



A group of Syrian migrants, refugees and asylum seekers living in the UK have outlined a series of practical measures they say would help newly arrived Syrians to settle in within their new communities.

At a discussion organised by Migrant Voice on 30 October 2015, the Syrians, who have lived in the UK for between six months and 10 years, discussed their experiences of arriving and living in this country. The meeting was a unique opportunity for Syrians to freely discuss their concerns about what challenges they, and/or other Syrians they know and work with, have faced since arriving in the UK. The most striking point made consistently throughout the discussion was that Syrian refugees want to integrate into UK society but feel they need more support to do so successfully.

This document has been produced by Migrant Voice to inform policy makers and NGOs in order to assist in developing more effective integration strategies. Here is a summary of the participants' key responses, concerns and recommendations:

Integration

- Syrians want help to integrate as quickly as possible. Many have been through suffering and displacement and have already spent years at war, away from their homes, in camps, on the streets and on dangerous and long journeys across Europe. A speedy response is vital. Failure to get support fast heightens the mental health impact of refugees' experiences of conflict and displacement. "People helping us should keep in mind the state of refugees' mental health even though many will not talk about it because of fear of stigma and cultural constraints."
- Learning English and having access to basic services on arrival are vital in preventing social exclusion, depression and isolation.
- There is not enough coaching: we do not know where to find information, and even when we have access coaching is needed to show how to access the information and to understand it and navigate our way through the system.
- Syrians are eager to integrate and become part of British society but would like support in integrating, especially learning about the laws of the country and the culture. This sort of preparation helps refugees to understand the host culture and to avoid unintentionally offending anyone or breaking the law. (This view was strongly supported by the Eritrean present at the meeting who said that it mirrors the views and experiences of the Eritrean community).
- It might also be helpful to inform the local host community about the new arrivals, about their culture, their journeys and experiences fleeing war and persecution, and why they are here.

- There is a far right agenda to say ‘the cultures are incompatible’, so it is important that we show that we can integrate. All the above will help towards bridging the gaps and reducing hostility or prevent the build-up of hostility.
- Syrians want information about which immigration rules directly affect them.
- We also want to know about available jobs, and how to access the labour market.

Barriers to integration

- Overseas qualifications are not recognised (as quickly/as much) as in, for instance, Germany and Sweden. “I know from my friends and relatives that in Germany they let people volunteer 2-3 hours a day soon after arrival.”
- Not allowing asylum seekers to work while waiting for asylum decisions. We want to contribute to this society.
- Long waiting times for decisions on asylum claims. Delaying decisions creates mental health and other problems, which makes it much harder for refugees to rebuild their lives once they receive permission to stay in the UK and are allowed to start.
- If refugees are made to feel unwelcome, this can affect their mental health.

Immigration policy

- We do not understand why we are sent to live in different cities across the UK.
- We do not have enough knowledge about government policies that affect us.
- Family migration is an issue – separating families between countries because of the strict interpretation of the Dublin rules.
- No legal aid available to people who clearly need legal assistance.

Treatment of Syrian asylum seekers

- “You cannot just bring people here and then leave them. You cannot just bring in 20,000 Syrians if you will not address the situation of the Syrians who are already here. The government talks as though they want to help but they are not helping those that are here – people are still being detained, threatened with deportation etc., even though everyone knows the situation in Syria.”
- The prime minister’s pledge to resettle 20,000 Syrians in the UK over five years is not enough. In five years the war may be over; what do we do in the meantime? What do we do to help the others who have fled Syria or will be fleeing in the coming months and years, what will happen to them? What is the strategy? People want to go back; they will go back when they can. If it was safe to stay, we wouldn’t leave, for example many would not have left if there was a no-fly-zone area in Syria.

Media coverage/public opinion

- We need stories of refugees in the media that aren't just about either extremely successful individuals to impress readers or stories of victims to make them empathise. We hear about the numbers but there aren't enough personal stories of regular individuals. The government and the public need to know who we are in order to better help us integrate.
- There is not enough interest from the UK government in the refugees fleeing the Syrian crisis
- The public don't realise that many Syrians fleeing the war are from professional or sometimes wealthy backgrounds. Many of us previously had a good life, are highly educated and/or have valuable manual skills. We left only because of war.
- "Only in 2014 did people start asking me about the situation in my country and the reasons I came here – before this they assumed I came for economic reasons." Some Syrian refugees are still paying their own way since arriving over a year ago, and are living in hotels.
- The perception is that it's easy to come to the UK. The reality is that it is not.

Background: Pioneering new initiative, Meet a Migrant, launched in London

Migrant Voice's first Meet a Migrant event was held in London on 30 October 2015. The aim is to get more migrants' authentic voices in the media.

The meeting was attended by 10 migrants (nine Syrians and one Eritrean), Migrant Voice staff, two migration experts, and journalists from the BBC, The Guardian, The Telegraph and The Evening Standard. The discussion focussed on the current refugee crisis, and particularly on issues facing Syrian refugees in the UK. The informal meeting gave our participants the opportunity to freely discuss their concerns and provided journalists with first-hand accounts and accurate information, bringing more migrant into the migration debate.

We are planning a series of similar meetings in London, Birmingham and Glasgow over the next two years covering other topical migration issues.