# Am I Welcome?

An exploration of refugees and recently arrived migrants experiences of accessing statutory services





## Contents

Introduction	03
Summary of findings and recommendations	05
Community profile	06
Sample profile	12
Education	13
Healthcare	14
Housing	15
Benefits, employment and the Job Centre	17
Conclusions	19
What next?	20
Bibliography	21

## Introduction Am I Welcome?

### **Background and objectives**

Southwark is a very diverse borough with almost 46% of the population coming from BAMER communities. A large proportion of the population was born overseas (39.6%) and there are more than 40 languages spoken within the borough. There are high levels of unemployment and child poverty, which are above both the national and London averages. Though refugee population is difficult to determine, there are significant numbers of refugees in the borough, as well as other recently arrived migrants.

There have long been problems with refugees and recently arrived migrants

"I found it too difficult, because my sister helped me it was easier. Job Centre was too difficult, when I came to sign in I just cried, I couldn't speak to them because I didn't know how to speak English. From then to this day I am scared of the Job Centre."

Middle Eastern refugee

accessing the services they are entitled to, from healthcare to housing and employment support. There is anecdotal evidence of difficulties in accessing GPs and antenatal care, as well as problems at the Job Centre and housing office. Recent proposals from the government around "health tourism" and immigration checks on housing raise concerns that these issues may become worse, particularly with regards to housing. The current housing situation in London could make it even more difficult for those that are multiply disadvantaged to access good quality, safe homes.

Citizens Advice Southwark works in a diverse environment. The overall aim is to try to improve access to statutory services for refugees and more recently arrived migrant groups. There is evidence from our service users and from groups

supporting the BAMER communities that there are issues with the service they receive. We see people with very low levels of English who have been sanctioned by the job centre, and women who have failed to access antenatal care because they are not clear on their rights. It is evident that workers in statutory agencies are often not clear on the law in regards to access.

This research project will help us to evidence these issues and bring them to the attention of the appropriate statutory bodies, as well as uncovering any problems that have gone unnoticed so far.

At Citizens Advice Southwark we saw over 1300 immigration issues in 2015, of which a substantial number were with regards to refugees and recently arrived migrants. We have a full time immigration advisor who offers advice up to OISC level 3, covering five London boroughs: Southwark, Lewisham, Greenwich, Bromley and Bexley. We also work with a number of voluntary organisations in Southwark that work with refugees and migrants, such as Southwark Day Centre for Asylum Seekers and Southwark Refugee Community Forum.

### Aims of Research:

- To examine the experiences of refugees and recently arrived migrants in accessing statutory services.
- To explore the ways in which refugees and recently arrived migrants think this can be improved.
- To make recommendations to improve policy and practice.

### **Policy Context:**

The immigration Bill 2015 is currently moving through parliament, and is set to build upon the Immigration Act 2014, and make significant changes to the rights of migrants in the UK. The Bill covers a number of areas, including expanding the "Right to Rent" requirement that requires private landlords to confirm the lawful immigration status of tenants before letting to them. There will also be further legislation on illegal migrants holding UK driving licenses and having UK bank accounts. This also brings in a new English language requirement for front-line public sector workers, and an extension of the "deport now, appeal later" rule.

With the current refugee crisis constantly in the news and the upcoming EU referendum, the issue of migration is very much at the forefront. This, coupled with the Immigration Bill, makes it a pertinent time to look at the experiences of these groups of people in accessing the services that they are entitled to. It is likely that the services will become more and more stretched as the Local Authority look to make further cuts following decreased budgets, with more savings to be made in the near future.

"My English isn't good so I can't find a job, I can't do interviews, yet still the Job Centre is pushing me to find a job. [I have] tried to find ESOL classes but it isn't easy, I go from place to place"

### Summary of findings and recommendations

The main issues raised through this research are:

- Lack of English language skills as a barrier to accessing statutory services;
- Difficulties with the Job Centre due to English language and cultural differences;
- Lack of information on rights and responsibilities in the UK;
- Gatekeeping and lack of support from the Housing Office;
- Long waiting times to access specialist medical care and treatment, particularly mental health care.

We have concluded that the following recommendations would be beneficial for these groups:

- More ESOL class provision to improve migrants and refugees abilities to speak and understand English, which in turn will improve their ability to find work;
- Work experience or volunteering opportunities for refugees and recently arrived migrants to allow them to improve their prospects of finding work, particularly if they have not worked previously;
- Consistent provision of interpreters by statutory services to prevent unnecessary appointments or mistakes being made due to misunderstandings;
- Workshops for new migrants to learn about life in the UK and socialise with others from the community;
- Increased awareness in those working for the statutory services of the issues facing these groups when they arrive in the UK to ensure a smooth transition into British life.

## **Community profile**

It is difficult to determine the exact numbers of refugees in both London and Southwark as these numbers are not recorded. The Home Office publishes quarterly statistics on asylum applications, decisions, appeals and removals as well as data on the number of people being supported by the UKBA, but once a positive decision has been made data is no longer collected on these persons. In order to estimate the number of refugees in a given area other datasets need to be used and combined to give an idea of the number.

In 2009 it was estimated that post 1989 refugee populations in London comprise about 600,000 people, or roughly 7% of the total population.

However, if we look at data from the 2011 Census we can get an idea of the migrant population of the borough, as well as a look at the make-up of the population as a whole.

## Southwark Demographics (2011 Census)

- At the last census, Southwark had a population of 288,283. Of these people, 61% were born in the UK.
- Gender –50.5% of the borough are female whilst 49.5% are male.
- Housing 43.7% of residents are social tenants, 29.3% own their property or are buying it, 23.7% are private tenants
- Employment 73% of the population of Southwark are classed as being economically active, of which 57.8% are employed full time, 13.6% part time, and 8.2% are unemployed.

## **NOS Data Analysis**

The following analysis uses statistics taken from the 2011 National Census. Drawing upon data specifically relating to London Borough of Southwark, it aims to provide context for the project *Am I Welcome?* which looks at the experience of refugees and recently-arrived migrants in the area.

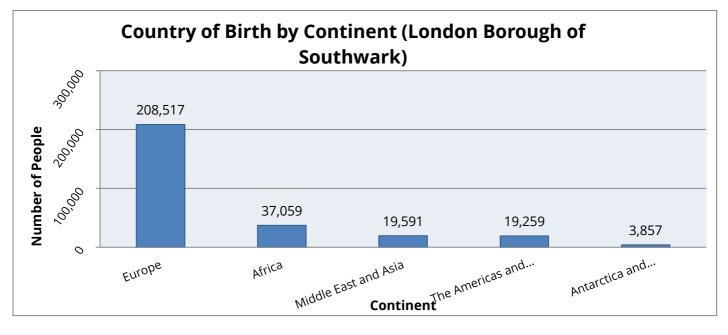
In general, data relating to refugees and recently-arrived migrants is incomplete, and therefore paints a flawed picture as to the reality within the borough. The information gathered as part of the 2011 Census, does however, provide a basis for

understanding certain trends within Southwark which relate to refugee and migrant populations.

In particular, the figures below indicate features such as date and age of arrival in the UK, household language, country of birth, ethnic group, and economic activity of Southwark residents. Although not exhaustive, this data gives some insight into the make-up of the population of the borough, as well as a base from which to build an understanding of experiences of people arriving in the UK.

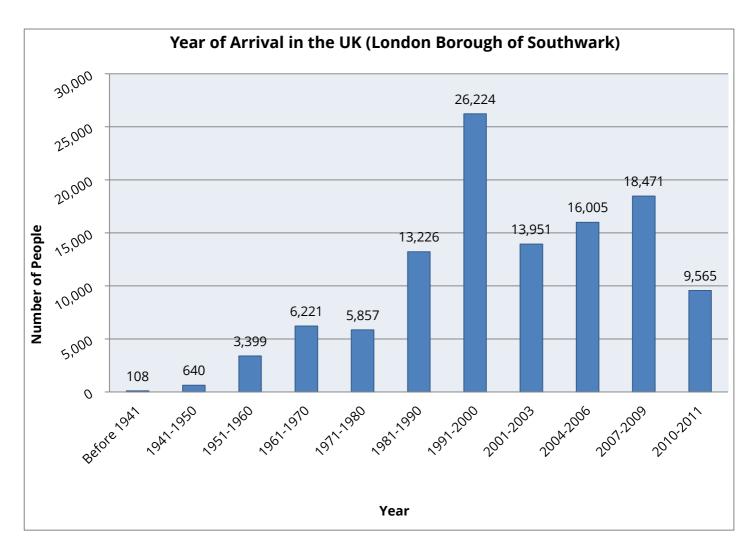
It should also be noted that the last National Census in the UK was taken in 2011. This means that while useful, it can be expected that basic data relating to the composition of the Southwark population will have changed over the past five years. While the following figures merely represent data relating to the London Borough of Southwark, the Census provides us with national statistics, meaning that it is possible to make comparisons between Southwark and other regional authorities. This is particularly useful in terms of the project *Am I Welcome?* as it highlights areas of the UK where refugee and migrant populations are similar to those seen in Southwark. As such a clearer appraisal can be made as to the effectiveness of service provision within Southwark.





Within the London Borough of Southwark, the majority of people (208,517) were born in Europe. This includes UK citizens, who greatly contribute to this figure; however it can also be assumed that this number is bolstered by freedom of movement within the EU. In terms of residents born outside of Europe, in descending order they were born in Africa; the Middle East and Asia; The Americas and the Caribbean; and Antarctica and Oceania. It is likely that proximity, postcolonial relations, and the prevalence of war are contributing factors to these findings.

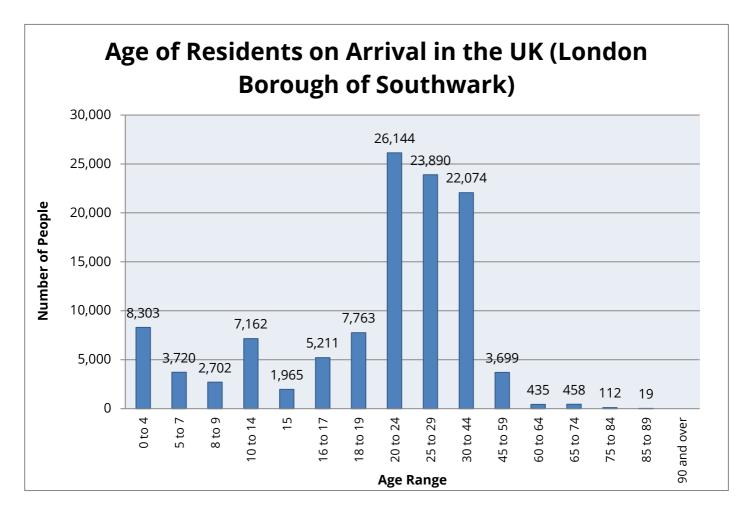
### Figure 2



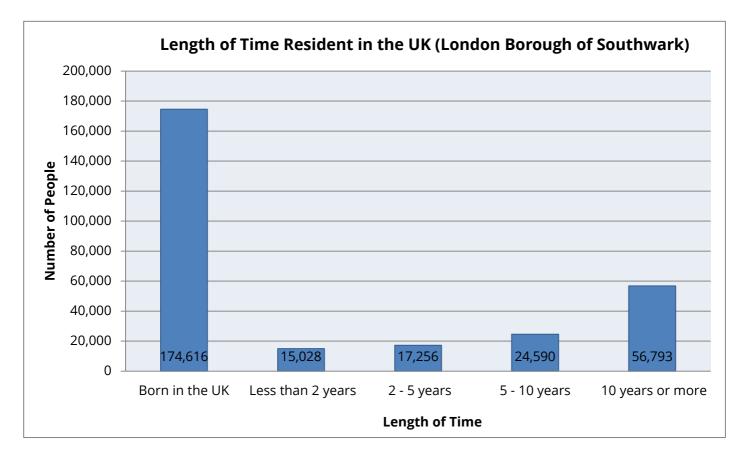
The data shows an increase in people moving to the UK towards the later part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This can be attributed to a general increase in mobility worldwide, however the spike during the 1990s during which 26,224 people arrived in Southwark is most likely due to factors external to the UK: the presence of war in certain African and Middle Eastern countries; the establishment of the EU and its provisions regarding freedom of movement; and economic and social developments in a number of East Asian nations. Other surges in numbers of people arriving in the borough equally reflect national, regional and global trends of movement in response to both integration and persecution.

### Figure 3 (below)

The age of residents arriving in Southwark tend to reflect what can be described as 'normal' patterns in terms of migration. The majority of economic migrants tend to be of working age, thus falling within the 20 to 45 bracket. Similarly, those fleeing persecution or instability in their home country are often young adults or those with young families. This once again accounts for the fact that the vast majority of people (72,108) who came to the borough did so between the ages of 20 and 45, with the next highest group being infants and young children (aged 0 to 4).

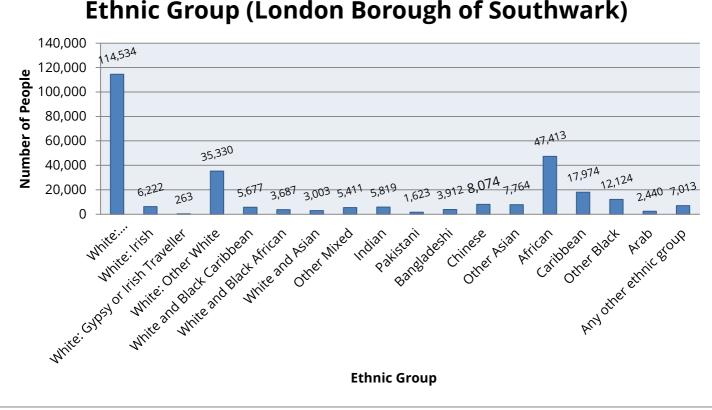


### Figure 4



While the majority of Southwark residents were born in the UK, there are also a substantial number of people who have been in the country for more than 10 years. This information reflects that shown in Figure 2. The high number of arrivals to the UK in the 1990s reflect the fact that a number of residents have been in the country for more than 10 years. This in turn relates to the number of people born in the UK, as it can be expected that residents arriving in the UK 10 or more years ago, may have settled and started their own families within the borough.

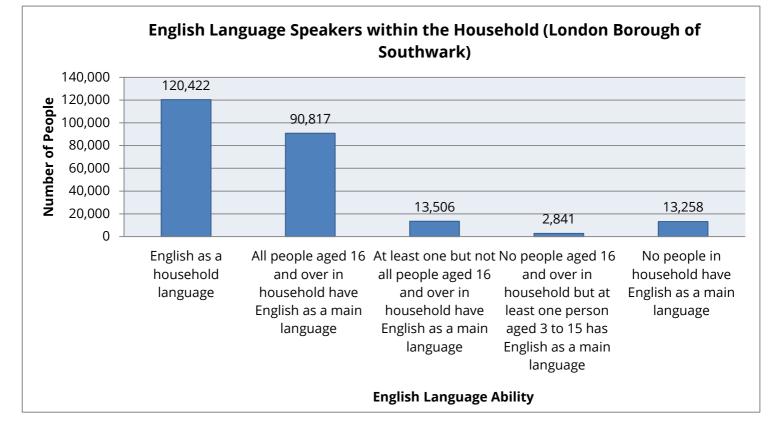
### Figure 5



Ethnic Group (London Borough of Southwark)

While the largest ethnic group within the borough is white British, it can also be seen that there is a high number of people of African or Caribbean ethnicity. It can be assumed that the high proportion of African and Caribbean residents reflect immigration trends prompted by disruption in home states and facilitated through close ties with certain countries in the post-colonial era. Furthermore, it is a welldocumented fact that people arriving in a new country often gravitate towards others who have shared similar migrational experiences, causing diasporic communities to congregate in certain areas so as to benefit from common cultural, language or religious ties.

### Figure 6



The data presented in Figure 6 indicates that the vast majority of households in the borough have at least one English-speaking adult. There remains, however a significant number of households where no residents have English as a main language. It can be assumed that these households are made up of recently-arrived refugees and migrants living in Southwark. Furthermore, despite being the smallest field presented in this figure, there exists a number of households where there are residents below the age of 16 that have English as a main language, but no adults. This illustrates well-documented instances of children learning English at school, while parents have far less scope for learning the language due to limited access to English language education.

## Sample profile

We worked with a number of refugee and migrant community groups in Southwark in order to produce this research. This included the Southwark Refugee Community Forum (SRCF) and Southwark Day Centre for Asylum Seekers (SDCAS). The interviewees, survey respondents, and focus group participants came from a variety of backgrounds and had been in the UK for differing periods of time. Countries of origin include Iran, Eritrea, Iraq, Latin America and West Africa. The participants were recruited through their connections with the groups we worked with, mainly as service users. We interviewed 10 refugees and migrants individually, and had 6 participants attend the focus group.

We used a combination of one to one interviews, focus groups, written surveys and Petra data, as well as census information and reports written by other charitable organisations to look into this issue.

"The Job Centre doesn't look at the individual. It focuses on box ticking. The system needs to be more flexible and look at the individual"



## Education

Upon arrival in the UK, accessing education is one of the first things many migrants will have to do, for either their children or for themselves. This is makes it very important that the information available is clear and the services easy to access. It is sometimes the case that the refugees or migrants may have not previously been in any type of formal education, so there may be more than just the initial language differences that are causing problems.

Our research suggests that accessing education, particularly for children seems to be quite straightforward. However, as with the other statutory services we looked at, there is on a reliance on friends and family for help with this as it is not easy to access information on how to do this. Some families have to wait for months until they are able to send their children to school, though this may be a more general issue and not specific to refugees and recently arrived migrants.

It was found that once children were in education the schools were very sympathetic to the situations of the parents and children. They are happy with the education and support the children receive and the level of English now spoken by their children. The schools are very good at helping with integration.

## "My sister helped me with everything. She filled the form in for my son's school. It was a normal school but it wasn't good. They said he had to go to a special school. My sister did it all."

With regards to education for adults, particularly ESOL classes (English for Speakers of Other Languages), many of our survey respondents and focus group participants were keen to learn and were accessing these classes. However, it was suggested that this is something they could do with more of as the classes are often very oversubscribed. One of the key obstacles facing people arriving in the UK is that they often have no, or limited, English language capabilities. ESOL is a real lifeline to people coming to the UK as without at least basic English there is little scope for finding work and accessing the statutory services to which they are entitled.

Southwark Council currently offer a number of ESOL classes at different levels, as well as specific courses for families. These are offered for free or at a reduced rate. There are other providers of these courses in the borough too. However, they may not be easily accessible and there can be other factors that bar refugees and recently arrived migrants from accessing these services. For example, certain communities may require separate classes for men and women, and it may be easier for groups to learn with of members of their communities as it creates a social and support network.

## Healthcare

Healthcare is an important service for refugees and recently arrived migrants to access, especially as certain conditions, particularly mental health issues, may be more prevalent among some of these groups. For these reasons it is important that groups can access GPs and healthcare as soon as possible upon arrival in the UK.

Our research suggests that most refugees and migrants found it quite easy to access basic healthcare such as GPs and dentists. It became more problematic when they tried to access more specialist services, such as mental health services, or specialists for particular disabilities. This may be a problem more with the availability of these services in general and not specific to refugee and recently arrived migrant communities.

One of our interviewees spoke about how difficult it was to find a specialist for his disabled son as well as mental health support for his wife who suffers from depression. He has requested appointments frequently with the GP to see a specialist but was still waiting for this. Another participant said how it took five years for her to receive support for her disabled children, despite frequently being reassured that this was going to happen.

### "The GP is very good. The doctor is very good."

We asked our survey participants particularly about mental healthcare, whether it was something they considered they needed and how easy it was to access. This is of particular importance with regards to refugees as they are often escaping from traumatic and dangerous conditions, and this can cause a number of problems. However, it is not just the situations they are escaping from that can cause these problems but also legislation in the UK and the wait for refugee status. Trauma and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder may be hidden until leave to remain is granted. It is also important to consider the taboos and cultural issues that each community might have, and the stigma that goes along with mental health issues.

The results of our survey suggest that those who have tried to access mental health services have done so successfully, even if it took a long time for them to have the specialist care they needed. There are a number of participants who are unsure if it is something they would benefit from, though this may be due to them being unaware of what is available and the purpose of the help available.

## Housing

Access to housing was one of the more problematic areas according to our research. Many refugees and migrants did not know about their rights and entitlements in regards to housing, and they often had to wait for long periods before being housed. There is evidence to suggest that some of our participants were placed in unsuitable accommodation or forced to jump through unnecessary hoops in order to receive what they were entitled to, and the language barrier was a problem as well.

There is currently an acute shortage of available social housing and affordable private rented properties in Southwark, and this is something that is experienced by the refugees and recently arrived migrants that we talked to as well. Interviewees talked about having to go back and forth between the housing office and local charities in order to progress their housing cases. It was often the case that the migrants were not aware of what they were entitled to which could make the process more difficult and drawn out. The information provided by the statutory services themselves was insufficient and the refugees and migrants tended to rely on family, friends and community groups for help.

### Case Study: Housing

Ms R was pregnant when she arrived in Southwark, having been granted refugee status. She stayed with friends but was told that she had to find her own place when her baby was born. She visited Southwark Day Centre for Asylum Seekers where a letter was written for her explaining her situation. She took the letter to the housing office but was told they couldn't help her. She returned to SDCAS for more help and was sent back to the housing office. She was informed that the council had a duty to help her and she had certain rights as a refugee. The officers at the housing department would ask her many questions but still refused to help her.

Ms R was eventually given temporary accommodation but the room was so small she didn't have space for her bed and her baby's cot. She didn't have access to a washing machine and had no place to put the baby apart from on her lap or her bed.

She felt the attitude of the housing officers and the lack of concern they showed to a vulnerable, pregnant woman was a big problem. She was so upset she would cry when she visited the housing office and no one would even look at her. It took help from SDCAS, social services and a solicitor for the council to house her.

She doesn't know about the laws here, it doesn't interest her, she just wants a decent place to live, a roof over her head and to not be on the streets.

As with accessing other statutory services, a lack of English was a real barrier to getting help for many of those we spoke with. For example, a member of the Latin American community who works with an advice agency to help Spanish speakers in Southwark considers the language barrier to be the biggest problem in getting settled. She described the typical situation of a family who has recently arrived in the borough as being greatly complicated by not knowing how the system works. A family with little knowledge of English and the system will rely on friends or family to help them with finding somewhere to live, often ending up in one bedroom in a shared privately rented property as this is all they can afford. If they then have problems with rent and are evicted, they will need further help from friends and family to complete a homelessness application, and without knowledge of how this works, they may end up back in one room or overcrowded accommodation.

It was suggested that having more information available in other languages could go a long way to help with this problem, as well as the use of interpreters – our interviewees and focus group participants had mixed experience of the housing office using interpreters. Interviewees mention that the housing officers are not very forthcoming with informing migrants and refugees of their entitlements, which could be greatly improved partnership working between the housing department and local advice agencies or refugee groups. Often those applying for housing help have to visit the housing office on multiple occasions as they do not understand what documents are required.

There were a number of complaints regarding the conditions of temporary accommodation that the refugees and recently arrived migrants were placed in. One refugee was given a temporary flat of which she says:

### "the conditions were terrible, not even an animal would live like that"

Another interviewee spoke of the unsuitable accommodation she was put in with her newly born baby, where she did not have enough room for her bed and the baby's cot. A focus group participant spoke of how the temporary accommodation her family was first put in was far from her sister who she had been relying on for help with her everyday life in the UK due to her lack of English language. This created much distress as she felt isolated and lost, and did not know how to use buses to travel around the borough. Another told of how she was given a flat on the top floor of a building when she had three disabled children and her husband has a slipped disc.

At Citizens Advice Southwark, we have seen a rise in cases of migrants with limited leave to remain being denied support from the council in finding accommodation. Despite this being in line with legislation, it is a change from how the council had been operating in the past. When this has been raised with housing officers, a policy change is denied. This is an area that will need further monitoring, especially with the proposed changes under the Immigration Bill.

## Benefits, Employment and the Job Centre

Benefits and the Job Centre was by far the most complicated issue for those we spoke to for this research. The problems here ranged from lack of support with finding a job, to difficulties with English causing problems, and cultural differences causing problems.

The benefit system in the UK is often unfamiliar to recently arrived migrants and refugees, with frequent legislation changes causing confusion and problems for those trying to claim. A number of our participants had never worked before arriving in the UK and so found the process particularly difficult, and if they were in employment, their qualifications and experiences may not be recognised by employers here.

As is the case with accessing other statutory services, our participants often had to rely on friends and family for help with the Job Centre and getting benefits. One participant told us how her sister had to help her apply for Job Seekers Allowance, and would attend all her appointments with her at the Job Centre. Her English was very poor and she had not worked before arriving in the UK, so had no idea of what a CV was, let alone how to go about applying for a job. On top of this she has three disabled children. She described being scared of the Job Centre as she was often shouted out and didn't understand what she was supposed to do. Another interviewee believes that his poor English led to him having his JSA sanctioned and a loss of much of his income for a period of time.

Many of our participants found the Job Centre pushed them to get work without considering their individual situations, such as language barriers, cultural differences, and lack of experience. This further forces them to rely on friends and family, and community groups. One interviewee described how she would go to a group in her community for help with job applications, but she was charged £15 for each application. This is unaffordable for someone on JSA and causes hardship.

### "There are barriers from the lack of experience, particularly with women from the Middle East. Around 75% of them have never worked, and many have never studied. So when they come here there is a lack of skills and experience."

An interviewee also raised the issue of lack of consistency with how rules, and particularly sanctions are applied. He had worked since arriving in the UK but having lost his job was applying for JSA for the first time. He was unfamiliar with the system and had left important documents at home when he attended an appointment at the Job Centre. He was sanctioned for not being able to prove that he had been looking for work, even though he witnessed another claimant being let off with a warning for the same issue. He felt this was particularly unfair and it damaged his faith in the system.

However, these problems do not end when these groups enter employment. Their immigration status and the lack of awareness by many employees mean that those with a right to work in the country often end up losing jobs they are allowed to do. This is something that some of our interviewees witnessed happening fairly regularly among the people they work with.

A number of suggestions were made as to what could be done to improve the experience of refugees and recently arrived migrants at the Job Centre. The first suggestion is to improve access to ESOL classes as a way of understanding the unique situation that refugee and migrants are in. There is little real scope for these people to find work without at least basic English. It would also be beneficial for the Job Centre to provide routine access to interpreters for claimants at appointments. However, this provision was removed in 2014, with advisers being allowed to use interpreters when they believe it to be beneficial and necessary, with the provision being maintained for those that are vulnerable or in genuine need of support.<sup>1</sup>

Another way for the Job Centre to support refugees and migrants into work and through the JSA process would be to allow more voluntary work in order for the claimants to gain experience. This is particularly true for women from certain Middle Eastern countries who have never worked, or even studied, before. This may also facilitate their English language learning while building up their skills and experience.

A lot of our interviewees believed that there needed to be greater awareness among the staff at the Job Centre of the issues that they were faced with and for them to have a greater understanding of the problems that come with being a newly arrived migrant in the UK. Simplifying the application process for out of work benefits may help with this. However, with the introduction of Universal Credit to the borough these issues may change somewhat, though it is unlikely to be for the better.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> "Further curbs to migrant access to benefits announced" gov.uk

## Conclusions

Our research has found that the experiences of statutory services that refugees and recently arrived migrants have can vary greatly between the services. There is also a variety of experiences depending on how much support is available to the migrant from friends, family or community groups.

The vast majority of survey respondents said they were provided with very little information as with regards to their rights and responsibilities in the UK. They were not told about what they needed to do, what benefits to apply for or how to go about finding accommodation. With regards to statutory services, education and basic healthcare have been considered to be straightforward and accessible, while housing and access to benefits and the Job Centre have been far more problematic for migrants.

A number of recommendations have been made as to how this can be improved:

- Better English language class provision: More ESOL classes for recently arrived migrants and refugees to improve their abilities to speak and understand English. Without at least a basic English there is little scope for them finding work.
- Work experience: Many of those arriving in the UK have had no previous employment, and some have had no formal education. This is particularly true for women coming from the Middle East. This makes the challenges of learning English and finding employment particularly difficult. Access to work experience of any sort would dramatically improve their prospects in finding employment.
- Interpreters: The consistent provision of interpreters and translators would be beneficial to these groups, while preventing unnecessary meetings or appointments due to misunderstandings or missing documents.
- Workshops on life in the UK: Many people who arrive in the UK often feel lonely or isolated. They would benefit from spaces to meet with those in similar situations where they could learn more about what is expected from them in the UK. This could be in the form of workshops or groups where they can build support networks and help resolve common problems.
- Increased awareness: There needs to be a greater understanding of the issues facing these groups in order to help them integrate and live a good life in the UK.

## What next?

### **Local Action Plan**

The recommendations from this report will be used to develop the Southwark Refugee and Asylum Seeker Action Plan which will be updated in 2016.

The findings will be shared with refugee and community organisations in Southwark, including:

- Southwark Day Centre for Asylum Seekers
- Southwark Refugee Community Forum
- Southwark Law Centre
- Southwark Refugee Project
- Southwark Council Community Engagement
- Southwark Housing Strategy
- Southwark Works
- Public Health
- Job Centre Plus
- Forum for Equalities and Human Rights in Southwark

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