

Bridges, Bonds and Belonging



Report to Newcastle City Council

By Inge Boudewijn and Jamie Harding, Northumbria University
with grateful thanks for the contribution of Hafez Karout and Hala Alasaly

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Executive Summary

The research was based on interviews with 17 refugees accepted under the UK Resettlement Scheme (UKRS) and six asylum seekers/refugees who had come to the UK by other means. All participants were based in Newcastle. All of the UKRS respondents, but only one of the others, had taken pictures of places in Newcastle and the surrounding area that were important to them.

The research demonstrated that Newcastle had exceeded its City of Sanctuary aspiration to “be a safe and welcoming city, where people new to the city are provided with the support and advice that they need and where links between new arrivals and existing communities are fostered.” There were numerous quotes to demonstrate that each aspect of this aspiration had been met:

“I felt safe. And the people in here, they are friendly... like, they are nice people. So are our neighbours and so we got that kind of... we get along.”

“When I first arrived here I was lost for words and I can’t describe how happy I was. I felt happy, secure and stable because it was a big change in my life...or rather it was a feeling that I moved to a completely new and better life. I would never have known that a man could be this happy if I hadn’t had the chance to move to Newcastle.”

“We didn’t expect that amount of support and care, but we found that whenever we need anything, we just find [NAME OF SUPPORT WORKER] available and also they helped us with GP, school. They helped us with any matters related to our life in here. So, yes, they helped us a lot, really with everything. All aspects.”

“I have never met anyone who was unkind... who treated me bad or who made me feel unwelcome or something like that. They always smile at me, which is really good, and they are all nice people.”

“It is safety and stability that made me home and made me feel that I was born again.”

“I feel like I belong to this area: this is my neighbourhood; this is my place; this is where I belong to.”

“I am so happy”.

The feelings of respondents when they first arrived in Newcastle were a mix of apprehension and hope. Many expressed the view that they were starting a ‘new life’, which usually had positive connotations.

The support provided by Your Homes Newcastle (YHN) to the UKRS respondents, and the Local Authority Asylum Seeker Liaison Officers (LAASLO) to the other respondents, was widely praised for helping people to feel welcome.

The friendliness of local people, and Grey’s Monument, were also factors that enabled respondents to feel at home and navigate the city.

Respondents were aware that language was a major barrier to integration and Newcastle College, where many learned English, featured prominently in the photographs of places that were important to them.

Respondents who were not part of the UKRS were more likely to access a range of sources of education and to be involved in voluntary work, which could be of great benefit to their self-esteem.

In addition to language barriers and immigration status, the refusal of employers to accept overseas qualifications was a major barrier to respondents working.

For a small number of respondents – some Muslim and some Christian – being able to practice their faith was associated with the feeling that they belonged.

Open spaces – in parks, at the coast and on the Quayside – were particularly important to respondents' sense of wellbeing. All these areas provided a sense of peace and the parks and seaside were important places for children to play.

There were few examples of hostile behaviour towards respondents. Loneliness and difficulties with services or housing were ongoing problems experienced by a minority.

Although friendships with local people were rare, the people of Newcastle were widely praised for their friendliness, a factor which contributed to feelings of safety - both in homes and neighbourhoods - for respondents and their children.

Trust in agencies and in the UK's respect for human rights were other factors that contributed to feelings of safety.

There was a strong sense of belonging among many respondents, which was reinforced by their neighbourhoods, their daily routines and local landmarks.

Although some respondents felt homesick, local places that reminded them of home could contribute to a sense of belonging in Newcastle.

Education (for themselves and their children) and work were central to the future aspirations of the respondents.

Introduction

This report examines the experience of refugees and asylum seekers in Newcastle upon Tyne. Newcastle has a long history of welcoming refugees and asylum seekers and in 2014 was officially recognised as a City of Sanctuary.

Most of the respondents to this research had come to the UK as part of the UK Resettlement Scheme (UKRS), a programme which brings together the previous Vulnerable Persons Resettlement (VPRS) and Vulnerable Children's Resettlement (VCRS) schemes and the Gateway Protection Programme. The VPRS was launched in 2014 with the aim of providing sanctuary to several hundred vulnerable Syrians. It was expanded in 2015 with the aim of resettling 20,000 Syrian people and in 2017 the scope of the scheme was extended to cover people of other nationalities who were fleeing the Syrian conflict (Home Office, 2017). Newcastle was one of the first local authorities that offered its support to the scheme. Housing and support services to refugees in the UKRS are provided by Your Homes Newcastle (YHN), through a contract with Newcastle City Council. A smaller cohort of respondents had made their own way to the UK and had sought asylum here; they are supported by Local Authority Asylum Seeker Liaison Officers (LAASLOs).

Previous research into the situation of refugees in Newcastle found a sense of optimism, with refugees voicing a wish to stay in Newcastle, to find stable and fulfilling work and for their children to achieve good levels of education. Most wanted to become British citizens, which would give them more opportunities, including opportunities to travel and visit their home countries (Flug and Hussein, 2019).

Flug and Hussein's (2019) research found that refugees tended to be positive about the quality and location of housing they had been offered, noting they felt a high sense of safety. Perceived low levels of discrimination appeared to be linked to these feelings of safety. However, there seemed to be a reluctance to describe racist incidents; these were often dismissed as a 'one-off'. Flug and Hussein speculated that this may have to do with not wanting to appear ungrateful towards the place that had welcomed them, or may be correlated partially to language skills, with racist comments going unperceived. (Flug and Hussein, 2019).

Local residents generally had a positive, welcoming attitude towards refugees, but personal interaction between the two groups was low, and local people tended to view integration as a one-way process where the burden lies on the refugees to adapt. While older refugees thought cultural differences were a barrier to friendship between the two groups, younger refugees did not see that as an issue, and voiced a strong desire to befriend locals. At the same time, many noted that interacting with people from their home country was important, where people were bound by language and shared experiences (Flug and Hussein, 2019).

The wider community in Newcastle had a very positive attitude towards refugees having a job, even in areas with high unemployment. Refugees and asylum seekers valued work for financial security reasons, as a way to learn English and make new connections, giving a routine to daily life and even improving emotional stability and self-esteem (Flug and Hussein, 2019).

The study in Newcastle mirrored previous research conducted in the North East of England among migrants, including refugees and asylum seekers (Vickers et al, 2016), in many of its findings about access to work. There was a strong relationship between having English language skills and finding employment, but much of the employment found was low-skilled (Flug and Hussein, 2019; Vickers et al., 2016). This placed refugees at risk of falling into 'a low-pay, limited English' trap, where lack of English skills meant that refugees were not given opportunities for higher paying jobs, while working long hours left them unable to attend English classes and they had limited exposure to the language in the work place (Flug and Hussein, 2019).

Both pieces of research highlighted that, where the qualifications a person brought from their home country were not recognised in the UK, this led to a lose-lose situation, where newcomers could not reach their full potential and wider society missed out on their potential contribution (Flug and Hussein, 2019; Vickers et al., 2016). Vickers et al. (2016) noted that, for asylum seekers, the barriers to finding work were greater than for the general population and for East European migrants, but most were keen to have a paid job. Immigration status could be a barrier to finding work, as could childcare, especially as migrants and refugees might lack the social networks to access informal childcare. Other barriers to work Vickers et al. (2016, p.4) identified were discrimination, as well as: "general confidence, mental health, gaps in experience, costs associated with starting work, and absence of social networks."

Methodology

In total, 23 refugees/asylum seekers took part in the research discussed below. 17 of these were part of the UK Resettlement Scheme (UKRS), 15 of whom were from Syria and two from the Sudan. Nine of these respondents were men and eight were women. The other six respondents had made their own way to the United Kingdom: there was an even gender split and three were asylum seekers, while three had received a positive decision.

Respondents were asked to take photographs of places that were important to them and then discussed them in interviews, alongside other questions about their experiences, their views of the city and the skills that they felt they had. Several of the photos of the UKRS respondents feature Newcastle's 2019 Christmas market, partly reflecting the time at which the research took place. In contrast, data collection with the six other asylum seekers/refugees occurred as the COVID-19 lockdown was taking effect, so only one of these respondents contributed photographs.

This report considers the main findings from the photographs and interviews before concluding with some brief reflections on the manner in which the City of Sanctuary principles are being put into practice in Newcastle and some recommendations. Where photographs were taken with respondents (and their families) in them, these are only included in the report where permission was specifically gained to use them for this purpose.

Four of the respondents from the UKRS, and five who were not part of the UKRS, agreed to be named in the report, so material that relates to them is identified as

such. The circumstances in which the report was completed mean that it was difficult to go back to check with the other respondents whether they were happy for material to be linked to them specifically, so they remain anonymous here.

The report largely considers the data from the UKRS and the non-UKRS groups together. Where there were significant differences between the two groups – e.g. in the areas of education and volunteering – these are highlighted.

Arrival and Early Experiences

We asked respondents to explain how they felt about Newcastle when they first arrived in the city. Perhaps not surprisingly, many voiced mixed feelings: on the one hand, hope and anticipation, but on the other, apprehension about living in a new country, with a different culture and a different language. For some, the transition was particularly hard:

“I felt alone. I felt very sad. Yes, well it was completely different, like ninety degrees different to back home. I felt lonely... very lonely at the beginning and because everything has changed. I used to work, but I came here and sat at home, did nothing, so basically, I felt like I started to get a bit of depression at the beginning.” (Shirin)

“Well it was a scary experience, it was very overwhelming, scary. It was like the biggest move or change in life that we had to make, but we just have to for the safety of ourselves and the little one. But at first it was all such a blur, it was just my whole head was just spinning, I couldn’t... I was scared to walk out and everything.”

Some people reported that they found the city large and crowded – others that it was peaceful. This seemed to depend largely on the places that people had lived previously.

Finding their way around a new city was frequently identified by respondents as an initial difficulty:

“It was really hard, really difficult for us. To get used to how life is here and to know where... until we managed to know where to go, how to do and things like that.” (Noura)

“You know when you arrive new in a city, I arrived here and I don’t know anything, and I arrived as if I was blind-deaf-mute...”

An often-heard phrase was that coming to Newcastle was like the start of a ‘new life’ – for some this reflected the difficulty of the experience:

“When I arrived in Newcastle, I felt a bit unhappy because it was a new life, a new language and new climate in general.”

“[arriving in Newcastle] was so hard because we were moving to a new life and a new environment with a new language.... There is big difference between cultures... When I arrived here I moved and lived temporarily in a place provided by the council. It is hard because I had to leave our home in Syria.”

However, for others, the sense of ‘a new life’ had only positive connotations – especially where contrasted with the struggles experienced in the ‘old life’:

“I underwent a lot of hardships, financially or whatever... [...] When I arrived [in Newcastle] we had a good welcome...each family taken to a home...That

is the most significant thing that happened to me in years. I felt that I was a human being born anew on that day.”

“When I first arrived here I was lost for words and I can’t describe how happy I was. I felt happy, secure and stable because it was a big change in my life...or rather it was a feeling that I moved to a completely new and better life. I would never have known that a man could be this happy if I hadn’t had the chance to move to Newcastle. You know we were always oppressed by other powers and we were not allowed to speak or express our thoughts... during our final days in Syria, there were lots of restrictions on our work and life even in the city where I was born. It is a new life now.”

When asked if anyone made them feel particularly welcome upon their arrival and during their stay in Newcastle so far, almost all interviewees mentioned Your Homes Newcastle and their case workers or their LAASLO if they were non-UKRS. Being picked up at the airport by someone familiar with their cultural background and the language that they spoke was viewed as particularly important by the UKRS respondents.

Respondents also valued help with communication issues and being provided with interpreters. There was great value placed on being shown around, including explanations of how to navigate public transport in the city and the locations of halal shops, mosques, libraries, the GP and other points of relevance. Other forms of support included setting up electricity and water supplies, making doctor’s appointments, opening bank accounts and helping with schooling issues.

Almost all respondents said that they were very grateful for the support that they had received. For example:

“We didn’t expect that amount of support and care, but we found that whenever we need anything, we just find [NAME OF SUPPORT WORKER] available and also they helped us with GP, school. They helped us with any matters related to our life in here. So, yes, they helped us a lot, really with everything. All aspects.”

The drop-in services run by Your Homes Newcastle were also appreciated. Many respondents expressed gratitude for the help that they received there, while acknowledging that case workers were busy and that they needed to become more independent with time.



One respondent had taken the above photograph linked to her case worker's help:

"It reminds me of the first day we arrived, when xxx, the Support Worker, took us to the job centre to register and then we went inside this building to have a look."

Among the respondents who were not part of the UKRS one LAASLO was frequently named as providing a high level of support. One respondent particularly valued being introduced to volunteering opportunities, while Kuveri said:

"she was able to show us the food banks ... how to register with a GP, dentist, looking for our kid's places in the school, showing us where the library is, where we could go for some minimal training. Yeah, so the reception was really good ... Even the kid at school, she, she felt welcome from day one, they already know her name, they know ... she was ... it was easy for her to make friends, yeah. So the reception was very good, very welcoming."

The friendliness of local people was also identified by a number of respondents as being important in overcoming feelings of isolation:

"It was mostly the people because I had to ask addresses, and they were answering me kindly."

"Now I am very happy, very happy because I have found people in Newcastle very friendly. Very friendly, very nice and kind, yeah." (Yolande, non-UKRS respondent)

A slightly surprising finding was the number of respondents who identified Grey's Monument as providing assistance to them settling in, because it helped them to navigate the city.



One respondent gave her reason for taking the above picture as:

“When we first arrived, we were taken to this monument and then so we could know where the bus stop is, for our home. They were telling us about the bus stop, and they were saying that as soon as you are here you can see the bus stop and you can just navigate.”



Another respondent said of this picture:

“The second place is Grey’s Monument. It is significant for me. You know when we came to Newcastle, we had a hazy view of the city. When we arrived, we had only a bird’s view of Newcastle away from the details. As newcomers we looked at Newcastle as a whole. Later we learnt the buses and routes and where each bus goes, and we learn places such as bus routes, castles, city centre. So, in the beginning I wanted a landmark, a waypoint on my map and the pivot of my compass. This is Grey’s Monument.”



Finally, one respondent took this picture and explained:

“The second photo is the Monument. It is important for me as a historic place that adds beauty and tradition to the city. Personally, it is so important as a design and, above all, it is a landmark for everyone new in Newcastle. Everybody meets there as it makes life easier when there is no question where to meet: It is a waypoint where all people meet without getting lost.”

The focus on the Monument reflected a desire for respondents both to be supported in day to day living tasks but also to understand better the nature of the city and what gave it its character. This was summarised by one respondent in the following terms:

For example, I used to live in an area far away from the city centre and I had to go shopping and buy groceries. At that time, I always wondered how I was going to manage buying things, what I was going to say to the bus driver or the taxi driver and how to get where I wanted to go. That could have been so difficult without the efforts of the supporter workers who were always there. They helped me get what I wanted and gave me guidance....

I'd like to go to the museums here, but I need to be accompanied by someone to explain to me the significance of things there, where they come from and what they were made of used for... My English isn't very good. I'd like to visit the historical sites, but I need someone to explain to me and guide me. I wish I could find someone to help in this respect. A museum is important to me because it shows me the history of the city, how it was, how people lived, how it developed until it reached the current situation.

College and Learning

Language was discussed as a barrier to feeling at home by almost all of the UKRS respondents and often identified as the most significant difficulty that they faced. However, it was a barrier that began to be overcome with time:

“It’s a totally different language, and I was having thoughts that I’m not going to cope, I’m not going to get used to living here. But then, with time, everything started to ease off and I started to integrate, and we started to kind of pick up the language and started to communicate a little bit, as well.”

“It is a long process for us, but it is not so difficult now as it was in the past.”

Many interviewees spoke about increasing their English skills as key to a better future, job opportunities, integration, and making friendships. Most were enrolled in English language classes, going to college three to five times a week. A small number of respondents identified specifically that they were attending Newcastle College; in other cases it was not clear whether it was Newcastle College or Westgate College that they were attending. College was identified as important in helping to overcome language difficulties:

“The first year was very bad for us to cope due to the language barrier, the language was a very big barrier for me because I used to not even be able to express myself to say what I want or to respond. [...] But then the second year when we started to go to college and we started to get on with it, and this is how it got a bit better ...”

“It was really hard for me when I first arrived due to the language barrier and I couldn’t communicate easily. After one year I’ve been attending college which has improved my English and I’ve also managed a few friendships, so basically I started to integrate and get on with the society.” (Halima)

Some UKRS respondents also featured college in their photographs, highlighting that it was an important element of their everyday efforts to improve their English skills.



One respondent said of the above picture:

“It was Newcastle College. Because I’m every day there, and I just wanted to take [a photo of] something special ... it’s part of my life, ‘cause I’m always there, so I just wanted to add it. [...] I’m studying there and all my future is there, so it’s really important to me.”



Shirin took the above photograph of the library outside the college and explained:

“I feel like it’s very important for everyone to go to the library... visit the library, and spend some time there, since we could learn English not only from college, but from also going to the library and reading some books there.”



It was not just the language skills and learning that college was valued for, but also the relationships that were developed. The respondent who took the above picture commented:

“This is college... on the way out, I just took a quick picture of it. But this is Newcastle College. This place is very important to me. I really like this place and whoever attends in the same class as me.”

There were some similarly positive views expressed of the staff who taught in the college:

“I can say that now I am learning the language and Newcastle College is a part of my life. I like the teachers in Newcastle College. Being in such a place has added a lot to my sense of belonging and integration in Newcastle...”

Hanaa noted that going to college and interacting with her classmates and teachers improved her confidence in speaking English:

“... my confidence has improved, and the teacher helped me a lot, because they normally correct, if I have pronounced something incorrectly, then they normally correct it for me. And no one laughs or something like that. So, that’s what kind of improved my confidence. So, I started to have kind of full confidence to speak up and to say if there is something that I need to understand more or if there is something that I would like to get a bit better.”

Hanaa further explained that she used to go to college four days a week, but now goes five days a week even though it is a struggle to balance with her child-care and other household duties, because it is that important to her to become independent and be able to find work.

One respondent identified a difficulty in learning to speak English, namely that she was constantly being called on by her family for translation services. However, there was no doubting the hugely positive impact of attending college and developing skills and confidence in English speaking.



Although one of the non-UKRS students also mentioned studying English at college, it was noted above that these respondents tended to have a good level of English language skills. This group reported a wider variety of subjects to study and places to learn, including online courses. Kuveri explained the choice of the library in Benwell (above) as one of the most important places to him in the following manner:

“So at the library it really where we get to be intellectually stimulated, yes. It’s our lens to the world. And you get to meet people... Our daughter is also attending a coding club there on a Friday afternoon. So this is where the learning, intellectual stimulation take place. Yeah, it’s also where you forget about everything else and then you, you live life, this you look, I’m doing things that create hope to improve my life, yes.”

Working and Volunteering



For those respondents who are part of the UKRS programme, there is no legal barrier to work and one respondent's picture of himself at his place of work (above) demonstrated how important this was to him:

"I learn in the shop, I learn here six, eight months. I like this picture of this place because I start work here. I like the work [of a] barber."

However, this respondent was unusual in working, despite the varied range of skills and job histories that there were among the respondents: financial management, human resources, teaching, retail, project management, insurance, working in the petroleum industry, plumbing, service industry, nursing, catering, business, farming, sewing, air-conditioning, tailoring and making cheese.

Many respondents identified that getting a job was one of their main aims and hopes for the future, as well as a piece of the puzzle of 'integration' and 'feeling settled' that was missing for them. For example:

"We kind of integrated in the city and I really like it. I've never seen any kind of negatives, apart from that I feel like the city is not active that much, so there isn't a lot of job opportunities. So, this is what worries me when I think about the future."

Shirin reported feeling isolated, suggesting that work could be the key to overcoming this situation:

“I still feel the same until I get employed and this is when I feel the massive improvement.”

Another UKRS respondent discussed the satisfaction that his role as a teacher had brought him before he moved to the UK:

“At work, I feel that teaching make me confident in life”

One of the non-UKRS respondents, Xiayimalidan, expressed his frustration at being unable to work because of his asylum seeker status:

“I’m a young man, I really don’t want to waste my time and I don’t want to every day take the benefit from the government. I appreciate this government give me this opportunity in staying in this... UK, but I have to appreciate this country, I don’t want to take any more the benefit or something, I’m young man, I have to do something.”

However, in addition to language, other major barriers to employment were the different nature of many jobs in the UK and the need to have qualifications that were acceptable. Two respondents who had worked as chefs discussed the need to gain new certificates in the UK if they were to resume this type of employment. There were similar difficulties for those who had worked in construction and one respondent who had worked as a gynaecology nurse expressed doubts as to whether she could take the necessary training in English to re-qualify.

Other employment-related difficulties were less obvious. One respondent who had been a plumber said that plumbing systems were very different in the UK. Another expressed frustration at being unable to gain a driving licence because he could not understand a verbal question – this experience had occurred three times:

“The examiner made me feel that I don’t belong and he treated me badly and cancelled my test for the third time.”

Respondents on the UKRS programme discussed a number of other ways in which they had used their time productively. Two respondents, one male and one female, said that spending substantial amounts of time with their children had led to them becoming more patient. One interviewee, when asked if she was doing anything to use or explore her skill set at the moment, explained:

“I keep giving a lot of advices, whether it’s for my family, for my friends, especially the pregnant women and when they have a new baby born, I keep giving them a lot of advices since I have got a lot of knowledge about some diseases and so on.”

Shirin said that she spent time teaching children to speak Arabic.



Five of the six non-UKRS respondents had been involved in voluntary work: Oxfam was the organisation where the volunteering most frequently took place, followed by Action Foundation. Kuveri took the above picture of the Riverside Health Project and said it was:

“where I can live out my profession, my skills, although limited... here you get to feel appreciated, you are contributing. Yes, you are taking from the system, but you also know you are giving back, yeah, you are adding your value to the community. You realise what others are going through, how could I make a mark, how could I make an impact, how can you make it better, so this is what, what happens here, yes.”

Another non-UKRS respondent praised the friendliness of Action Foundation and described their role as:

“welcoming people, asylum seekers like myself, welcoming them, chatting with them, and helping them feeling happy, feeling at home.”

Faith

A limited number of respondents discussed the importance of practicing any form of religion. Shirin reported that she was teaching children about the Qur'an.



Two other respondents discussed the importance of celebrating Eid, with one explaining their choice of the above picture in the following manner:

“It was in May 2018 when it was my first Eid in England. That was in the backyard of Westgate College and what made me happy and feel I am home is getting together with other Muslims celebrating Eid.”



Another had taken the above picture of himself with his brother at the Metro Centre and said that this was important because they were celebrating Eid.

For two of the non-UKRS respondents, Christian faith was very important. Kuveri was a pastor of a church and part of an online group for prayer and other activities. Amir identified a church as a key place for him, where he received friendship and support with his immigration status. He described the church as his family.

Places to Enjoy

The photographs included large numbers of places that respondents went to for pleasure. These can be divided between those that they went to in order to entertain their children and those that they went to in order to enjoy the peace – although there was a considerable degree of overlap between the two.



Parks and open spaces featured heavily in the discussion of the places that were good to take children to. One respondent said of the above picture:

“I feel happy when I see my kids happy. This photo was taken after my daughter did well in the sprinting competition at school, so I wanted to give her a reward and I took there to play and have some fun.”

Another parent discussed how happy it made his children to go to the soft play in Exhibition Park.



Noura explained the choice of the picture above in the following terms:

“My daughter really loves coming to this place [Leazes’ Park] to feed the ducks, she would normally have like a bag of food. She keeps crying saying, ‘I want to feed the ducks’, but she normally goes there and feed them... She really loves to go to this place, she’s obsessed.”

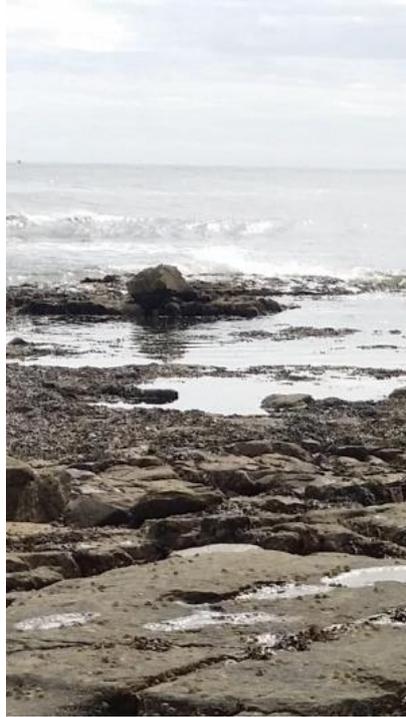
Another similarly discussed her children going to Leazes Park to see the swans and the geese, along with the soft play toys and the slides.

Leazes Park was also a popular location for those without children, with one respondent describing it as:

“where I went one day for a walk and I discovered that it’s a very nice place with a great space, with a lake, and ducks, it’s really important. A nice place you can go there to recreate yourself and escape the hustle and bustle of life. We asylum seekers, it’s a very good place for us because most of the time when you feel loneliness because we sometimes suffer from that, you can go there and recreate yourself. It’s a very important place for me.”

Another respondent chose the Town Moor as a special place for similar reasons:

“Just getting off the bus and just walking around, just lying on the grass and enjoying this beautiful quiet view, listening to the birds, open space, so free. Just lovely.”



Halima took the above picture and commented on how much her children had enjoyed their visit to the beach:

“They really had a good day there and again, the beauty of the nature had attracted me and just made me take a picture of it. It’s really nice and they really liked it.”

Coastal areas were also popular as places where adults themselves could relax. One respondent said of Tynemouth:

“It’s the like scene in general and how it just makes you feel that you let all of the stress out and you just throw it in the sea.”



The above picture of North Shields was chosen by another respondent for similar reasons:

“when I visited this place I felt that it is a box where you can put all your sadness.”



The respondent who took the above picture of Seaham commented that it was a place that made them feel comfortable and safe, giving them positive energy.



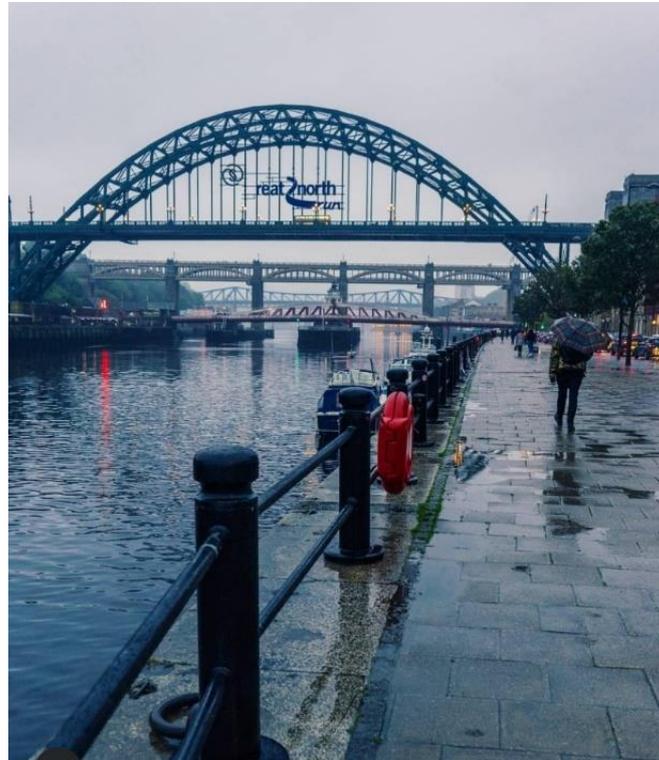
Like the beach, the Quayside offered the soothing power of water. Noura summed up the above image by saying: *“It’s quite peaceful, quiet, nice.”*



Another respondent discussed a specific bench that he went to on the Quayside for deep thinking and relaxation. Furthermore, he saw the Quayside as having many other positive qualities, as was shown by his discussion of the above image:

“This is a great and romantic city at once. The first photo makes me feel that Newcastle is such a great city in terms of the job opportunities it provides to people. Have a look at places like the Quayside it tells us how romantic the

city is.... If you take a cup of coffee and sit there you will enjoy happy moments and have a sense of comfort and clear thinking.”



The Sunday market featured in the discussion of two pictures of the Quayside, with one respondent saying of the above image:

“This place, whenever I feel down, whenever I feel like kind of upset, I go to this place, I watch the water and I feel better, especially on Sunday, I really like when every Sunday to visit the Sunday market.”



Another said of this picture:

“In the beginning we have a photo of the Quayside. First, I like to visit this area because it gives me a sense peace and serenity. It also has a nice view and you can see a lot of nice things, such as the Sunday market, which is a so beautiful and I like so much about it, except that I wish there were more parking bays.”

Barriers and Areas for Improvement

As noted earlier, language was the greatest barrier that respondents faced in seeking to settle into Newcastle with a number of respondents suggesting that they initially felt as though they were 'mute' due to their lack of English. This added to frustrations when there were (very occasionally) difficulties with learning English: Shirin expressed disappointment at being put in the wrong level of English class initially and Xiayimalidan said that he had had to wait a long time to begin learning the language.

Some of the areas that respondents found difficult, e.g. the weather, were beyond anyone's control. Others such as buses being late were not related to the respondents' status and several were employment related, as discussed above. One respondent had not been aware that he should not leave young children in the house on their own and was grateful to a support worker for informing him that this should not happen.

While the overall picture was of praise for services, there were occasional complaints such as a respondent who felt that her GP had been dismissive of her and another who was concerned about the amount of rubbish in the street (although this had now been resolved). One respondent wanted to move house but complained that the process was slow. Another was disappointed with her housing, but this may have been linked to unrealistic expectations - she was disappointed that there was no television or wi-fi in the property.

For a minority, initial culture shock was replaced by an ongoing feeling of loneliness. Halima, when asked what she liked least about living in Newcastle, said:

"Just the loneliness. I feel sometimes myself and my children, because when they finish school they come home and then there is no-one to play with, there is not much to do. It's like a routine and it's a bit boring sometimes."

Noura said:

"Back in Lebanon like people used to know each other but here we are very isolated, and we were lonely, and we didn't really know anyone... it hasn't really changed a lot since we don't know a lot of people."

It was not clear whether there were specific factors that were linked to the loneliness felt by these respondent – Noura was a lone parent and Halima was one of the most recently arrived of the UKRS respondents, having been in Newcastle for approximately one year.

Kuveri felt that more could be done to bring information together for newly arrived asylum seekers, possibly in the form of a booklet or a telephone app. He explained that:

"... the information is like given piecemeal. After a month you ask a question or you're given information on that piece by bit. So if we could have like, well something that I was think of also developing like a toolkit, like a guidance, like a checklist just to ... let's say you do a formal induction, either you bring a

group of new arrivals weekly or monthly, whatever the schedule could be, you bring them together, a group of ten to 15 as well, then you give them a formal induction, everything all at once. I think that would make it also easier instead of having to move from one person to the other in terms of the spread of the resources.”

One respondent suggested that it would have been easier to get on with people in the neighbourhood if more information had been provided about the circumstances of people on the UKRS:

“They didn’t really know that we came under the same scheme, because there are a few families that are living around the block who came under the same scheme, but they weren’t... Like, they didn’t really know how did we end up in here. Whether we were living here or somewhere else and then we moved, or we are just a normal asylum who get their status in here.”

However, it was unclear whether other respondents would have wanted this to happen; this may be a matter for further investigation.

There were very few examples of hostile behaviour to respondents but Noura described having something thrown at her and her daughter while they were waiting at the bus stop and noted that she regularly was the target of ‘dirty looks.’ Another refugee, while not having experienced hostility themselves, said that they felt uncomfortable in their area because of reports of incidents that happened to other people. Similarly, Amir said that he personally had not experienced difficulties, but he had heard racist views being expressed of others who spoke non-English languages in public places. Respondents did not discuss taking any action in these cases, or even mention the possibility of taking action: a point that is returned to in the conclusion.

Relationships with Local People

The examples of negative relationships in the last section represented the exception rather than the norm. A small number of respondents had struck up friendships with people from Newcastle, and there were many accounts of the friendliness of local people. One of the respondents who had been able to establish friendships identified overcoming the language barrier as the key to this:

“I discovered that the people here in Newcastle are the nicest people in the world. But the language was a barrier between me and those nice people. I thought it was hard to make friends here as we thought that the English people were not very sociable, but later when I learnt to speak the language a bit I found that it is so easy to make friends with the nice people in Newcastle.”

Another suggested that difficulties in understanding North East accents were overcome by the friendliness of the people:

“You know when you don’t understand they are eager to help, they will never let you stay without understanding, that’s the beauty of it all.”

Several respondents discussed having a good relationship with their neighbours, including having chats when they ran into them, sharing meals, and taking outings together. In most cases, these neighbours also came from migrant backgrounds, but there were also examples of positive relationships between neighbours and the local population. As one respondent put it:

“I found that the people and the neighbours are so, so nice. I feel as if I was living among my family and the people of Newcastle are my big family. We are getting on well with our neighbours and get together and have chats when we meet on the roads.”

The friendliness of people that they did not know was a feature of the accounts of several respondents:

“I have never met anyone who was unkind... who treated me bad or who made me feel unwelcome or something like that. They always smile at me, which is really good, and they are all nice people.” (Hanaa)

“It’s a nice place to have a walk with family and watching other people walking as well. Because I think it’s a kind of participation with the whole community when everybody is walking, you are walking as well.”



One respondent commented on the picture above, saying:

“I love the people of Newcastle and the smiling faces you see around you in the street. Many people say hello even if they don’t know you. A smile on somebody’s face is enough to make your day.”

Amir said that he felt at home because the friendly culture was similar to the one that he was used to in Iran:

“They are interacting to each other a lot, they go to each other houses regularly, they are friends, you know, they have a close community with each other. So that’s what people are doing in neighbourhoods in Iran, they all know each other ... There are a lot of good and bad similarities, but all of them totally together, they are, you know, doing good to me because I feel like I’m at home.”

Feeling Safe

Appreciation of the friendliness of people in Newcastle was often linked to a feeling of safety:

“I felt safe. And the people in here, they are friendly... like, they are nice people. So are our neighbours and so we got that kind of... we get along.”

“Really the people are friendly wherever you go, they are helpful, yeah. You are not scared of anything. I mean you, you feel good day in day out.”

“The way how I feel safe is when I ask someone for help, I find them like helping me, they do provide me with the help I need.” (Halima)

Although it was noted earlier that there were some examples of dissatisfaction with housing, for many feeling happy and safe in their home was linked to a sense that they belonged in their neighbourhood. One respondent told us that, while waiting for his front door lock to be fixed, he never felt worried that someone would enter his house. Kuveri explained his reason for taking a photograph of his house as:

“This is home. This is comfort. This is identity. This is ownership, sense of being; I’ve got something at least, yeah.”



Another respondent said of the above picture of his children in the backyard:

“It is important to me because my kids were new to this environment and they were happy as they were playing with the snow. You know we don’t have snow in Sudan. Like any father I feel happy when I see my kids happy.”



Shirin took this picture to contrast her feeling of safety in her home with her previous experience:

Shirin: *“The reason why I took a picture of this is not mainly for the sofa, just for home. That home is the safest place I can be in and I believe that’s for everyone else, as well.”*

Inge: *“Yes, that’s a very meaningful photograph. And why did you want to show us that?”*

Shirin: *“Just because every time I remember people back home living in camps, I feel sorry for them and I feel I thank my god for me being in a house and being safe.”*

Trust in the agencies that work in Newcastle was also linked to the sense of being in a place of safety. One respondent discussed the contribution of the information given by Your Homes Newcastle

“Newcastle helped us and they used to run like a regular meetings in Kenton Library to raise our awareness and to kind of provide us with more information, and our support worker as well ... When they were there, we felt we are safe, we really felt that we are safe, and we cannot thank them enough.”

In other cases, it was trust in those whose job was to provide security that was the key factor:

“So, feeling you are safe, or when a policeman smiles at you, here in the UK is something taken for granted and can make you feel safe on the long run. You feel you are at ease when a security man gives support with a smile, which was missing in our country.”



One respondent explained the significant of the above picture by saying:

“The third photo is what we, Arab refugees, call the ‘Primark Street’ ... One distinctive characteristic of this street is the sustained sense of safety it gives to people in the area, as there is always a security staff or a policeman patrol here and there; no one can misbehave, and the kids always feel safe.”

At a more abstract level, several refugees linked their feelings of safety to faith in the UK’s policies and laws protecting human rights:

“The UK embraces human rights and equality between refugees and locals. The local law maintains equality and all people are seen equal in the eye of law and responsibilities. ... You know, you come from a country of fears where we had to worry about stability and safety, which are guaranteed for everyone here in the UK. A human being is safe here.”

“What I love most about England in general, not Newcastle in particular, is that it is a country of law and justice... a country of human rights.”

“What I like most about living in Newcastle is that we all enjoy having the same rights and treated equally. Living here is nice and we are so happy...”

“We came here for more security...you know the situation in Syria and we came here in the hope of a better life and better education for our kids. I am a happy that we have rights here.”



The feeling of safety and respect experienced by most respondents was one that was extended to their children. One respondent, who had taken the picture above, said that she felt comfortable and safe at Eldon Square, where here children enjoyed playing and feeding the birds.



Shirin commented on the picture above:

“Although it was night-time, we feel really safe, it was me, myself and daughter and we always feel safe when we go out even if it’s a bit late. ... It’s to just express how I feel safe when I go out at night-time. I can never feel frightened that I’m going out at night.”

Safety was again a reason for another respondent considering Newcastle to be child friendly:

“I think its child friendly, compared to what I’ve heard about other towns like the big cities, bringing up your child in Newcastle, it’s safe. There’s not a lot of pressure on children....”

The importance of a feeling of safety to overall wellbeing was highlighted by one respondent:

“It is safety and stability that made me home and made me feel that I was born again.”

Belonging

Almost all interviewees, especially those who reported initially feeling dubious or unhappy about coming to Newcastle, noted they had adapted to some degree and were happier now than when they arrived. It appeared that the feeling of belonging developed quicker among the non-UKPR respondents but this may have reflected that many of them had a high standard of English on arrival in the UK. The adjustment from an initial feeling of being lost to one of belonging was illustrated by Noura:

“At the beginning when we first arrived I kept telling my husband ‘let’s go back, let’s go back, how are we going to cope?’ But then, now I feel like I’ll never ever go back.” (Noura)

Similarly, Shirin said:

“When you live abroad and then you see how they present the UK and so on, you feel like, ‘Wow’, but then when you come and just live... It’s a normal life and it’s like everyone else.”

Some UKRS respondents highlighted – directly or indirectly – the importance of the presence of a wider Arabic speaking and/or Muslim community in Newcastle for their sense of belonging, and some were firmly embedded in this. For example:

“The most important thing is presence of Arab community which makes me feel as if I was living in many countries within one country, not to mention the strong social ties that link those communities.”

However, the same respondent highlighted that sometimes tensions existed within this community.



Daily life and routines, lived in a particular daily setting, are likely to contribute to the sense of feeling at home. Some participants took photos of scenes of their neighbourhood, or everyday outings to show us their routine, or what they liked about a place. One respondent said of the above picture:

“Even if I don’t need to buy anything, I just prefer to go around and have a look. Especially the music as well, sometimes they do play music in the street. And the way how busy and lively it is. ... I go to town every day so therefore I really like the city centre and the surrounding. So yes, I go there literally every day.”



One respondent contributed two pictures of her route into college, one of which is shown above, to demonstrate the importance of this routine to her.



The above photograph was used by one refugee to explain how changing his allegiance to Newcastle United was an important part of feeling that he belonged:

"I used to hear about Newcastle team, but I wasn't really that big a fan of them, but then when I came to here and I got to the stadium whenever there is a match on, I go to all of them...since this is the city that kind of welcomed me and made me feel welcome and cared about me, so it's a shame on me if I don't support Newcastle while I'm living here."



Respondents' feelings of belonging were sometimes linked to the neighbourhood in which they lived. The respondent who took the above picture of the place that he got on and off the bus said:

"I feel like I belong to this area: this is my neighbourhood; this is my place; this is where I belong to."



Shirin said of this picture of her neighbourhood:

"I really love the area that I'm living in. I don't know why, but I really love it, I really like it."



A feeling of belonging in Newcastle could also be linked to the physical landscape. One respondent explained taking the above picture by saying that local landmarks helped to give him and his family a feeling of being at home:

“The third place, the Tyne bridge, is symbolically important and in a way similar to our relationship with Grey’s Monument. You know when we go to London and on our way back to Newcastle, we often arrive to Newcastle at night. When it was difficult for us to know which direction the train is going (London or Edinburgh) or which station the train is arriving, the Tyne Bridge has a reassuring role because it used to tell us that we arrived home and we are not going to get off in the wrong station. That was in the past because we did not speak the language very well. Now we feel that the Bridge is a part of our own Self; we feel that we are home again whenever we see the Bridge.”

Yolande also identified the Tyne Bridge as important and said:

“I learnt that there are two towns, two cities, Newcastle Upon Tyne and Gateshead, and I noticed that this bridge is link a link between both cities.”

There were a number of respondents who simply wished to praise life in Newcastle, without giving any specific reasons:

“There is nothing that puts me off this city... I like it so much.... I’d like to say that Newcastle is the best place I have ever seen in my life so far.”

“My love for England is increasing every day. I love it more and more.”

“I am so happy”.

Looking Back

Of course, while many things about living in Newcastle were positively experienced by many participants, some discussed homesickness, and one voiced a strong desire to go back home when it becomes possible (although, as noted previously, others wanted to remain in Newcastle permanently). The feeling of homesickness was also at times reflected in photographs, as many people had taken pictures that reminded them of a previous home in some way. Here are some examples:



“This place is Eldon Square and it reminds me of the court of the Omayyad Mosque in Damascus. Sometimes I come and sit here and remember the old days in Damascus.”



Hanaa: *“This area really reminds me of the neighbourhood back in Syria where my family used to live. Yes, it reminds me of it and that’s why I took a picture of this.”*

Inge: *“And what about it reminds you of...”*

Hanaa: *“Because of the buildings. Exactly the same the way that it was built and the way that it looks. It’s exactly the same.”*

Inge: *“Okay, for you, you like to see places that remind you of back home?”*

Hanaa: *“Yes.”*

Inge: *“Okay. Do you know why is that important to you? Is it the good memory or the...?”*

Hanaa: *“Yes, of course, it’s really good memories and also my family still lives there.”*



“The second photo is taken in a park in Newcastle with a small pond in the middle. I like it because it is again similar to what we had in our hometown Afrin. We are living here, but we left our heart and mind there.”

This practice of connecting the physical landscape and ‘feel’ of Newcastle to a previous home was not just reflected in photographs, but was a topic that was often brought up throughout the interviews. Several people likened Newcastle city centre to Damascus; particular to buildings they knew from back home; and the presence of pigeons. Sometimes, places were also photographed and discussed because they reminded people of other happy places and previous homes outside of Syria – e.g. in Lebanon, where many stayed before coming to the UK. However, this feeling did not necessarily imply the person thought their life back home was better or indicate they wanted to move back. In fact, these feelings often seemed to strengthen the connection to Newcastle:

“Sitting at the Quayside makes me feel that I belong here. Maybe because I used to enjoy the same moments in I was in Damascus, close to Barada in particular, or Café Rotana in Damascus... I feel that the same feelings I used to have in Damascus are getting back to me when I sit at the Quayside... I mean those feelings of peace and quiet.”



One respondent said of the above picture:

“The first photo is taken in a nice area in South Shields. The first time I went there was when I went by train with my wife. It has nice views and I felt home and I belong because everything was reminiscent of a place in Syria called Tartous.”

In one case, it was not a place but an activity that reminded a respondent of home. She said that teatime reminder her of her grandmother, who loved tea:

“There’s no way you can go to an English person’s house and not have tea. I like that.”

Looking Forward

It was noted above that few respondents were in work and that several expressed the view that this was an element that was missing from their integration into Newcastle. Ambitions for the future largely focused on work and education, for themselves and/or their children.

Those who had had previous career paths often had the ambition to do something related to what they had done before. However, others wanted to pursue new careers and/or learn new skills. Of the hobbies described by respondents – volleyball, writing poetry, kick-boxing, doing hair and makeup, taking care of cars, orthographic drawing, acting, and coaching sport teams – several had the potential to become jobs in the future. Some respondents hoped that college courses could be the gateway to a new career:

“I’d like to work as a hairdresser. I wish the College could provide courses to teach me hairstyling, but nowadays all my time is dedicated to taking care of my son.”

“I used to be just a housewife and then when we moved to Jordan, I have done courses – two courses. One like sewing course and the other course is hair and beauty..” (Hanaa)

“[An agency in Newcastle] also advised that they might have hair and beauty course or sewing course – so, they will get me enrolled into them once they’ve kind of got something started .. they are just waiting for me to improve my English and then they will consider registering me for those courses, so I can understand what’s going on.”

“I would like in the future to get into like a sewing course, I normally specialise in embroidery...I have been asking if there is any sewing courses or anything like that, because I’m really interested in doing one.” (Noura)

For other respondents, an extended period of education would be needed for them to fulfil their ambitions. The youngest participant was currently studying English but wanted to move on to study dentistry in the future, saying:

“I haven’t done before but I was like, when I was a child it was my dream and here I can achieve it.”



Shirin wanted to study online marketing and said of the above picture:

“It’s my dream. It’s like my future dream. One day I might... It might be a different university, but one day I’m dreaming to be up to studying.... I keep passing it every day, so I feel like it’s one of my goals, one of my dreams is to reach it one day.”

The education available to their children – together with the assurance of their safety and the care that was provided for medical needs and conditions such as autism – was seen by respondents as a key advantage of living in the United Kingdom. Shirin felt confident that her children were being well educated:

“I feel relaxed because my kids are getting good schooling, so in the future they may do well.”

Another respondent said:

“You know the situation in Syria, and we came here in the hope of a better life and better education for our kids.”

One participant whose child had specific educational needs said:

“Life in here is really good for me and I will never ever think to go back since my son’s future is here. Like back in Lebanon he was very isolated, he was like kind of just getting in one place and not being able... like he was like housebound. But yeah, here it’s amazing how like my son’s life is going to be and I would never ever think to visit back home or go back because I really like it.”



One respondent said of this picture:

“The second photo is the Tyne Bridge. I took this photo when I newly arrived in Newcastle, then I had a walk with my wife... I told my wife that I like the view, so my wife took a photo of it. Then a talk with my wife talked about our new life here in Newcastle and we thought of the secure future that is coming for us as a family. We also thought of the secure life we would have, the good schooling for our kids and the bright future that we believe is awaiting them.”

Kuveri and another non-UKRS respondents said that they hoped to do voluntary work to support newly arrived asylum seekers; Kuveri also wanted to start a business and to watch Newcastle Falcons.

Conclusion

Newcastle's City of Sanctuary aspiration is to *"be a safe and welcoming city, where people new to the city are provided with the support and advice that they need and where links between new arrivals and existing communities are fostered."* The conclusion of this research is that Newcastle is both safe and welcoming, with excellent support and advice provided to new arrivals. Respondents had had a wide range of needs met extremely effectively. Almost all expressed very positive opinions of their own situation and the people around them, whether support workers or members of the community. Although this conclusion makes recommendations for possible means of making further improvements to services, there should be no doubt that Newcastle has already exceeded its own aspiration to be a City of Sanctuary.

Feelings of safety and belonging were among the most striking findings of the research. There were positive relationships between new arrivals and existing communities, although the lack of genuine friendships between the two groups is one of the few less positive findings of this report. The picture is very consistent with that of previous research (Flug and Hussein,2019). It is **recommended** that the council explores opportunities to create more contacts between informal support groups (such as faith groups) and refugees/asylum seekers.

There were examples of complaints about services and reports of hostility from the local population but it is clear that these were very much exceptions rather than the norm. Where there were examples of hostility, it appears that these were largely unreported; a finding that is consistent with the work of Flug and Hussein (2019). It is **recommended** that there is consideration of whether any further steps can be taken to encourage refugees and asylum seekers to report such behaviour, regardless of whether or not it is a crime or whether they feel confident to contact the police in the first instance.

It was clear that, despite mixed emotions on arrival, UKRS respondents in particular tended to move from feeling bewildered by their new surroundings to feeling comfortable with them. Of course, this process was not consistent across all respondents and some felt more at home in Newcastle than others. However, even those who experienced some continuing feelings of loneliness expressed satisfaction with the city and the way that they had been made welcome in it.

In addition to the pictures of prominent local landmarks, there were other indications in the interviews that UKRS respondents in particular wanted to become more familiar with the city and area that they were living in. One respondent expressed a wish to visit the Angel of the North and another enjoyed visiting the Discovery Museum. It was clear that many respondents strongly desired to feel a connection both with their places or origin – e.g. by seeing places that reminded them of their previous home – and with Newcastle. It is **recommended** that initial support focuses as much on understanding the nature of the city as on practicalities such as registering with a GP.

There is a danger in reading too much into the apparently more pro-active approach taken by the non-UKRS respondents (in finding voluntary work, for example). Those from the UKRS were not asked specifically about volunteering or about steps that they had taken to increase their employability. In addition, the non-UKRS group could only be interviewed without an interpreter and so they were, by definition, able to speak at least conversational English.

The accounts that non-UKRS respondents gave of the volunteering that they were involved in, or would like to be involved in, were often linked to their own experiences as refugees/asylum seekers. Action Foundation was one of the charities that they were most likely to volunteer with (for example, Amir volunteered as an interpreter) and two respondents wanted to be involved in providing support to newly arrived asylum seekers. In the case of the UKRS respondents, it was clear that many who already had friends or family in Newcastle made use of this informal structure of support on arrival. However, it is **recommended** that investigations are made as to whether refugees from the UKRS can be encouraged to give support to new arrivals on a more systematic basis. One option might be the involvement of refugees and asylum seekers in bringing together information that would be helpful for people who are new to the city, as suggested by Kuveri. It is further **recommended** that UKRS respondents in particular are encouraged to take up broader volunteering activities or to take up other activities that may involve them more with the local resident population.

The accounts of UKRS respondents made clear the pivotal role that learning English played in contributing to their integration and their feeling of belonging in Newcastle. This is consistent with findings at a national level – regional variability in teaching English as a second language led to specific funding being allocated to the UKRS programme for this purpose (All Party Parliamentary Group on Refugees, 2017). While the teaching of English is clearly already a priority for services, it is **recommended** that there be further examination of any steps that can be taken to speed up this process – including any learning that could take place before UKRS residents travel to the UK.

There was only one UKRS respondent who appeared to have unrealistically high expectations of the services that were to be provided. It seems, therefore, that there is no need for any activities to adjust expectations.

It is **recommended** that those involved in planning services for asylum seekers and refugees look (if they have not already done so) at the Cities of Migration website and in particular at the Good Ideas Index (<https://citiesofmigration.ca/good-ideas-in-integration/view-all-good-ideas/>). This shows how cities all over the world are working, as Newcastle is, to improve the transition from asylum seeker to refugee. It may be that adopting some of the initiatives described on the website can further improve the highly impressive services that make Newcastle such a safe and welcoming city for refugees and asylum seekers.

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