Policy Briefs: The Art of Belonging
Supporting social integration of young forced migrants in urban contexts through cultural place-making

Context

Almost half of the world’s forced migrants are children under the age of 18. Those vulnerable children and young people who arrive in the United Kingdom tend to be dispersed to cities and large towns in urban areas. Young, often unaccompanied, forced migrants arrive in our cities in the hope of a better life but find themselves at risk of higher rates of poor mental health, isolation, exploitation and in extreme cases of human trafficking.

If young new arrivals are perceived as bringing little of value to receiving societies, there is also a risk of community tensions. There is a pressing need for policies supporting the social inclusion of young, forced migrants into our societies.

This brief draws on work in Nottingham, which already leads on inclusion of new arrivals through the innovative NEST provision, and includes guidance for Government to support local authorities. It is based on qualitative research of a planned programme of cultural citizenship for young new arrivals in the city.

Key recommendation

The Government should support regional and local authorities to offer a planned programme of social inclusion activity for young, forced migrants and new arrivals, especially those who arrive unaccompanied in our cities with no support network.

Potential benefits include:

- Enhanced community engagement & cohesion, by allowing new arrivals to contribute their skills & efforts to local areas
- Greater opportunities for all members of society to reach their potential, including those to whom the UK has given sanctuary
- More dynamic public cultural spaces, more engaged young people, and a greater sense of local pride and belonging
- Greater sense of cultural citizenship, leading to social connectedness and inclusion
- Improved mental health and wellbeing among migrants and the communities they live in

1 https://data.unicef.org/resources/stronger-data-brighter-futures/
2 https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/briefings/migration-to-the-uk-asylum/
3 https://www.unicef.org.uk/publications/child-trafficking-briefing/
4 https://www.hhe.nottingham.sch.uk/campuses/nest/
Belongingness is ...for me, it is a feeling of connection to others and a connection to a place. It means feeling welcomed and accepted. It means being safe enough to be me – Young participant

Some of the most important findings from the project include:

- Arts and cultural participation are catalysts for social connectedness and belonging and galleries, libraries, and museums function as spaces for learning about cultures and values different to your own.

- Barriers to young people engaging with arts and cultural activities within their city are magnified for young new arrivals. Finding out about and then financing and accessing activities is a challenge. Arts and cultural organisations find it difficult to communicate their activities to the relevant target groups - and this is more difficult with young new arrivals. Cultural activity for new arrivals needs to be both visible (to the new arrival and those supporting them), and sustainable (beyond short term grant funding) and part of annual planned arts programming.
Cultural citizenship programmes can enhance social connectedness by:
- Challenging stereotypical representations of refugees, particularly young unaccompanied males. The project showcased the skills and potential of the young new arrivals and the final exhibition offered opportunities for the public to see this potential
- Creating opportunities for bringing together people from the host community with the new arrivals through cultural participation
- Encouraging empathy and the desire to help

Young new arrivals’ involvement with arts activities has a number of benefits associated with positive mental health. These included overcoming isolation, and strategies to lessen triggers of past traumas and negative emotions, creating new memories.

The project showcased development of skills and personal efficacy, illustrating how the new arrivals can contribute to their communities and the region.

‘Can you achieve your potential without feeling you belong to a place?’
- Representative from refugee community support body

‘So pleased you are here. In our city. Your city. Thank you for your contribution to the exhibition.’
- Member of the public writing in exhibition comments book

‘Sometimes you can feel bad mentally or physically and … when I am sometimes feeling bad doing this in these places makes me feel better because you focus and forget about bad things’
- Young participant

‘Developing talent and supporting new arrivals could make a significant impact on the development of cities and communities’
- Audience member at public dissemination event
Future developments in Nottingham

The project highlighted the potential use of public and shared spaces to celebrate the outcomes of future iterations of the project. Possible future developments suggested by members of the public included:

- Taking interactive workshops into the communities, libraries, parks, shopping centres to get the young people working with the community
- Urban trail of the artwork
- Pop ups in train station, libraries, empty shops
- Adverts in local businesses
- Setting up stalls to sell the art pieces.

‘The Art of Belonging showcase should become part of the cultural fabric of the city’
- Audience member at the dissemination event

Methodology

The project needed to be sensitive to the needs of our young participants. Whilst they can outwardly exhibit strong resilience, privately they are often dealing with trauma and grief, whilst some still need to be vigilant because of continued risk of trafficking. The research instruments were designed collaboratively with representatives from those working with refugee communities.

We conducted an ethnographically informed study comprising close observation of each session, documenting what the participants did through photographs and fieldnotes. This also comprised interviews with the young people drawing on the fieldnotes and photographs as aids to the conversation. The interviews were conducted in English with the aid of the young people’s translation apps on their mobile phones when necessary. The young people, many of them unaccompanied were all aged between 15-18, their distinctive cultural contributions to the workshops and final public exhibition reflected the work of 39 new arrivals from countries across the world, including Afghanistan, Eritrea, Iraq, Iran, Vietnam, Syria, and Sudan. Kurdish voices were also strongly represented. Most of the participants were males with a small group of girls joining in the final weeks. The project gives voice to those who are often rendered invisible in their new place, sometimes for their own protection.

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