

# Policy Briefing

## Newcomer Wellbeing and Placemaking in Southeast England

How do refugees and asylum seekers experience wellbeing and placemaking in urban contexts? The Displacement, Placemaking and Wellbeing in the City (DWELL) project explored this question through interviews with people working for non-governmental and community organisations in southeast England. It found that the current asylum system negatively impacts wellbeing and placemaking for asylum seekers, and that access to urban spaces is key to building community connections. Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and faith groups play an important role in sustaining a sense of wellbeing and place for refugees and asylum seekers.

### Key messages

- Asylum seekers may experience challenges to their mental health as a result of their previous experiences, and mental health issues are often exacerbated by the asylum system. Changes to the national asylum system are necessary to improve asylum seekers' wellbeing and to facilitate integration and placemaking.
- Accommodation arrangements for asylum seekers should be reformed to ensure that people experience a sense of stability and dignity. Having internet access in asylum accommodation is vital, not just for maintaining connections with family and friends overseas but also for accessing local services.
- Equitable access to communal urban spaces is an important step towards building and strengthening community connections.
- The significant work of NGOs and faith groups in encouraging a sense of place and wellbeing among refugees and asylum seekers should be recognised and supported.



**Placemaking and wellbeing are interlinked: the process of making a place is likely to influence wellbeing, and wellbeing in turn affects the ability to make a place.**

## The effects of uncertainty

Placemaking can be understood as the individual and collective process of creating spaces of belonging. Wellbeing is a multidimensional concept and includes social, emotional, physical, spiritual, and mental aspects. Placemaking and wellbeing are interlinked: the process of making a place is likely to influence wellbeing, and wellbeing in turn affects the ability to make a place.

Our research in southeast England found that asylum seekers experience significant challenges in their attempts to make a place, and confront numerous barriers to their wellbeing. They may experience anxiety, depression, or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as a result of experiences in their home country or on their journey to the UK. These mental health difficulties frequently impact people's ability to form social connections and to contribute to collective placemaking. Yet the research found a significant lack of mental health support for asylum seekers in the UK, with long waiting lists at mental health charities and within the National Health Service (NHS). There was also evidence that mental health difficulties are exacerbated by the length and nature of the asylum process. People seeking asylum in the UK frequently wait years for a decision on their leave to remain. During this period, they are not permitted to work and there is very little communication from the Home Office. As well as the detrimental effects of this situation on asylum seekers' mental health, the uncertainty and dependence created by these aspects of the asylum system impact people's ability to integrate into society and to 'make a place'. The research found that even when asylum is granted, refugees may be rejected by potential employers due to mutual misunderstanding of refugees' rights and entitlements to work under UK law.

## Asylum accommodation

Historically, the Home Office has provided accommodation for asylum seekers in the UK while their asylum claim is being considered.



**Asylum seekers are often given little information or notice about changes in accommodation, with some reporting less than 24 hours' notice.**

However, the British government recently announced a plan to send asylum seekers who have entered the country by illegal immigration routes to Rwanda, where their asylum claims will be processed. People who are permitted to remain in the UK while seeking asylum cannot choose where they will be accommodated. Asylum seekers are often moved from one site to another, compounding uncertainty and limiting their ability to settle and make a place. One research participant described an Eritrean asylum seeker who was suddenly moved from a small town on the south coast of England to Cardiff, the capital city of Wales, and so was unable to complete an English language course she had been doing at a local college. Asylum seekers are often given little information or notice about changes in accommodation, with some reporting less than 24 hours' notice. Misinformation is a further problem. One asylum seeker was told by the Home Office that he would be moved to East Croydon, on the outskirts of London, when he was actually being moved to Hastings – a seaside town more than 75km away. The research also found that asylum seekers frequently experience delays in receiving financial support following their dispersal to new accommodation, which sometimes leaves them unable to feed their family for several days.

Asylum seekers in the UK are housed in different types of accommodation, including initial or 'emergency' accommodation and longer-term temporary or 'dispersal' accommodation. Our research found that

during the Covid-19 pandemic, 'emergency' forms of accommodation, including hostels, hotels, and bed and breakfasts (B&Bs), were used to house asylum seekers for long periods of time. Many families were housed in single hotel rooms with no furniture other than beds and with no access to a communal space where they could socialise with others. The simultaneously stifling and isolating effects of these arrangements severely impacted asylum seekers' mental wellbeing.

The research also found that during the pandemic, asylum seekers in emergency accommodation were often subject to high levels of monitoring and surveillance, including threats from hotel managers that any complaints about the accommodation would affect their asylum claims. One research participant suggested that housing asylum seekers in hotels and hostels encourages segregation by marking them as distinct from the rest of the community. It was also reported that in private 'dispersal' accommodation, housing is often not serviced by council waste collection, creating shame and indignity for asylum seekers and preventing them from taking pride in their homes.

Research participants stressed that the internet is a key mode of contact between asylum seekers and family and friends in other countries. During the pandemic, access to the internet was necessary in order to make applications to schools and other local public services. Digital connectivity is clearly a crucial component of transnational and local placemaking that promotes social and emotional wellbeing among asylum seekers. Yet our research found that internet access is not provided in any form of asylum accommodation, and that many asylum seekers lack the funds to purchase mobile phone data. There is an urgent need to ensure better online access for asylum seekers.

### **Building community**

Urban spaces have the potential to promote community connections and to encourage

social integration. Our research found that for asylum seekers and refugees in southeast England, places of worship such as churches and mosques provide opportunities to form and strengthen social 'bonds' along religious and ethnic lines of identification. Social 'bridges' across religious and ethnic differences can also be developed in communal spaces such as parks, community centres, and libraries. However, the process of joining a library can be challenging as it requires a local guarantor, and most asylum seekers and refugees do not have one. Many also do not have the money to socialise in spaces that are not free to access such as cafés, pubs, and coffee shops.

### **The role of NGOs and faith groups**

Our research found that NGOs and faith groups play a key role in compensating for gaps in government support for asylum seekers and refugees. These organisations and groups promote relational wellbeing by providing English lessons and access to communal spaces in which to socialise. One research participant spoke of their work in empowering young refugees and asylum seekers by sharing knowledge about local leisure activities such as bowling. They also described helping young people to navigate the asylum system, including teaching them about their rights and entitlements to employment and services such as the NHS. Some organisations give asylum seekers and refugees the opportunity to garden and to connect to the land in tangible placemaking processes. Others offer creative activities that encourage people to express their cultural identity, and also link asylum seekers and refugees to mental health support. However, stigma in relation to mental health was reported as a key challenge. More broadly, it was noted that many refugees and asylum seekers have a strong desire to reciprocate support and to contribute to broader placemaking in society. It was notable that a sense of wellbeing was linked to opportunities for both giving and receiving.

## Policy recommendations

- **Reform the current asylum system.** As well as improving mental health support for asylum seekers, there is a need to reduce delays in the asylum decision-making process, and to ensure clear communication from the Home Office throughout the process. Asylum seekers should also be allowed to work and thereby contribute to society and develop a collective sense of 'place'. There needs to be better understanding among both employers and refugees of refugee rights and entitlements in relation to work.
- **Ensure that asylum accommodation promotes stability, dignity, and connectivity.** Asylum seekers should be given adequate notice and information about being moved to other accommodation. Placing asylum seekers in emergency forms of accommodation for long periods of time leads to social isolation, which has serious consequences for mental health and wellbeing. Internet access should be provided in asylum accommodation to ensure wellbeing and enable placemaking.
- **Encourage equitable access to communal urban spaces.** Although communal urban spaces can support a sense of local community, access to these spaces is frequently inequitable. These spaces must be able to be accessed by asylum seekers and refugees, who may lack social or financial capital. Encouraging equitable access to communal urban spaces will require decisive action by local governments and policymakers.
- **Support the work of NGOs and faith groups.** NGOs and faith groups play a key role in supporting wellbeing and placemaking for asylum seekers and refugees. This role should be recognised by the government in the form of increased funding for these organisations and groups. However, it is also important to recognise that the solutions offered by these organisations are temporary. There must be longer-term structural changes to ensure that asylum seekers and refugees are able to make a place and experience positive wellbeing in the UK.■

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### Further reading

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