

ARRIVAL INFRASTRUCTURES AND MIGRANT NEWCOMERS IN EUROPEAN CITIES (AIMEC)

FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE IN NEWHAM (LONDON)

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Contents

Acknowledgements.....	2
Tables of Figures and Boxes.....	3
Executive Summary.....	4
Introduction	7
Newham: An Arrival Area	7
Arrival infrastructures and the Social Infrastructure Ecosystem.....	9
Methodology.....	10
Challenges Faced by Newcomers Arriving in Newham.....	12
Access to information	12
Lack of Awareness of Rights and Entitlements	13
Digital Barriers.....	13
Waiting times.....	13
No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF)	14
Visibility and Appearance of Social Infrastructure Spaces.....	14
Main Arrival Infrastructures in Newham	16
Commercial Spaces as Supportive Social Infrastructures	16
State-funded Social Infrastructures and Support	17
Civil Society Organisations and Religious Spaces.....	19
The Role of Individuals in Arrival Infrastructures	22
Newcomers as Assets to the Arrival Infrastructure Ecosystem	22
Implications for Policy and Practice.....	25
Improving the Visibility of Local Services ('Social Front Doors').....	25
Mainstreaming of Approach to Welcoming Newcomer Families in Schools.....	25
Strengthen Support for Handholding	25
Increased Outreach Work.....	26
Catalysing Newcomers as Assets in the Social Infrastructure Ecosystem	27
Conclusion.....	28

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Tables of Figures and Boxes

Table of Figures

- FIGURE 1: A street scene and a community noticeboard in Newham. © Malte Gembus*
- FIGURE 2: Domains of arrival infrastructure*
- FIGURE 3: A local social infrastructure ecosystem, illustrated by the Greater London Authority*
- FIGURE 4: Photograph and caption about the challenge of language when visiting a health centre. Photograph and text © Rohima, Renewal Programme 'Arrival Stories' exhibition participant.*
- FIGURE 5: A Digital Hub volunteer signposts a client to other services at the Renewal Programme. © [Renewal Programme](#)*
- FIGURE 6: Green Street Library. ©[Oxyman](#)*
- FIGURE 7: Kensington Primary School exterior (© Kensington Primary School website) and teachers participating in an arrival infrastructures workshop (© Malte Gembus)*
- FIGURE 8: The Renewal Programme (left - © Renewal Programme) recruits volunteers to assist in its food bank and community café (right – © Malte Gembus)*

Table of Boxes

- BOX 1 Green Street Library*
- BOX 2 Welcome Newham and One Stop Shop*
- BOX 3 The crucial role of schools*
- BOX 4 Religious spaces*
- BOX 5 Volunteering as Arrival Infrastructure*
- BOX 6 Reaching Out*

Executive Summary

Overview

Urban areas with a long history of immigration, known as ‘arrival areas,’ provide a variety of resources for newcomers through what is termed ‘arrival infrastructures.’¹ Arrival infrastructures can be described as concentrations of actors, institutions and organisations which facilitate migrant arrival. They can be specifically targeted to newcomers or form part of a broader social infrastructure ecosystem that fosters wellbeing and community integration among all residents.

This summary encapsulates findings from the London Borough of Newham, which was the UK site of a three-year research project titled [Arrival Infrastructures and Migrant Newcomers in European Cities \(AIMEC\)](#). The AIMEC project studied migrant arrival and settlement processes in London (UK), Brussels (Belgium), and Dortmund (Germany), examining how newcomers in these cities obtain settlement information and how long-established residents support them.

Through qualitative, ethnographic research including interviews and participant observation, and engagement with local stakeholders through volunteering, the research in Newham engaged with recently arrived residents and those providing support to them. This included individuals in both institutional and everyday settings, including public spaces, local businesses, civil society organisations, and state-funded institutions.

Key Findings

Challenges on Arrival

Key challenges faced by participants upon arrival in Newham included:

- Difficulties in accessing information about resources such as affordable housing and legal status, navigating a complex web of organizations and intermediaries.
- Limited awareness of their rights to welfare support, leading to non-engagement with services.
- Low digital literacy that hinders access to essential information despite efforts by local organizations to provide digital support.
- Long waiting times for legal status applications that create uncertainty, preventing newcomers from planning for the future and impacting their mental wellbeing.
- No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) that prevents people from accessing welfare benefits. Those who are not permitted to work therefore tend to depend on peer networks and informal social infrastructures for support.
- Difficulties in finding services due to language and digital barriers and the limited visibility of services in public space.

¹ Saunders, D. (2011). *Arrival city: how the largest migration in history is reshaping our world*. London: Windmill Books; Meeus, B., Arnaut, K., & van Heur, B. (Eds.). (2019). *Arrival Infrastructures. Migration and Urban Social Mobilities*. London; New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Supportive Infrastructures

Newcomers in Newham access a variety of support infrastructures:

- Commercial spaces serve as crucial social support hubs. Local business owners often act as 'arrival brokers,' providing information about essential services such as housing, employment, and healthcare. For instance, shopkeepers, pharmacists, and restaurant owners often offer guidance and support, creating informal networks that assist newcomers in navigating their new environment.
- State-funded infrastructures, though less pervasive, also play a vital role. Public institutions like libraries and primary schools offer resources such as English classes and citizenship courses, while the Welcome Newham project provides targeted advice and guidance for migrants.
- Civil society organisations and religious spaces complement these efforts by offering a wide range of services, including foodbanks, legal advice, language classes, and mental health support. Despite their crucial role, these organisations often struggle with capacity issues due to limited funding and rely to an extent on the dedication of individuals who go 'above and beyond' their role to provide support.

While formal channels – that is, institutionalised support structures with an explicit support function – are commonly presumed to be the primary sources of settlement assistance, our findings underscore the crucial role of informal support, often provided by longer established migrant residents who share their local knowledge or 'arrival expertise.'

The Role of Individuals in Arrival Infrastructures

Individual efforts within the local support ecosystem play an important role in extending the capacity of arrival infrastructures, developing them, and unlocking access through advice and handholding.

- **Role of Individuals:** Individuals, such as staff members, volunteers, and community workers, play a crucial role in arrival infrastructures by acting as brokers who facilitate connections and support newcomers in adapting to their new environment.
- **Personal Efforts:** Despite limited funding, arrival infrastructures continue to support newcomers largely due to the extra efforts of individuals who go beyond their official roles to assist and guide them.
- **Newcomers as Active Participants:** Newcomers are not just passive recipients but active contributors to the social infrastructure ecosystem. They connect different spaces, contribute to the development of infrastructures, and help others in the arrival process.

Recommendations for Policy and Practice

Improving the Visibility of Local Services ('Social Front Doors')

Enhance the visibility of services through clear signage, multilingual information, and an inviting appearance to make resources more accessible, especially for those with limited social networks and digital literacy.²

² Encouragingly, support infrastructures in Newham are already engaging in processes to increase visibility and accessibility, such as through health systems mapping and changes to the outward appearance of the Renewal Programme.

Mainstreamed Approach to Welcoming Newcomer Families in Schools

Develop a comprehensive approach across all schools to support newly arrived families, including capacity-building among staff and multilingual initiatives to create welcoming environments.

Handholding

Recognize that some newcomers need more than just information. Provide direct assistance ('handholding') through individuals who can help navigate systems, fill forms, and access services. Emphasize the need for personalized support to guide newcomers through complex systems, ensuring they receive necessary services, especially those with limited English proficiency and digital literacy.

Increased Outreach Work

Expand detached and outreach roles, such as the Welcome Newham 'Family Navigators' and Community Neighbourhood Link Workers, to bring services directly to the places where people are, thereby reaching a broader audience, including those at risk of homelessness

Catalysing Newcomers as Assets in the Social Infrastructure Ecosystem

When planning for social integration and in working to optimise support to new arrivals in local areas, Local Authorities should not overlook the role newcomers often play in capacitating and shaping arrival support systems. Providing volunteering opportunities or supporting social connections between new and recent arrivals could be seen as a potentially fruitful catalyst for informal signposting and handholding support.

Introduction

Established paradigms for examining immigration assume that migrants settle in areas populated by national majorities or among co-ethnics in distinct neighbourhoods. However, today, migrants often move into places which have already been settled by previous migrants of various backgrounds. Such areas have also been described as ‘arrival areas’, situated in ‘arrival cities’.³

Although there is a wide-reaching policy and research agenda concerning migrant incorporation into receiving societies, little is known about how migrants find support when they first arrive, and the role of long-established residents in newcomers’ settlement process. This report highlights findings from the UK site of a three-year, ESRC-funded research project titled [Arrival Infrastructures and Migrant Newcomers in European Cities \(AIMEC\)](#). The AIMEC project looked at migrant arrival and processes of settlement in three European Cities: London (UK), Brussels (Belgium) and Dortmund (Germany). In these three arrival areas, migrants have been arriving over many decades and as a result have developed resources that facilitate arrival and settlement. These include public and civil society organisations supporting migrants, places of worship which welcome migrants, as well as small businesses such as barbers, grocery shops and money transfer agencies which are often run by longer-established migrants. The project examined the nature and the role of these arrival infrastructures in facilitating the settlement of newcomers in arrival areas. The project drew on the notion of arrival infrastructures⁴—referring to concentrations of actors, institutions and organisations which provide information and support.

This report summarises the findings from our research in the project’s UK site: the London Borough of Newham. It focuses on the key challenges participants faced when they first arrived, the kinds of support structures provided in the borough, and the role of individuals within the ecosystem of these structures. In addition to presenting the challenges, it also includes some examples of good practice in supporting migrants and makes some recommendations on how access to resources for newcomers could be improved.

Newham: An Arrival Area

The London Borough of Newham, with a population of 349,900 in 2021,⁵ has a long history of immigration, specifically due to the borough’s proximity to the former London port and the locomotive-building factory ‘Stratford Works’ which have attracted labourers from abroad for at least two centuries. Nowadays, Newham is a place where diversity is commonplace. The area saw considerable numbers of postcolonial migrants from the Caribbean, South Asia and Africa especially since the late 1940s, over-layered by ongoing immigration from across the world, especially since the 1980s. By 2021, 54.5% of Newham residents were born abroad.⁶ Since EU accession in 2004, the number of Eastern European residents in Newham has increased significantly and makes up about

³ Saunders, D. (2011). *Arrival city: how the largest migration in history is reshaping our world*. London: Windmill Books.

⁴ Mees, B., Arnaut, K., & van Heur, B. (Eds.). (2019). *Arrival Infrastructures. Migration and Urban Social Mobilities*. London; New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

⁵ Office for National Statistics (ONS) 2021: *Population and migration statistics transformation, Newham case study*.

⁶ Office for National Statistics (ONS) 2021: *How life has changed in Newham: Census 2021*.

15% of the population⁷. Importantly, Newham has also seen an increase in migrants of other backgrounds, for example from Latin America and Southern Europe (with many of these European migrants originating in Latin America, Africa or Bangladesh).⁸ These newcomers are not only differentiated in terms of countries of origin, but also regarding educational backgrounds, socio-economic status, religion, legal status and other such factors. Newham hosts over 1,200 asylum seekers⁹ and is a highly transient place, with one of the highest population turnover rates in London.¹⁰ These characteristics of a highly diverse and volatile population are reflected within the arrival infrastructures newcomers encounter when they arrive. Such infrastructures often involve support workers, shopkeepers, teachers, librarians, volunteers and random encounters with residents who themselves have migration experience and related expertise.



FIGURE 1: A street scene and a community noticeboard in Newham. © Malte Gembus

Despite some of Newham's neighbourhoods being only a stone's throw away from London's main financial district (Canary Wharf), Newham is one of the most deprived areas in the UK, with an employment rate of only 71.1%¹¹ and the highest child poverty rate in London (52%).¹² Residents with limited English skills are particularly affected by poverty, and families of ethnic minority backgrounds live in households with lower net income than those of white backgrounds.¹³ Covid-19 has had further negative effects on the economic situation in the borough, with 102,000 residents being furloughed or having to claim unemployment benefits. The total number of welfare benefit claimants rose by

⁷ Compost London CIC / Bonnie Downs. (2021). Newham Key Statistics. <https://bonnydowns.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Key-Newham-Statistics-2021.pdf>

⁸ Aston-Mansfield Community Involvement Unit. (2017). Newham Key Statistics 2017. https://www.aston-mansfield.org.uk/wp-content/themes/aston_mansfield/uploads/Newham_Statistics_2017.pdf

⁹ Sturge, Georgina. (2024). Asylum Statistics: CBP01403-Annex---Supported-asylum-seekers-by-local-authority. <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/sn01403/>

¹⁰ Compost London CIC / Bonnie Downs. (2021). Newham Key Statistics. <https://bonnydowns.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Key-Newham-Statistics-2021.pdf>

¹¹ <https://www.ons.gov.uk/visualisations/labourmarketlocal/E09000025/>

¹² Trust for London. (2023). Newham. <https://trustforlondon.org.uk/data/boroughs/newham-poverty-and-inequality-indicators/>

¹³ London Borough of Newham. (2021). Children and Young People's Joint Strategic Needs Assessment 2021-2023. <https://www.newham.gov.uk/downloads/file/3607/cyp-isna-august-2021>

200% after February 2020.¹⁴ The support systems described throughout this report evolved in this scarce economic context, with some arrival infrastructures emerging specifically in response to the impacts of low incomes and deprivation.

Arrival infrastructures and the Social Infrastructure Ecosystem

Urban areas with a long history of immigration, known as ‘arrival areas’,¹⁵ provide a variety of resources for newcomers through what is termed ‘arrival infrastructures’.¹⁶ Arrival infrastructures can be described as concentrations of actors, institutions and organisations which facilitate migrant arrival, for instance by providing information and support. They occur within a variety of domains, including state-funded, civil society, social, commercial, digital and public spaces (see FIGURE 1). They form part of social infrastructures, or the spaces and systems that support community life. In its Social Integration Strategy,¹⁷ which seeks to foster social integration for all residents of London, the Greater London Authority (GLA) has shown how formal and informal social infrastructures serve different types of needs and support different aspects of social integration. ‘Formal social infrastructures’ include educational settings, libraries, community centres, sports facilities and places of worship. In contrast, informal social infrastructures are spaces and services such as cafés, hairdressers or nail salons. They don’t have a formal social support role but can nevertheless fulfil that function.

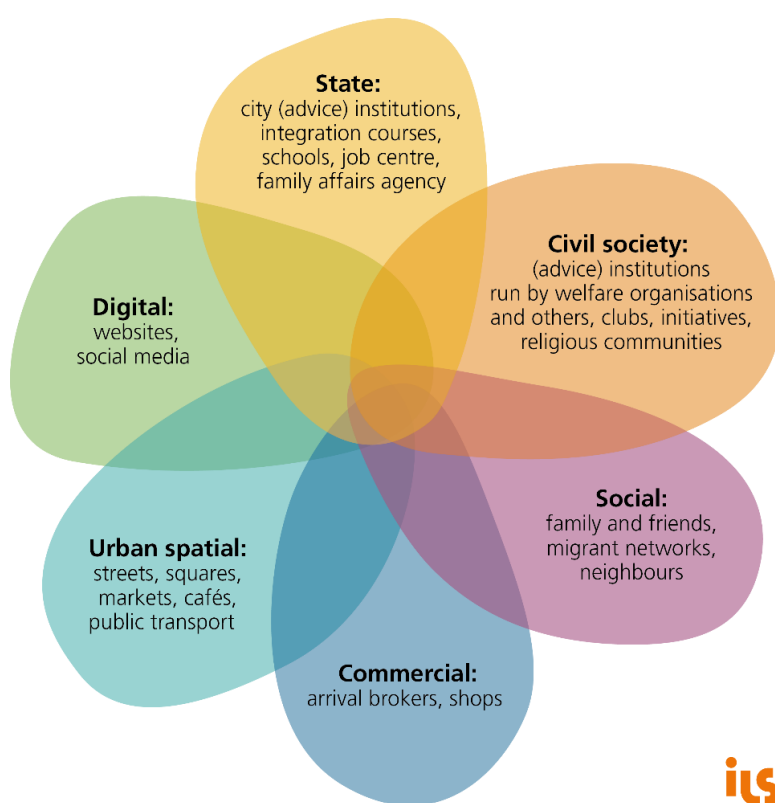


FIGURE 2: Domains of Arrival Infrastructure¹⁸

¹⁴ London Borough of Newham. (2021). *Children and Young People's Joint Strategic Needs Assessment 2021-2023*. <https://www.newham.gov.uk/downloads/file/3607/cyp-jsna-august-2021>

¹⁵ Saunders, D. (2011). *Arrival city: how the largest migration in history is reshaping our world*. London: Windmill Books.

¹⁶ Meeus, B., Arnaut, K., & van Heur, B. (Eds.). (2019). *Arrival Infrastructures. Migration and Urban Social Mobilities*. London; New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

¹⁷ Greater London Authority (GLA). (2018). *All of us: The Mayor's Strategy for Social Integration*, p.45

¹⁸ Neßler, Miriam; Hartig, Lara; Hanhörster, Heike & Toppel, Cornelia. 2024 (forthcoming). Arrival infrastructures: helping new arrivals find their feet in Germany. *ILS TRENDS*; see also Xiang, Biao & Lindquist, L. (2014). Migration Infrastructure. *International Migration Review*, 48(1). <https://doi.org/10.1111/imre.12141>

The interplay of different social infrastructures within a local area can be imagined as an ‘ecosystem, where different types of provision form a community of interconnected support’.¹⁹ Successful local ecosystems depend on the *links* between social infrastructures (see FIGURE 2). Signposting between, for example, informal social infrastructures and public services can make an important difference to individuals’ access to financial, emotional and social support.

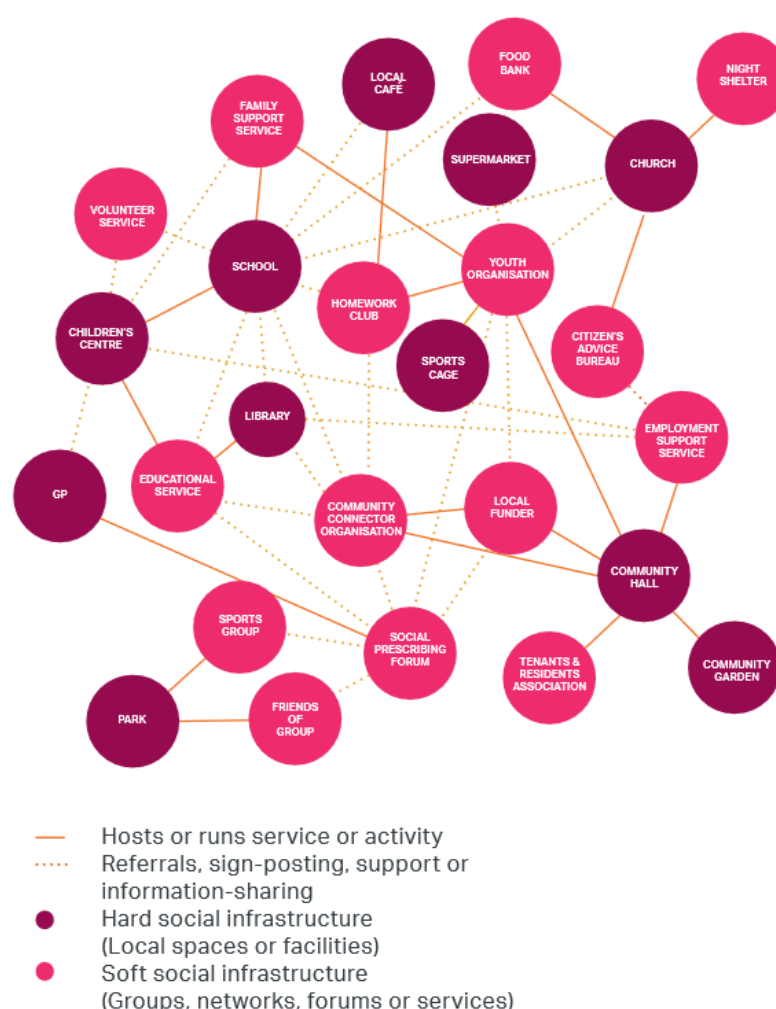


FIGURE 3: A local social infrastructure ecosystem, illustrated by the Greater London Authority²⁰

Methodology

This report is based on twelve months of ethnographic research in Newham undertaken in 2021 and 2022. We worked with individuals in a several settings, ranging from public spaces (squares, parks, markets) to local businesses (corner shops, restaurants, cafés), civil society organisations (community organisations, religious sites, NGOs, language classes, food banks) and state-funded institutions (e.g. libraries, schools). Research methods included visits, over 30 in-depth interviews, and participant observation including regular volunteering at the Renewal Programme and Kensington Primary

¹⁹ Greater London Authority (GLA). (2021). [Connective Social Infrastructure. How London's social spaces and networks help us live well together.](#)

²⁰ Greater London Authority (GLA). (2021). [Connective Social Infrastructure. How London's social spaces and networks help us live well together.](#)

School. The newcomers recruited as participants held a wide range of legal statuses, including asylum seekers, people on visitor visas, EU migrants with and without settled status, and people on spousal visas. The expert-practitioners interviewed included councillors, community workers and teachers, among others. We visited and conducted interviews with the following organisations, developing longer-term, collaborative relationships with the first four:

- [Renewal Programme](#): Community Organisation providing ‘wrap-around’ support to the local community of Manor Park, East Ham and beyond.
- [Kensington Primary School](#): Primary School in East Ham with a multilingual approach to learning.
- [St. Martin’s of Tours Church Plaistow](#): Church in the Plaistow / Upton Park area housing three congregations (English, Spanish and Portuguese-speaking)
- [Newham Council \(specifically the Public Health and Welcome Newham team\)](#): Local Authority
- [NewWay Project](#): Charity supporting Newham’s homeless population.
- [Bonny Downs Community Association](#): Community-led charity bringing people together and connecting the local neighbourhood.
- [Poplar HARCA](#): Community Housing Association based in Tower Hamlets.
- [Care 4 Calais \(Newham group\)](#): Volunteer run charity delivering essential aid and support to refugees living in the UK.
- [Compost London](#): Community development organisation supporting the Voluntary, Community and Faith sector in Newham.
- [Applecart Arts](#): Theatre and Arts company in East Ham running a local café and arts space.
- [Rosetta Arts](#): Arts organisation in West Ham facilitating workshops and exhibitions.
- [Malayalee Association of the UK](#): Charity based in Manor Park providing a diverse range of services and activities for the local Malayalam-speaking community.
- [St. Paul & St. James Church](#) (Stratford / Maryland): Church based in Stratford / Maryland which supports a range of migrants especially from Eastern Europe.

Challenges Faced by Newcomers Arriving in Newham

Newcomers face many challenges when they first arrive. Among the most commonly mentioned aspects is language. For nearly all of our Newham participants learning English was among their top priorities and equally mentioned as one of the main barriers that prevented them from accessing important support structures. However, language is just one aspect within a variety of interlinked challenges and barriers that newcomers struggle with. The limitations of different legal statuses can be considered another important major aspect that cuts through the entire spectrum of challenges faced by newcomers.



The GP

'It reminds me of when I went to the GP for the first time. Everyone was talking in English. I could neither understand nor speak. I was very nervous as well as embarrassed'.

FIGURE 4: Photograph and caption about the challenge of language when visiting a health centre. Photograph and text © Rohima, Renewal Programme '[Arrival Stories](#)' exhibition participant.

Access to information

When first arriving, newcomers interviewed in Newham faced a range of challenges in finding information about resources and opportunities, such as finding out how to access **work**, **schools** for children, **adult education and language learning** opportunities, and **medical care**. Finding affordable **housing** is one of the primary challenges for many newcomers. Furthermore, obtaining permanent legal status was a key obstacle for some, and one that kept a number of participants trapped in precarious situations. Getting good quality **migration advice and legal support** is crucial, but a complex web of organisations and intermediaries has to be navigated to obtain it. Further, access to information often relied on networks of personal connections, which people who are new in a place must often build from scratch. Organisations in Newham often refer or 'signpost' service users in order to give them the best variety of support. However, it often requires a personal connection to successfully link newcomers to other supportive structures or organisations. These personal contacts can provide proactive help or 'handholding', such as accompanying a newcomer to engage with a service.

Lack of Awareness of Rights and Entitlements

Newcomers may also be unaware of their rights and entitlements regarding welfare support (see BOX 6), and thus stay away from services assuming that they don't meet the eligibility criteria. Some participants only learned about certain services available to them, such as children's services or homeless support services, through meetings with volunteers or outreach workers who shared this information.



FIGURE 5: A Digital Hub volunteer signposts a client to other services at the Renewal Programme.

© [Renewal Programme](#)

Digital Barriers

Digital technology, the internet and smartphones play an important role in accessing information. Many research participants mentioned using apps such as Google Maps to find their way around, or translation apps to help with language barriers. However, digital barriers are an additional challenge in accessing information for those newcomers with low digital literacy. Many participants arrived just before or during the Covid-19 pandemic, a time when the digitalisation of service provision accelerated drastically, and changes were made frequently to the ways in which services were delivered. Recognising the problem, several organisations in Newham implemented 'digital inclusion hubs' where newcomers were able to get support with filling in online forms, booking appointments online, etc. While they make every effort to support people with limited digital literacy, these hubs can be hard to find in the first place for those who lack digital literacy.

Waiting times

The processing time for legal status applications can be a big challenge for newcomers, especially for those who are in the process of claiming asylum. However, people applying for other types of visas (i.e. spousal or student) sometimes face similarly long waiting times. Waiting times can last several years, and prolonged uncertainty puts many newcomers in a state of limbo where they are unable to make decisions and arrangements for the future. For many whose status does not include a right to work or to access welfare benefits, such delays can cause prolonged destitution with no access to

statutory support structures. Waiting times can therefore take a huge toll on mental wellbeing. A participant who has waited four years for her asylum interview, for instance, noted:

‘I need medicine because I can’t sleep at night, and I’m very stressed and worried because nothing is moving, and I just have to wait. And even my doctor became very concerned about this.’

No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF)

Many newcomers have no recourse to public funds (NRPF), which means they are not permitted to access state-funded welfare benefits. Among participants in the project, this was the case for individuals in the asylum process, EU citizens without pre-settled or settled status, people on a visitor visa (either EU or overseas), undocumented residents, or those with a specific ‘NRPF’ visa condition on their student or spousal visas. Undocumented migrants, asylum seekers, EU citizens without a form of settled status and those on visitor’s visas are particularly burdened by this since they normally are not permitted to work to support themselves.²¹ Having NRPF means that these individuals are often completely reliant on peer networks and wider social infrastructures.

Visibility and Appearance of Social Infrastructure Spaces

Given the digital and language barriers that can exist for some newcomers, many do not encounter online signposting of resources and services, and a number of participants highlighted that they had to find language classes and other services by walking around and looking for them.

One participant mentioned that her initial accommodation after arriving did not permit her and her children to stay inside the house during the day. Without knowing anything about the neighbourhood, she started walking around and found an inviting-looking library next to a park. For the next couple of weeks, she would come each day with her children to spend time in the library and in the park. It was in these spaces (semi-public and public) that she first encountered people who could support her. The librarian helped her enrol her children in school and she made an acquaintance in the park that helped her to find a more favourable housing arrangement.

This underscores the importance of services being visible from the street, with an inviting appearance – something the Greater London Authority (GLA) has referred to as a ‘social front door’.²² Our participant immediately recognised the library as an inviting space where she could come to stay for a while (without knowing what the space actually offered). This eventually led her to make contact with the librarian and others inside and outside of the library space. In addition to the physical appearance and layout of support spaces, accessibility can be affected by people’s perceptions of whom a place is intended for. This is related to cues such as signage of what is offered in that place, as well as the types of people within the space, which can signal whether a place is aimed at a diversity of people or dominated by one group.

²¹ With the exception of a few asylum seekers who qualify to work under the [Shortage Occupation List](#).

²² Greater London Authority (GLA). (2021). *Connective Social Infrastructure: How London's social spaces and networks help us live well together*; also see Wessendorf, S., & Gembus, M. (2024). The social front door: the role of social infrastructures for migrant arrival. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 50(12), 2822–2838.

BOX 1: Green Street Library: 'The library is like a mother'

Green Street Library in Newham represents a place that attracts a particularly large range of individuals from many backgrounds. It is located at a busy high street, and its set-up, with its large shop window, posters about community events, and a continuously busy atmosphere, signal that it is accessible to people of all backgrounds. It thus represents a good example of a successful social front door. The library also hosts English classes, and many of the students find the class just by walking in and asking about information. One of the librarians emphasized that people come in with all kinds of questions. She said that the library is there for everybody and for all kinds of enquiries, emphasising that 'the library is like a mother'.¹

¹ Susanne Wessendorf, 'The library is like a mother': Arrival infrastructures and migrant newcomers in East London, *Migration Studies*, Volume 10, Issue 2, June 2022, Pages 172–189, <https://doi.org/10.1093/migration/mnab051>



FIGURE 7: Green Street Library.

©[Oxyman](#)

Main Arrival Infrastructures in Newham

Newcomers draw on a variety of arrival infrastructures and practices to overcome the challenges discussed above. These range from informal information exchanges in places like cafés and shops, to civil society spaces such as community groups, to state funded places like libraries or schools, and social networks with friends and family, including social media. In this section we highlight the main types of arrival infrastructures that research participants accessed: commercial spaces, state-funded spaces and civil society spaces. While it is often assumed that assistance for settlement comes through formal channels, agencies and programmes, our findings highlight the important role of informal support structures such as shops or restaurants, often provided by migrant residents who have ‘arrival expertise’. Our findings also illustrate how, regardless of arrival infrastructure domain and the formality or informality of the space, an important role is played by specific people in their individual capacity when it comes to helping newcomers access services such as legal advice, GPs or schools.

Commercial Spaces as Supportive Social Infrastructures

Arrival areas are characterised by a wealth of social infrastructures run by individuals, many of whom in one way or another have experience in arriving in a new place themselves, or have connections with others who have arrived. Proprietors of local businesses can act as ‘arrival brokers’,²³ with signposting and information provision becoming an integral part of their work. Of course, people working in social infrastructures do not just provide help or information to newcomers, but to anyone who approaches them. One of the shopkeepers we spoke to explicitly said, ‘I don’t care if people are migrants, I just try to help’.

For example, the owner of a kiosk at an underground station describes himself as a shopkeeper as well as an ‘information point.’ The support he provides consists mainly of signposting and simple information provision, for example about Oyster cards for public transport. Various shopkeepers said they had informed people about local amenities such as doctors’ surgeries or schools. They were also approached for jobs and would direct newcomers to businesses that they believed might have vacancies. For instance, a builder’s merchant talked about how he is often approached by men working in the building trade, asking him whether he knows about jobs in the area. Those working in pharmacies reported that they are often asked for information about hospitals and doctors’ surgeries.

These fleeting ways in which proprietors provide information might seem banal, but they can play an important role in migrants’ arrival trajectories. Local businesses can, however, also provide spaces for more than signposting and simple information provision, as exemplified by a shopkeeper who spoke about how people ‘wander into the shop just to chat in Russian.’ Similarly, a Brazilian café is known to the Portuguese-speaking community as a place where information can be sought and exchanged, but also a place to relax and socialise.

A restaurant serving food from the Indian region of Kerala emerged as a hub for information sharing and care, especially for the Malayalam-speaking community. It exemplifies how informal and formal support structures can intersect. The owner, who is an active member in the local Malayalee association, told us that a lot of his customers struggle economically due to precarious immigration

²³ Hanhörster, H., & Wessendorf, S. (2020). The Role of Arrival Areas for Migrant Integration and Resource Access. *Urban Planning*, 5(3). [doi:10.17645/up.v5i3.2891](https://doi.org/10.17645/up.v5i3.2891)

situations. ‘If someone can’t pay, we don’t charge them,’ he explained. The situation of overseas students, who have no access to welfare benefits and many of whom lost their part-time jobs during the pandemic, was of special concern to the restaurant owner. He and the association’s leaders set up a foodbank during the pandemic, first operating out of the restaurant and later moving to a rented shopfront that now functions as the association’s headquarters. Importantly, the foodbank was not targeted at a particular group, but accessible to all residents.

In a study of the ‘social value’ of three highstreets in London, the Greater London Authority has similarly identified ‘additional services’ provided by local businesses, including the opportunity to have a chat or exchange pleasantries, but also more tangible acts of support for example for translating, form filling and signposting to council services. Over 40% of local businesses, surveyed in three areas of London, reported being involved in such activities.²⁴

State-funded Social Infrastructures and Support

Public institutions can play a vital role in supporting migrants, even though they are not as densely spread as the commercial arrival infrastructures discussed above.

When research commenced in 2021, there appeared to be few council services targeted directly at ‘migrants’ or ‘newcomers’ in Newham. There was council-commissioned ESOL provision and social workers providing statutory support to some migrant-headed families under S17 of the Children’s Act. However, these forms of support were not specifically targeted at more recent arrivals. The council’s 2020 ‘Social Integration Strategy’²⁵ did not deal with ‘migration’ or ‘newcomers’ as a separate issue, but treated these groups as part of the borough’s mainstream population. Newcomers thus were implicit in the administration’s goal ‘to create a fair and socially inclusive borough’²⁶ but not explicitly mentioned in the council’s strategies or services. This contrasted starkly with the German context, where there were a variety of municipal as well as regional and national services designed specifically to support newly arrived people and families.²⁷

However, in 2022, Newham Council initiated a project of targeted services for migrants called the **Welcome Newham** project. It combines a set of advice and guidance services designed specifically for refugees and asylum seekers and can be seen as a good practice in overcoming barriers associated with arrival (See BOX 2).

Libraries are another example of state-funded support structures that facilitate inclusion (see BOX 1 in the last section). Although many of their services are not specifically targeted at newcomers, they provide a variety of initiatives aimed at migrants, such as English classes or citizenship courses. They are also important places where people can be signposted to other services.

²⁴ We Made That, & LSE Cities. (2017). [High Streets for All](#). London: Mayor of London.

See also: Hall, S., King, J., & Finlay, R. (2017). [Migrant Infrastructure](#): Transaction economies in Birmingham and Leicester. *Urban Studies*, 54(6), 1311-1327.

²⁵ Newham Council (2020) ‘Social Integration Strategy’, available at: <https://www.newham.gov.uk/downloads/file/2870/social-integration-strategy>

²⁶ Newham Council (2020) ‘Social Integration Strategy’, available at: <https://www.newham.gov.uk/downloads/file/2870/social-integration-strategy> p.14

²⁷ Neßler, Miriam; Hartig, Lara; Hanhörster, Heike & Tippel, Cornelia. 2024. Arrival infrastructures: helping new arrivals find their feet in Germany. [ILS TRENDS](#)

BOX 2: Welcome Newham and One Stop Shop

Welcome Newham consists of a weekly 'One-Stop-Shop' at Stratford Library, where newcomers receive advice and signposting in areas such as GP registration, universal credit, child benefit, school admissions, biometric residence permits (BRP), English classes (ESOL), job seeking, renting and homelessness.¹ A similar central contact point for holistic support is run by the City of Dortmund, Germany, located near a registry office for newcomers which signposts people to the One-Stop-Shop.²

No appointment is needed, and Newham's One-Stop-Shop is set up in an open and accessible way on a drop-in basis with tables where the attendees can approach an advisor directly and informally. The Welcome Newham team also runs regular workshops here about employment and the transition out of the asylum system. Initially, the programme supported solely Ukrainian nationals, but it was gradually opened up to all refugees and asylum seekers. All services cater to the situation of newly arrived people, and more specifically asylum seekers and refugees.

The Welcome Newham initiative also created Family Navigator roles which, similarly to the One-Stop-Shop, provide advice about housing, legal advice, welfare benefits, NASS support, English Classes, School enrolment, and health. Family Navigators are detached workers who are present in spaces like libraries and asylum accommodations (hotels), facilitating access by bringing services to the people that need them. They were created to help tackle the barriers newcomers face, particularly regarding challenges of visibility, navigability and digital exclusion.

Welcome Newham represents a great example of an initiative that bridges state-funded and civil society support structures and facilitates access in culturally sensitive ways. The Stratford One-Stop-Shop provides a casual and inviting space where newcomers can have informal chats with experts and practitioners from organisations and statutory services. The layout and design of the One-Stop-Shop communicate accessibility and make it easy for newcomers to engage with support structures without off-putting bureaucratic formalities and hurdles.

An independent evaluation report has shown that the combination of One-Stop-Shop and Family Navigators has helped people to feel more supported by the council.

¹ Jenson, Julie A. (2023) Evaluation Report: One-Stop Shops Provided by: Welcome Newham and Havering Refugee and Crisis Team, p. 4.

² Neßler, Miriam; Hartig, Lara; Hanhörster, Heike & Tippel, Cornelia. 2024. Arrival infrastructures: helping new arrivals find their feet in Germany. [ILS TRENDS](#).

Primary schools represent another example of publicly funded institutions that are not specifically designed to support newcomers but sometimes provide additional support for recently arrived families. The kind and amount of support provided by schools in the borough varies considerably. While some provide little additional help, others go way beyond their remit of providing education (See BOX 3).

While these state-funded institutions play an important role in supporting newcomers, they have insufficient financial capacity to provide the help needed by many new arrivals. In Newham, civil society plays a crucial role in filling the gaps left by an underfunded local authority.

BOX 3 The crucial role of schools

Kensington Primary School is a prime example of a welcoming space for newly arrived families. In recent years, the school has taken a multilingual approach towards education, recognising the unique composition of its student body where more than 90% of students speak a language that is not English at home (something that is not uncommon in Newham primary schools). 'We see this as one of our biggest strengths' Soofia Amin, one of the school's Assistant Head Teachers, explains. 'We are trying to get away from the deficit mindset that is often linked to multilingual students and rather see it as an asset.'

Multilingual activities form part of everyday teaching at Kensington, for example when students use the multilingual library. This assets-based approach towards multilingual education distinguishes Kensington Primary as a welcoming space that particularly caters for the needs of newly arrived families.

The school staff are knowledgeable about arrival processes, which in many cases is linked to their own personal or family migration-experience. Newcomer families receive support at the school that includes navigating complex bureaucratic processes as well as making social connections in the neighbourhood. Soofia specifically stresses the emotional support the school often provides: 'We strive to be there as a constant support with our doors always open, this is what helps our newly arrived families. We are the safe space when they first arrive.'



FIGURE 7: Kensington Primary School exterior (© Kensington Primary School website) and teachers participating in an arrival infrastructures workshop (© Malte Gembus)

Civil Society Organisations and Religious Spaces

Newham is a borough that has a rich landscape of civil society organisations, with a long history of community work typical for London's East End.²⁸ The vast majority of organisations have built up capacities and expertise about the arrival process and are familiar with supporting newly arrived people. These include charities combating homelessness, community centres offering educational activities, churches, etc. Poverty and other forms of destitution are often linked to migration status or recent arrival, thus civil society organisations form an important part of local arrival infrastructures.

²⁸ Wills, Jane (2011). [The geography of community and political organisation in London today](#). *Political Geography* 31, pp. 114-126.

The services offered by civil society organisations include foodbanks; advice services relating to the asylum process, housing, and welfare benefits; casework (more intense and continued one-to-one support specifically for newcomers); legal advice (the Renewal Programme for example has an in-house migration solicitor); English language classes; vocational training; mental health support; and various community and leisure activities. Further, civil society organisations can represent important spaces for socialising and making friends and, importantly, building one's skills and finding a purpose in situations where many newcomers are unable to work due to their legal status and thus have little to do. Volunteering in such organisations can thus be a support structure in itself (See BOX 5).

Like civil society organisations, religious sites can play an important role in supporting newcomers by way of emotional and social support as well as practical advice, signposting and the provision of English classes. Several religious leaders told us that a large part of their work consisted of supporting families in their process of settlement. St. Martin's of Tours Church is just one of several religious sites where such support practices are commonplace (see BOX 4).

BOX 4: Religious spaces

Reverend Marco Lopes of St. Martin's of Tours Church told us how getting to know congregation members and their needs is one of the most important parts of the church's work and how difficult this can become when you only see 'an anonymous sea of faces'. This church has been particularly helpful in welcoming Spanish and Portuguese-speaking newcomers due to the pastor's language skills and dedication to supporting people who are new to London. He wanted the church to function like a community centre, by running a weekly foodbank, providing support with language classes as well as aspects of signposting and advice work. The pastor himself supported congregation members by translating in dealings with institutions and statutory services, either on the phone or occasionally attending appointments in-person, and signposting them to other services known to him. Additionally, the church functioned as a place of encounter where newly-arrived congregation members meet more established migrants who speak their language and possess arrival expertise.



FIGURE 8: St. Martin's of Tours Church (© St. Martin's of Tours [website](#))

Civil society organisations and religious sites play an important role in filling provision gaps left by underfunded public services. However, just like public services and charities countrywide, they lack the resources to adequately address the needs of their service users.²⁹ For example, the Renewal Programme's foodbank and refugee and migrant advice services are regularly forced to close for new referrals while the support workers deal with the backlog of the existing referral list.

²⁹ Civil Society (2023). *Chronic underfunding of public services pushing charities to crisis point, NCVO warns*. <https://www.civilsociety.co.uk/news/chronic-underfunding-of-public-services-pushing-charities-to-crisis-point-ncvo-warns.html>

The Role of Individuals in Arrival Infrastructures

Importantly, links between social infrastructures, as well as the social relations formed within them, directly depend on the individuals operating in them. In the community spaces we observed, such as civil society organisations or faith groups, new relationships were often brokered by staff members or volunteers who introduce new users. Also, in formal infrastructures such as libraries or schools, friendly staff and receptionists can play a vital role in making individuals feel welcome and encouraging them to seek information. In research, such individuals have also been described as ‘brokers’ who mediate between different parties.³⁰ Brokers do not only operate in spaces with a formal social support role, but also in informal social infrastructures such as corner shops or barbers. These places can thus play an important role in signposting newcomers to services.

The fact that many civil society organisations and publicly funded institutions continue to make a difference in newcomers’ lives despite their dire funding situation is often due to individuals within them who go above and beyond what is usually expected of their role. For instance, there was an Assistant Headteacher who visited students’ houses to make sure children attend school, and assisted families with form filling and phone calls; a pastor at the church who tried to understand his congregation members’ migration situation and translated for them during appointments and phone calls; and an ESOL teacher at a community centre who stayed after class to listen to her students’ issues to find them the right support. All these are examples of individuals in organisations who make things possible and open doors for newcomers.

One of our participants described the support she received from her local Care 4 Calais support group like this:

‘Honestly, I was very new here and was going to send my son to school just like that, and she told me “Tomorrow I’m going to come and pick you up to buy your son’s school uniform.” And I couldn’t believe it, she came with her car to the hotel [asylum accommodation], and we went and she bought trousers and shirts for my son. Look I know that this is part of her job, but others might have told me just to come meet them somewhere, at ASDA or wherever but not her. She came and picked me up. For me, that was another level of help. And she helped with other things as well.’

Newcomers as Assets to the Arrival Infrastructure Ecosystem

Importantly, newcomers are not just passive users of infrastructures but play an active role in Newham’s social infrastructure ecosystem, linking different spaces and infrastructures, and contributing to their development. We found that they contribute in three different ways.³¹

³⁰ Hanhörster, H., & Wessendorf, S. (2020). The Role of Arrival Areas for Migrant Integration and Resource Access. *Urban Planning*, 5(3). doi:10.17645/up.v5i3.2891

Hans, N. (2023). Arrival brokers as a key component of the arrival infrastructure: how established migrants support newcomers. *Geogr. Helv.*, 78(3), 381-391. doi:10.5194/gh-78-381-2023

Neßler, Miriam [forthcoming] “If you have money, you can get everything you want” Arrival brokers and their commercial infrastructuring for and with migrant newcomers in Dortmund, Germany. *Urban Planning*.

Lindquist, J., Xiang, B., & Yeoh, B. S. A. (2012). Opening the Black Box of Migration: Brokers, the Organization of Transnational Mobility and the Changing Political Economy in Asia. *Pacific Affairs*, 85(1), 7-19.

³¹ Neßler, Miriam (2024). *Migrants’ strategies and agencies during arrival processes: Searching and Finding -Activating and Navigating – Shaping’*, presentation at the final AIMEC event (unpublished).

Searching and Finding: Newcomers often engage with a variety of formal and informal spaces and structures, seeking different avenues as they try to adapt to their often rapidly changing circumstances. In the process, newcomers establish new connections between different spaces and initiatives. The connection for example between the Renewal Programme and St. Martin's Church was established mainly by service users and volunteers who were active in both spaces, which then led to more formalised forms of collaboration between the two institutions.

Activating and Navigating: The ecosystem of arrival infrastructures in Newham often relies on a specific connection or relationship to 'activate' the supportive structure and make a difference to a particular newcomer's situation. For example, a young mother who had arrived very recently from Brazil started accessing the foodbank at the Renewal Programme. For the first months, she would attend with her young son, collect her food parcel and then leave immediately. One day, however, it was raining heavily so she decided to sit down at one of the tables and wait until the rain calmed down. She was offered a coffee by one of the kitchen volunteers. The two sat down and engaged in a lively conversation about their children. The volunteer realised that the Brazilian woman was not aware that the Renewal Programme also offered ESOL classes and a women's group and helped her to sign up for both activities. The volunteer was also a newcomer and participant in these programmes and could reassure the woman that they would see each other there.

This example reiterates the importance of interpersonal relationships in the arrival process. The young mother's interaction with the volunteer made a real difference in her journey and helped her to connect with other groups and individuals. Despite having attended the community centre numerous times before, it was this interaction and the connection formed with the volunteer that activated the potential of support for her. Hence, establishing and maintaining different types of relationships is one of the most crucial activities that produce and activate arrival infrastructures.

Shaping: Many newcomers themselves become part of supportive structures that help others in the arrival process. This takes place in formal as well as informal spaces for example by passing on arrival expertise to family, friends and acquaintances or by getting involved in organisations through volunteering. At the Renewal Programme for example the involvement of newcomers as volunteers led to a re-shaping of the organisational structure and its mission. The roles of 'provider' and 'beneficiary' at the foodbank were blurred since several people occupied both at the same time.

Volunteer Programme Manager Melanie Berard explained that the organisation now sees volunteering as a support service in and of itself rather than a way of getting free additional members of staff. She explained that it was through involving 'service users' (who are mostly newly arrived) as volunteers that this shift in thinking came about, which led to the volunteering programme building up capacity to support those who are newly arrived. This is one example of how newcomers' involvement actively shapes arrival infrastructures and contributes to their further development.

BOX 5: Volunteering as Arrival Infrastructure

The Renewal Programme specifically encourages service users to get involved in the organisation's work, which Volunteer Programme Manager Melanie Berard explained as follows: 'I think it's really important that our volunteers represent the community, and I think in many different aspects, it means that they can understand experiences of our service users better. [...] It's going from a position of being helped to being the one helping. And I think we can't underestimate how that makes people feel.' Many members of the volunteer team are recent newcomers and often find themselves in precarious immigration situations. Volunteering helps them to structure their day, improve their English, gain skills and confidence, and extend their social networks. As one participant summarised: 'In a way, it [volunteering] distracts you from the fact that you also need help. But you just try to feel like you live a normal life – that's it.'

This resonates with findings from our other two research sites in Dortmund and Brussels, where newcomers also took on roles as 'mediators and multipliers' of arrival expertise through volunteering in civil society organisations. Our partners in Dortmund specifically stressed that these activities often worked as a gateway into paid employment in the social care/community work sector.



FIGURE 7: The Renewal Programme (left - © Renewal Programme) recruits volunteers to assist in its food bank and community café (right – © Malte Gembus)

Implications for Policy and Practice

Both the local authority and civil society organisations face considerable financial constraints that make it difficult to increase their support for newcomers. They also face challenges created by national policies and procedures. These include the precarious situation faced by residents with no recourse to public funds, who cannot access mainstream welfare support at times of crisis, and the extended time it takes for processing asylum applications, thus keeping asylum seekers in limbo and making it difficult to access paid work. Nevertheless, a number of initiatives have been successful in enhancing both the accessibility of support and the ways in which outreach can be enhanced. The continuation and strengthening of these initiatives could further improve the inclusion of newcomers.

In this section, we draw on project findings to identify potential directions for policy or practice among local authorities and civil society actors seeking to support migrant arrival at the local level.

Improving the Visibility of Local Services ('Social Front Doors')

Increased visibility of organisations and services can help in facilitating access to resources and information, especially for newcomers with few social networks and limited digital literacy. The GLA refers to 'the social front door' as the welcoming outward appearance of organizations and services, with clear signage of what a place offers, for example language classes or advice services, and signage in different languages. A number of research participants who lacked social connections with people already familiar with local services, said that they walked around the area when looking for resources such as English classes. Making resources visible in public space is thus crucial in facilitating access.

Mainstreaming of Approach to Welcoming Newcomer Families in Schools

The work of Kensington Primary School is a great example of how schools can become welcoming spaces and hubs for newly arrived families. Widening this by developing a borough-wide approach to how schools work with newly arrived families would enable more families to benefit. By building capacity among school staff around the rights and entitlements that people with different migration statuses possess, newly arrived families can be signposted and supported in a more efficient way. Additionally, Kensington Primary's multilingual approach is an important element that helps students and parents feel welcome and appreciated even if they possess limited proficiency in English.

Strengthen Support for Handholding

Despite a rich landscape of civil society organisations in Newham, newcomers often need extra support to access services and help more generally, and it is often individuals who make a big difference. Stakeholders across the research sites told us that sometimes the only way of supporting people was, for example, to physically take them to language classes, or to directly help them filling in online forms or making phone calls. They emphasised that signposting individuals to support services is sometimes insufficient, and that, in particular, newcomers with limited English knowledge and limited digital literacy needed extra support, also described as 'handholding'. Hence, being accompanied by someone who knows how to navigate the system, fill in forms, access interpreters, or speak to receptionists can make a huge difference. In addition to acquaintances and friends, individuals working in state institutions such as libraries or schools, individuals working in civil society organisations and those working in religious sites play an important role, and some go beyond their

remit to help people. Such handholding activities could be recognised and strengthened through formal incorporation into the work remit of people working in state institutions and civil society organisations.

Increased Outreach Work

‘Handholding’ can be carried out by friends, family, or serendipitous acquaintances, but our research has also shown the importance of publicly funded outreach workers. Detached and outreach roles are those that bring services to the places where people are. Examples of these are the Welcome Newham ‘Family Navigators’ who run advice sessions in public libraries and asylum accommodations, as well as the council’s ‘Community Neighbourhood Link Workers’ that are attached to the borough’s public libraries, but also reach out to people on the high street or in other community spaces. These roles were created to widen the reach of specific services to all groups and individuals boroughwide. Charities combating homelessness are particularly active in detached and outreach work since they often work with populations that are disengaged from formalised support structures. Since housing is one of the main challenges newcomers face, many newly arrived migrants undergo periods where they are at-risk of homelessness and some end up sleeping rough.

BOX 6: Reaching out

When we met Marina in 2022, she told us that she and her husband arrived in London three years ago from Romania. Marina’s husband had acquaintances who had already been in London for a while. The couple joined these acquaintances who were sleeping rough as a group around Stratford Shopping Centre, sharing food and money. Marina mentioned that they tried to access welfare benefits but were told they weren’t eligible.

After four months, a pastor from a local church spoke to them while doing outreach around the shopping centre. He told Marina and her husband about services that they did have access to despite not having settled status. He introduced them to a day centre for homeless people run by the Salvation Army, from where they were referred to Crisis, who then organised a more permanent accommodation for them in a hostel.

With the help of support workers at the hostel they were referred to English classes at the Renewal Programme, where they received support to make a late application for EU settled status.

BOX 6 demonstrates the impact a single encounter can have to significantly change a newcomer’s situation. Marina and her husband assumed that no help was available to them from formalised organisations, and for their first period in London, they solely relied on the solidarity and support from their peer network. The encounter with the pastor initiated a cascade of signposting and referral mechanisms which ended up putting the couple in an improved situation.

Catalysing Newcomers as Assets in the Social Infrastructure Ecosystem

When planning for social integration and in working to optimise support to newcomers in local areas, Local Authorities should not overlook the role newcomers often play in capacitating and shaping arrival support systems. Providing volunteering opportunities or supporting social connections between recent arrivals could be seen as a potentially fruitful catalyst for informal signposting and handholding support. Creating spaces of encounter shaped by people with arrival experience and expertise is a useful way to facilitate connections being made and enhance the catalysing effects this can have. Involving newcomers in volunteering and support can also help with the mental health effects of the long waiting times that we have highlighted, especially in light of the fact that some newcomers are not allowed to be employed.

Conclusion

Our research showed that newcomers face considerable challenges in finding the right information and resources when they first arrive. This is especially the case for those with an insecure legal status, limited English language skills, few social connections and limited digital literacy. In all our sites, a combination of state, civil society, religious, commercial and social infrastructures helped newcomers access resources such as housing, work and education. However, both the local authority and civil society organisations lack the funding to create consistent and continuous support for those in need.

Because of a large backlog in asylum applications, newcomers are experiencing prolonged legal limbo without recourse to mainstream welfare support.³² Amongst those receiving refugee status, homelessness has risen due to an ongoing housing crisis and the limited time available to refugees to find housing upon receipt of refugee status.³³ For those dealing with these issues around migration status together with language and digital barriers, arrival infrastructures are likely to become ever more important, and potentially over more prolonged periods.

Considering these difficult circumstances, improving the visibility of resources and information in public space via the design of social front doors can help increase accessibility. Furthermore, involving newcomers themselves in providing support via volunteering, even if they have only recently arrived, can not only enhance their own lives and build their skills, but also unlock the potential of passing on their arrival expertise to more recent newcomers. Existing initiatives that increase outreach, such as Newham Council's family navigator programme, are promising steps towards improving newcomers' lives. By applying to become a Borough of Sanctuary, the borough has shown its commitment to being a welcoming place that supports newcomers. However, structural deficits can only be compensated to a limited extent with such initiatives and programmes, particularly under fiscal constraints. An important support to Local Authorities in arrival areas such as Newham would be recognition at national policy level of the dynamics, evolving needs and opportunities specific to areas of concentrated arrival, as well as attention to questions of how local responses could be sustainably supported and financed. Whilst fiscal conditions are constrained at present, we hope that the recently elected government will consider how the funding model for local authorities could be enhanced to provide more consistent support for social infrastructure and local support systems. This could in turn help ensure the long-term economic and social inclusion of newcomers.

³² The Migration Observatory (2024): [The UK's asylum backlog](#).

³³ Refugee Council (2024): [Keys to the city. Ending refugee homelessness in London](#).



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