



Commission on the
Integration of
Refugees

Executive Summary

From Arrival to Integration:
Building Communities for
Refugees and for Britain

March 2024

Introduction

Finding Consensus Around Pragmatic Solutions

Almost everyone agrees that the UK’s asylum system is broken. It is expensive, ineffective, and harmful. There is a desperate need for new ideas on how to create a system that works effectively and enjoys public consent.

Taking up this challenge over the past two years, the Commission on the Integration of Refugees has undertaken the most significant and detailed exploration of the UK asylum system in a generation. The Commission brought together a group of commissioners with diverse expertise and political perspectives to consider the question of how an integration-based approach could help fix the UK asylum system.

Drawing on this input and evidence, we have been able to achieve full or near-consensus around 16 recommendations to shape a new future for the UK’s asylum system.² These recommendations are underpinned by a financial model developed by the London School of Economics (LSE), which found that the benefits outweigh the costs within three years, and that they would yield a net economic benefit to the country of at least £1.2 billion within five years.

The process of developing this study and recommendations has shown us two things. The first is that we have had to negotiate genuine differences of opinion in order to reach our conclusions – this has not been a conversation within an echo chamber. The

The solutions we are proposing would not only be more effective than the current system, but cheaper, more coherent, more in tune with the values of compassion and fairness that so many people manifest towards asylum seekers, and capable of delivering long-term economic benefits and positive social outcomes both for refugees and wider British society.

The Commission on the Integration of Refugees has undertaken the most significant and detailed exploration of the UK asylum system in a generation.

The Commission conducted and commissioned six pillars of research, which have formed the evidence base for this landmark study.¹ We received evidence from more than 1,250 individuals and organisations, including refugees and asylum seekers, policymakers and politicians, local government and civil servants, third sector workers, academics, faith and community leaders, and many other stakeholders.

second is that there is space for political consensus around proposals for reform. This is important because any solutions need to have the consent of the British public. What we have learned gives us confidence to suggest we can change the story about the UK asylum system from an acceptance of brokenness to a call for achievable solutions.

Total annual costs and benefits of expediting asylum application processing and providing ESOL and employment support*

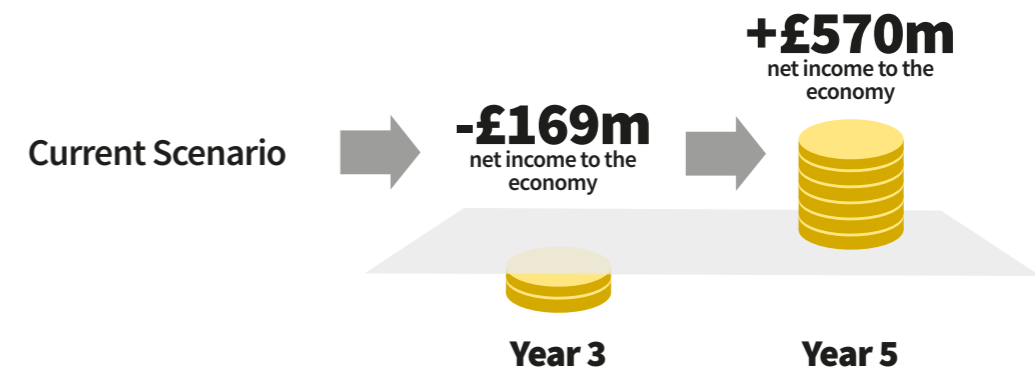
	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5
Costs	£2,027,290,175	£1,165,747,387	£445,666,240	£171,701,571	£68,855,805
Benefits	£59,499,706	£556,739,641	£1,015,985,001	£1,236,767,493	£1,309,673,287

*All costs and benefits are discounted at 3.5%. The full tables with the 95% confidence intervals are presented in the appendix.

¹ They are: a Call for Evidence, a Review of Asylum Reform Initiatives from 1997-2022, International Comparisons, Local Engagement Hearings around the UK, a Quantitative Survey of Refugees and Asylum Seekers, and a Financial Model for the Recommendations. The Review of Asylum Reform Initiatives and International Comparisons were carried out by the Good Faith Partnership, the Qualitative Survey was carried out by the Neighbourly Lab research agency, and the Call for Evidence and Local Engagement Hearings were led by the Commission.

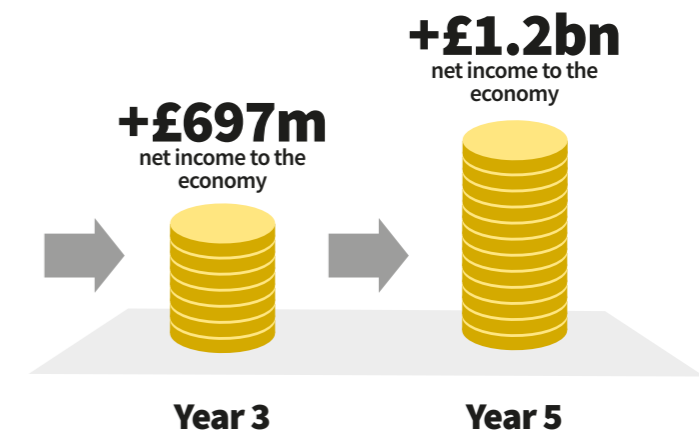
² 14 recommendations were supported by all 22 Commissioners, while two recommendations were supported by 21 Commissioners.

Economic Benefit of Changes Proposed by the Commission



Proposed Scenario

- Processing applications within six months (and people being able to work from six months)
- Employment support from six months
- Free English classes from arrival



Fixing a Broken System

From Ineffective Deterrence to Mutually Beneficial Integration

The UK has a clear national interest in fixing its asylum system. Although this is a highly contentious and politically polarised issue, people will continue to be forced to migrate as a result of many factors, all the more so in an increasingly unstable world. The current system does not work, despite the vast resources it consumes. We need a new approach.

The What: A Focus on Integration

The Commission proposes that a new model should be based on a paradigm of integration. Not only will a new focus on integration deliver better outcomes for asylum seekers and refugees, but also for the UK as a whole – from contributing to tackling the housing crisis and homelessness to promoting economic flourishing via the untapped potential of many asylum seekers.

The How: A Coherent Approach with Local Delivery

The key to achieving integration of asylum seekers is through a coherent approach that is implemented with a much greater level of devolution and localisation. While national planning and coordination are necessary, local authorities and communities need to be empowered for delivery.

The first element is a coherent and holistic approach, which is necessary to unlock the economic benefits projected by the LSE. The three main conditions for this are that the government needs to meet its target to process asylum applications within six months (meaning people can work from this point), and that asylum seekers receive ‘free English language provision’ and ‘access to employment support’ from six months.

The second element is localisation. Devolved and local governments already play a major role in the asylum system, and alongside other countries, and initiatives such as the Ukrainian refugee settlement programmes, community sponsorship programmes, and initiatives by businesses, they offer an abundance of good practice. The UK’s national-level policy direction and rhetoric has long been out of tune with the positive potential in these initiatives.

However, devolved and local governments are caught in a dilemma whereby they are currently expected to deliver more services for new arrivals but lack power over key policy areas that affect these services. A new concept of ‘local integration partnerships’ would help to address this problem. These coordinating mechanisms would be established in local areas

(defined with sufficient flexibility to accommodate different local governance arrangements and differently sized political units). The allocation of resources would need to follow a whole-system review of public spending. In this model, local authorities would provide local leadership and coordinate a partnership of relevant stakeholders including the NHS and other institutions, civil society, faith groups, and diaspora and other community groups, for the delivery of services.

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Below: Commissioner Hanna Kienzler visits the clothing service at Brushstrokes Community Project.

What is integration?

Integration is defined as “communities where people, whatever their background, live, work, learn and socialise together, based on shared rights, responsibilities, and opportunities”.³

Our work has focused on integration rather than methods of entry, but one of the 12 key principles adopted by the Commission is that there should be safe and legal routes for asylum seekers to enter the UK. As we were carrying out our study, the UK Parliament debated and passed the Illegal Migration Act, which means that people seeking asylum through “irregular means”, such as arriving via small boats, will no longer be able to claim asylum in the UK. Legal and policy processes around the Act are still ongoing and will have profound implications for refugee integration. However, the reality is that as people continue to seek refugee protection in the UK, the need to provide effective and humane integration strategies also continues.

³ Home Office, (2019) ‘Indicators of Integration Framework Third Edition,’ available online: <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/627cc6d3d3bf7f052d33b06e/home-office-indicators-of-integration-framework-2019-horr109.pdf>



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Recommendations to the UK Government

16 Evidence-based Proposals for Reform

The following recommendations are addressed to the UK government. They are designed to be mutually reinforcing and their impact will be greater if they are implemented together rather than being taken as a set of options from which to choose. Some of them are directed at specific government departments or agencies, but the Commission envisages that a coordinated approach across Whitehall and with local integration partnerships will be necessary.

The full report includes a rationale and evidence base for each recommendation as well as proposing modalities for their implementation.



To view this report online scan the QR code or visit www.refugeeintegrationuk.com/publications

The current system is siloed, fragmented, and inconsistent, with widely divergent provision for asylum seekers and a lack of control by local people. This creates confusion and sometimes exacerbates grievances or hostility.

Recommendation 1 calls for a “new settlement for refugees”.

Recommendation 1: Devolve asylum and refugee resettlement support systems in a “New Settlement for Refugees”. This calls for a whole system approach to put local integration partnerships in the driving seat of refugee integration.

The current system is siloed, fragmented, and inconsistent, with widely divergent provision for asylum seekers and a lack of control by local people. This creates confusion and sometimes exacerbates grievances or hostility. The new settlement for refugees should have local integration partnerships at its heart, enabling local control over funding and delivery of services.

The UK government and devolved governments should adopt a new statement of goals for refugee integration policy (similar to existing policies in Scotland and Wales), accompanied by a system-wide review of public spending on refugees and asylum. The New Scots Refugee Integration Strategy (2018-22) and Wales Nation of Sanctuary Plan (2019) model good practice. Overall numbers to be resettled should be determined at national level.

The whole system needs strong governance and oversight, including the reinstatement of a UK Refugee Minister and involving people with experience as refugees. Existing Strategic Migration Partnerships (SMPs) need to be reformed to liaise effectively between government and local integration partnerships.

Recommendations 2-6 call for a **new and more community-oriented approach to the accommodation** of asylum seekers.

Recommendation 2: Develop a comprehensive Resettlement Scheme drawing on best practice and experience from recent and current programmes, including the Ukraine Family Scheme, Homes for Ukraine, the UK Resettlement Scheme (UKRS), and the Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (VPRS).

Resettlement schemes, including sponsorship schemes, enable local communities to take responsibility for refugees and encounter them as fellow humans. As such, they can offer a successful pathway to integration. The Homes for Ukraine scheme provided a particularly strong model of good practice, while sponsorship and family reunification schemes can provide effective routes for refugees to enter the UK.

A new comprehensive resettlement scheme should be coordinated nationally and administered through local integration partnerships, based on a multi-year financial settlement.

Recommendation 3: Deliver housing through local integration partnerships, led by local authorities, to ensure that central government and independent sector resources are invested in the expansion of accommodation in communities, some of which would be reserved for refugees and asylum seekers. This would be beneficial to the whole population in need of housing, as well as to refugees and asylum seekers.

The current reliance on for-profit provision of accommodation is extremely expensive, with the UK government having spent approximately £2.3 billion in 2022/23 – a figure that is inflated by the length of the application process. Accommodation is often substandard and poorly run, with adverse effects for mental health, education, and employment, as well as local integration.

A switch to local integration partnership provision in the context of investment in local housing would create local agency and channel funding to local councils instead of private contractors. This in turn could deliver important benefits for the wider community.

Recommendation 4: Extend the transition period for asylum seekers to “move on” after being given leave to remain as refugees from 28 days to 56 days.

Homelessness and destitution are significant barriers to integration. Extending the period for asylum seekers to move on after being given leave to remain would reduce the likelihood of homelessness, reduce pressure on local authorities and charities, and improve the prospects for integration. It would also bring the policy into line with existing homelessness regulations. The provision of accommodation for a longer period would need to be offset against faster decision-making.

“If I’m in prison, I have a sentence and I count down the number of days. When I’m in detention, I count the number of days I have been here.”

(Newcastle Local Engagement Hearing)

Recommendation 5: Only use detention as a last resort and as a precursor to rapid removal where genuine absconding and/or security risks cannot otherwise be managed. Case-management alternatives offer better value for money, have been demonstrated to work, and are more humane. Children should not be detained under any circumstances.

Integration-based approaches are both cheaper and more successful than detention. At present, the UK has very high rates of detention and is the only country in Europe without a statutory maximum duration. Post-detention removal rates are very low, and in 2021-22 the Home Office paid £13 million in compensation payments for unlawful detention. Detention is also linked to higher rates of depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress, and suicide, while removing opportunities for asylum seekers to engage with the very communities who could help them.

Community accommodation should be the default, since it offers a much better platform for integration as well as improved value for money, while also treating asylum seekers with dignity.

Recommendation 6: Avoid moving refugees and asylum seekers to different accommodation (after their initial placement) without their consent, unless there are exceptional circumstances, as this will impede their meaningful integration.

Many asylum seekers experience repeated relocations, jeopardising their ability to form social bonds or to

integrate in any meaningful way. This is particularly harmful for children and their education. The policy of centrally managed dispersal with limited local control often puts pressure on housing stock and frontline services, creating the risk of more social hostility. Moving asylum seekers after their initial placement should be based on consent.



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Recommendations 7-10 call for a **fresh approach to education and English language provision** for refugees and asylum seekers.

Recommendation 7: Provide refugees and asylum seekers with access, free of charge, to English language provision from day one after they arrive in the UK, with local integration partnerships empowered to commission language provision to suit local needs.

English language proficiency is a foundation for all other aspects of integration and should be treated as a priority. Language proficiency is also the key to unlocking the economic potential in asylum seekers, yet at present, they are eligible for only 50% funding after waiting six months on their asylum application.

Language education should be nationally funded but delivered through local integration partnerships – with civil society, faith groups, families, and other community groups playing a role. Online learning could help to mitigate regional disparities.

Recommendation 8: Enable all refugee and asylum-seeking children to access mainstream education immediately, no matter when they arrive in the school year. Schools and colleges should be incentivised to provide appropriate education and support.

Schools and colleges are critical places of integration, particularly for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. While the UK currently provides access to mainstream schooling for all new arrivals, schools do not receive any additional funding after the school year begins. This funding model needs to change so that schools are enabled to address practical barriers for refugee children, including around language and mental health needs. Learning from good practice and using parent partnerships can help to underpin this shift.

Survey of Refugees and Asylum Seekers



76% do not feel that they were contributing to society as much as they would like

Neighbourly Lab (March 2024)

Survey of Refugees and Asylum Seekers



22% had been unable to access English classes due to waiting lists
13% waited for a year or more to access an English class

Neighbourly Lab (March 2024)

Recommendation 9: Provide language access/assistance to all refugees and asylum seekers for the initial six-month period after arrival.

While language learning is crucial to longer-term integration, access to information in the early stages requires the consistent provision of language assistance to support those who struggle with language barriers. International good practice in this area includes buddy schemes or support through local volunteer networks.

Recommendation 10: Ensure that appropriate pathways are in place for refugees and asylum seekers to meet their full educational potential by recognising qualifications and providing access to further and higher education.

There is a huge potential benefit in addressing the underemployment of refugees who bring an array of skills that could contribute richly to the UK economy

and society. Despite this, many refugees are unaware of the educational opportunities available to them and commonly become deskilled. This is detrimental to their mental health and a wasted opportunity for wider society.

A shift in approach would require that existing qualifications are better recognised. There should also be new pathways to qualifications particularly in shortage sectors such as healthcare.

“Dad has applied for ESOL but they said it’s full. Lots of people want to go to the ESOL class. My dad also volunteers and is trying to improve English but he knows so little it is harder without the classes.”

A young person who lives with her father in a northern city and gave evidence to the Commission. They are both currently seeking asylum.

Above right: Commissioners Sabir Zazai and Bishop Guli Francis-Dehqani at the Glasgow Hearing.

Survey of Refugees and Asylum Seekers



33% had a bachelor's degree or equivalent
26% had a master's degree or equivalent

Neighbourly Lab survey of 755 refugees and asylum seekers (314 Ukrainians, 441 non-Ukrainians). 26% of non-Ukrainian respondents had bachelor's degrees or equivalent and 12% had master's degrees or equivalent (March 2024).

Recommendations 11-13 call for a rethink of the current approach to employment and entrepreneurship.

Recommendation 11: Make people in the asylum system eligible for general employment after six months of waiting for their asylum decision. This eligibility should not be limited to the jobs on the Shortage Occupation List.

Employment is a vital route to integration. It is also the key to unlocking economic benefits for the country. Having permission to work after six months would reduce dependency on public funds, reduce homelessness, improve self-reliance and mental health, and encourage integration in communities. The current system effectively forces asylum seekers into precarious and illegal employment. Introducing the right to work backed by language and employment support would help them into legitimate, well-paid jobs.

Recommendation 12: Make people in the asylum system eligible for jobs on the Shortage Occupation List from day one. Consideration should be given to a Government-backed finance scheme to assist those granted refugee status who wish to set up in business.

Refugees and asylum seekers often have high levels of education and entrepreneurial energy that go underutilised, while the UK has serious skills shortages in key sectors. Many asylum seekers also have no experience of welfare provision and strong traditions of small family businesses, and they expect to support themselves through work. For these reasons, asylum seekers should be given access to jobs on the Shortage Occupation List from the first day.

Recommendation 13: Create a programme of employment support for all refugees and those asylum seekers who are allowed to work.

To facilitate refugees and asylum seekers taking up employment, there should be an enhanced programme of support for them and employers. This would enable refugees and asylum seekers to find and take up opportunities and allow potential employers – some of whom have already established ground-breaking schemes to employ and train refugees – to check eligibility and proceed with confidence.

“Honestly speaking, what makes me even more frustrated is that where I’ve been volunteering for a year every now and then there’s an opening for a job. There are plenty of jobs I could do and I’m really happy here. I really value the community here, and I feel I’m valued. But I’m really restricted because I am still waiting for my leave to remain so I can do all these useful things. There are lots of opportunities. There’s a bright future for me here. I’m ready to contribute, to help people, to pay taxes, but I’m not allowed to.”

A man living in Scotland who is seeking asylum and took part in the Glasgow Hearing

Recommendations 14-15 concern strengthening the prospects for social inclusion.

Recommendation 14: Provide a “Welcome to the UK” pack for all refugees and asylum seekers upon arrival, learning from and building on existing examples.

Recommendation 15: Establish more Welcome Hubs, bringing together the local community, local government, and civil society.

Evidence shows that the first six months are crucial for building social connections and gaining access to services. Welcome packs should be produced by local integration partnerships, incorporating hyper-local information, and provided to asylum seekers at the earliest opportunity. These should include information on how to navigate the asylum process itself.

Welcome Hubs could provide a place for local integration partnerships to mobilise frontline services for asylum seekers. They would exemplify the shift to local leadership and offer an opportunity to build social connections and strengthen local community. Welcome Hubs would build on pre-existing community schemes and could learn from good practice in other countries. The model would be highly scalable.

Recommendation 16 calls for a new approach to physical and mental health.

Recommendation 16: Carry out Joint Strategic Needs Assessments (through collaboration between the NHS executive and civil society (including charities, faith groups, and diaspora organisations) to increase understanding of the composition and needs of local refugees and asylum seekers. Findings should inform the planning, development, and offering of relevant, inclusive, and responsive care systems that improve health and address health inequalities.

Strong provision for physical and mental health and wellbeing is an important condition for integration, while integration itself would improve health outcomes. Local integration partnerships should include the NHS and ensure that refugees and asylum seekers have access to appropriate healthcare that considers specific needs. When taken alongside other measures such as language and employment support, providing specialised mental health support would contribute to the net economic benefit of an integration-based model.

Commissioners

Trixie Brenninkmeijer
 Jacqueline Broadhead
 Lord Alex Carlile
 Bishop Dr Guli Francis-Dehqani
 Carolyn Downs
 David Goodhart
 Baroness Brenda Hale
 Kevin Hyland

Diana Johnson MP
 Professor Cornelius Katona
 Dr Ed Kessler (Chair)
 Professor Hanna Kienzler
 Janice Lopatkin
 Jehangir Malik
 Bishop Paul McAleenan
 Rabbi Baroness Julia Neuberger

Professor Jenny Phillimore
 Mishka Pillay
 David Simmonds MP
 Enver Solomon
 Nicola Thomas
 Sabir Zazai



**Commission on the
Integration of
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Commission for the Integration of Refugees
Woolf Institute, Madingley Road, Cambridge CB3 0UB
[@CIRefugeesUK](#) | contact@refugeeintegrationuk.com | refugeeintegrationuk.com