



Meeting the social care needs of refugees and asylum seekers

Discussion material

How you can use this discussion material

Before our first session, we'd like everyone to read this document which summarises the evidence from research, practice and lived experience. The aim of this material is to spark discussions in your local Networks about your experiences and ideas for change.

Throughout the document you will find the following questions:

- Do you have any experience or knowledge about the needs of people seeking asylum in the UK?
- Do you think that categories such as 'Asylum Seekers', 'Refugees' and 'Vulnerable People' are helpful to understand the problem, the needs of a person, and provide the right support?
- How much do you know about the UK national policies about refugees and asylum seekers? What are your thoughts about UK politics on refugees and asylum seekers?
- What do you think of the needs identified by the evidence? Is there anything missing or something you don't agree with?
- What is your experience about the needs of people seeking asylum and refugees? Does this resonate with what is described by the evidence?
- Have you heard of any of the case studies presented in the documents? What do you think of these projects? Are you aware of any similar projects in your local area?

You will find these questions at the end of each section with a space for your notes - we hope that this activity will help you to get ready for your Network group discussion.

Although the document talks about entitlement and migration policies, it is not a legal guideline. There are links to websites which can provide more correct and updated information.

The content of this document may also leave you with questions you'd like to ask the IMPACT Networks team, or other Networks across the UK - you can feed these back to your Local Network Coordinator to pass on.

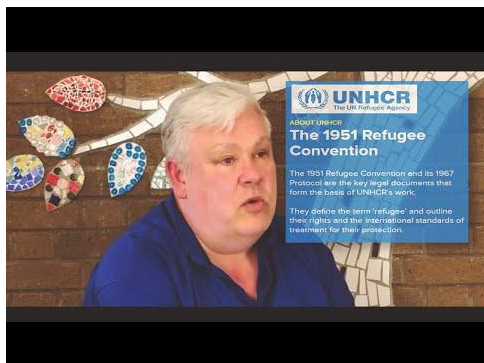
What's the issue?

According to the Migration Observatory, around 1.2 million long-term international migrants were in the UK in 2023. Of these, 81,000 came to claim asylum, which is equivalent to around 7% of all immigrants in that year (Migration Observatory, 2024). Even if 7% is not a big number, refugees and people seeking asylum are recognised as one of the most vulnerable groups of people in society (Home Office, 2022; Public Health Wales, 2023). As such, refugees and asylum seekers have specific health and social care needs which are different from ethnic minoritised groups (Patel and Kelley, 2006; Scie, 2010; BMA, 2025). With this, evidence means that it is crucial to avoid generalizing services designed for other minority groups when providing support to asylum seekers and refugees. While some needs may overlap, refugees and asylum seekers often have unique challenges related to their displacement, cultural backgrounds, and legal statuses that require tailored approaches (Patel and Kelley, 2006; Scie, 2010; BMA, 2025).

While there is a general acknowledgement that refugees and people seeking asylum are in need of more support and protection, evidence shows that these groups of people find

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various barriers to access basic services such as health and social care, good quality housing, employment and education (British Red Cross and UNHCR, 2022; Lingham and Kilkey, 2025; Yeo, 2023; Walsh and Ferazzoli, 2023). The review also suggests that there is a lack of evidence specifically around social care and refugees and asylum seekers in the UK. Most of the evidence explores other needs such as health, housing, finance, employment, but social care is overlooked. For this reason, IMPACT decided to focus a network on the 'social care needs of refugees and people seeking asylum'.



Watch the [video](#) on the left (3 minutes) - this is a short interview with a volunteer support worker, and project lead, who first got involved with supporting refugees back in 2015. The video explains some of the most common and often misunderstood aspects of how the United Kingdom supports people seeking asylum.

The person interviewed explores some of what it means to be an asylum seeker or a refugee, what circumstances lead people to flee their homes. He also discusses the kinds of support available to them once they are here, including financial assistance, housing, and access to work.

Question: What do you know about the problem discussed so far? Do you have any experience of migration and people seeking asylum? Any thoughts about the video?

Legal definitions, needs and support

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) defines a **refugee** as a person who has been forced to flee their country of origin and cannot return to their home country due to the fear of persecution (UNHCR, 2023). Tom Vickers (2012) argues that the term 'refugee' should refer to *all those seeking sanctuary, regardless of whether or not their application is legally successful*.

While we agree on this principle, it is important to **make a distinction between the current legal usage in the UK** and other definitions **because this is strictly linked to what a person is entitled to** - in other words, different legal migration status are linked to different levels of access to services.

- In the UK, a '**Refugee**' is an individual to whom the UK government has offered protection in accordance with the Refugee Convention 1951 and granted leave to stay (Scie, 2010). As such, a refugee is legally 'entitled' to access services, housing and benefit support.
- An '**Asylum seeker**' is a person who has asked for protection but has not received a decision on their application to become a refugee, or is waiting for the outcome of

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an appeal (Welsh government, 2019). According to the UK policies, people who are still seeking asylum are entitled to a limited access to services.

- People seeking asylum have also been noted in the evidence to have a 'vulnerability' (Ecre, 2017) which impacts on entitlement to services and support. 'Vulnerability' is a legal category that means a group of people requiring specific measures to safeguard their rights (Ecre, 2017). For example, Children and People with Disabilities are considered a 'vulnerable group'. Therefore, there is an acknowledgement of **the need to develop specific measures to accommodate the specific needs of certain groups of refugees and people seeking asylum** (Ecre, 2017).

Evidence highlighted some criticisms around the use of vulnerability as a concept because it can lead to a negative perception of refugees and people seeking asylum only as passive subjects rather than being people actively claiming for human rights (Ecre, 2017; Krivenko, 2022). However, it is an important categorization in social care because this should drive social care practitioners to provide accessible, appropriate and effective care (see [the guidance on Vulnerability](#) from the UK government, 2022).

Question: What do you think of these categories (Refugees, Asylum Seekers, Vulnerable People)? Are they helpful to understand the needs of a person, and provide the right support?

Asylum policies across the 4 UK nations



Seeking asylum is a human right (UNHCR, 2023). However, evidence highlights that recent politics in the UK and worldwide are becoming more restrictive and controlling, rather than focused on support and protection (Walsh and Ferazzoli, 2023; Patel and Kelley, 2007; Mayblin and James, 2018). In the UK, the provision of social and welfare support for asylum seekers has gradually been reduced causing multiple gaps in service provision (Patel and Kelley, 2007; Mayblin and James, 2018; Murphy and Vieten, 2016).

Additionally, frequent changes to legislation have generated confusion about entitlements, creating barriers to accessing services (Patel and Kelley, 2007; Walsh and Ferazzoli, 2023).

The UK government has responsibility for asylum and immigration policy for the whole of the UK (including Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales). Evidence suggests that the present UK political context is not very 'welcoming' for people seeking asylum and migration more broadly (Maguire 2023, Walsh and Ferazzoli, 2023). The 'hostile environment' - a series of policies aimed to make life impossible for migrants and refugees

who do not have permission to live in the UK - are impacting on asylum seekers' access to services and basic human rights, such as housing, health, decent standard of living, family and private life (Maguire, 2023; Yeo, 2023; Isaacs et al., 2022).

For this reason, the Permanent Peoples' Tribunal (PPT) held a hearing in London in November 2018 to address violations of migrant and refugee human rights, focusing on the UK's 'hostile environment' policies. The tribunal examined the impact of these policies, which restricted access to housing, healthcare, and other basic rights, and found the UK government guilty of violating the human rights of migrants and refugees. However, nothing changed in the UK policies (Bassell, 2022).

The integration of refugees is a 'devolved matter'. This means that decision-making power has been transferred from the UK Parliament to other institutions across the 4 UK nations: the Scottish Parliament, the Welsh Parliament, the Northern Ireland Assembly, and the Local Authorities (LAs) in England. Each of these institutions is discussing **the importance of a Refugee Integration Strategy** but these are unevenly developed.

- **England** is following the ['Integrated communities action plan'](#) published by the UK Government in 2019. The aim of this plan was to create a more integrated community. It set out some actions specific to integrating refugees, which included increasing the provision of information to newly-arrived refugees, and working across government, civil society and other partners to improve the coordination and provision of services. Each local authority is interpreting and implementing this at their own discretion.
- **Scotland** has to follow the UK government national policies, and the Scottish Parliament has produced the [New Scots Refugee Integration Strategy Delivery Plan 2024-2026](#) with **six main goals, including** - *"New Scots live in safe, welcoming, inclusive communities, where everyone's dignity is respected and everyone is able to build diverse relationships and healthy intercultural bonds"* and *"New Scots are able to access well-coordinated services, which recognise and meet their rights and needs"*.
- **Wales** is an important exception, not only in the UK context but in Europe because it is the only country which has declared itself as a "Nation of Sanctuary" in 2019 with the aim to be a welcoming place for refugees and asylum seekers (Edwards and Wisthaler, 2023). This commitment is supported by a government plan with over 130 actions focused on integrating people seeking asylums and refugees into Welsh society. The initiative aims *to ensure that people seeking sanctuary feel safe, understood, and valued, and can contribute to the rich tapestry of Welsh life* (Welsh Government, 2019). So far, this was only an ambition but Edwards and Wisthaler (2023) highlighted the symbolic power of this declaration.

- The complexity of the **Northern Ireland** context in terms of racism, asylum policies and the history of the country was also raised by the [2024/2025 IMPACT network on 'Strengthening Inclusion and Anti-racist practices'](#) run by the British Association of Social Workers (BASW) in NI. Evidence noted that the country has seen an increase in the numbers of asylum seekers and refugees in recent years (Murphy and Vieten, 2022) but the **Northern Ireland refugee integration strategy is still new and in development**. A consultation started in 2021 and it was promoted by the Executive's Racial Equality Strategy 2015 - 2025 (Northern Ireland Executive Office, 2022). However, a strategy has been published only recently in 2025. One of the main criticisms of the strategy is that, in contrast with Scottish and Welsh plans, the Northern Ireland one doesn't provide any single indicator or performance measurement (Law Centre NI, 2025).

Question: Were you aware of the UK national policies about refugees and asylum seekers? Does your experiences of seeking asylum, entitlement and access to services resonate with what described in the section you have just read?

The needs of refugees and asylum seekers, and entitlement to services

Evidence shows that there is a general acknowledgement that people seeking asylum and refugees have very specific needs due a combination of factors related to:

- **Life before applying for asylum** (e.g. escaping from war and persecution, risk encountered during their journey such as physical and/or sexual violence, dangerous route, starvation) (Home Office, 2022; Rethink, 2025)
- **Individual characteristics and intersectional factors** (E.g. disabilities, gender, sex, age, long-term physical and/or mental health conditions) (Yeo, 2023; Rethink, 2025)
- **Isolation, social exclusion, language barriers and culture estrangement** (Refugee Action, 2017; Maguire, 2023; Yeo, 2023; Isaacs et al., 2022; Lingham and Kilkey, 2025)
- **UK migration policies and waiting time for asylum requests** (Walsh and Ferazzoli, 2023; Yeo, 2023)
- **Increased risk of exploitation and abuse** due to the lack of advocacy and support (British Red Cross and UNHCR, 2022)

In this document, we have grouped those needs into 4 categories:

- Health and Mental Health Support
- Social Care
- Housing, Basic Needs and Financial support
- Information, Legal and Advocacy Support

However, in the present UK migration context, it is impossible to talk about the needs of people seeking asylum and refugees without mentioning what they are entitled to - *Please do not use this document as a legal guideline.*

Health and Mental Health Support



What is entitlement to health? This short [video](#) (11 minutes) explains the entitlements to NHS services and to vaccination for migrants in England. Watch it if you would like to know more about what asylum seekers and refugees are entitled to.

Refugees and asylum seekers are entitled to access NHS provision - although asylum seekers are limited in services they can access (see [the BMA toolkit](#) for more information).

When looking into the physical and mental health needs of asylum seekers and refugees, a guideline from the British Medical Association (2025) explains that refugees and asylum seekers can have complex health needs and holistic and person-centred care is essential.

The guideline identifies as common health challenges:

- untreated communicable diseases
- poorly controlled chronic conditions
- maternity care
- mental health and specialist support needs

Mental health is one of the most common health issues for asylum seekers and refugees highlighted by the evidence. According to Rethink Factsheet (2025), refugees or asylum seekers are more likely to experience mental illness than the rest of the population, in particular, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, anxiety disorders, and suicidal ideation. Around the world around 3 in 10 refugees and asylum seekers experience PTSD.

While a common narrative in media and political discourse is that asylum seekers and refugees are a burden to the national health care system (Shavisi, 2019), a report from the WHO (2018) noted that migrants, in general, in the UK and elsewhere in Europe tend to use fewer services than native populations.

Adult Social Care

In the UK, social care refers to the support provided to individuals who need assistance with daily living due to illness, disability, age, or other factors, aiming to help them maintain independence and wellbeing (The King's Fund, 2017). When we talk about social care, this includes:

- Care packages
- Direct payments to enable a person to arrange their own care
- Residential care and supported living placements
- Safeguarding inquiry and plan when an adult with care and support needs is at risk of abuse or neglect

When looking at the entitlement to social care for asylum seekers the law is not very clear (Immigration Advice Service, 2025). Broadly speaking, social care is not a 'public fund' and so can be provided to a person who has no recourse to public funds (See [NRPF network](#), no date). This means that social care can also be provided to people seeking asylum who are accommodated by the Home Office (See [this document from the Home Office](#) for more information).

It is worth noting that there **is an important entitlement change in relation to age**. The Home Office makes funding available to local authorities in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland in respect to the costs of supporting unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC) ([Gov.uk](#)). A UASC is an individual under 18 applying for asylum and who is separated from their parents and not being cared for by an adult. However, this means that until 18 years old, UASC are entitled to extra support but this is interrupted soon before the day the young person turns 18.

Housing, Basic Needs, and Financial support

Housing, basic needs, financial support are interconnected aspects of individual wellbeing and societal support. Everyone has the right to adequate housing - this includes the right to a safe, secure, and affordable place to live (see [OHCHR factsheet](#) on Human Rights and Housing).

- Asylum seekers who are accepted by the UK government are recognised with the title of 'refugees', and can then apply for housing or benefits in the UK.
- Individuals who are seeking asylum generally cannot access mainstream welfare benefits like Universal Credit. This condition is called "No recourse to public funds" (NRPF). However, they may be eligible for asylum support, provided by the Home

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Office, which can include housing and financial assistance while their asylum claim is being processed (See [webpage from UK Gov](#)).

- People seeking asylum are offered basic housing on a no-choice basis anywhere in the UK. This accommodation can be in hotels or army barracks as well as in normal housing.
- People seeking asylum are also entitled to cash support, which is £49.18 for each person in the household. This is aimed for food, clothing and toiletries. If the accommodation provides the meals, the allowance will be £9.95 for each person in the household instead.

Most people seeking asylum are also not entitled to work in the UK. There are only two groups - those who have been waiting for more than 1 year for a decision and those who were in the UK with a working Visa before seeking asylum - that might be entitled to work (see [the NRPF network webpage](#) for more information) but, in this case, they are only able to work roles that are on the UK Visas and Immigration shortage occupation list (Poverty and Inequality Commission, 2023).

Information, Legal and Advocacy Support

As seen, the asylum system in the UK is very complex. Entitlement to services and support is strictly linked to the legal migration status and navigating the system can be challenging (Griffiths and Yeo, 2021). Not only for refugees and asylum seekers, but for all migrants - being in a new country means often dealing with another language, a different culture and a different service provision (Refugee Action, 2017; Lingham and Kilkey, 2025; Walsh and Ferazzoli, 2023). Prompt, culturally appropriate and translated information is not only important to navigate the complexity of the legal system but it is essential to find, understand and access the UK services (British Red Cross, 2023; Wilding, 2022; British Red Cross and UNHCR, 2022).

Question: What do you think of these needs? Is there anything missing? Were you aware of the limitations given by entitlement?

Borders, Barriers and Inequalities

This link between the migration status of a person and the entitlement to services is a central element of the 'hostile environment' politics (Griffiths and Yeo, 2021). Health and social care professionals, but also those people providing other services such as renting houses or ESOL Classes, are required to check the migration status to verify if people are entitled (can access) those services - people studying migration have called this control strategy as 'everyday borders' (Yuval-Davies et al., 2018). This has created a challenging context for practitioners to provide support, and for asylum seekers and refugees to

access services to address their needs (Walsh and Ferazzoli, 2023; Lingham and Kilkey, 2025; Isaacs et al., 2020; Maguire, 2023).

A study made by Asif and Kienzler (2022) on the “**Barriers to healthcare for refugees, asylum seekers, and undocumented migrants in the UK**” highlighted the challenges experienced when attempting to access healthcare, including:

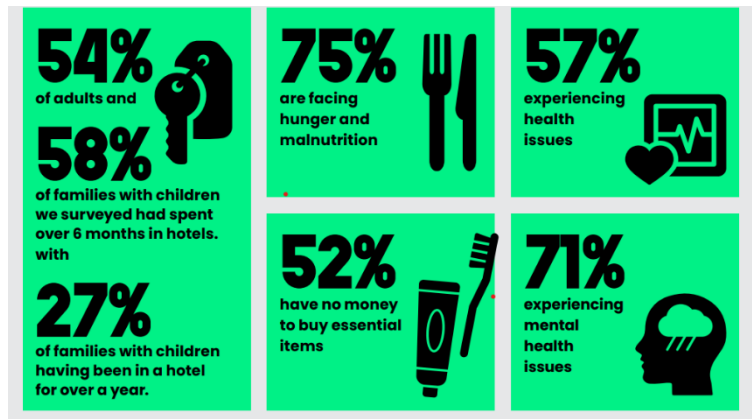
- the need to provide proof of identification and address, which discouraged many from accessing
- care in the NHS or registering with a GP for fear of being deported
- essential services being chargeable if the patient is not a UK citizen or from Europe, such as antenatal
- care, operations, and services from specialist clinics
- lack of understanding of how the UK healthcare system operates
- language barriers

These barriers are not only for healthcare services but also in social care (Ferazzoli and Walsh, 2023; Refugee Action, 2017; Lingham and Kilkey, 2025).

Barriers to access health and social care services are even more problematic if we look at the **mental health needs of people seeking asylum and refugees**. As seen, traumatic experiences lived during the different phases of the migration process make refugees and people seeking asylum vulnerable to mental health conditions, including post-traumatic stress and depression. However, evidence shows limited access to services and a need for more specific training for professionals (Trueba et al., 2023).

Poverty is also a recognised feature of the UK asylum process as evidenced by various studies and reports (Isaacs et al., 2020; Refugee Action, 2023; Lingham and Kilkey, 2025; Mayblin and James, 2017). **Poor housing conditions, poverty and unhealthy eating**; the stress of awaiting an asylum application decision, and the lack of community support have all been linked to physical and health issues (Isaacs et al., 2020; Walsh and Ferazzoli, 2023; Yepo, 2015).

A report from Refugee Action (2023) revealed the consequences of “the reality behind what we call ‘asylum accommodation’ in the UK”, including family groups living in one room for over a year, overcrowding and lack of proper hygiene in hotels causing infectious disease



outbreaks on the premises (see the image on the right).

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the British Red Cross report (2022) raised concerns about the connections between increased risk of exploitation and human trafficking, and the lack of safe accommodation, limited access to employment and education, and the lack of legal advice.

Digital exclusion has also been reported as an important barrier for asylum seekers and refugees when trying to manage asylum claims, accessing healthcare services, and understanding what is available in their local areas (British Red Cross, 2023). According to a report from the British Red Cross (2023) internet access was very patchy in Home Office accommodations and people seeking asylum have very unequal access to data broadband and digital devices - this is also due to limited funds to provide adequate services and equipment.

The same report also highlighted the link between digital exclusion and the isolation of refugees and asylum seekers (British Red Cross, 2023). Many of the participants of the research made by the British Red Cross (2023) noted the importance that digital devices and the internet have to stay connected with their families and friends. However, as mentioned earlier, financial insecurity and lack of access to broadband services are a common experience for many refugees and people seeking asylum in the UK.

There is great attention about **the negative impact of isolation on people seeking asylum**. Much evidence highlighted how hostile environment policies are disrupting the ability of refugees and people seeking asylum, and more broadly migrants, to establish their network of relationships with important **negative effects on the physical and mental health of refugees and people seeking asylums once they are in the UK** (Isaacs et al., 2022; Nguyen et al., 2024; Walsh and Ferazzoli, 2023; Refugee Action, 2017; Walsh and Ferazzoli, 2023; Maguire, 2023).

For example, one report from the Refugee Action (2017) reported the importance of **English Language Classes (ESOL) and translation services** in enabling connections and relationships, but also in developing language competency that supports a person to

start a new life in the UK. Recent changes in policies have limited the access to translation services and ESOL classes for people seeking asylum, reducing the opportunities to build relationships and improving the level of English to get more connected (Maguire, 2023).

Transition from unaccompanied refugee adolescents to adulthood - Evidence highlighted also this as a critical problem in providing care for people seeking asylum. As seen in the section about social care and entitlement, unaccompanied asylum seekers are entitled to extra support from the local authorities.

The social care needs of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC) involve a significant transition to adulthood, transitioning from being a Looked After Child to a Care Leaver under leaving care legislation, often at age 18. This transition is complicated by potential issues with legal status, ineligibility for student support, trauma, mental health difficulties, and barriers to education and employment (Omorogbe and Salter, 2023).

Question: What do you think of the barriers? Is there anything missing or something you don't agree with?

Good Practices

In 2012, the Social Care Institute for Excellence promoted the implementation of a human rights-based approach to social care to ensure that asylum seekers and refugees are treated with dignity, equality and respect. The framework recommended as best practice:

- **Securing organisational commitment** to promoting the wellbeing of refugees and asylum seekers is an important first step.
- **Multi-agency partnerships built around the needs of refugees and asylum seekers**, at both strategic and operational levels, will facilitate access to and development of appropriate social care provision.
- **Creating a local strategy using the joint strategic needs assessment framework** will enable local authorities to plan and develop services for populations of refugees and asylum seekers, as well as other migrant populations.
- **Involving refugee and community organisations and refugees/asylum seekers in the design and delivery of services is good practice and will result in better service provision** (Scie, 2012).

On the basis of these recommendations, we have selected a series of good practices across the UK.

[Case study 1: Leeds Asylum Support Network](#)

The Leeds Asylum Support Network developed a range of projects to support refugees and asylum seekers in the city. These projects include:

- **The Befriending project** provides volunteer befrienders who visit isolated asylum seekers and refugees regularly for periods of six to 12 months with the aim to know the city and support the integration into the local community.
- **The English at Home project** offers one-to-one home tuition by volunteers for asylum-seeking pregnant women, new mothers and mothers of young children, who cannot afford childcare and are unable to attend English classes. The aim is to help women access mainstream services by improving their English language skills, and to provide a minimum level of advocacy and interpreting and orientation into the UK.
- **The Short Stop scheme** aims to support the many refugees and asylum seekers who experience homelessness at some point during their asylum claim. Short Stop volunteers provide a hot meal and a bed for the night to people who have nowhere else to go.
- **LASSN also supports the Leeds Refugee Forum** to provide a collective voice for refugee community organisations in Leeds and promote refugee integration and community cohesion in the city.

Case study 2: Stirling - Forth Valley Welcome: Walk and Talk language project

In Stirling, Migration Scotland worked in partnership with Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) and Scottish Environmental Protection Agency (SEPA) and started a series of walking groups.

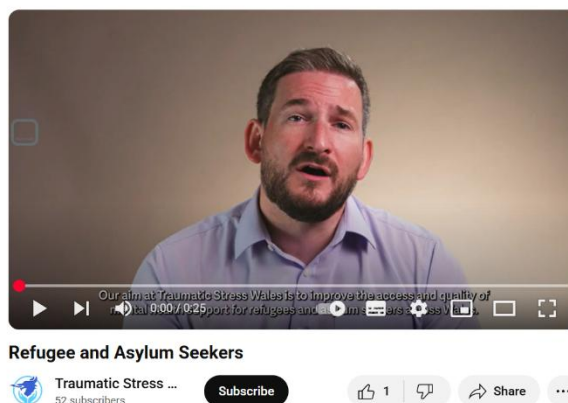
A small group of up to 4 Syrians and walking companions (usually one/one) meet up somewhere convenient, go for a walk somewhere interesting, talk about anything, have a coffee, walk back, go home, then the Syrians write a blog in their own words which is published (with their permission) on a Walk & Talk Facebook page exactly as they wrote it. The idea is that it should be easy to organise for all parties, inexpensive, sustainable, visible, fun for all and have an identifiable outcome.

The aim of the project is to enhance confidence in English, vocabulary, willingness to write, ability to make and keep an arrangement, meeting and making friends with Scots, appreciation of Scotland's heritage & environment and employability. Mutual learning from each other.

Case study 3: All Wales Traumatic Stress

As part of the Traumatic Stress Wales funded by the Welsh Government, a specific workstream dedicated to refugees and people seeking asylum has been developed. This project is aimed to provide high standard quality mental health support for forced migrants who have experienced traumatic events.

Watch this [video](#) for more information.



Having read the material above, in the first Local Network Meeting, we'd like you to discuss:

Your experiences...

- Do you have any experience or knowledge about the needs of people seeking asylum in the UK?

Thinking about this discussion document...

- Do you think that categories such as 'Asylum Seekers', 'Refugees' and 'Vulnerable People' are helpful to understand the problem, the needs of a person, and provide the right support?
- How much do you know about the UK national policies about refugees and asylum seekers? What are your thoughts about UK politics on refugees and asylum seekers?
- What do you think of the needs identified by the evidence? Is there anything missing or something you don't agree with?
- What is your experience about the needs of people seeking asylum and refugees? Does this resonate with what is described by the evidence?
- Have you heard of any of the case studies presented in the documents? What do you think of these projects? Are you aware of any similar projects in your local area?

Next steps...

- Are there any next steps you'd like to agree as a group? Anything you'd like to discuss?
- Do you think there is anyone else who should be involved in your meeting?
- Is there anything you need from the IMPACT team?

IMPACT Surveys

Thank you for taking part in our IMPACT Network. We'd like to know a bit more about everyone taking part, and what they hope to achieve. We have two surveys: [one is to help us make sure we are being as inclusive as possible](#) and the other is to [understand what people hope to accomplish by being part of a Network](#). The data is anonymous and may be used for evaluation of the Networks potentially in papers about the Networks.



You can complete our IMPACT network surveys by scanning these 'QR codes' with your phone's camera - Open your phone's camera app and point it at the QR code.

If you don't see a notification, you might need to enable QR code scanning in your phone's settings.

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Cover image: the picture was taken by young people with migratory backgrounds during an art workshops during the 'Everyday Bordering in the UK' project. For more information visit the project [website](#).



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