



# 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<sup>1</sup>. Those vulnerable children and young people who arrive in the United Kingdom tend to be dispersed to cities and large towns in urban areas<sup>2</sup>. 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<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> 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

<sup>1</sup> <https://data.unicef.org/resources/stronger-data-brighter-futures/>

<sup>2</sup>

<https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/briefings/migration-to-the-uk-asylum/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.unicef.org.uk/publications/child-trafficking-briefing/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.hhe.nottingham.sch.uk/campuses/nest/>

## About this research

The Art of Belonging research project, located in Nottingham, England and Lund, Sweden, aimed to understand how to lessen the impact of social isolation experienced by young, forced migrants who have newly arrived in cities in different European contexts. The project explored how to enable young migrants to build connections with their new place such that they can go on to lead lives of meaningful engagement in their city. Our main research question asked: **How can place-specific arts and cultural initiatives help young refugees to develop a sense of belonging, and increase participation in the civic, social and cultural life of their new cities?**

The emerging findings from the Nottingham case study speak to issues of integration, representation of youth, and the role arts and culture can play in individual and collective mental wellbeing.

## Key Findings

'Policy makers need to understand the importance of belonging for young people and new arrivals. [The project is] the human touch to an inhumane circumstance'

- Audience member at public dissemination event

Through the research undertaken in this project, the cultural citizenship work undertaken in Nottingham was found to be a cost-effective way to reduce social isolation, improve mental health, and break down barriers between new arrivals and their host communities.



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.



'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

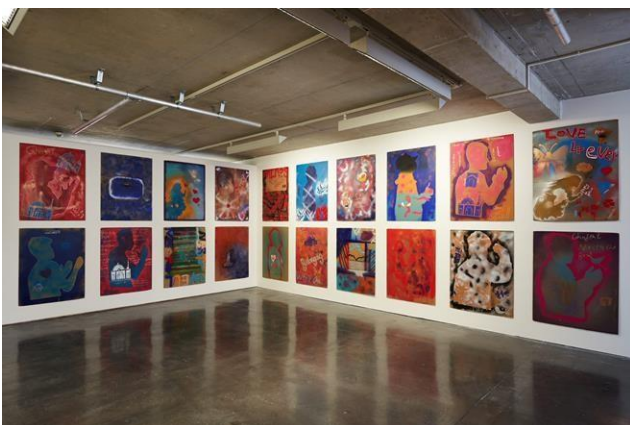
- **Barriers to young people engaging with arts and cultural activities within their city are magnified for young new arrivals.** Finding out about and then financing and accessing activities is a challenge. Arts and cultural organisations find it difficult to communicate their activities to the relevant 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.

‘Can you achieve your potential without feeling you belong to a place?’

- Representative from refugee community support body
- 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

‘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
- 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.



‘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



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

‘Developing talent and supporting new arrivals could make a significant impact on the development of cities and communities’

- Audience member at public dissemination event

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## 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

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## 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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