POLICY BRIEF

How London's local councils build proactive responses to asylum

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This policy brief describes the responses that London's borough councils have been developing to address challenges asylum-seekers face. It provides recommendations for how to maximise existing capacity and build new capacity for addressing this complex and urgent policy area.

Summary of findings

- Councils' motivations to respond to asylum include meeting their statutory obligations and supporting all vulnerable residents to integrate socially in their boroughs. Hence this encompasses both short term and long term objectives.

- How councils respond to asylum varies in their approach from more reactive 'crisis-like' responses to more predictable and proactive responses. The approach depends on the needs, but also the council's capacity and resources to respond. Some councils are leading the way with more holistic and strategic responses while others remain stuck in a reactive mode. This leads to a 'postcode lottery', in which peoples' experiences in the asylum system differ widely based on which council they happen to be accommodated in.

- Councils carry out various activities to develop their responses, ranging from improving their understanding of the needs of people seeking asylum to strengthening the councils' partnerships with the voluntary and civil society sector. Advancing even one or two of these interrelated 'response domains' helps councils move towards more proactive responses.

- They build capacity to respond more effectively by experimenting and sharing knowledge, making creative use of existing resources, and adjusting internal council structures.

- Asylum teams have been set up in different ways. Having a strategic and operational role and sharing roles between departments enables a multisectoral and integrated response critical for this complex policy area. Local governments should consider how an alternative structure to their team could more easily enable proactive and coordinated action on asylum.

- Funding capacity-building initiatives offers a tested and cost-efficient way to improve responsiveness and innovation in asylum responses. Supporting more capacity-building initiatives, such as the Greater London Authority (GLA)'s Asylum Welcome Programme design labs, will help local governments to build relationships and gather resources they need to meet emerging challenges both within and beyond migration. Government should support more of this type of work UK-wide, in addition to increasing funding for asylum responses.

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Policy recommendations summary

For full description of recommendations, go to .

For Central Government

Support people seeking asylum to socially integrate into their local communities

Improve communication and collaboration with local authorities

Improve data-sharing between government ministries, Home Office contractors and local authorities

Support local authorities to orient newly arrived asylum-seekers (e.g. to develop Welcome Packs)

Continue and increase funding for this policy area

Build institutional and governance capacity through specific interventions

For Pan-London Stakeholders

Create spaces for long-term collaboration amongst borough council officers with both strategic and operational roles

Connect operational and strategic-level discussions

Bring a focus back onto problems in dispersal accommodation

For Local Authorities

Document evidence of costs and concerns in managing responses to asylum not just for planning but also for advocacy

Maintain, expand and capitalise on networks of borough council officers to support collective action

Develop an internal strategy that aims for a more proactive response

Who are people seeking asylum?

They are people seeking protection from persecution and serious human rights violations. They have applied for recognition as a refugee under the United Nations Refugee Convention and are waiting for a decision on their claim. They must be in the United Kingdom to apply for asylum.

Most people seeking asylum in the United Kingdom are indeed found to have a well-founded fear of persecution; two-thirds (67%) of initial decisions made in 2023 have been grants of protection (Refugee Council 2024). People seeking asylum are a very diverse group. The majority of those supported by the government are families with children; single adult men make up one-third of the asylum-seeking population (Pinter 2021).

Research methods

This research and brief is based on semi-structured interviews (10) and consultations (19) with London borough council officers and participation in a 6-month action learning process called the GLA Asylum Welcome Programme. The GLA hosts the London Strategic Migration Partnership (LSMP), a governance body that enables collaboration between a variety of stakeholders for the benefit of both migrants and the wider community. The GLA's LSMP team commissioned the programme using funding from the mayoral budget.

From January to June 2023, it brought together 11 London borough councils to share knowledge and to pilot projects supporting the 'social integration' of people seeking asylum (GLA 2018). 'Design labs' were the core of this programme. These were a series of workshops (5) and webinars implemented and facilitated by the charity Refugees in Effective and Active Partnership (REAP) and the immigration think-tank British Future to enable the collaborative development of solutions. The lessons from the Design labs have been documented in the Asylum Welcome Toolkit, launched in February 2024.

Introduction

Local authorities across the United Kingdom have been especially active in supporting refugees in recent years. This includes providing services and information to Hong Kong nationals and resettled refugees from Afghanistan, Syria and elsewhere, and they are also supporting the hosting of Ukrainians through the Homes for Ukraine scheme. However, in contrast to these other programmes, responding to asylum has presented a major challenge. Though local authorities are allocated funding to support resettled refugees in their integration process, similar levels of funding have not been available to support people seeking asylum (Broadhead 2020). Local authorities receive funding to support unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, but this has also been shown to fall far short of needs (London Councils, n.d.).

Asylum policy changes rapidly. Local authorities must adapt to unexpected openings and closures of hotels, the sudden movement of asylum-seekers in and out of the borough, new policies for asylum-seekers to share rooms, and more recently, the granting of refugee status to an unknown number of people as the government works to reduce its asylum decision-making backlog. These changes and uncertainty make it difficult for councils to respond proactively. Local authorities in general are limited in their ability to engage in this policy area. This has raised a series of questions about how local authorities can meet their statutory obligations towards these newcomers and help prepare them for integration in the United Kingdom. The risks of ignoring these preparations are high. This includes the potential for an increase in homelessness applications from asylum-seekers that recently received refugee status (London Councils 2023) as well as people seeking asylum deemed inadmissible after the passing of the Illegal Migration Act (GLA 2023).
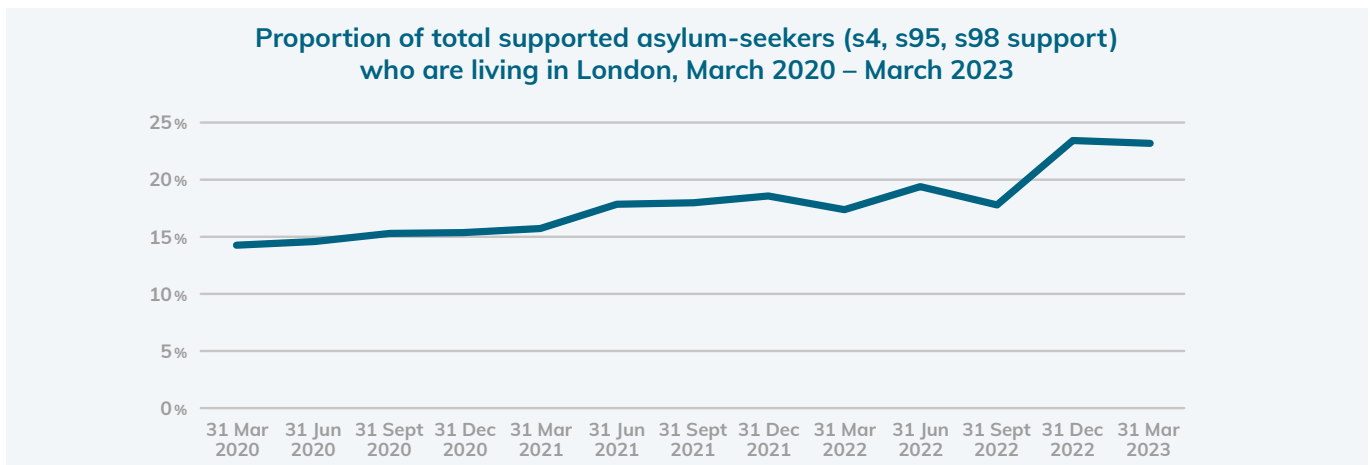
Supporting people seeking asylum has been a major issue for London's borough councils. The number of people seeking asylum accommodated in London has increased rapidly in the past three years, in particular because of the introduction of hotels as 'contingency' asylum accommodation in 2020. As of March 2023, one in five people seeking asylum in the United Kingdom was living in accommodation in London (23.2%). Of these 16,337 people, two-thirds were in hotels and one-third was accommodated in dispersal housing (UK Home Office 2023).

This policy brief describes the responses that London's borough councils have been developing to address challenges asylum-seekers face in general as well as those created by the asylum system. It highlights three ways that councils are adapting despite a lack of resources. These are experimenting and sharing knowledge, making creative use of existing resources, and adjusting internal council structures. It ends with recommendations for central government, pan-London, and local authority stakeholders for how to maximise existing capacity and build new capacity for addressing this complex and urgent policy area.
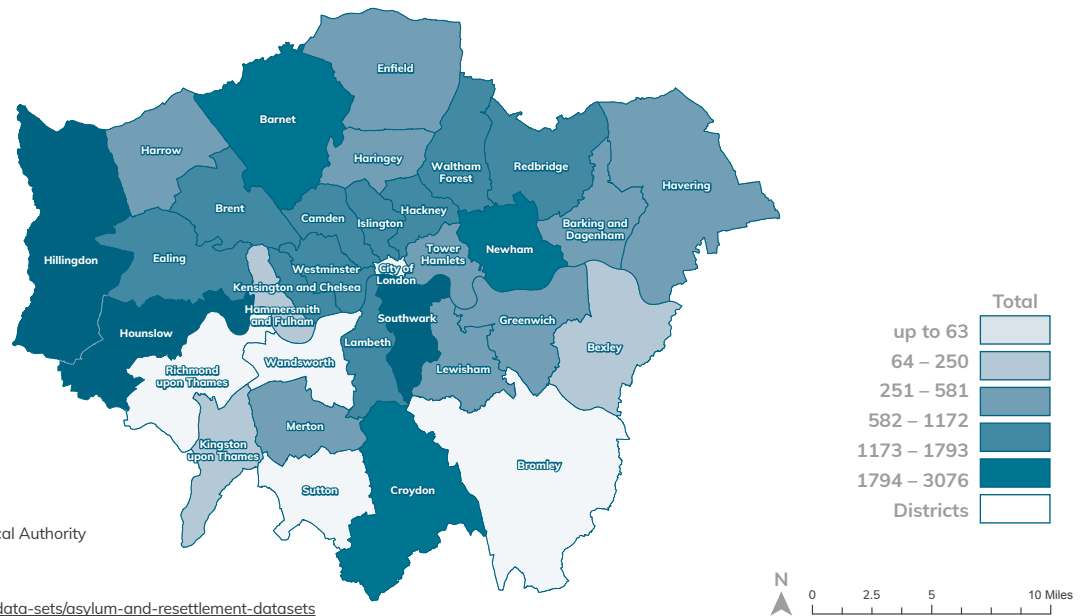
Why councils respond to this 'local need'

Historically and now, local authorities have had different roles in supporting asylum-seeking populations, including towards unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and others seeking international protection. In the past decade, their role was dramatically reduced as accommodation provision was taken over by private-sector contractors (Darling 2022), such as Clearsprings Ready Homes in London. But this has been changing in recent years.

Councils across London have been responding to the rapid increase in people seeking asylum since 2020. Backlogs during the COVID-19 pandemic compounded pre-existing waits for people within the asylum system, resulting in the majority (67%) of main applicants waiting longer than six months for an initial decision on their case by the end of 2022 (Migration Observatory 2023). This, alongside an increase in arrivals, led to a situation in which more people were staying in the asylum system for longer, overwhelming the existing supply of asylum accommodation dispersed within communities (this is known as 'dispersal accommodation'). The Home Office adapted by accommodating people seeking asylum in various kinds of hotels (UK House of Commons Library 2023), many of which were procured in London due to their availability and capacity, for example around Heathrow Airport, affecting the boroughs of Hillingdon and Hounslow.

Proportion of total supported asylum-seekers (s4, s95, s98 support) who are living in London, March 2020 – March 2023

Number of people seeking asylum supported by Local Authorities in London as of March 2023

Cartography: Melissa Weihmayer
Data source: UK Home Office
Asylum seekers in receipt of support by Local Authority
(Section 4, 95 and 98 support)
Published: 25 May 2023
Available at:
https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/asylum-and-resettlement-datasets

Total

up to 63	
64 – 250	
251 – 581	
582 – 1172	
1173 – 1793	
1794 – 3076	
Districts	

Local councils have responded to this unprecedented situation for a variety of reasons. There are no specific responsibilities placed on councils within asylum policy aside from the care of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. However, this does not preclude responsibilities in general. Those participating in the design labs referred to a duty to fulfil their statutory obligations, especially towards vulnerable children and adults, and to ensure that people are safe and protected from exploitation in their boroughs (e.g. safeguarding). But they also saw the importance of supporting all residents in their boroughs regardless of immigration status and settlement prospects. Council officers expressed the challenges of inequity between different groups seeking refuge, arguing that people seeking asylum are near destitute and need just as much support to adapt to life in the United Kingdom as those resettled under other schemes, if not more. They saw shared benefits in bringing expertise gained from refugee resettlement programmes to supporting asylum-seeking populations.

Importantly, they acknowledged that those seeking asylum are accommodated in the borough and hence are embedded within its communities, regardless of whether they are being housed in hotels or in dispersal accommodation. Building social connections between those seeking asylum and community members was described as a long-term contribution towards social cohesion in the borough and beyond. Indeed, the council officers agreed that supporting peoples' integration into one borough in London helps in their overall trajectory towards integration in the United Kingdom. This perspective is especially relevant in London given that most will need to relocate to find more affordable housing after obtaining refugee status.

How councils respond: eight domains, ranging from reactive to proactive

The activities that borough councils were doing to respond to asylum can be described as encompassing eight interrelated 'response domains'.[1] The borough councils participating in the design labs varied in how they advanced each of these domains, with some describing themselves as feeling more 'behind' in developing their responses than neighbouring councils. Depending on needs, capacity and resources, some councils were able to progress in all of them at the same time while other councils prioritised just one or two. For example, in order to establish a tailored service, councils saw it as critical to first improve their understanding of the needs of asylum-seeking residents and strengthen their relationships with voluntary and civil society sector organisations operating within the borough. This enabled better coordination to avoid duplicating services and created opportunities to support the ongoing activities of the voluntary and civil society sector organisations through commissioning or micro-grants. Councils also prioritised different domains at different moments, for example focusing on engaging politically when changes to asylum policy were seen as especially detrimental to the wellbeing of people seeking asylum.

Each of these response domains notably could be undertaken as more reactive, 'one-off' activities in response to an incident or a crisis, or they could be undertaken more proactively by creating predictable processes able to adapt to future changes. Again, not all councils had the capacity to proactively approach all aspects of their response. But choosing to be more proactive in some areas could enable progress in others. Establishing a strategic vision is one response domain which is inherently proactive, bolstering all the rest. Councils differed in their approach to strategy development; some preferred to keep these as operational and dynamic plans to guide their internal work while others worked with the City of Sanctuary movement to gain clearer strategic direction by becoming official Boroughs of Sanctuary.[2]

(1) These eight 'response domains' are the result of my thematic analysis of interviews and workshop materials. The table on the following page outlines each domain.
(2) More information on the City of Sanctuary movement, and its 'Local Authority Network' with case studies that include some London Boroughs of Sanctuary, can be found here: https://la.cityofsanctuary.org/

Table 1. Response domains along a continuum of reactive and proactive approaches

Response domains	Reactive	← →		Proactive
Description	**'one-off'** Meeting statutory obligations and emergency needs if and when they arise. Characterised by unpredictability and lack of clear decision-maker taking ownership of the problem. Difficult to estimate the costs of this type of response.	**'outsource'** Putting service providers in place so that basic needs are met. This could include outsourcing to commissioned voluntary sector and civil society partners to provide a broad range of needs.	**'outreach'** Working to tailor service provision to make it more accessible for diverse asylum-seeking residents. This could include outreach initiatives to identify new service users.	**'adapt'** Establishing a process for adapting service provision and coordination to future changes, such as increases in numbers of asylum-seeking residents or changes in demographics (e.g. more children or more single adults).
Understanding needs	Aware of needs meriting crisis response (especially health) but not beyond this.	Aware of needs of a specific subgroup and which providers are needed to holistically respond to that subgroup (e.g. children).	Aware of needs of various subgroups and which providers are needed to holistically respond to various subgroups; aware of existing data gaps and working to fill them by collating admin data.	Regularly collecting information and consulting with asylum-seeking residents to adapt offer; understanding needs are holistic and multisectoral.
Establishing a service	Addressing needs when the council is alerted to the needs by asylum-seeking residents or other partners, may be at a 'crisis point'.	Commissioning a service provider to meet broad range of needs or to focus on the needs of one group (e.g. families), preparing for crisis needs. Including asylum-seeking residents into mainstream services.	Commissioning different service providers for different services and/or subgroups, and filling remaining gaps in-house, reducing crisis needs. Including asylum-seeking residents into mainstream services and creating a separate bespoke service offer to cover specific needs.	Regular coordination meetings with service providers and in-house team to adapt offer to different subgroups as needs change over time, preventing crisis needs. This includes monitoring accommodation conditions and services by central government subcontractors to ensure quality.
Engaging directly with people seeking asylum	Soliciting feedback for services rendered.	Commissioning a service provider to consult with asylum-seeking residents to better understand their needs.	Developing a consultative process so asylum-seeking residents can provide feedback on the services the council is intending to provide.	Establishing a group of asylum-seeking residents empowered to collaborate with the council to develop ideas for services and monitor their implementation.
Strengthening relationship to voluntary and civil society sector	Unaware of voluntary and civil society organizations and their activities in the borough.	Commissioning a small number of voluntary and civil society sector organisations that council is accustomed to working with to undertake specific programmes or services.	Mix of commissioning and partnering with voluntary and civil society sector organizations that do a variety of services for a variety of subgroups. Relationship is not merely commissioning but also sharing information and consulting for advice.	Regularly coordinating with voluntary and civil society sector partners, two-way communication and decision-making, able to identify remaining gaps in service provision and allocate funding to steer voluntary sector to fill those gaps.
Strengthening relationship with external partners	Contacting Clearsprings and Migrant Help, the main government contractors supporting asylum-seekers in London, to escalate issues on a case-by-case basis, may or may not get a consistent response.	Occasional outreach to Greater London Authority or London Councils to transmit complaints to Clearsprings and Migrant Help when crises arise.	Direct line of communication with Clearsprings and Migrant Help via specific roles and escalation channels.	Regular coordination meetings in collaboration with other boroughs in addressing wider problems with Clearsprings and Migrant Help.
Engaging with other boroughs	Reaching out to other boroughs at crisis moments in order to solve a specific and unforeseen problem.	Engaging with other boroughs somewhat regularly for information sharing on what has worked and what hasn't to test new ideas.	Partnering with other boroughs on specific activities, such as joint commissioning of a research piece or voluntary and civil society sector organisations for service delivery.	Partnering with other boroughs to establish a strategy that identifies which activities and services are more effectively undertaken jointly (such as coordination with external partners).
Engaging politically (with local, city-level, and/or central level stakeholders)	Reacting to media requests and resident groups on asylum issues as they come up.	Proposing to internal decision-makers to engage councillors in this policy area.	Developing lobbying letters targeted to different levels of government to highlight specific impact of asylum policies on borough, developing strategies of engagement with councillors in this policy area.	Alignment between council manifesto and engagement strategies, councillor endorsement, regular media engagement, working with other boroughs to develop lobbying letters to central government.
Establishing a strategic vision	No strategic vision to guide decision-making and prioritization of activities.	Relying on strategic vision for migration to guide decision-making and prioritization of activities for asylum.	Engaging with political actors to develop a strategic vision that encapsulates various aspects of migration, including asylum.	Developing a process to engage with political actors to establish and monitor a strategic vision that encapsulates various aspects of migration, including asylum, alongside an action plan and key performance indicators for carrying out the vision, measuring its progress, and adjusting the vision over time.

How a council moved from reactive to more proactive approaches depended on the capacity of councils to engage in this policy area. It is important to note that capacity is not static. Of course, an infusion of external resources can enable a rapid increase in capacity by hiring new staff and funding specific programmes or services. But this is not the only way that capacity emerges; it can and should be continuously built internally. This does not replace and indeed supports efforts towards advocating for adequate resources.

Politics of the council also plays a role in enabling or hindering this capacity-building. Depending on its strategic and political priorities, asylum teams are either given more autonomy to grow as needed or can be sidelined in strategic discussions. Some councils have pursued Borough of Sanctuary status in order to obtain the clear strategic and political direction they need to expand their capacity.

There were three key activities that increased capacity both through and alongside the design lab workshops: experimentation and information exchange to better tailor services to people seeking asylum, making creative use of existing resources (funding, partnerships, and data), and adjusting council structures. I will explain each in turn, drawing on examples from the participating borough councils.

1 Experimentation and information exchange enables new solutions

No council had sufficient resources on its own to test a variety of approaches to responding to asylum issues. It was by bringing the results of these tests together into the design lab workshops that revealed to councils which approach worked best for which situations. They first reflected internally about how they would improve upon the option they tested. By then sharing that information with their peers in other councils, this gave councils multiple approaches to compare. The process produced a menu of options along with pros and cons of each. Importantly, councils brought this into their decision-making moving forward.

We saw the benefits of experimentation and information exchange through discussions on how to prepare people seeking asylum for their receipt of refugee status. This is known as the 'move-on' period because it is a time in which people seeking asylum transfer out of the asylum system, losing the small financial support this provides as well as a bedspace within asylum accommodation. This has created substantial challenges for people seeking asylum, as the time in between receiving their notification letter from the Home Office and their eviction from asylum accommodation is only 28 days, and has even at times been reduced to only 7.[3] It has proven difficult to find new housing and apply for mainstream welfare benefits before asylum support runs out (Provan 2020; Hughes 2024).

Councils have been struggling to support people through this period. Councils generally do not know in advance who will be in this situation and when. Streamline Asylum Processing is one example of a rapid change in policy affecting how councils manage. This policy sought to reduce the backlog of asylum-seeker applications awaiting an initial decision by issuing questionnaires to people of select nationalities.[4] This produced a large number of people obtaining refugee status and needing to 'move on' at the same time. Local authorities across the United Kingdom have been highlighting the problem that the short move-on period creates for those seeking asylum but also local authorities.[5] In addition to the increased risk of homelessness and rise in rough sleeping among former asylum seekers, accelerated decision-making processes are also putting increased pressure on council housing services which are already under strain given the shortage of affordable property in London.

Despite limited options, councils view awareness-raising as one way they can intervene. The goal is twofold: to help those within the asylum system to prepare, and to manage expectations. Some have proposed information sessions to help people seeking asylum better understand the wider context of housing challenges in the United Kingdom. These can also provide an introduction for navigating the private rental sector. But it is not evident how to communicate this to such a diverse group. Additionally, for those preoccupied first and foremost with the uncertainty of their asylum process, they may not see housing information as a priority.

(3) The 7-day notice period was due to a change in the Home Office's interpretation of its own guidance between August and December 2023. The Home Office reversed this following a surge in street homelessness (Butler et al. 2023). A letter from a coalition of refugee support services to the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities describes this challenge further.
(4) These are nationals of Afghanistan, Eritrea, Libya, Syria and Yemen who entered or arrived before 7 March 2023, as described in the Home Office Guidance published 16 August, 2023.
(5) A letter by the City of Sanctuary Local Authority Network to the Secretary of State, dated 14 September 2023, lists this as one of the top issues of concern to local authorities.

To confront this challenge, councils explained three different approaches to these information sessions:

Table 2. Approaches to raising awareness about housing options

Option tested by councils	Benefit	Drawback
Offering a general information session on immigration advice and the asylum process, including a component on housing issues	More people saw this as relevant to them and hence sessions had higher attendance rates and wider reach	Allowed for very limited time to focus on specific housing issues
Offering a more specific information session on housing issues and the risk of homelessness	Able to provide more detailed information on housing context and housing options (such as prices in the private rental sector)	Sessions had low attendance as people did not necessarily prioritise housing before receiving their notification of refugee status
Offering a tailored session for people that received questionnaires for the Streamline Asylum Process including a system for them to engage with the council's housing teams early on	This initiated a formal process for people to follow to contact the housing team early to develop personal homelessness plans, enabling the council to provide tailored services	Though other people joined (mainly because refreshments were served), the session content was more geared towards a select group, hence was not seen as relevant for others

By reflecting on the pros and cons of each approach together, councils could then decide which approach best suited the needs of those seeking asylum in their boroughs at that time. For example, if they had a lot of people that were eligible for the Streamline Asylum Process, then they may prioritise tailored sessions for that group. Conversely, if this were not the case, they may decide to hold a combination of general information sessions on immigration advice and more specific housing sessions to reach a wider group while also leaving sufficient time for answering housing questions. In fact, having consistent sessions at regular intervals seemed key for increasing attendance over time, and focusing on a different theme for each session helped some councils cover a variety of issues. Overall, presenting these different tested options together in a group helped to convert experimentation into new knowledge and guidance for other councils to consider.

Because each council participating in the design labs also implemented their own pilot projects, they could furthermore bring key lessons from this experience.

Lessons learned

The following are a selection of lessons shared in the final workshop based on the pilot projects. Many of these have been documented in the Asylum Welcome Toolkit, launched in February 2024:

- **Building trust with people seeking asylum is crucial** for them to feel comfortable to ask questions, seek support, and report safeguarding issues. This helps overcome the fear that doing so could negatively affect their asylum applications. But building trust takes time and hence councils need to develop strategies for engaging longer-term with their asylum-seeking residents, whether through regular information sessions, organising social events, or having consistent presence in hotels and community hubs. Creating dedicated outreach teams to meet people in hotels and in their dispersal accommodation also helps to build trust.
- **Developing services, such as connecting people seeking asylum with volunteering opportunities, also takes time;** it is important for councils to be realistic about these timescales in their project planning.
- **It is difficult to introduce changes, plans and new services without buy-in from senior-level managers and councillors.**
- **Councils cannot do this by themselves;** they need to develop and deliver their responses in partnership with voluntary and civil society sector organisations in their boroughs.
- **Councils can improve access to services by collaborating with other directorates and teams within the council** to co-locate different services in one familiar venue. This makes it more convenient for people seeking asylum to navigate and can stretch existing resources.
- **When helping partners in the borough** like schools and NHS general practitioners to better adapt to the needs of asylum-seeking residents, guidance needs to be practical and clear, for example using checklists and examples.
- **Building relationships with hotel managers has been helpful** for improving safeguarding and addressing problems before they become crises.
- **Supporting people seeking asylum in hotels is a different experience than supporting refugees in hotels.** This has required substantial learning within the council to adapt its processes and services. Discussions with other councils on how they made this transition was essential.

2 Making creative use of existing resources increases the efficiency of responses

Councils have very limited financial resources they can use to develop responses to asylum. There was no dedicated funding from central government for asylum work prior to 2022. This required some councils to use emergency COVID funding to support public health and wider responses in hotels, but this was very limited. New Asylum Dispersal Grants offered by the Home Office to councils is a start – including a one-off £250 payment for each asylum-seeking resident on March 27th 2022 and a one-off £750 payment of the same kind on April 1st 2023. The Home Office has also provided £3500 to local authorities for new beds made available for dispersal accommodation between March 2022 and 2023. Though intended to counter pressure on local services, this funding does not cover most council funding shortfalls in this policy area and does not support longer-term planning. Councils with a long history of hosting people in dispersal accommodation also have not benefitted from the £3500 payments unless they added new bedspaces during that period.

This has left many councils questioning how they can stretch existing resources to cope. Beyond financial resources, this includes staff time able to plan and implement services, partnerships with voluntary and civil society organisations to pool resources within the borough, and knowledge resources such as data collected by the Home Office and its contracted providers or through council systems and questionnaires.

An example of a council project to maximize existing resources is an initiative to expand English as a Second Language (ESOL) provision for people seeking asylum. People seeking asylum in London now have access to the Adult Education Budget[6] six months after they arrive in the UK. However, research has demonstrated the importance of starting language training as soon as people arrive (Chick 2023). Additionally, the council was able to use information it collected over the course of 3-4 years from residents using its migrant advice service. This revealed that the migrants that were offered access to language training within two months of arriving in the borough were more likely to enrol in courses.

The council collaborated with adult education providers, including local colleges and voluntary and community sector organisations, to find a way forward to enable early adult education provision. Language providers were able to commit to a quota of places they could offer to asylum-seeking residents as soon as they arrived in the borough. They then developed a system to access the funding from the Adult Education Budget when feasible to do so, e.g. after six months. Providers benefited from the assurance that they would have a predictable number of students using their services, since the match between students and places would be facilitated by the council. Because of this benefit, providers were willing to also contribute to the running costs of the migrant advice service.

Over time, it was not only the ESOL offerings that were expanded; the financial resources available for the migrant advice service increased as well. In fact, what began as a small team funded by the Department of Levelling Up, Housing and Communities evolved into a longer-term initiative with various sources of funding including from different internal council departments.[7] This was not simply a creative and effective use of staff time and partnerships within the borough. It was also a diversification of resources that enabled the continuity and expansion of this service for people seeking asylum.

3 Adjusting council structures promotes integrated and multi-sectoral responses

Councils are embedding asylum work within their structures, showing that this policy area is becoming more institutionalized to enable the long-term support of people seeking asylum. This has also been a process of experimentation to clarify how councillors, managers, officers, and frontline service providers need to work together to advance this policy area.

Institutional structures in some cases reflect the reactivity of this policy area in general. A council's capacity to plan, implement and grow its response and resources for asylum depends in part on which department and role happened to have been initially tasked with asylum work. For most London councils, this was their Children's Services departments due to their ongoing responsibilities towards caring for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children[8]. In some cases, working on this policy area within a more specialised department or directorate has made it challenging to initiate cross-departmental collaborations within the borough.

But council structures are not fixed. It has been possible for officers working on asylum to develop a case for restructuring and moving asylum work from one directorate, department or team to another as the asylum work and responses evolve. Four of the eleven councils participating in the design labs were either discussing internal restructuring or had recently restructured. Here I outline four ways in which institutional structures affected asylum responses.

First, those councils that were able to create a small 'asylum team' did so in one of two ways: either this team emerged from within an existing refugee resettlement team, or the council created a generalist, centralised team to work on this issue separate from refugee resettlement and other migration responses. These had various advantages and disadvantages for asylum work.

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(6) This fund has been managed by the Mayor of London since 2019. For more information on this and other ESOL provision in London, the Greater London Authority developed an English Language (ESOL) for Resettlement guidance, last updated June 2023.

(7) This team was funded as part of the Department of Levelling Up, Housing and Communities' 'Integrated Communities Strategy' in 2018, according to this initiative's Green Paper. This initiative was not specific to asylum but supported five pilot 'Integration Areas' around the United Kingdom.

(8) A National Transfer Scheme, in place since 2016, ensures that the responsibilities for caring for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children are shared between councils in London and local authorities across the United Kingdom. While it started as an opt-in system, local authorities are now all mandated to participate, as explained in the National Transfer Scheme Protocol for Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children, published 17 August 2023.

Table 3. Characteristics of asylum teams based on how they emerged

Origin of asylum teams	Key characteristics
Asylum team emerged from a wider resettlement team	• Benefits from existing and new refugee resettlement funding, such as Homes for Ukraine, where funded activity can involve multiple groups of refugees and people seeking asylum. • Already focused on supporting social integration for new arrivals, creating an opportunity for transferrable expertise (but working with asylum-seeking residents still requires new experience and knowledge). • Often has strong pre-existing ties across local authority departments. • Can identify useful areas of collaboration and joint work across services for newcomers, for example on ESOL, volunteering, and improving social connections. • Better equipped to support residents after receiving refugee status.
Asylum team emerged from a generalist, centralised team	• Closer to decision makers from multiple key departments (e.g. health, housing, education). • Ability to navigate various departments in the council to create new services and programmes. • Has overview of various funding pots (e.g. from public health as well as refugee resettlement) that can be pooled to maximise resources. • Often necessitates new functions and forums to be established, requiring substantial co-ordination across council departments.

Resettlement-based asylum team   >>

The following is an example of asylum work being conducted from within a wider refugee resettlement team, with the roles working on asylum highlighted in yellow. This made sense for this particular council because the number of resettled refugees it supported was far higher than the number of asylum-seeking residents accommodated in hotels within the borough.
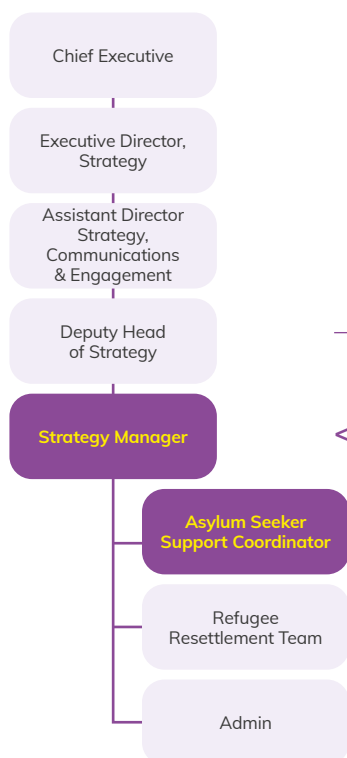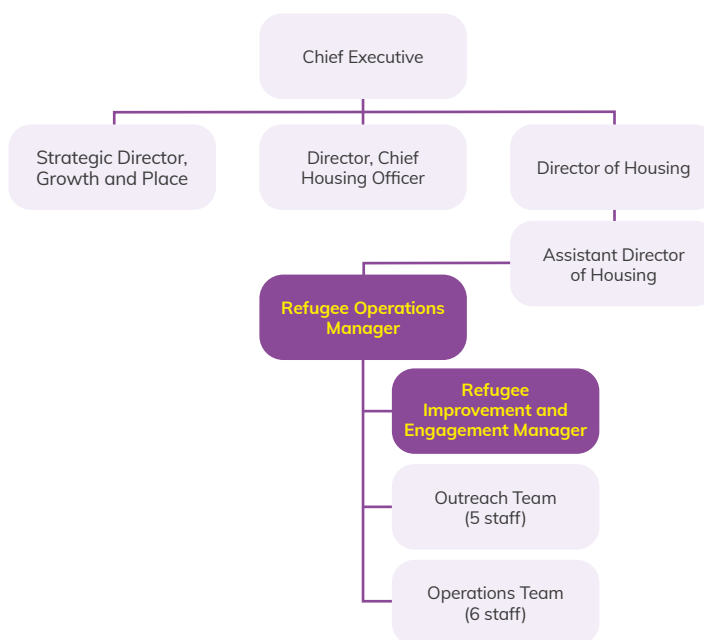
Generalist, centralised asylum team

The following is an example of a generalist, centralised asylum team, with the roles working on asylum highlighted in yellow. This setup made sense for this council because it first encountered asylum issues when Home Office contractors procured several hotels within the borough to be used as asylum accommodation. The 'Strategy Manager' explained that asylum work fit best in the 'Strategy team' as it was such a cross-cutting issue that it did not fit anywhere else within existing council structures. The borough later had a substantial number of resettled refugees arrive and added a refugee resettlement team at that point.

Second, it is important to note the variety of 'institutional homes' for asylum teams. Among the eleven participating councils, the most common setup was for asylum to sit within a multisectoral 'Communities' directorate, with Housing and Children's Services directorates not far behind.

The specific 'institutional home' also provided some advantages and disadvantages. For example, a housing-based team was better prepared for discussions around the 'move-on' period, but struggled with other services that required a deep and multi-sectoral understanding of asylum-seeker needs, which was better suited to public health or adult social care. Indeed, relevant expertise from a variety of areas is needed for a more holistic response, going beyond children and adult social care to also include environmental health, public health, and community safety, among others.

Institutional base (directorate) for asylum response in 11 councils
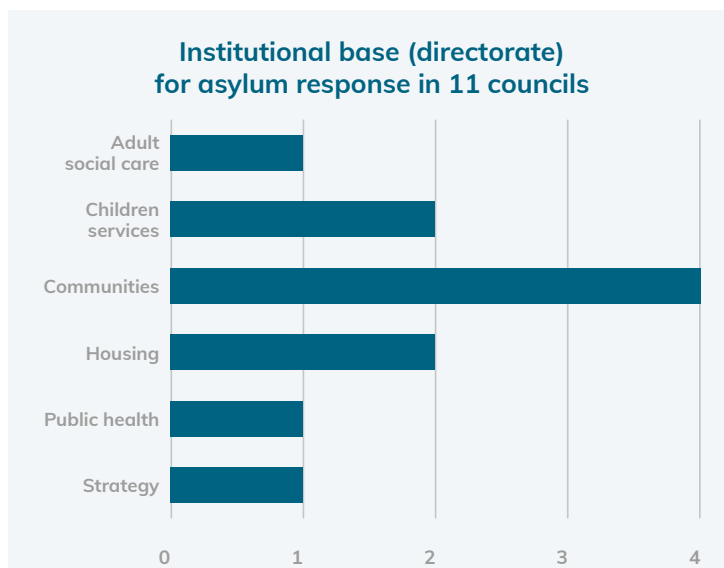
Table 4. Effects of department or directorate on asylum responses

Department or directorate	Key characteristics
Housing-based asylum team	• Closely linked to refugee resettlement and 'move-on' period, which drives a closer focus on the long-term resettlement and integration of asylum-seeking residents. • Able to undertake risk assessments for new accommodation sites to push for adequate quality. • Oftentimes housing is a larger and higher-profile department in councils, helping this policy area gain more visibility.
Communities department-based asylum team	• Community safety and 'prevention' focus enables multi-sectoral and proactive planning. • Strong existing connections with voluntary and civil society sector partners and police. • Specific expertise in safeguarding.
Public health-based asylum team	• Often already a multi-sectoral service provision model (aiming for holistic health outcomes). • Strong connections with NHS and some voluntary and civil society sector organisations, particularly in mental health and disability. • Benefits from prior capacity built during the COVID-19 response. • Attuned to intersection and acute health needs. • Recognises that wider determinants such as income, housing, education, are important drivers of health and wellbeing.
Children's services-based asylum team	• Longer history of expertise working with Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC) due to the UASC National Transfer system. • Often well connected with professional associations of social workers such as the Association of Directors of Children's Services. • Learning and new expertise needed to adapt services to adult needs.

Third, there were different ways that councils created conditions to enable a more multi-sectoral and integrated response. One council situated its asylum team across two departments, namely their Communities directorate and 'Early Help'[9] directorate, in order to draw expertise and resources from both. A different council chose to have officers 'seconded' temporarily from other directorates to provide an infusion of capacity when most needed. This council also chose to 'co-locate' personnel between two departments, in this case including a social worker role that worked half-time on asylum within their Housing directorate and half-time in the Adult Social Care directorate.

(9) An 'Early Help' service supports families with children ages 0 to 19 that need additional support. It explicitly aims to intervene early to mitigate problems.

Communities department-based asylum team that is operationally dispersed

One council had a more complex setup with a 'Strategy Lead for Policy' working on asylum within its Communities and Regeneration directorate, while officers delivering services to asylum were dispersed within other directorates. This included a Health Visitor in Public Health, an Outreach Worker in its Children's Services, and a Homelessness Prevention and Relief Officer in its Housing directorate. This helped to integrate asylum work across different council functions. Strong support from the council's Corporate Management Team furthermore bolstered collaboration between directorates and teams.
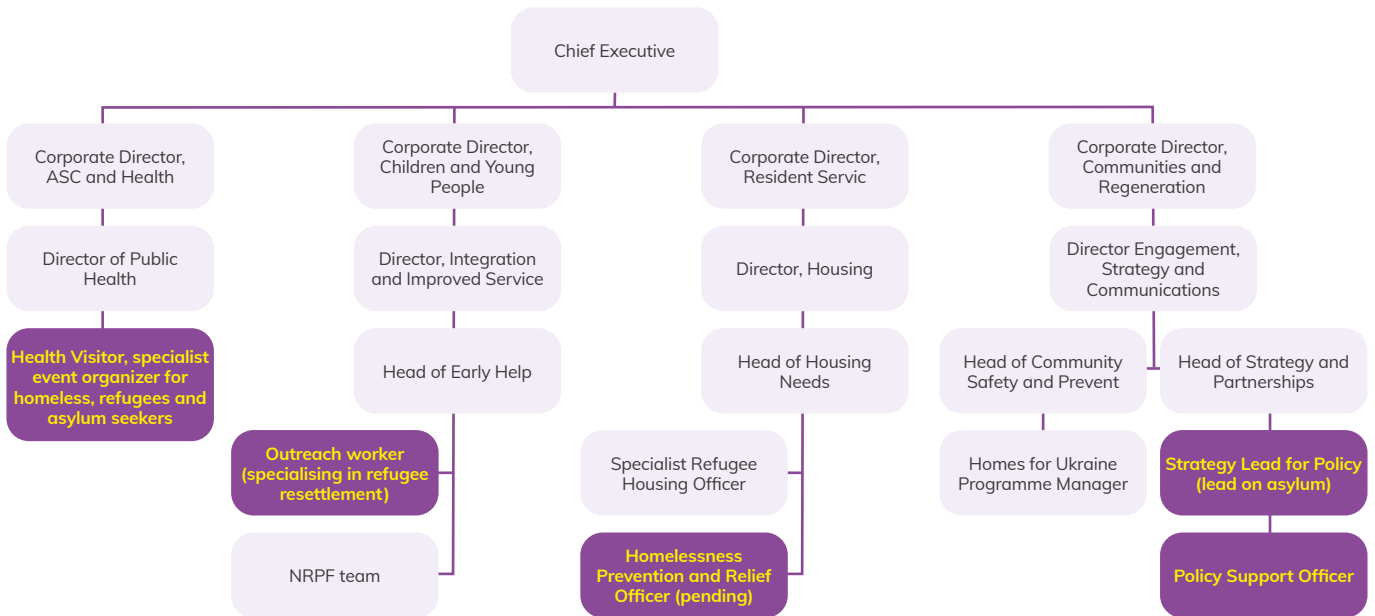
Housing-based asylum team with its own operational capacity

The following is an example of a council with a larger team responsible for asylum as well as support for migrants with no recourse to public funds and Ukrainians hosted by the Homes for Ukraine scheme. This team transitioned out of the Children's Services directorate into the Housing directorate to become a housing-based team. However, it also has brought in dedicated social care expertise in the form of a Children's Social Worker and more generalist Outreach Leads, as well as a bespoke Early Help Lead. Its 'Transformation Team' is unique; these roles conduct special projects to improve council responses in this policy area.
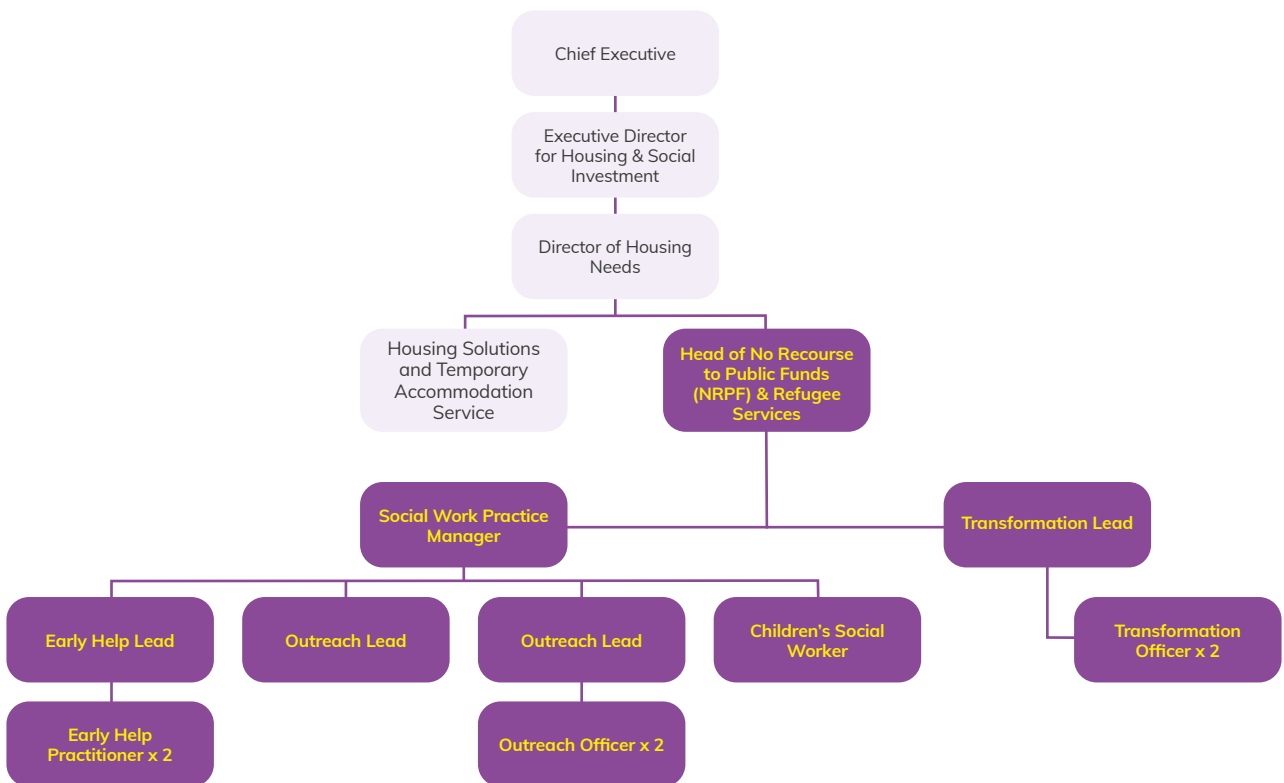
Fourth, some councils had greater decision-making powers for setting a strategic direction for the response and getting buy-in from internal and external stakeholders. This is key to shifting towards proactivity. The following are institutional elements that helped those councils to deliver a more strategic and more proactive response:

- **Having at least two officers within asylum teams** to enable separate roles in charge of strategic planning and operational management. This helped to ensure that longer-term goals would not get lost and could be complementary to and guide everyday service delivery.
- **Ensuring sufficient autonomy within the asylum team** to experiment with different approaches to service delivery and use resources in new ways for addressing this challenging policy area. This required flexible job descriptions and a culture of supporting innovation and change (e.g. 'Transformation Officer' roles).
- **Planning regular, multi-sectoral coordination meetings** with 1) internal partners including high-level engagement from Housing, Public Health, Police, among others and 2) external partners including Home Office contractors such as Clearsprings Ready Homes, hotel management, NHS, and voluntary and civil society sector partners.
- **Creating clear lines of decision-making to senior management and political representatives** to ensure sufficient support for developing this policy area.
- **Bringing in a much wider group of borough stakeholders** to manage this policy area. After achieving 'Borough of Sanctuary' status, one council developed a more complex institutional structure which enabled key oversight and guidance from a 'Sanctuary Oversight Board' as well as a 'Sanctuary Forum' made up of board members that included residents with lived experience with input from voluntary and civil society organisations.

Capacity-building initiatives within and beyond migration

A variety of models exist for initiatives and organisations that build the capacity of public sector institutions. The design lab methodology, for example, is often used within urban development and planning but was shown to work equally well for tackling migration issues like asylum. This methodology could be scaled up or brought to other regions in the United Kingdom. But other options exist and merit financial and political support:

- the No Recourse for Public Funds Connect and Network is based in a London council but has its own independent funding to provide guidance and training to other councils across the United Kingdom;
- the City of Sanctuary Local Authority Network collates case studies and creates information-sharing spaces and collective action opportunities for councils;
- the Capabilities in Academic Policy Engagement (CAPE) connects academic research with national government, parliament, local and regional authorities through fellowship placements in policy organisations and seed funding to co-develop research projects;
- the Westminster City Council Urban Lab builds internal council research capacity and collaborates with academic institutions on research projects; and,
- the National Institute for Health and Care Research Fellowship Programme brings doctoral students into local authorities for their research and to provide additional capacity.

Conclusions

Local authorities across the United Kingdom are at the forefront of migration issues on account of their close relationship to the communities they serve. They should therefore be seen as key partners in the implementation of migration and asylum policy. These London local councils have demonstrated significant expertise in preventing safeguarding crises and ensuring that minimum housing standards are met for people seeking asylum accommodated within their jurisdictions. They have also demonstrated their suitability for supporting asylum based on their expertise gained from implementing better-resourced resettlement programmes.

Migration responses like asylum are an important case for understanding how local governments adapt to new and complex challenges in general. Developing responses to asylum despite limited resources demonstrates a capacity for creativity and innovation. These traits help local governments to better serve their communities through difficult times. With more recognition and financial support from other levels of government, local governments can and should feel empowered to take on new challenges beyond migration, such as preparing for climate change related events like the 2022 heatwaves. These efforts also build from the COVID-19 public health response[10] showing the importance of increased governance capacity in emergencies. The learning acquired through developing more proactive responses to asylum will benefit the United Kingdom's local communities for years to come.

(10) For example, the Local Government Association describes how local authorities quickly created new hubs to set up new services and reach the most vulnerable in their communities at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Policy recommendations

1) For Central Government:

1.1) Support people seeking asylum to socially integrate into their local communities. The earlier they integrate the better their chances to become self-reliant and to contribute to their local communities and the United Kingdom as a whole. Social integration is a vision shared by central and local governments, as described in recent strategy documents. Though integration is a devolved issue in the United Kingdom, the lack of guidance for local authorities in England contributes to confusion and reactivity. The central government should build on its conceptual foundations to develop a robust national integration strategy for England that acknowledges the benefits of starting the integration process early for people seeking asylum, and supports other social integration initiatives (Commission on the Integration of Refugees 2024).

Table 5: Definitions of Integration

Definitions of integration	Department of Levelling Up	Home Office	Greater London Authority
Strategy that develops the definition and framework	Integrated Communities Strategy Green Paper (2018) and Integrated Communities Action Plan (2019)	Indicators of Integration framework (2019), updating the framework first published in 2004	All of Us Strategy on Social Integration (2018) and Social Integration Measurement Toolkit (2021)
Definitions of integration	Integrated communities: 'communities where people, whatever their background, live, work, learn and socialise together, based on shared rights, responsibilities and opportunities'	Building from 'integrated communities' definition, '[t]his report treats integration as a multi-directional process involving multiple changes from both incoming and diverse host communities.' Though historically used to describe refugee resettlement, most indicators could be usefully applied to measure the integration of people seeking asylum. The approach adopted is based on the following principles: Integration is... • Multi-dimensional • Multi-directional • A shared responsibility • Context specific	Social integration: 'the extent to which people positively interact and connect with others who are different to themselves. It is determined by the level of equality between people, the nature of their relationships, and their degree of participation in the communities in which they live'
Strategy's advice to local councils	Take a 'whole council' approach to integration, developing a local vision with partners, businesses, the voluntary and community sector and communities, and mainstreaming integration objectives across policy and service delivery.	Measure and monitor integration outcomes according to the indicator list, tailored to the priorities of the local context. Enhance practices and structures at local levels that are essential to underpinning effective integration.	• Promote shared experiences for Londoners • Increase 'active citizenship' through volunteering, social action, etc. • Work with partners across London to address inequalities and barriers particularly detrimental to social integration • Build a 'social evidence base', setting (holistic) measures for social integration and collecting and evaluating data

1.2) Improve communication and collaboration with local authorities. This means that the Home Office and Department of Levelling Up, Housing and Communities should be consulting with local authorities in advance of implementing any policy and operational changes. This enables local authorities to consider the potential implications of these policies and make meaningful contributions towards shaping them. This will help make the policies more adaptable to different local contexts and better able to be implemented. It may even result in the more efficient use of resources as local authorities become better able to anticipate policy changes.

1.3) Improve data-sharing between government ministries, Home Office contractors and local authorities, including demographic data, so local authorities can prepare for receiving people seeking asylum in their communities. For example, if they do not know how many families with children will be arriving in their area, they cannot support their local schools in identifying sufficient school places. Current data sharing arrangements are also insufficient for local authorities to have visibility of upcoming decisions.

Policy recommendations

1.4) Support local authorities to orient newly arrived asylum-seekers. Asylum-seekers urgently need information once they arrive at their accommodation so they can find adequate sources of support, services, contact numbers for council offices, and spaces for making social connections in their local area. This helps them cope with life as they await their asylum claim and prepare for longer-term integration. Though local authorities have a wealth of knowledge, they cannot do this alone and without financial support. They need support to develop materials in collaboration with their voluntary and civil society sector partners to adequately signpost people seeking asylum and to keep this information up to date. Financially supporting local authorities to develop Welcome Packs to complement the generic information provided by accommodation contractors could greatly improve peoples' experiences of arrival.

1.5) Continue and increase funding for this policy area. A lack of funding is clearly damaging to integration outcomes for people seeking asylum. Longer-term funding to 'do integration well' helps to create more socially connected communities that are more amenable to welcoming new arrivals. Hence investments in this area have wide benefits. Additionally, insufficient amounts of funding have resulted in a loss of 'governance capacity' (van Popering-Verkerk et al, 2022)[11] which has prevented local authorities from taking long-term and strategic decisions, impedes collaboration both within councils and with external partners, and renders service provision reactive and ineffective. The Asylum Dispersal Grants have only begun to compensate local authorities for the resources they have already contributed to this work. Working with Strategic Migration Partnerships but also collaborating directly with local authorities, for example through the governance structures supporting the transition to full asylum dispersal[12], will help in matching resources to needs in this dynamic and challenging policy area.

1.6) Build institutional and governance capacity with specific interventions in addition to financial resources. In addition to increased financial resources, local governments should be supported through capacity-building initiatives to enable them to adapt to new and emerging challenges. This includes developing research capacity to quickly learn about complex policy areas and share information through networks. GLA's Asylum Welcome programme and its design lab process demonstrates this.

2) For Pan-London Stakeholders:

2.1) Create spaces for long-term collaboration amongst borough council officers with both strategic and more operational roles. Capacity-building is critical through such initiatives as the GLA's Asylum Welcome Programme and its design labs. They served as an opportunity for knowledge sharing, but also for network building, a much-needed endeavour after these were fractured during the COVID-19 pandemic response and shifts towards remote-working. Pan-London stakeholders should build on events such as the Greater London Authority Illegal Migration Bill Emergency Summit and the Asylum Welcome Toolkit Launch Event to continue facilitation support for the sustaining of these networks through similar events going forward. This means especially helping boroughs to collaborate with one another in their responses to a variety of migration issues.

2.2) Connect operational and strategic-level discussions. Productive spaces for borough council officers to exchange information and advocate collectively for policy change are the governance structures created to manage the full asylum dispersal plan, as well as more operational working groups such as the Local Authority Forum for Refugees. However, design lab discussions revealed that more can be done to connect operational discussions with strategic-level discussions (e.g. decisions taken by Chief Executives or within fora convened by the London Strategic Migration Partnership [LSMP]). Regular briefings by London Councils and/or the LSMP board to council officers would be valuable to disseminate information, especially given the delay in publishing meeting minutes.

2.3) Bring a focus back onto problems in dispersal accommodation. Discussions around asylum governance tends to assume that councils are struggling to meet the challenges of asylum policy because of the new use of hotels to accommodate people seeking asylum. However, substantial evidence from the past two decades points to similar capacity gaps when supporting people living in dispersal accommodation (Darling 2022; Mayblin Wake and Kazemi 2020; Hyne 2011). For this reason, it is imperative to consider the capacity needed both for supporting people living in 'contingency' hotels and those in dispersal accommodation. Governance working groups managing the shift towards full asylum dispersal and new bedspaces acquired in London should review the existing challenges of those living in dispersal accommodation, including poor housing conditions and difficulties in reporting concerns to a complex array of subcontractors (Darling 2022).

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(11) Governance capacity is defined as the potential of actors to coordinate their actions and the deployment of resources in the pursuit of collective issues (van Popering-Verkerk et al, 2022, p. 1770).

(12) In its Member Briefing on Asylum Dispersal, London Council describes the transition from a voluntary / opt-in system of asylum dispersal to a mandated system of 'full dispersal' based on allocations determined through Regional Dispersal Plans.

Policy recommendations

3) For Local Authorities:

3.1) Document evidence of costs and concerns not just for planning but also for advocacy. Having this information ready when escalating problems to pan-London stakeholders and central government actors can help to demonstrate that certain issues are not one-off incidents but indicative of wider problems that merit urgent action. Borough council officers tend to undervalue the contributions they make towards migration responses and policy. Small actions such as collecting evidence on the costs accrued in responding to asylum or safeguarding concerns raised, participating in government 'burdens assessments', and advocating for better housing conditions may not appear to be creating immediate impact, but does have an impact long-term in this policy area. Local authorities should document and communicate more widely about these small steps of everyday practice that are improving lives at the local level.

3.2) Maintain, expand and capitalise on networks of borough council officers to support collective action. Councils working alone struggle to experiment, learn and maximise limited resources. Collaborating with other councils on a variety of 'response domains', such as jointly commissioning services across borough boundaries with a mental health provider, can make a substantial difference for pooling resources and increasing the effectiveness of the service. Reaching out to officers in other councils to maintain relationships and share information is key for adapting to these complex policy areas.

3.3) Develop an internal strategy that aims for a more proactive response. This could identify which of the eight interrelated response domains are the most pressing gaps for the borough or area. Developing and maintaining strong relationships with the NHS, education, police, voluntary and civil society sector and other local partners is especially critical to be better prepared to address new challenges in the future.

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Note on data

Because the period of data collection for this research was January to June 2023, the figures provided in this brief are based on Home Office statistics up to date as of March 2023. Datasets covering the period until end of December 2023 are available as of 29 February 2024, here: https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/immigration-system-statistics-data-tables#asylum-and-resettlement

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