bromwich East constituency, which is represented by Nicola Richards MP of the Conservative party, after Labour lost the seat in the 2019 election for the first time in the history of the constituency. The Conservatives received 47 per cent of the vote share (an increase of 8 percentage points) compared to Labour's 42 per cent (a decrease of 16 percentage points). In the EU referendum, Sandwell voted to leave by 67 per cent – within the top 10 per cent of Leave voting areas.

Sandwell is an asylum dispersal area – an issue which has been brought under the spotlight in recent months, as the council, along with seven other local authorities in the West Midlands, have launched a legal challenge against the Home Office. In part, this results from councils' concerns about the concentration of asylum seekers in deprived and urban areas, with inadequate resourcing to support people's integration locally (Bulman 2021a).

Research from HOPE not hate (Carter and Clarke 2021) also identified Sandwell as a local authority that is likely to be at risk of seeing cohesion challenges as a result of the pandemic. This is based on an assessment of the short-term economic impact of the pandemic, on long-term economic resilience more generally, and on polling that suggests historically more negative attitudes towards migrant communities. The study suggests that, economically, Sandwell has been one of the worst hit places in the UK. The analysis used to make this assessment finds that Sandwell is in the top 20 per cent of local authorities for an estimated decline in gross value added (GVA) due to the pandemic and is in the top 20 per cent for a rise in welfare claimants. Moreover, Sandwell had the highest proportion of residents with no qualifications prior to Covid-19.

Substantial programmes of work have been undertaken in Sandwell, funded by the Controlling Migration Fund, that have sought to address the pressures of migration – particularly on education – and support the settlement of migrant children and families in the area. The funding for this project was submitted by the Sandwell New Arrivals Partnership (SNAP), a cross sector group, focussed on supporting migrants, asylum seekers and refugees in the area (Rawlings and Heffernan 2020).

4.
WHAT WE FOUND

ABOUT THE FOCUS GROUPS

Seven focus groups were held online with participants from receiving communities, and three groups were held in person with people that had migrated to live in the UK. Altogether, we spoke to 70 participants across our three case study areas; 45 from the receiving community and 25 people that had more recently migrated. The groups with migrant communities in Sandwell and Cardiff were made up of asylum seekers and refugees from a number of countries. The migrant group in Oldham was made up of Romanian Roma individuals. More detail about our methodology and who took part in the focus groups can be found in appendix A.

For four of the groups, participants were recruited via community groups and charities and workers from these organisations also joined the group discussions. Their contributions offered a bird's eye view of issues locally, and we have included some of their reflections in this chapter. In addition, informal interpreting also occurred throughout some of the focus groups, with some participants with a better grasp of English translating for others. For the Oldham focus group with Romanian Roman participants, one individual interpreted most of what was said. Accordingly, there is a mixture of first- and third-person tense in the quotes used in this chapter.

When quoting participants from the receiving community we identify their gender, age range and in which are they live. When quoting participants that have migrated, we identify their gender, age range, country of origin (where this would not be disclosive) and in which area they live.

Loss, isolation and hardship have been a defining feature of the pandemic for many people

In the focus groups we asked participants what impact the pandemic had had on their local communities – however, this was not typically a question that could be answered without reference to the significant losses that people have experienced at an individual level. As one participant working with a community group in Oldham put it:

> *"We had families going into poverty, we had increase of domestic violence, and isolation and mental health became a big, big problem… there was a lot of issues that were coming to us, but discreetly"*
> Community worker, Oldham

The 'discreet' problems that some participants described were a result of the isolation that people experienced during the months of lockdown. Many found their ability to socialise and connect with others ruptured, and this had a stark impact on people's wellbeing and mental health, as one participant in Cardiff explained:

> *"To be honest, I was quite isolated. I was on my own in the house, I didn't meet anyone, I didn't go anywhere, I mean, other than that, if I went shopping [for someone else], I'd just pick the shopping up and drop it outside and sit in the*

"Many found their ability to socialise and connect with others ruptured, and this had a stark impact on people's wellbeing and mental health"

car and just wave bye basically, I didn't really meet anyone. So, I was quite isolated and, you know when I was talking about depression and stress, and I did go through some anxiety, and some sort of, I was feeling a bit stressed out, because you're on your own all day"

Female, 30–49, Cardiff

Parents across all of the case study areas spoke about the impact on their children, as one mother in Sandwell illustrates:

"My son, it has affected him a little, as he didn't mingle with other children. He found it a bit difficult to mix with other children at school because he had only been with his family."

Female, 30–49, Nigeria/Sandwell

A participant in Oldham reflected on their impressions of how the pandemic had impacted the people around him:

"When the second lockdown come in it was a bit more serious. I think it's isolated a lot of people and I think you don't really see as many people - and I suppose you probably shouldn't… but I think it's isolated a lot of people and there's people who I used to see regularly out and about who now have a fragile mind-set, and I think it's been a detriment to people's mental health in the area… Human interaction is a really big factor in people's mental health and now that they're all stuck to their computers or their social media and things like that and thinking that the social media world is what life should be and it's not really."

Male, 30–49, Oldham

We also heard of the devastating loss and bereavement that participants had endured in the last 18 months or so. As one participant in Sandwell demonstrated:

"I lost my dad in lockdown, and I basically went through a whole raft of things - I had a very close friend commit suicide… [I] had six bereavements. One was my brother-in-law, one of them was actually due to Covid"

Male, 50–64, Sandwell

The impacts of the pandemic have been unequally shared

While for a good many of our participants the greatest impacts of the pandemic were felt at the individual level, it was recognised that the effects of the pandemic were unevenly felt. Be it worse infection and death rates, intensification of poverty, job loss, the ability of a community to be resilient in the face of the pandemic, or insufficient mental health support, many spoke about how these were shaped by geographical location and according to the wider inequalities that shape people's lives – for instance, on the basis of gender, age, class, ethnicity, and disability.

One person in Oldham, for instance reflected on the likely disproportionate impact on people in their town:

"I was just reading there last week that I think the bottom fifth of people… the bottom fifth of earners who either have been furloughed or whatever, might have lost jobs, that sort of stuff, have actually racked up more and more debt, so it's just teased out some of those inequalities… Oldham regularly [comes] top for the worst sorts of these sorts of things, so wages… unemployment and things like this."

Male, 30–49, Oldham

And another person in Cardiff shared how the pandemic has deepened the feeling of deprivation locally:

"At the moment, [this area] has got really like, you can see the poverty in the area, which ten years ago, you really couldn't, and to tell somebody that they were living in poverty, and [in a] deprived area, I don't think they would have really believed you. But now, with the lockdown and everything else in the last couple of years, you can really see that you are living in a deprived area."
Female, 50–64, Cardiff

There were different views between participants within our case study areas too, with people noting that the impact of, and response to, the pandemic varied from street to street – and perhaps also according to property types. In Sandwell, where participants came from a broader spread across the borough, one group discussed the extent to which their community 'came together'. One woman, who lived in a flat in a tower block, said of the Clap for Carers phenomenon (in which people stood outside their front doors to applause NHS workers during the first lockdown):

"I didn't see anybody doing the clap if I'm being absolutely honest. I didn't see anybody clapping anywhere. So, I can't say that brought my specific part [of Sandwell] any closer together. Because everyone was probably indoors eating their dinner or something... I don't know. But I haven't seen no one clapping. Maybe it's like what [another participant] said about like on specific roads, and that like you got a community on your road, but then when you get past that road, that community doesn't exist"
Female, 30–49, Sandwell

As well as differing impacts on place, participants indicated that there were a number of groups that they saw as facing the worst impacts of the pandemic and lockdown measures, including older people, younger adults and children, single people, those with health conditions that meant they had to shield, and people who were out of work. For instance, one participant spoke of their concerns for older people locally:

"the elderly population, or the population that lives maybe by themselves, I think it's impacted them quite negatively, because, you know, I have a few relatives that are, you know, quite old in age and for them, like going to even to the shops or going to the temple like for prayers and stuff that would be kind of a social thing. So not being able to do that has kind of impacted their mental wellbeing and then also, not being able to... have any visitors physically has also been quite hard for them as well."
Male, 30–49, Sandwell

Participants had deeply reflective conversations that situated their own experiences in relation to the experiences of others. People tended to have deep compassion and empathy for people in potentially worse circumstances than themselves.

"I think for me, although personally, we've not had any of those sort of health issues. I think when you mentioned looking at how much worse things have been for other people, we've absolutely appreciated the fact that something as simple as having a huge garden, you know, we've got apartments that sort of overlook us and every day we've been out in the garden, we thought 'thank goodness', because, you know, how would it be if we were living in an apartment and - I know that there's so many families out there that have got young children

[who] haven't got a garden and are in apartments, you just think 'how are those mums coping?'"

Female, 30–49, Sandwell

But there was also frustration evident in our conversations. Many expressed the belief that too little had been done by those in power to protect the most vulnerable and that inequality had widened as a result. One participant in Cardiff, for instance, reflected on the distance between those in the Welsh government and people in communities like his. He told us:

"I think there is a very clear divide between the social classes at the moment as to what you can and can't do. People who have multiple properties are using that as a loophole to get around Covid, so [they] breach those restrictions without consequence. Whereas people in areas such as ourselves, who are working class and blue-collar communities, are left to pick up the pieces - we're the ones dealing with our family members being impacted by Covid-19 and fending for ourselves"

Male, 18–29, Cardiff

"the last 18 months or so have, at the very least, pressed pause on social contact between different groups in communities "

The pandemic has pressed pause on social contact between migrant and receiving communities and for some their sense of community has weakened

Asked to consider how the pandemic had impacted on community relations, it was evident that events of the last 18 months or so have, at the very least, pressed pause on social contact between different groups in communities, including between receiving communities and newer migrant groups. We heard in some focus groups about existing challenges or concerns locally that had not necessarily got worse during the pandemic, but which – it could be said – laid dormant.

This is an inevitable result of the social distancing and lockdown rules imposed by the government to contain the virus, but some participants also noted how people's fear of becoming ill and their desire to protect their health, as well as the health of those close to them, led to a greater "**mental distance**" between people. This in turn made them feel more separate and isolated:

"People start to be afraid of others. Because, you know, you are at the beginning of the pandemic and you are hearing the news about the deaths, cases, and all; this is bad. So, you feel, by all these experiences, completely changed. Now, it is better, like a return to a type of normality, but at the beginning it was like you were a ghost, you know. People used to smile in the street to each other, but at the pandemic, they want to run from each other, because they don't want to catch the virus."

Female, 30-49, Iraq/Cardiff

And some believed that the pandemic and associated measures had set back the sense of community locally:

"The community aspect has always been an issue within the Oldham area, especially around [this area], the community aspect has been going, especially now with Covid-19 it's pretty much dead now. Nobody wants to socialise; nobody wants to social distance... I think [another participant] mentioned about [the sense of community] coming back, but I have to disagree, I think it's even less now with nobody interacting with each other and you feel a bit alone to be honest."

Male, 18–29, Oldham

Another participant agreed, emphasising that Covid-19 had reinforced an already existing trend of decreased social connection and trust:

"When I was growing up and as I got older you knew people around the corner, you knew your neighbours, you would look out for each other, you would help each other out if need be, but there doesn't seem to be any of that now. People are living within their own little bubble, and I think it's become worse because of Covid-19 as well. I think people are just looking out for themselves and their own and not really engaging in the community because that's the way the world is. It's not just a problem around [this area], I think it's a problem around the country, I think the community spirit is not what it was. Covid has brought out some good aspects of what people have done for others, but I've not seen it around [this] community at all."
Male, 30–49, Oldham

Many participants from the receiving community spoke of relying on their existing family and friendship groups for support and socialisation during the pandemic, and as a result, meeting new people – whether new migrant groups or otherwise – was off the cards. One woman in Sandwell reflected on the groups' perception that there were increased numbers of Eastern European migrants living locally and the challenges that the pandemic had thrown up for meeting and getting to know them:

"So, it was lockdown; everybody was in their house, so if people are in their house, you can't see them. You know [that Eastern Europeans live here] because the shop wasn't there one day and then there's a shop that says Eastern European food or whatever on the outside… but it's not like you see a lot of Eastern European people kind of running in there and doing their supermarket shopping… If it was normal times before Covid, you could probably say, 'oh well, maybe they just keep themselves to themselves', and that's why you don't see them. But when you've been in lockdown, and everyone's supposed to be in their house, are they just sticking to the rules or [is it that] they just don't want to be outside, and they don't want to mix with people? Either way, you can't knock them."
Female, 30–49, Sandwell

For many of those that we spoke to from a migrant background – particularly for asylum seekers and refugee groups – the feeling of being isolated from their local community was more pronounced as it was often the case that they were separated from close familial and friendship networks. One participant, for instance, shared how important playing basketball was to him, and that being unable to play with his team during the lockdowns was a great loss:

"[Now he spends his time] anywhere, just sitting down… because he doesn't have any family in this country."
Male, 50–64, Iran/Sandwell

Those without close family and friends near them relied on community spaces to interact with people. The closure of public spaces was therefore central to participants' experiences of isolation during the pandemic:

"Library, especially libraries closed! I used to sit in the library reading books and I just talked to people about what was going on, because I don't have any friends or family around me here."
Female, 30–49, Pakistan, Sandwell

However, even for some people that had migrated who did live with their families, their ability to interact with the local community was limited, hindering their efforts at integration. For example, one participant spoke of their language learning being impaired because of the pandemic:

"I arrived, two months later started the pandemic... I have over two years here [now] and normally, you hope to learn English in two years, but when that happened, all your plans stopped... I want to finish to learn English because, the language, I like this language. I want to meet more people.."
Male, 18–29, Central America/Cardiff

Participants had different opinions as to the extent to which this integration-stasis was a problem – but it was clear from our conversations that particularly for migrant groups, the consequences of feeling increasingly isolated from their local communities and the lack of social connections was concerning.

In some cases, the pandemic has exacerbated pre-existing tensions in communities, and some have experienced increased racism and discrimination

Some participants from the receiving community spoke of existing tensions that they felt or perceived in their local community towards newer migrant groups. In Oldham, for instance, there was some conversation about the extent to which new migrant groups, particularly the Romanian Roma community, had settled locally. Some members of the group perceived that this community had not, so far, integrated into the local area. As one participant explained:

"For me it's changed dramatically over the last two or three years. The difference in the multicultural ethnicity around the area has changed a lot. It's always had a strong white British and Asian Muslim community around the area. But the influx of the Eastern Europeans has really changed the way the area is, the way people behave, the way it looks, and I'm going to be honest, not a lot of it is positive, it's quite negative in terms of what they've brought... there is a lot of criminality around the area, a lot of gangs of Eastern Europeans milling around. There is a lot of theft of things, lead from windows and things like that, the level of criminality has gone up a lot recently in the last two or three years. I can only put that down to one thing, because it's the influx of the Eastern Europeans that's coincided with it all happening."
Male, 30–49, Oldham

Participants aired longstanding concerns that preceded the pandemic, speaking for instance about the 'congregation' of groups in the street, and the perception that littering and fly-tipping had increased locally. The issues that participants described were not new, but the pandemic had fuelled animosity – particularly as people perceived that some were not following Covid-19 regulations:

"I think certain communities, they're not sticking to the guidelines and that's what annoys me. We're all sticking by the guidelines and isolating, but you see them still in groups, not wearing masks. They seem to be flaunting the laws. Nothing yet seems to be done about that."
Male, 65+, Oldham

"They'll all be congregating like [another participant] said, in groups, and I think, 'oh, I can't even go and see my mum', but they have their mum, their gran, just everyone in the garden, and yeah, they do congregate. I always see them in groups, but

nothing gets said. People are scared to say anything to them. They're intimidating."
Female, 30–39, Oldham

However, there were also participants that dissented from this view. One person placed negative views about Eastern European Roma communities – and new migrant arrivals more broadly - in historical context:

"The Asian community was seen to not be working at the time when they first came over, or they weren't working hard enough. The Polish was taking people's jobs and now the Romanians aren't getting jobs, but there [are] no jobs to get. Covid-19 has put half the population out of work. So I think it's a bit of a tricky one to suggest that these guys aren't trying to work or whatever... it's harder for those guys to learn the language as well. Which is then more of a struggle for them to integrate with us because they're not going to be freely accepted. We're clearly talking now [about how] they're not freely accepted into our community because they don't speak the language, or whatever."
Male, 30–49, Oldham

Despite some grievances, participants in Oldham were very engaged and motivated to address issues of social cohesion locally. They referenced the 'race riots' that took place in Oldham and a number of other northern towns in the early 2000s, and as a result, tended to have fairly constructive views about how things could be improved, which are reflected in our recommendations.

The views of the Romanian Roma participants that we spoke to in Oldham did not echo the sentiment of the participants from the receiving community – rather they tended to emphasise the positive connections they had made locally:

"One of [the participants] has a Pakistani friend, our neighbour, she is really good friends with my sister, my mum. They share food as well, really close family friend. Also, they had some... Africans, they were Christians, and they were coming to their house, they were studying together, and they were really good... She says her neighbours love her; she doesn't have a problem with them. They are white English people."
Female, 30–49, Romania/ Oldham

As well as the tensions outlined above, participants from minority ethnic communities spoke about facing increased discrimination during the pandemic. We heard about the alienating effects of this – hindering people's sense of belonging in their community, and in turn the extent to which they see themselves as integrated or welcome. One refugee living in Cardiff told us:

"I heard about the news that people from ethnic minorities, it's highly possible for them to transmit... the virus. So, some people, they feel stigmatised."
Female, 30–49, Sudan/Cardiff

"participants from minority ethnic communities spoke about facing increased discrimination during the pandemic"

And similarly, a community worker in Oldham described her experience:

"I've faced, and other ladies [in this group] have faced a lot of racism during the pandemic, but that's because we were accused of spreading the virus... my sister-in-law, we were out walking in a park, she wears the scarf and the jubbah... and a white couple, with a dog, a young couple, came up to her and said, 'What are you doing here? Because of

you, because of you the virus is spreading in the UK – go back to where you came from.' She's half-British!"
Female, 30–49, Oldham)

People that had migrated faced a number of specific challenges and the asylum and immigration system compounded the worst effects of the pandemic

While there were no doubt a great many challenges faced and shared by all participants, in focus groups with asylum seekers, refugees and migrants there was significant evidence of specific and persistent challenges that were a direct result of the asylum and immigration system, and which made the pandemic harder to bear.

Disconnection

Those within the asylum system spoke about being assigned accommodation on a no-choice basis, of sitting in the back of a car not knowing where they were being taken, or of being moved from place to place and not being able to settle anywhere. Such constant relocation hindered their ability to integrate into their local area.

The effect of this meant that participants were dislocated from their limited social networks – something that was particularly felt during periods of lockdown. This was exacerbated by the closure of many public services which meant many participants could not access the support they needed. The movement of certain services online or over the telephone presented access issues to those facing digital or language barriers, as one participant explained:

"Many of the council facilities are still not open, you can only contact people over the phone or over the internet, which is no good if you don't speak English."
Case worker, Sandwell

Children from asylum-seeking and refugee families also faced severe disconnection, as concerns were expressed about the challenges in accessing sufficient technology for children to be able to keep up with their education. This appeared especially pronounced for larger families, since they did not have enough devices for everyone:

"We had no gadgets, there was no internet, all we had was just my phone, so it was a struggle. I'm well-endowed, I have 5 kids [laughs], so it was tough."
Female, 30–49, Nigeria/Sandwell

"The [children] are stopped from going to school and they have to self-isolate, they are not getting education, they are not learning anything… So, for her she said that it was hard because she have seven kids. And with seven kids and [one] laptop, internet, and all that. It was really hard because you cannot pay attention to everyone at the same time. It was, like, keep lacking connection. One of them was getting kicked out [of the internet connection], one of them was getting in."
Female, 30–49, Romania/Oldham

Dangerous accommodation

A number of participants were, or had been, housed in initial asylum accommodation including hotels and former military barracks. Several concerning issues emerged from our discussion with these participants, who described the incredibly negative impact of this accommodation on their ability to settle and integrate locally. One participant, who had been in the UK for five years and was not showing symptoms of the virus, was

placed in a hotel and was told by private security contractors that he was not allowed to leave it for any reason:

"During the first lockdown, I was in a hotel in Derby. In May last year. They said you have to isolate for two weeks. Why? They said, 'because you went outside'… I said I'm not new here, I've been here for five years. I said I don't want to stay here; I want to move to another place."
Male, 30–49, Iraq/Sandwell

Another participant recounted their horrific experience staying at Penally camp, a former military barracks during the height of the pandemic. His account highlights the dangerous and isolating nature of such accommodation for those consigned to them:

"During the pandemic, it was the highest rate of the pandemic, we were sent to Penally camp, and they put us six people in one room… I felt worthless, because they don't care about you, you know?… Penally [the village] was far away, 40 minutes' walk, because you are in the middle of nowhere and you have nothing to do. It was all surrounded by barbed wire; it was like a prison. Gates closed. It you want to go out, you have to sign, check in, check out… Nothing you can do there, just buildings, nothing else. There were a lot of fights, we had to stop them. They called the police, police just came and watched, not even stopped them. Once a friend got sick, we called an ambulance, ambulance did not come. The staff took him to hospital. [...] Most of my friends now have mental [health] issues."
Male, 50–64, Turkey/Cardiff

Employment difficulties
Finding work was a top priority for many participants and many expressed their frustrations at the barriers they faced under the asylum system. Some participants described applying for work permits while waiting for their asylum claims to be processed, yet they were only able to apply for positions in shortage occupations, most of which did not match either their skillset and experience or were not jobs that were locally available. Given that asylum seekers can only apply for work permits after 12 months of waiting for a decision on their claim, this also reflects the protracted delays that people have been experiencing.

"Some of them have been granted [work permits] while their cases are still being decided by the Home Office. But the jobs that are being advertised do not really suit. A lot do not meet the criteria. They come back to us saying they haven't been able to get a job."
Case worker, Sandwell

One participant that had been granted a work permit, nonetheless, described the challenges of finding work during the pandemic:

"I just finished my degree in 2019 and just a few months after I was so unlucky, I was about to get a job and there is no job. And this year is the worst year if you are trying to get a job. Even if you have a work permit you cannot do anything."
Female, 30–49, Pakistan/Sandwell

Participants from the Romanian Roma community spoke too of the impact of the pandemic on their experiences of employment. Many were in insecure and gig economy work that meant they faced additional challenges when the pandemic hit. An interpreter explained:

"[In relation to] work, she got fired three times, because [the barbers] it's been shut down... so like, she has to stay at home. [For others too] they couldn't go to work, they had to stay home. Some of the work couldn't be done online, from home... She is saying she is really worried because if they go on lockdown again, they shut down everything, [and] she doesn't know what to do and how to survive and how to make money."

Female, 30–49, Romania/Oldham

Feelings of instability and insecurity

The experiences of the Oldham group regarding the immigration system were quite different, given that all had migrated from Romania, within the European Union. They nevertheless expressed frustrations with the immigration system, especially regarding the changing rules and the perceived insecurity of their position within the UK as the EU withdrawal deadline passed. The group generally expressed worries that if they left the UK, they would not be able to return.

"Today is a new rule, tomorrow is another rule. They are saying there is no stability with what they are doing and what's going on and what happens at the moment... They are worried, because they heard, they won't let you come back in. She [is] saying people on social media, like Facebook, they seen, like [that they are doing checks] and they can say to you, 'yes you can come in the UK, no you have to go back to Romania.'"

Multiple group members, Romania/Oldham

Many also relayed problems with filling out documents regarding their EU Settlement Status, and that there was some confusion over what they were required to do. This added to a growing sense of insecurity regarding their position in the UK.

Conspiracy theories

Research has suggested that language barriers and social exclusion mean that migrant communities are vulnerable to misinformation, since accurate information is not easily accessible for them (Crawshaw et al 2021). This was something we heard about in our conversations with some participants from the migrant community, as we heard about the negative effects of conspiracy theories on some groups.

"Some people have this ideology about Covid, some believe it is a conspiracy from the government, from Bill Gates. And all that. Some think it is the mark of the devil, some think the world is coming to an end."

Male, 30–49, Nigeria/Sandwell

And we heard about the vital role of community groups and charities in supporting vulnerable communities to tackle conspiracy theories:

"A conspiracy was circling around, like on social media, but then [a community] leader sat down, and he said, 'look, we are hit by this Covid-19 and just don't care about this conspiracy, let's try and do something, try to control it.' ...They started using social media, Zoom, trying to advise people, saying, 'Look, this is affecting our community more that other people, so let us try and find a solution...' So they massively went to get vaccinated... The number of people contracting Covid-19 and the number dying has reduced."

Male, 30–49, Nigeria/Sandwell

But the pandemic has also been a catalyst for visions of greater community togetherness

Despite the numerous challenges that communities and individuals have faced during the pandemic, we also heard positive reflections from participants, as the pandemic had afforded them an opportunity to evaluate what was important to them. People spoke about the limitations of life before the pandemic and what they would like to keep as we move forward. Importantly, for many, the pandemic has also been a catalyst for visions of greater community togetherness. Those that have experienced an increased sense of community wanted this to stick around and hoped that those in power would recognise the value of fostering a sense of community through investment.

A key way that this increased sense of community was evidenced was through the informal support networks that sprung up in some neighbourhoods. In each neighbourhood – albeit to varying degrees - we heard of these kinds of networks. For instance, people would collect shopping and prescriptions for their neighbours, for one woman in Oldham these small acts had caused her to rethink her community as she says:

"I was thinking of moving, but now it's changed, which is nice."
Female, 50–64, Oldham

The pandemic was seen by some to have been a chance to reset how neighbours related to one another:

"We're not a community like we used to be. But through the pandemic, I think the community have started to get back a little bit to what it was; I think it started to fray a little bit. But I think there has been such kindness and community since the pandemic. It's quite nice to think maybe we can all start again, somehow and be kind to each other again."
Female, 50–64, Cardiff

"I didn't speak to one of my neighbours before, not out of spite or anything, just never saw them – [we] both work and never saw them. Since the clap for carers, you get to know them, what they do as jobs, what their children are called, ridiculous little bits that should know really about your neighbours… and it was the whole sense of like community, like passing notes through doors like if you need any food, if you're isolating, if your shielding, they're able to help. And it was just a really nice sense of community that I've never felt before."
Female, 30–49, Sandwell

We heard about the increased role for social media for any participants, and some even found that digital means of connection had brought them closer to their neighbours:

"I would say that definitely has been more of a community, togetherness. I don't know whether you've heard of the app called Nextdoor, it's an app for the community. I've noticed in the time period of this pandemic since it all started last year there has been more use on that, people asking for help for shopping or if they need something to picked up or delivered. There is no money involved, it's purely just for helping [each other]."
Male, 18–29, Cardiff

For some, the advent of the pandemic – and the sense that "we're all in it together" – had focussed people's minds away from divisive issues, such as Brexit and immigration.

"In the last 12 months I've not had one conversation with a friend or family member about Brexit. It's been a bit of a breath of fresh air in many ways. Whether or not it's brought the communities together as a result of that, I'm not too sure. I think the fact that we've had to self-isolate and all the rest of it probably has meant that hasn't been possible, but I personally wouldn't say it's got any worse. I suppose any of the tension that exists suspended in mid-air a little bit… I think people have been more willing to give other people the time of day. So, this isn't about where you're from and all the rest of it. I think people are looking at other people, perhaps from different backgrounds, different countries, different ethnicities and all the rest of it, and talking about health conditions. What makes you vulnerable… [The fact that] you're from a certain country or you don't speak English is irrelevant in many ways."

Male, 30–49, Oldham

Some people saw that these acts of community solidarity and support were vital – because they felt that there was little alternative support from government:

"It has been more of a community since Covid, before that if you spoke to your neighbour, it was just 'morning' or 'evening', now they're like your lifeline to have some sort of conversation with somebody because of the lockdown… it's really that your neighbours have become your new family… I think the government in general has literally left us to fend for ourselves. So I do talk to my neighbours, I talk a lot more now than I did before Covid, I see a lot more of them out in the street when I go for a walk… So it just seems that if it wasn't for a community thing, I think you would go insane."

Male, 30–49, Cardiff

5.
A LOOK AT HOW CHARITIES AND COMMUNITY GROUPS HAVE RESPONDED TO THE PANDEMIC

Throughout our research we heard about the incredible work of organisations supporting people in the most challenging of circumstances. Below we share details of three such organisations that have kept significant numbers of people buoyed over the last 18 months.

CASE STUDY: OASIS, CARDIFF

Oasis is a large charity based in Splott, Cardiff that supports asylum seekers and refugees in the city, and beyond.

During the pandemic, Oasis remained open to support their clients. Concerned about the welfare of those that they work with, the team were determined that clients could still receive a meal, have someone to talk to, and get advice and support where necessary. There was particular concern for their most marginalised clients, who - if they didn't get a meal from Oasis - may not get a meal at all. They adapted their services - through providing a food delivery service, setting up WhatsApp chats and phone check-ins, and continuing to provide advice, advocacy, and provisions to those in need. Even for those who turned up physically – they were never turned away but were supported in a marquee erected in their carpark-come-courtyard space.

In fact, Oasis scaled up their provision during the pandemic after the opening of Penally camp in Pembrokeshire in September 2020, where up to 250 asylum seekers were housed. Though two hours away, Oasis provided support – unfunded - to people placed in the military base. Despite multiple bureaucratic, logistical, and financial challenges, they arranged for English language classes, organised activities such as yoga and football, and made attempts to set up a social space for the men accommodated at Penally. Oasis have been able to support many of the men that moved from Penally to Cardiff when the camp was closed, and they are now working with partners to prepare for the arrival of refugees from Afghanistan.

Oasis has built a reputation for dealing with challenges constructively. An unofficial motto of 'dealing with what's in front of us', as well as building a place of community – in which over 235 people volunteer – means they have been able to offer a responsive service throughout the pandemic. The pandemic was but one of a number of challenges and crises that organisations such as Oasis have faced in the last few years. They continue to meet the challenge with resolve, and to ensure that everyone they meet receives a 'Warm Welsh Welcome'.

CASE STUDY: WOMEN'S CHAI PROJECT, OLDHAM

The Women's CHAI project is a community organisation based in Oldham that provides weekly support groups to mothers of children attending a number of local schools. The groups seek to "care, help and inspire" local women through mutual support and friendship, and to create opportunities for work, volunteering, learning and creative exploits. While the groups were initially set up for South Asian women, the group membership has broadened recently, with women from white British and other ethnic minority communities also joining.

Uniting the women in the group is their experience of living in a deprived area facing significant inequalities and disadvantage – challenges which have been brought into sharp focus by the pandemic as women have experienced social isolation, poverty, hate crime and rising levels of domestic abuse. Via WhatsApp, Zoom and – latterly - walking groups, they have provided a space to vent about the pandemic and about the challenges that women are facing at home; this has been a vital space to counter the worst effects of isolation. Facilitators worked with other agencies to ensure that public health information was accessible to those that experience language barriers and to minimise the effects of misinformation and conspiracy theories. The group have supported one another too, providing meals or shopping for others who were unable to due to loss of income, isolation, or illness.

It is evident that groups such as these, which are already embedded in communities, are linchpins for social cohesion and integration. The group are already engaged in important work to bridge communities locally. They are proud, for instance, of their involvement in a creative community project run by Oldham Coliseum, which saw local groups create quilt patches responding to the themes of togetherness, hope and connection – and which were brought into a unifying patchwork quilt by the theatre.

Looking to the future, the CHAI project wants to respond proactively to some of the emerging tensions locally, and the group hopes that in the future they can expand the numbers in their groups and encourage women from the Roma community to join. Before the pandemic, the Chai group taking part in an International Women's Day event that brought them together with local Roma women. However, the pandemic has stalled progress – and resources, funding and local-level commitment are inevitably needed in order to continue the work of dispelling myths, understanding one another better, and creating a true sense of togetherness locally.

CASE STUDY: BRUSHSTROKES, SANDWELL

Brushstrokes is a charitable community project of Father Hudson's Care, based in Smethwick, that supports asylum seekers, refugees and others that have migrated to live in Sandwell and West Birmingham.

When the pandemic hit, the organisation adapted its way of working. They moved classes online, coordinated with local partners to ensure that food could be provided to those who needed it, and ensured that advice was available for anyone who was in crisis. Brushstrokes' reputation preceded it, with clients referring other new arrivals to the organisation. Indeed, while other organisations and institutions closed

their doors, Brushstrokes expanded their reach – from supporting around 150 people per week pre-pandemic to supporting 400 per week during the pandemic.

One thing that Brushstrokes hope will stick around after the pandemic is the increased emphasis on partnership working that has emerged locally in response to the pandemic. Working jointly with the local authority has meant that when people present to the homelessness team they are referred on to the charity for ongoing and holistic support. The 'Everyone In' scheme was a real opportunity to get to know those in need of support – by working in partnership, EU nationals that were homeless, for instance, not only received housing assistance but were supported to complete their application for settlement ahead of the EUSS deadline.

Brushstrokes now has its eye on responding to the Afghan crisis, and they are supporting the delivery of the ARAP (Afghan Relocations and Assistance Policy) and providing immediate support to Afghan's housed in 'bridging' hotel accommodation in the area. They are also implementing learning from the pandemic – supporting people to develop literacy and digital skills so that they are not left behind, developing joint assessment processes with local authority teams, and supporting their staff and volunteer team to recover from a period of working in crisis mode. Inevitably they are also mindful of funding. Emergency grants made during the pandemic have been a lifeline for organisations offering such support – but the question of how that funding is sustained once the sense of emergency fades - but the challenges for clients remain - is yet to be answered.

6.
OUR RECOMMENDATIONS

"Communities need to come together more, there should be more integration. If this is our town, this is 'us'. Sandwell should be 'us'... The UK should be 'us'... maybe the MP or corresponding authorities should take note of this."
Case worker, Sandwell

Through this research we have appreciated the huge breadth of work that informal community groups and more formalised community and charitable organisations have undertaken to support one another through the past 18 months. The pandemic, alongside an ever-changing immigration landscape, means that many have been responding to not just one crisis, but multiple crises simultaneously. It has also exposed deep inequalities – both between and within local areas – as the economic, social and health impacts of the pandemic have hit some communities especially hard. Communities, and the organisations working alongside them, have their eye on the future – on how they can recover and reconnect after a prolonged period of separation. The goal of policymakers, at the local and national level, should be to support this to happen.

"The pandemic, alongside an ever-changing immigration landscape, means that many have been responding to not just one crisis, but multiple crises simultaneously"

Below we set out three areas in which action is needed, at both local and national level, so that the conditions for community wellbeing, integration and social cohesion can be met across the UK. These are drawn from our conversations with participants as well as broader conversations with organisation and councils.

First, we advocate for **significant investment in the social infrastructure of communities**, in recognition of the concerns raised by participants that their communities were experiencing the long-standing impacts of austerity and existing inequalities as well as the pandemic. As one participant told us:

"I think the general consensus is that everyone feels a bit abandoned by the government, and I would suggest a little bit of inward investment would be nice."
Male, 50–64, Oldham

Second, given that the worst harms of the pandemic have been exacerbated for those that have migrated, we set out **priority areas for reform in the immigration and asylum system.** Doing so should mean that everyone in our communities – no matter their immigration status - can live healthy, connected and fulfilling lives.

Finally, we offer some suggestions for **local level leadership that fosters inclusivity and integration**, so that councils – working in partnership with community groups, charities and communities themselves – can deliver better outcomes for their residents now and build resilience for the future.

INVEST IN COMMUNITIES THROUGH SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE

The findings from our conversations with settled and migrant communities highlight the importance of government investment to support local cohesion and strengthen the resilience of communities to social and economic shocks. In response to the pandemic and the extended use of social distancing measures, some analysts have called for a 'social stimulus' to support communities (O'Shaughnessy et al 2020). In England, there is an opportunity for **the rebranded Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) to set out a strategy for how to deliver a 'social stimulus' to revitalise civil society post-Covid-19**.

In particular, there is a strong case for investment in 'social infrastructure' – that is, the physical spaces and services that serve as opportunities for people to meet, interact, and form relationships. It is this investment, perhaps more so than investment in physical infrastructure projects, that will make a tangible different to the lives of communities across the UK. We therefore urge that the government **brings forward plans to make a significant long-term investment in social infrastructure as part of its 'levelling up' agenda**.

Rather than setting up a separate fund for social infrastructure – which risks complicating an already fragmented funding landscape for local and combined authorities – we propose that the forthcoming Shared Prosperity Fund (SPF) is used as the primary vehicle for delivering this investment. As set out in a recent article by IPPR on the SPF, we recommend that the fund at least matches the equivalent scale that the UK would have received from EU structural funds (around £11 billion over the 2021–27 period according to CPMR 2019). Rather than distributing the funds directly to recipients across the UK through a competitive bidding process, the government should develop a transparent and fair methodology for allocating amounts to each nation and region, based on criteria such as productivity levels, skills profiles, unemployment, household income, and wellbeing (Roscoe et al 2021).

We also recommend that the Shared Prosperity Fund explicitly includes an objective to promote social cohesion and integration as one of its funding priorities, in recognition of the importance of the public sphere for economic development. This reflects the recent recommendation from the APPG on social integration that the guidance for the UK Levelling Up and Towns Funds should be revised to include a requirement that they are used to support social connection (APPG on Social Integration 2021). Moreover, in order to make the investment as inclusive as possible, the government should make clear that all communities, regardless of immigration status or 'no recourse to public funds' conditions, are eligible for support under SPF projects.

Finally, as far as possible we recommend that powers over how the fund are used are determined at the local level. We therefore suggest that the lead authorities responsible for managing the SPF are able to design the funding allocation process in their own way and make independent decisions for their localities. Moreover, as we have argued previously, we recommend that each lead authority sets up local residents' panels – representing both newcomers and long-standing residents – to consult with their communities about the priorities of the fund. This would help to ensure that residents from different backgrounds have the opportunity to have a direct say in how investments in social infrastructure are made (Henry and Morris 2019).

REFORM IN THE IMMIGRATION AND ASYLUM SYSTEM

The findings from this report – in particular our focus groups with migrant communities in each of our research sites – have demonstrated the critical role of immigration policy in shaping experiences of integration in local communities. The Covid-19 crisis has highlighted how immigration rules can have major implications for social inclusion, from access to healthcare to protection against destitution. A post-pandemic strategy on cohesion and integration is therefore intimately connected with the decisions of the Home Office on UK-wide immigration policy.

We highlight a number of priority areas of immigration policy that we have found are in particular need of reform in light of the pressures of the pandemic. First, while there has been considerable investment in integration for those on refugee resettlement pathways, current asylum rules risk severely hampering the integration of those who make spontaneous asylum applications. Given the increasing delays within the asylum process and the extended periods of limbo faced by many in the asylum system, it is vital to consider the process of integration for people while they wait for their application to be decided. Our focus groups highlighted particular concerns over the quality of contingent asylum accommodation, reinforcing the findings of other inquiries. Moreover, we also heard about the risks of social and economic exclusion due to bars on asylum seekers working and accessing the mainstream benefits system.

We therefore recommend that action is taken to ensure that the government promotes the integration of spontaneous asylum seekers on an equal footing to those who arrive through resettlement routes. In particular, we suggest that the Home Secretary immediately ends the use of former military barracks as contingency asylum accommodation and conducts a broader review into the quality of initial accommodation. We also recommend that the Home Office considers proposals to allow asylum seekers to work in any occupation (unconstrained by the Shortage Occupation List) after six months of waiting for their asylum outcome (in line with recommendations made by the 'Lift The Ban' coalition (2020)).

Looking beyond the asylum system, the pandemic has highlighted the limitations of the 'no recourse to public funds' (NRPF) policy (as discussed earlier in the report). The NRPF regime meant that many were excluded from mainstream welfare support during the pandemic due to their immigration status. This placed additional pressures on local authorities, who in many cases have statutory responsibilities to support people who are destitute (Morris and Qureshi 2021a). Moreover, the onset of Covid-19 led to a surge in applications from people asking to lift the NRPF condition, on the basis of either destitution, child welfare, or other exceptional financial circumstances (Home Office 2021d). This concession is, however, only available to people on particular immigration routes, including the 10-year partner, parent or private life route and the new BN(O) visa.

A meaningful approach to integration must therefore address the risks of social and economic exclusion caused by the NRPF policy. In particular, we recommend that the opportunity to lift the NRPF condition should be extended to individuals on all forms of leave, rather than only those on particular routes, and that the application process should be simplified and streamlined.

LOCAL LEVEL LEADERSHIP TO FOSTER INCLUSIVITY AND INTEGRATION

We recognise that there exist constraints at the local level as to what can be delivered given limited budgets and other financial pressures - exacerbated by the need to respond to the unfolding coronavirus crisis. However, this is not reason enough for complacency. We suggest that there are three key ways that local authorities and regional bodies can move the dial on integration and social cohesion as we emerge from the pandemic.

First, **adopt 'sanctuary' principles that create the conditions for integration.** There is a growing sanctuary movement in the UK which is building a network of towns, cities, boroughs, regions and nations that create a welcoming place of safety for all those fleeing violence and persecution (City of Sanctuary 2017). In the US context, the 'sanctuary city' movement sees local officials limit their cooperation with agencies delivering an immigration enforcement agenda (Morris 2020b). In practice, we see that promoting sanctuary should mean upholding the rights of migrant communities, supporting their integration, and challenging unjust policies that inhibit the wellbeing of migrants – be that through destitution, detention or exclusion from mainstream provision.

One way that local leaders might tangibly enact the principle of sanctuary is through committing to limit cooperation with the Home Office for immigration enforcement purposes. Local authorities should reflect on where their own competencies, agendas and goals may conflict with those of central government (ie integration versus immigration enforcement) and consider how they might reasonably respond to these tensions. Examples of this can be seen in the refusal of councils to cooperate with the Home Office on its policy that could see rough sleepers deported from the UK (Bulman 2021b). Such commitments should be instilled across council departments, with data-sharing between public services and the Home Office delimited according to agreed and clearly outlined guidance. Where this is not yet possible, an audit of existing arrangements could be instigated to determine what data-sharing is currently taking place with the Home Office, on what basis, and what would help to address ambiguity in current data sharing protocols (Morris 2021).

In addition, councils should encourage local GP services and healthcare providers to adopt 'safe surgery' principles (DOTW 2019), which would support the inclusion of migrant, refugee and asylum-seeking groups – important at all times, but especially critical to promote public health more generally in the context of the pandemic.

Sanctuary should be viewed holistically and strategies for inclusion and integration should reflect this. They should not be limited to those seeking asylum or who have refugee status but encompass all those who are without immigration status, who are subject to NRPF, and who have pre-settled status – who may also face the sharp end of the 'hostile environment'.

In light of challenges highlighted in this study related to language barriers during the pandemic we also recommend that local and combined authorities ramp up efforts to coordinate ESOL activities in their local areas – particularly between formal college provision and informal community provision. In addition, ensuring the timely provision of translated guidance in community languages should be a priority for local level strategies. This would benefit from cooperation with community groups, such as those enabled by the Community Champions scheme.

Second, **commit to joined up working on integration.** This should include, where possible, developing local and regional integration strategies that includes cross sector input to deliver more accessible and inclusive services

to migrant communities, as well as to monitor and support greater community cohesion in areas in which new migrants settle. This is not something that should be done from scratch but should build on evaluation and learning from previous government funding and programmes to support the integration of asylum-seeking, refugee and migrant communities - such as the Controlling Migration Fund and the Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (see also Broadhead 2021).

It might also include models of partnership working that build trust between public services, the third sector and the communities they serve. For instance, we have heard positive feedback about hybrid approaches that see the statutory sector and the voluntary sector working together to provide inclusive services for both migrant and settled communities. Beyond this, the local authority has a key role in convening and bringing together those that are working on issues of integration and cohesion at the local level, so that there can be effective collaboration and intelligence-sharing.

Part of creating an effective integration strategy is recognising the value of all the players that contribute to promoting integration at the local level. Supporting local voluntary and community groups that are so often the backbone of communities to weather funding uncertainties is critical. The funding landscape is challenging, and especially so for smaller 'by and for' groups (ie groups led by people from the same communities they support) that are often the first to respond to crises but may lack capacity to do long-term strategic fundraising.

Third, **proactively tackle community tensions.** In our research we heard about tensions that have, for the most part, simmered under while residents were under lockdown restrictions. Ensuring that such tensions do not spill over will take a proactive engagement with communities – to understand where tensions lie, to engage communities in productive and open conversations, and eventually to deliver more opportunities for different groups to come together in safe and enjoyable ways to build trust and understanding. As we heard from one person in Oldham:

> *"I don't want to sound cynical, but I think it's going to take more than a carnival to sort this town out… When the race riots were happening there was talk about having local communities and people meeting in a safe environment where we had the ability to build trust. So I don't know if we need something like that again…"*
> Male, 18–29, Oldham

Tackling tensions is especially important as the pandemic has cemented the role of social media in people's daily lives, which has become a key site of disinformation and conspiracy theories that can inflame tensions online as well as at the local level toward minority groups (Commission for Countering Extremism 2020; Carter and Clarke 2021). Driving forward with events, campaigns and projects that counter extremist or hateful messages is paramount. Mapping and working in partnership with organisations and groups that are trusted in communities will be vital to the success of tackling tensions and promoting cohesion.

Finally, we want to end with one last thought, one that spans the recommendations above and which we heard recurringly across our focus groups with participants; start with the **principle of co-production.** Communities are keen that they should be consulted on their views: that there should be meaningful mechanisms for their voice to be heard and for them to be involved in decision making about their local areas. Where mechanisms do exist for codesign and coproduction on matters related to integration and cohesion with communities, local councils should assess

the extent to which these are inclusive of both migrant and receiving communities, and ensure that they are seeking out the views and experiences of a diverse and representative group of residents. As we heard from one woman in Sandwell:

> *"If they could do something that would involve all the communities and perhaps actually speak to all of the communities and all the different community groups and different ages within the groups about what they would like and what they want to see happen. I think that would be a good way of trying to bring people together."*
> **Female, 30–49, Sandwell**

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APPENDIX A

METHODOLOGY

Researchers held focus groups online and in-person with participants from receiving and migrant communities living in Cardiff, Oldham, and Sandwell to understand how the pandemic had impacted their local communities.

The geographical scale of our research sites

Our Welsh research site was situated in a neighbourhood within the capital city of Cardiff, while the two English sites are towns within commuting distance of major English cities: Manchester and Birmingham. For both our online and in-person focus groups we sought to recruit participants from defined neighbourhoods (typically MSOA level) within our case study areas – in efforts to look at comparable sized areas – however due to limitations of recruitment, in some areas we had to recruit from a wider geography (typically spanning two to three MSOA areas).

In Oldham, participants came from one neighbourhood spanning two MSOAs close to the town centre; in Cardiff, participants lived across three closely neighbouring MSOA districts between one and two miles outside of the city centre; and in Sandwell, participants were more broadly distributed across three MSOA areas, though the majority lived in, or close to, densely populated town centres in the borough.

Focus groups with the receiving community

Focus groups were held online with participants residing in Cardiff, Oldham, and Sandwell. Participants were from what we have termed the 'receiving' community – that is they had typically lived in the UK and in these areas most, or all, of their lives. Seven focus groups were held in total reaching a total of 45 people; two focus groups were held in each area between March and May 2021 and an additional focus group was held with South Asian residents in Oldham in September 2021. Some of the women in the final focus group had migrated to join family members, though typically they had lived in the area ten years or more.

Across the three case study areas we aimed to recruit a diverse set of participants, with participants selected on the basis of gender, age, qualifications, ethnicity and length of time in the area. Overall, just over half of our participants were women (57 per cent) and roughly the same amount were aged 30–49 (55 per cent). The remaining participants were equally split between those aged 18–29 and those aged 50–64, plus one person aged above 65. Just under two-thirds of participants (62 per cent) had qualifications equivalent to A-level or above. Just over half of participants were white British (53 per cent), with the remaining participants from minority ethnic communities, including Pakistani, Indian, Black British, Black Caribbean, Black African and mixed heritage backgrounds.

There were some challenges with recruitment due to the nature of recruiting via online panels (rather than 'on-street' recruitment). For instance, the final focus group in Oldham was arranged via a community organisation as we were unable to recruit anyone from a South Asian background in the first two groups, despite these communities making up a significant portion of the population in the town.

Participants in the first six focus groups were also screened on the basis of their views about migration and on Brexit. On a scale of 1–10 (where 1 was strongly

disagree and 10 strongly agree), participants were asked how far they agreed that migration contributed positively to the UK. On the whole participants were more positive about migration than not, with just over half recording their views as between seven and 10 (51 per cent). Another 46 per cent were in the middle of the scale, reporting between four and six on the scale. On Brexit, correspondingly, participants were slightly more inclined to identify with a 'remain' position, with 57 per cent leaning towards remain and 43 per cent towards leave.

Focus groups with people that have migrated

Focus groups were held in person with 25 people that had migrated to Cardiff, Oldham, and Sandwell between June and July 2021. These groups were held in person due to the digital barriers facing those communities.

The focus group in Sandwell held 10 participants, who either had refugee status or were seeking asylum. They were recruited through the charity Brushstrokes, a community project supporting refugees and migrants mainly across Sandwell and West Birmingham. Participants came from a wide range of countries, including Nigeria, Albania, Iran, Iraq and Pakistan. Six were male and four were female. Most participants were between 30 and 49 years of age, but two participants were in the 18 to 29 age range and one participant was in the 50 to 64 age range.

In Cardiff, the focus group was made up of four people with refugee status and a further three people seeking asylum. They were recruited through the charity Oasis, helping refugees and asylum seekers integrate within the local community. There were four females and three males, all from a wide range of countries, including Sudan, Turkey, Honduras, Iraq, and Nigeria. A wide age range was represented, with three participants between the age of 30 and 49, but also one participant above 65 and another below 29.

The focus group in Oldham consisted of eight participants who had migrated from Romania, within the European Union. There were five females and three males in this group, six of which were between the ages of 30 and 49. The other two participants were between 18 and 29 and 50 and 64 respectively.

Analysis

The focus group recordings were transcribed and NVivo software used to analyse the transcripts for key themes pertaining to the impact of the pandemic on communities.

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