MAYOR OF LONDONLONDONASSEMBLY

Asylum Welcome Design Lab - summary report

A photo showing participants in a workshop at City Hall

Key information

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Contents

1. Introduction

Local authorities across London have had to undertake rapid and substantial changes to their support for people seeking asylum over recent years. Having accommodated proportionately fewer people seeking asylum than other regions from 2014 to 2020, London has since seen a marked increase in the numbers residing in the city, while a national backlog in cases has also led to many new arrivals often waiting in cramped hotel accommodation for months or even years. Central government policy has meanwhile prompted sudden changes to the asylum system, often leaving local authorities with minimal time to anticipate, flex and adapt to new measures.

As a result, London boroughs have often struggled to keep up with a fast-changing context, and to proactively plan strategies for improving and scaling their asylum responses.

It is in this context that the Greater London Authority commissioned an Asylum Welcome Design Lab, focused on bringing local authorities together to build new knowledge that can help improve the social integration of people seeking asylum in London. Design Labs are a relatively new process for driving systems change and strategic planning around complex issues. The project brought together 11 London boroughs, with the goal to help the local authorities develop a more holistic system of service delivery that responds to changing population needs and creates opportunities for social connection.

This report explores the findings and key lessons from the Design Lab. It outlines reported trends in the integration issues facing people seeking asylum in the city and themes in current practice among the participating local authorities, as they develop responses to support and integrate asylum-seeking residents. The report collates learnings from the Design Lab for enabling local authorities around London to construct proactive and strategic asylum responses. It also reviews and evaluates the success of the Design Lab as a methodology for improving peer networks, driving innovation and strengthening partnerships.

This report is intended for stakeholders working within, or in partnership with, local authorities to help people seeking asylum to settle and integrate into their new communities in London. An accompanying toolkit is also available in addition to this report which compiles useful guidance resources for shaping local authority support for people seeking asylum, drawing from practical examples of effective working from the eleven participating local authorities.

2. About the Design Lab

The Design Lab brought together eleven local authorities from around London, supporting them to develop activities, systems and strategies that would improve inclusive access to services and integration outcomes for people seeking asylum in their borough.

The final 11 local authorities selected were:

- Barking and Dagenham
- Barnet
- Brent
- Hammersmith and Fulham
- Hillingdon
- Hounslow
- Kensington and Chelsea
- Lambeth
- Newham
- Tower Hamlets
- Waltham Forest

The local authorities completed five core half-day workshops, alongside a series of specialist topic-themed webinars, briefings and one-to-one mentoring calls. These encouraged collaborative discussions on the sharing of good practice, to explore new innovations for supporting people seeking asylum, along with discussions on producing frameworks, definitions and objectives for a more strategic approach to asylum issues in a volatile policy context.

Presentations and activities were delivered by REAP and British Future and expert individuals to strengthen participants' understanding of the integration challenges for people seeking asylum at different stages of their journey, from first arriving in their borough through to preparing for moving on once they receive a result on their asylum application.

Themes of the Design Lab workshops:

1. Overview and Assessment: identifying priorities
2. Recently Arrived Asylum Seekers: forming initial connections and access to basic support
3. Establishing Local Connections: building effective local relationships
4. Settling and Increasing Agency: towards greater integration, preparing to move on
5. Concluding Workshop: cases and lessons for strategy and actions

Themes of the Design Lab specialist topic group webinars:[Reference:1](#)

1. Connecting with Asylum Seekers: communication, engagement and voices
2. Responding to Vulnerability: safeguarding and supporting families and children
3. Access to Health and Mental Health, Support for Wellbeing
4. Employment and Employability
5. Community Relations and Strategic Communications

Local authorities were also supported to each develop their own pilot initiative, testing a new creative solution to help integrate people seeking asylum. Over the six-month Design Lab the boroughs designed, funded and implemented a diverse array of projects based on their individual prioritised local challenges. Pilots ranged from new 'open house' activities for contingency hotel residents to make social connections, through to strategic plans for redesigning new asylum teams, featuring closer governance co-ordination across different borough departments.

3. Key findings

3.1 Key integration issues for people seeking asylum

The eleven local authorities identified a wide range of ongoing issues which they needed to address in order to improve the settlement and integration of people seeking asylum. These largely concern issues around the quality of accommodation for residents in contingency hotels, and ensuring entitlements and standards were met, but there are also concerns about asylum seekers' need for agency, issues accessing services, obstacles to learning English and difficulties promoting social contact with other residents.

The [Asylum Welcome Toolkit](#) explores examples of good practice on how the local authorities were innovating and responding to navigate these challenges.

Poor conditions and quality of life for people in contingency accommodation

The local authorities were deeply troubled by the welfare of people seeking asylum inside temporary hotel accommodation and reported a wide array of issues impacting their ability to get on with their lives. Concerns were shared by a majority of the participating boroughs over the quality of food provided and the lack of communal space for residents.

Many also reported safeguarding risks at accommodation sites, yet felt local authorities were given poor information about the appropriate pathways to escalate concerns with the Home Office, for example about potential trafficking, or violence against or sexual exploitation of women and girls.

Responses

Action taken to address these issues included filing safeguarding reports to address key issues with the food provided or staff services. In some cases, this had been effective, for example leveraging the hotels to source a new caterer. We saw examples of local authorities escalating their concerns through a variety of channels: via contacts at the Home Office, through their MP, and in some instances through an escalation to the Home Secretary.

Other responses to concerns around contingency accommodation included the provision of 'safe spaces' for people seeking asylum outside the hotels, where residents could access a nutritious meal, participate in wellbeing sessions and raise issues with outreach staff.

People seeking asylum have their lives on hold

One of the core barriers to integration for people seeking asylum was felt to be their lack of agency and independence to set up new lives. Restricted access to employment and inability to generate income meant that people seeking asylum were severely constrained in their ability to travel from accommodation sites to legal appointments, key services, social spaces and shops. This was reported to be having negative effects on the mental health of many people seeking asylum, who struggled to find a daily routine and establish new social connections.

Responses

Volunteering was seen as a popular route to providing people seeking asylum with opportunities to develop skills, social connections and to practice their English language, until they were able to access employment.

The local authorities were also keen to advocate for new travel opportunities for people seeking asylum. Many hotels were reported to prevent people seeking asylum from keeping bicycles, but one borough proceeded to pilot a scheme that offered discounted or free travel including Santander bicycles around London.

Barriers to services

Participating local authorities shared similar experiences of people seeking asylum struggling to access key services. Upon arrival, many asylum-seeking residents were unclear of how to register for schools or GP surgeries, or how to contact police about concerns for their safety. Information leaflets in different languages were sometimes available at hotel reception desks but were not proactively displayed or offered to residents. Those with less understanding of the English language, fewer digital skills, or who were coping through physical and mental health conditions, were felt to be particularly impacted and at risk of isolation.

Responses

Many of the local authorities were developing welcome packs and orientation sessions or resources, co-designed with people seeking asylum to help improve awareness of entitlements and support easier access to services. Information and tips on developing these resources is available in the [Asylum Welcome Toolkit](#).

Distress from the streamlining questionnaires and reduced move-on period

The new streamlined asylum process, which required people asylum seeking from a list of specific nationalities to submit a questionnaire within 30 days, rather than completing an interview, was reported to be causing

distress for applicants. Often applicants with poorer English language skills struggled to understand the questions, while overstretched legal aid services were seeing waiting times increase rapidly. Many of the boroughs were keen to see further government support, including an extended deadline for submitting questionnaires, and clearer data on the individuals affected by the new policy.

Similarly, there were major concerns around the introduction of a policy that gave people with a successful asylum application 7 days' eviction notice from their hotel, with reports of teams struggling to source appropriate accommodation for new refugees.

Responses

Some of the boroughs noted that they were working with universities to support schemes that trained students to offer OISC level 2 immigration advice.

Boroughs were also navigating the new 7-day 'notice to quit' accommodation period through seconding colleagues from their housing department into an asylum team, particularly those with experience in temporary accommodation, to support increasing demand and pressure on 'move on' services.

Learning or improving English language skills

Participants shared positive feedback of utilising the Adult Education Budget to deliver ESOL services in their borough. However, there were concerns that people seeking asylum were only eligible for funding after residing in the UK for six months, provided they were still waiting on a decision on their case or appeal. Some offered non AEB-funded courses but this was dependent on the availability of providers in their borough and not all had the funding available to offer this.

Responses

Waltham Forest had pioneered a new ESOL advice and support service that helped every migrant resident to find free provision. Key learnings from this process had included:

- Brokering places for ineligible learners free of charge
- Working with all providers, not just Adult Learning Services; for example, VCS and community delivery through subcontracting models
- Establishing different entry points to courses, setting up short courses, and providing Recognising and Rewarding Progress and Achievement (RARPA) Programmes and Conversation Clubs.

Social isolation and risks of community tensions

Participating boroughs often noted that asylum seeking residents were struggling to meet and mix with other residents, since travel restrictions and lack of income had reduced their opportunities. The lack of social contact between people seeking asylum and other community groups was also noted to be contributing to community tensions in some local authorities. This included where areas of high deprivation were seeing increasing demand at overstretched foodbanks.

Responses

A wealth of evidence shows that social contact between in-groups and out-groups can reduce stereotyping and prejudice, and increase levels of mutual trust, respect for difference and empathy.Reference:2 Local authorities agreed that they could do more to facilitate social mixing. We heard several encouraging examples of

opportunities offered for people seeking asylum to play team sports and engage in volunteering – both of which can help arrivals to meet new people and begin to feel at home in their borough.

3.2 Themes in current practice

The following themes in current practice were observed among the local authorities participating in the Design Lab, as they sought to support asylum seeking arrivals to settle into their new communities and access services.

Political buy-in from councillors emboldened participants to innovate.

A majority of the participating local authorities noted having backing from their councillors and senior executive leadership. This had fostered a supportive environment to design new innovative approaches to support the needs of people seeking asylum.

Where some of the boroughs noted a less supportive atmosphere from elected members, the Design Lab was used as an opportunity to strengthen relations with Voluntary and Community Sector organisations, to help co-ordinate and broaden civil society efforts to support new asylum-seeking arrivals.

A majority of the local authorities were improving cross-departmental and multi-agency collaboration, through strategy forums and innovative governance models.Reference:3

Rapid increases in the asylum-seeking population have prompted closer join-up in many local authorities between multiple departments and agencies to improve service access and facilitate more co-ordinated responses to local integration issues. Examples often included regular forums and meetings with senior department leads, policy and NHS representatives. This was felt to have reduced barriers to services, improved information sharing, and fostered collaboration to maximise the reach and impact of services.

The boroughs were also experimenting with an array of governance models for their asylum teams to improve cross-departmental co-ordination and enable proactive decision making. Details of different models can be found in the Asylum Welcome toolkit.

Learnings from Ukraine and Afghan resettlement were improving asylum responses.

Local authorities were transferring lessons acquired from other resettlement programmes, for example on hotel in-reach from experiences at Afghan bridging hotels, and 'one stop shop' early help initiatives developed through the Homes for Ukraine programme. In some cases, where needs were similar, this had led to co-ordinated integration initiatives which bridged refugee and asylum groups.

Most Local Authorities had been more responsive in some policy areas, while lacking capacity and time to focus on others.

The participating boroughs were keen to provide a broad support offer for people seeking asylum which went beyond their statutory obligations. However, their experiences of rapid change and increases in asylum seeking populations meant that some of those participating had needed to prioritise housing, safeguarding and health responses. Consequently, for some boroughs there was comparatively less focus in their responses on

employability support, ESOL, education and strategies for social connection that could help people seeking asylum form connections with residents of other backgrounds.

Many of the participating boroughs noted that they were 'catching up' and used the Design Lab to address gaps in their support offer, such as partnerships with schools, volunteering opportunities and pathways for vocational skills training. Others with a longer history of resettlement, or with particular expertise, helped share good practice and models for expanding into these areas through 'hotspot' case study presentations.

Poor communications with the Home Office and service delivery providers are impacting on integration efforts and strategic development.

A majority of the local authorities in the Design Lab reported having limited communication with the Home Office and contracted accommodation providers, though several also noted incidents of more effective collaboration based on warmer individual relations. This was a particular concern for boroughs with higher populations accommodated in contingency hotels, who reported that hotels were opened in their local authority with minimal notice to prepare appropriate support services. Meanwhile lines of accountability were often unclear with government subcontracted service providers.

There was also a widely-held concern about the lack of data shared between the Home Office and local authorities, who lacked clear data on new arrivals, those impacted by the application streamlining questionnaires and also the sites of dispersal accommodation in their borough.

Strong partnerships are in place with VCS organisations to provide services.

Positive relations with VCS organisations were seen by the local authorities to be among their main strengths. However, there were concerns that the increasing numbers of people residing in contingency hotels was stretching the capacity of the sector, with fears of burnout from organisations struggling to source sustainable funding or to expand their teams in response to growing service demand.

The 'Borough of Sanctuary' scheme had helped prompt strategic thinking and proactive welcoming efforts.

Seven of the eleven participating local authorities either had Borough of Sanctuary status, or were in the process of seeking accreditation. The requirements of joining the scheme had prompted a more joined-up and strategic approach at borough level to 'creating a culture of welcome', including through improved methods of consultation and co-production, to ensure services were informed by those with lived experience of the asylum system.

4. Pilot initiatives

The Design Lab tapped into a strong enthusiasm among local authorities in London to innovate their practice and develop more scalable, responsive ways of addressing the needs of people seeking asylum. Over six months, each of the eleven participating local authorities was guided to design and deliver a pilot initiative in their borough, pioneering a new activity, service or strategy to improve the social integration outcomes of people seeking asylum.

Good practice from the pilot projects is examined in detail in the [Asylum Welcome Toolkit](). However, a summary of initiatives completed by the local authorities, and the key strategic lessons drawn from developing these, is set out in the table below.

Table 1: Asylum Welcome Design Lab pilot initiatives

Local authority	Pilot activity
Barking and Dagenham	The borough created an induction 'helping pack' for new arrivals (translated into different languages) that compiles information on accessing services, settling into the borough, and finding spaces for social connection. **Key lesson:** the borough has co-produced the pack with people seeking asylum, VCS partners and council teams through a series of eight focus groups. The team will look to utilise methods of consultation and co-production in their wider work, including through setting up and training a new 'Voice and Influence' group to input on future asylum strategy.
Barnet	Barnet is piloting a new volunteering service, in partnership with local VCS organisations. This will facilitate new volunteering opportunities, tailored to help the development of transferable qualifications and skills that increase employability for people seeking asylum. **Key lesson:** the development of the service has strengthened the partnership and collaboration of the borough with Volunteer Barnet and other local VCS organisations to ensure volunteering opportunities are inclusive and engaging for people seeking asylum.
Brent	Brent has designed a 'Welcome Pack' for asylum seeking residents, compiling useful information, including on how to access key services. Focus groups with people seeking asylum will also be used to inform the content and the pack will be reviewed six months after launch to evaluate user experiences and feedback. **Key lesson:** engaging residents with lived experience and hotel managers has helped uncover key barriers to accessing borough services. As a result, Brent is launching a Travel Scheme for asylum seeking families to allow them to access Family Wellbeing Centres.
Hammersmith and Fulham	Hammersmith and Fulham have created new 'open house sessions' for residents of contingency hotels, comprising opportunities to leave their accommodation, socialise, and to access a local authority 'surgery' where they can share concerns around their needs. **Key lesson:** the borough has benefited from introducing an ongoing evaluation process, using feedback forms to continuously improve sessions around the needs and suggestions of service users.

Local authority	Pilot activity
Hillingdon	Hillingdon has considered the business case for a new Multi-Agency Asylum Support Team. This comprises a cross-sector coalition, bringing together the borough outreach team, key local authority departments and key VCS partners, combined with consistent engagement with the Home Office, Migrant Help and accommodation providers. **Key lesson:** Hillingdon has mapped current support systems for people seeking asylum in the borough (including in schools, VCS networks, the NHS and social services) to identify the gaps and to find opportunities for co-ordinating integration services. From this, they hope to then overhaul their asylum support model, prioritising closer join-up to enable a more responsive system, capable of flexing to sudden increases in demand.
Hounslow	Hounslow has designed supplementary training for staff in contingency hotels, aimed at raising awareness about potential victims of domestic violence and Violence Against Women and Girls. **Key lesson:** Hounslow staff have strengthened relationships with contingency hotel management and local police services. The borough will maintain consistent communications with both going forward.
Kensington and Chelsea	Kensington and Chelsea has developed a multi-disciplinary 'Integrated Outreach, Early Help and Social Care team', drawing on learning and best practice established in their Afghan bridging hotels. **Key lesson:** the borough has now begun tracking and measuring impact and key outcomes in its outreach, early help and social care work with people seeking asylum to better evaluate responsiveness. For example, the borough is using school admissions data from Clearsprings Ready Home to ensure all children are enrolled upon arrival.
Lambeth	Lambeth is using their status as a Borough of Sanctuary to ensure that ten schools in the borough become accredited 'Schools of Sanctuary'. Schools of Sanctuary accreditation requires schools to develop a strategy for welcoming asylum-seeking children and refugees, and to improve strategies and awareness around their needs and vulnerabilities. **Key lesson:** the borough appointed a dedicated Schools of Sanctuary Lead, expanding its capacity to build and strengthen relationships with schools in the borough. The Schools of Sanctuary Lead was able to develop an overarching strategy with key milestones and objectives.

Local authority	Pilot activity
Newham	Newham has developed two pilot projects: 1. A new multilingual outreach team comprising two Welcome Newham Officers and two Early Help Family Navigators, who meet with new arrivals to support them with immediate needs. 2. A new move-on service that builds on an existing 'one-stop shop' model initially set up for people who have arrived from Ukraine, expanding provision to people seeking asylum that have received successful applications. This includes help and advice on seeking employment, accessing benefits and immigration advice. **Key lesson:** improving their in-person outreach presence has helped the borough to understand residents' needs in more detail and to identify barriers to services. The new outreach staff have then fed back to Clearsprings and subcontractors in hotels to report safeguarding concerns.
Tower Hamlets	Tower Hamlets has developed two pilot initiatives: 1. A new Community Partnership Forum to co-ordinate VCS organisations that support people seeking asylum. The forum aims to broaden relations with the VCS sector in the borough to help fill gaps in services, for example social connection opportunities for single asylum-seeking men. 2. Plans for a new multi-agency resettlement and migration team are being developed, in anticipation of a new contingency hotel being opened in the borough. **Key lesson:** the development of a multi-agency team is helping the borough bring together a more co-ordinated asylum response, drawing on expertise across departments, and reducing the duplication of effort.
Waltham Forest	Waltham Forest has developed two pilot activities: 1. Facilitating new volunteering opportunities for people seeking asylum, combined with vocational skills training. 2. Setting up a new pathway to train people seeking asylum in advocacy and community organising. **Key lesson:** co-locating services, for example in partnership with VCS organisations delivering foodbanks, helped to improve engagement from people seeking asylum. Services were delivered in places where residents felt familiar and comfortable, and where they did not need to incur additional travel costs.

5. Outcomes and Evaluation

Evaluation evidence indicates that the Design Lab has been successful in meeting its core objectives to enable practice sharing, innovation, and the development of strategies for integrating people seeking asylum. In

feedback surveys and calls with the participating teams, the boroughs reported that the process helped create protected time and a supportive environment to prioritise their key local issues and think about creative solutions, zooming out from the short-term pressures and caseload of their day jobs.

The local authorities have reported feeling better equipped with new peer relationships, which had helped enable the sharing of good practice. These have ranged from practical sharing of resources such as Safeguarding Assurance Tools, through to discussions for new ideas on supporting and helping integrate people seeking asylum, such as through new schemes to provide free access to bicycles.

The boroughs have also strengthened their knowledge and understanding of social integration, and the distinct integration challenges and needs for people seeking asylum. As a result, three boroughs are now formalising their working definitions of integration as part of a broader strategic plan for their asylum policy. Four were also paying closer attention to incorporate integration outcomes into their service design, for example through bespoke volunteering opportunities which improve vocational skills for economic integration, or through mapping and increasing awareness of local activities for social connection.

The table below summarises project outcomes from the Asylum Welcome Design Lab.

Table 2: Asylum Welcome Design Lab project outcomes

Design Lab Outcome	Outcomes among the participating boroughs
Outcome 1: Success Participating London local authorities and their key partners have successfully expanded their out-of-borough peer-networks to follow up for future problem-solving and collaboration.	• Quotes from feedback surveys and one-to-one calls highlight that participants used the Design Lab to build new connections and shored up pre-existing relations that weakened over Covid-19. • Participating boroughs produced a shared set of advocacy priorities and voiced enthusiasm for opportunities to work together and (with the GLA and London Councils) to lobby on prioritised integration challenges. • Outside of Design Lab sessions, participants noted exchanging resources such as terms of reference for steering groups, examples of orientation welcome packs and Home Office contacts. • The project led to expanded attendance in the external 'Local Authority Forum', chaired by Hammersmith and Fulham.

Design Lab Outcome	Outcomes among the participating boroughs

Outcome 2: Partial success
 	
Participating London local authorities and their key partners have tested and implemented solutions to overcome challenges identified at the start of the programme, for example an action plan that outlines how they work towards the social integration of people seeking asylum.
	• Each of the eleven local authorities has designed a pilot project themed around one or more of their priority integration challenges. A majority of these have seen timeline slippage and remain in progress. However, all pilots have a clear plan for reaching their completion in 2023 along with identified steps to scale-up up the projects or institutionalise learnings.
	• Three participating boroughs are formalising their definitions of social integration developed over the Design Lab to inform wider local authority strategy. Five others have embedded social integration outcomes into new services and initiatives.
	• Each of the eleven boroughs has applied and embedded new learning from the Design Lab into wider practice in their asylum resettlement response, this includes:
	    ○ Five which are setting up new channels for multi-agency or cross-borough working.
	    ○ Five that acknowledged using practice from other participants to inform ongoing plans to expand and upskill their asylum teams.
	    ○ Six that have now developed new forms of consultation and co-design involving asylum-seeking residents.
	• One area for improvement was that only five of the eleven local authorities implemented evaluations to assess the effectiveness and take-up of their pilot initiatives. Future Design Labs could look to build in evaluation design at an earlier stage.

Design Lab Outcome	Outcomes among the participating boroughs
Outcome 3: Success Participating London local authorities and their key partners can identify key resources and sources of expertise required, internal to their local authority as well as external, to confront future issues in supporting people seeking asylum.	- All 11 of the participating boroughs developed new partnerships and relations within their borough as a result of the priority issues identified through the Design Lab. These included: - Closer join-up within boroughs across departments e.g. through the setting up of new forums. - Relationship building with local VCS organisations, including through new steering groups and mapping exercises. - Pilot activities prompted specific boroughs to improve relations with other local agencies such as the police and schools, to promote closer collaboration and coordination in future in supporting people seeking asylum. - At least four of the eleven boroughs engaged in more consistent communication with contracted providers of contingency accommodation, and noted having plans to remain in closer contact beyond the Design Lab. - Peer-exchange promoted access to new resources and networks. These ranged from exchanging Home Office contacts to data sources. - A Design Lab forum page and round-up email shared relevant events, London-based research, toolkits, funding databanks and VCS reports with participating boroughs.

6. Conclusions

The Asylum Welcome Design Lab aimed to help eleven London local authorities improve their support to people seeking asylum, working with them to consider approaches for a more systematic, proactive, and holistic system of service delivery that responds to the needs of new arrivals and creates opportunities for social connection.

With the Design Lab having concluded, this chapter considers key conclusions and project learnings from the insights shared by the local authorities.

Home Office policy has meant current practice to date is largely reactive.

Sudden shifts in Home Office asylum policy over the past three years have left minimal headroom for boroughs to prepare for the rapid increases in the number of people seeking asylum housed in London. Consequently, local authority responses have been largely reactive and crisis-led. This has been a particular trend for boroughs with larger populations in contingency hotels, where poor communications with the Home Office and contracted accommodation providers has substantially reduced their ability to accurately forecast and map the needs of new arrivals. Many of the boroughs were also housing people seeking asylum in large numbers for the very first time

and were having to adjust at pace, often drawing learnings from teams in NRPF and refugee resettlement, or from responses to other welcoming schemes such Homes for Ukraine.

The recent policy of streamlining some asylum decisions through the use of questionnaire-based applications, with a deadline of 7 days for submission, is an example of another change that is further adding to this pressure. Local authorities are scrambling to identify the individuals affected by the new policies at short notice with inadequate data from central government to locate and contact those most vulnerable. The lack of notice given on the implementation of the policies has furthermore restricted the time for boroughs to build support systems of legal aid, as well as employability, housing and 'move-on' support for those with successful applications.

Evidence indicates that the Design Lab has helped participating boroughs to consider creative solutions for improving their responsive capacity to these challenges, and to begin working toward more co-ordinated, proactive strategies for integrating people seeking asylum.Reference:4 These include steps toward setting an overall strategic direction as a local authority and a set of Key Performance Indicators, but within which officers and teams can reprioritise and adapt rapidly. However, participants were frank about the broader reality that this innovation was taking place with little resource from central government and that poor communications with the Home Office was disruptive to efforts from local government to produce longer-term strategies.

There is appetite, however, to address gaps and support people seeking asylum beyond statutory obligations, with an eye to long-term integration.

The shifts in the Government's asylum response and poor communications with local authorities has weakened existing integration efforts. However, the Design Lab has been warmly received by participating boroughs as an opportunity to think more deeply about their approaches to asylum and desired strategic outcomes. We have consistently found an appetite for information sharing on good practice between the participants.

The eleven local authorities were keen to better understand how they might develop joined-up and holistic responses to help integrate people seeking asylum, through comparing means of reaching service users, signposting people toward services, working across departments and building effective multi-agency partnerships. Indeed, many have used the opportunities for peer exchange and the development of their pilot projects to begin redesigning their current asylum strategies, or to inform ongoing processes of asylum strategy development.

While the primary focus of many local authorities has so far centred around issues of safeguarding, children and families, housing and healthcare, local authorities also seem to be moving beyond simply meeting core statutory obligations, with growing consideration being given to improving service inclusivity, volunteering and advocacy opportunities, and mental and physical wellbeing for people seeking asylum.

7. Recommendations

The number of people travelling to the UK to seek asylum is set to remain high. Local authorities in London must be prepared to innovate and respond to this challenge if they are to ensure new arrivals are able to access entitlements and support, and if they are to help integrate asylum seeking residents to promote connected, cohesive communities.

The [accompanying toolkit](#) to this report explores examples of good practice on how local authorities can pursue and develop effective strategies for asylum integration. Building on these insights, and from the insights and experiences shared by local authorities in the Design Lab, the authors also make the following recommendations for London boroughs supporting people seeking asylum.

1) Think proactively: develop adaptive strategies for asylum resettlement and integration

The rapidly shifting backdrop of national policy undoubtedly places pressure on boroughs. However – regardless of this context – it is crucial that local authorities now look to zoom out from short term pressures to develop, formalise and implement longer-term asylum strategies. Definitions and conceptual frameworks of integration, developed with input and consultation from people with lived experiences of asylum, can in turn enable clear and measurable outcomes and frameworks to track progress and mainstream an integration lens across the work of a local authority. These will undoubtedly need to be adaptive as government policy develops. Yet asylum strategies and objectives can nonetheless steer the overall direction and facilitate more cohesive, cross-sector responses to supporting people seeking asylum to set up new lives, lay down roots in their communities and thrive.

2) Prepare for future changes in government policy

In the continuation of a long line of rapid policy changes, Home Office policy looks likely to continue shifting rapidly over the coming year. Notably, if the Illegal Migration Act comes into force, this could place substantial new restrictions on the rights and accommodation provision for many people seeking asylum in the UK.

Caught up in the short-term challenges of improving existing service and responding to new policies, the boroughs in the Design Lab had found little time to consider the implications of these potential changes for their future practice. Yet it is crucial that local authorities continue to scan the horizon to anticipate potential impacts from future shifts, and that the Home Office engages local authorities in dialogue on how services can proactively be prepared or adapted in anticipation of new policy.

3) Explore how to support service users moving between London boroughs

A key theme raised in discussions around the integration of people seeking asylum was their vulnerability to being uprooted from their borough – to be moved to alternative sites of accommodation, or to settle once they receive a result on their application. This carried the risk of damaging the social connections of people seeking asylum and disrupting their access to services such as ESOL lessons or mental health support.

Local authorities should consider new steps to support the transition of people seeking asylum when they move to a new local authority, to prevent adverse shocks to their process of social integration. This could include holding 'move on' drop-in sessions to assist people with handovers and referrals to equivalent support services in their new local authority.

Where boroughs in London are responding to similar needs for people seeking asylum – for example in providing volunteer opportunities, ESOL lessons and vocational skills training – boroughs should also consider the potential for jointly pursuing VCS partnerships and contracted services, capable of enabling service users to transfer from one part of the city to another. The GLA and London Councils could also help to convene and chair online discussions for local authorities interesting in pursuing service join-up, to provide opportunities for boroughs to explore collaboration and, where necessary, pooled funding.

4) Borough of Sanctuary status can galvanise council support and should be a springboard for wider integration strategies

Seven of the eleven local authorities participating in the Design Lab were either Boroughs of Sanctuary or were seeking accreditation. The reflections by these local authorities demonstrated that the scheme is an effective tool for driving discussions on asylum and refugee support. The certification scheme helped unlock buy-in from councillors keen for their borough to 'catch up' with neighbouring local authorities. The accreditation requirements had also prompted senior leads to undertake more proactive strategy development on their asylum response, for example to broaden their multi-agency partnerships, and to undertake new forms of service user consultation.

Integration is a complementary framework of practice that extends the idea of sanctuary or refuge to affect all society. Sanctuary is often seen as starting from a process of creating a place of welcome, hospitality and safety for people fleeing situations of danger,Reference:5 for example through advocating and building a stronger safety net of services for new arrivals. Integration usefully broadens that concept: adding complexity, building social, economic and political change over a longer period that should enhance the life experiences and chances for individuals, community and society together.Reference:6

Local authorities seeking Borough of Sanctuary status can therefore use their Sanctuary Strategies as a springboard for plans with even wider aspirations, which consider how to increase levels of social connection, economic engagement and political involvement.

5) Advocate to bridge and co-ordinate welcoming policy

Integration responses for people seeking asylum, and for refugees from Ukraine, Afghans and Hong Kong will each encounter distinct group-specific needs and challenges. However, there will be many opportunities, particularly for social integration in the UK, if a joined-up response is established based on common needs. There is currently a risk of unnecessary duplication where separate welcoming programmes draw upon the same pool of 'welcomers' – those civic society groups, faith organisations, employers and schools proactively engaged in support for new arrivals. A joined-up approach can help to identify top priorities for successful settlement and integration, as well as needs of specific groups.

A national policy framework, across local authorities, will be crucial to identify how asylum and refugee resettlement work can be usefully joined up. This should be done in ways that recognise both shared needs and obstacles to successful integration and challenges for specific groups. Local authorities can help advocate central government for this more coordinated approach to welcoming newcomers, to strengthen the availability and quality of support.

References

- Reference:1These optional webinars explored key themes emerging from the workshop in greater depth, featuring specialist expert input, local authority case studies and discussions to share good practice.
- Reference:2See, for example Allport, G. (1954) The Nature of Prejudice, Boston MA: Addison-Wesley and Christ, O., Schmid, K., Lolliot, S., Swart, H., Stolle, D., Tausch, N., Al- Ramiah, A., Wagner, A., Vertovec, S. and Hewstone, M. (2014) 'Contextual effect of positive intergroup contact on out-group prejudice' in Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, 111(11), 3996-4000
- Reference:3See Weihmayer, M. F. (2024). Approaches for Analysing the Local Governance of Displacement (Forthcoming doctoral dissertation). Department of Geography and Environment, LSE,

London, United Kingdom.

- Reference:4See chapter seven.
- Reference:5See Bradford City of Sanctuary definition: https://www.bradford.gov.uk/your-community/asylum-seekers-and-refugees/…
- Reference:6The Mayor of London definition sets out that this is determined (1) by the level of equality between people, (2) the nature of their relationships and (3) by their degree of participation in their communities.