

Producing Urban Asylum

Project findings

What was the Producing urban asylum project?

Producing urban asylum was a 3 year project focused on asylum accommodation and service provision in four UK cities (Birmingham, Cardiff, Glasgow and Sunderland). The research was led by Dr Jonathan Darling at the University of Manchester and was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council.

What did the project involve?

The project aimed to understand the effect that changes to asylum accommodation and service provision are having on asylum seekers, refugees, stakeholders and local authorities. The dispersal of asylum seekers for accommodation started in 2000, but since 2012 contracts for accommodation have been given to three private companies – Clearell, G4S and Serco. These contracts are collectively known as COMPASS (Commercial and Operating Managers Procuring Asylum Support). This project documents the effects of this change in policy in different cities, and compares their experiences of asylum dispersal.

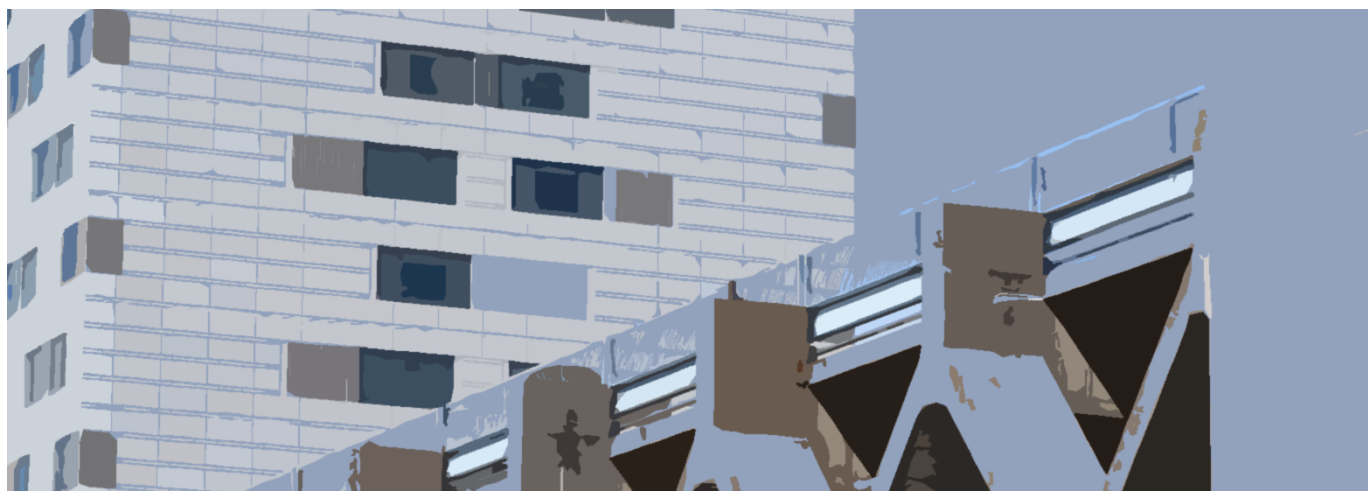
What evidence has been produced?

The research produced 106 interviews with people across the four cities, including asylum seekers, local authority representatives, asylum support groups and networks, journalists, policy-makers and service

providers, alongside interviews with national policymakers and stakeholders. An archive of national and local policy documents relating to dispersal was produced, and media coverage from each city for the duration of the dispersal policy (2000 – present) was collated.

What did the research find?

The overarching finding of the research is that the asylum dispersal system in the UK is fragmented and uneven. Experiences of dispersal among local authorities, support services, and asylum seekers vary considerably by location. Headline findings are outlined overleaf, but most notable for public policy are three points. 1) Support for the dispersal process has wavered historically and geographically. Dispersal is increasingly housing-market driven, leading some local authorities to feel they are unfairly treated by comparison to their neighbours. 2) Lessons from earlier phases of dispersal have not been sufficiently acted upon. In particular, greater community preparation and communication is required for all dispersal areas, and funding for services should allow the needs of asylum seekers and other communities to be recognised and addressed together. 3) Asylum seekers highlighted the 'no-choice' nature of dispersal, and a lack of coordinated support and advice services, as a barrier to feeling part of the city they were accommodated in.



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KEY FINDINGS

Responsibility

The COMPASS accommodation contracts increased the distance between asylum seekers and accommodation providers, allowing for the deferral of responsibility. In particular;

- Asylum seekers and support groups felt they were passed between contractors when addressing issues with accommodation, leading to the slow resolution of issues.
- Accommodation contracts were insufficiently monitored, local authorities often lacking the capacity to take on this role.
- Outsourcing support services and cutting face to face support, increased the burden on charities and support groups without increasing their funding.

Communication

Successful dispersal requires clear and effective communication between local authorities, the Home Office and support organisations. COMPASS has shifted the balance of power between these groups;

- Following the transition to COMPASS in some areas there was a breakdown in communication between organisations and the remit of some networking forums was narrowed.
- Strategic Migration Partnerships play a key role in communication between stakeholders, but these are over-stretched and need further support.
- Communication around COMPASS has been most effective in areas where existing partnerships between local authorities and private providers were in place.

Geography

Asylum seekers experience considerable spatial variations in dispersal accommodation, support, and opportunities for community participation;

- Areas with longstanding support organisations have positive effects on how asylum seekers experience the asylum system and their city.
- The devolved authorities in Scotland and Wales have played a role in encouraging asylum integration through supporting community organisations and initiatives.
- Designing dispersal on the basis of accommodation and its cost can ignore the needs of asylum seekers, and lead to disconnections between areas of housing and areas of support.

Instability

Dispersal has been shaped by variations in political support. In particular;

- Dispersal has always been a policy negotiated with local authorities, but one in which local authorities have felt pressure to support the Home Office.
- Asylum policy is a highly uneven policy area, with a focus of policy shifting rapidly, this can be difficult for local authorities and others to respond to.
- Support for dispersal dwindled within local authorities before COMPASS, and cuts made to services and contracts made this a less attractive area of responsibility for local authorities.

Community

For dispersal to be successful, cities need to ensure communities are prepared for new arrivals;

- The lessons of early assessments of dispersal have been overlooked, especially the need for effective communication between government and local communities before dispersal.
- Local authorities should take a lead in supporting asylum seekers and in shaping public debate on dispersal – where this has happened shifts in attitudes towards asylum have taken place.
- The concerns of communities and local authorities, need to be more transparently addressed by the Home Office, and funding for services that meet community needs should follow dispersal.

For more information see: www.producingurbanasylum.com

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