Background

In early 2017, the Home Affairs Select Committee set itself the objective of building greater consensus behind immigration policy. Such a consensus must necessarily include migrants and their communities, and address issues of particular concern to them such as enforcement. Experiences of enforcement can affect levels of trust in immigration systems for individuals and their communities. Building consensus between Government, host communities and migrant communities necessarily involves asking migrants their views on immigration policy.

To this end, Coventry Refugee and Migrant Centre and Detention Action arranged a panel discussion session in Coventry in September 2017 with 11 individuals. Panel members were asked to provide their opinions and experiences in response to a range of topics, including general views on immigration, integration and Government policy.

Individuals came from a range of countries and ethnicities. The group consisted of a variety of different genders and age groups, and varied from new arrivals to those who been in the UK for up to two decades. Panel members included people with refugee status and others without status. It was also comprised of individuals who had come to the UK via the Government’s ‘Syrian Vulnerable Person Resettlement Programme (SVPRS).’

Context

Coventry is the ninth largest city in England and twelfth largest in the United Kingdom. It is the second largest city in the West Midlands region after Birmingham, with a population of 345,385 in 2015.\footnote{2015 mid-year estimates from the Office for National Statistics, UK Population Estimates, \url{https://www.ons.gov.uk/releases/populationestimatesforukenglandandwalesscotlandandnorthernirelandmid2015}}

The city has historic links to migration, dating back to the 17th century when Huguenots fled from France and set up a ribbon weaving industry. At the outset of World War Two, it also provided sanctuary to a number of the 9,354 children under who were evacuated to Britain on the Kindertransport. The destruction of the Cathedral and most of the city during the infamous ‘Operation Moonlight Sonata’ in November 1940, led to the designation of Coventry as a city of peace and reconciliation, a tradition that has continued into the 21st century. Since 1999 it has been a dispersal city for asylum seekers, and more recently became a City of Sanctuary.

Latest figures show that Coventry continues to welcome the highest number of Syrian refugees in the UK outside of London. From September 2015 to March 2017, it had welcomed 209 out of 673 (31%) resettled Syrians across the West Midlands.\footnote{Individuals resettled under the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme between Sep 2015 and March 2017, West Midlands Migration Partnership, document held on file.}
this, it currently hosts 498 asylum seekers and has the highest the total number of National Insurance Number (NINO) registrations from EU citizens (6,036), which made up 88% of total NINO registrations from non-UK nationals from March 2016 to March 2017.3

The 2011 census stated that Coventry has an ethnic minority population which represented 33.4% of the population.4 Between June 2015 and June 2016, its population was growing at the tenth fastest rate out of all Council areas in the United Kingdom, and the fourth fastest rate outside of London. While the population growth can be attributed to several factors, most recent data suggests the main reason for the rise (6,300 out of 7,500 or 84.0%) was net international immigration.5 Evidence suggests that the population is also becoming younger. In 2007, the average age was 36 and in 2016, was 33 years old.

Currently there is considerable physical division between different ethnic groups in Coventry. The west of the city is home to far fewer migrants than the east. No ward in the west includes more than 20% of migrants, whereas all wards in the east include more than 20%, with some much higher such as Foleshill at 72.8%, St Michael’s at 55.5% and Upper Stoke at 36%.6

In 2016, there was a rise in racially or religiously-motivated hate crimes following the EU referendum, with a reported 21.9% more hate incidents in the city. 311 recorded incidents were recorded from April to September 2016, versus 292 recorded incidents from April to September 2015.7

According to the Department for Communities and local Government, social housing in Coventry in 2016 had a waiting list of 14,030 households waiting for accommodation, far more than other similarly populated areas. For example, Northumberland had 8,367 and Shropshire had 6,436.

With growth of 15 per cent (nearly 8,000) over the last 12 months, the West Midlands has also seen the biggest rise in GP registrations, with Coventry falling within the highest bracket of 500 - 1,900 of new migrant GP registrations. Finally, there were also 1,794 more children in Coventry in 2016 than in 2014 from minority backgrounds.

Key findings

Views on immigration

Panel members largely agreed that they had had a positive experience of living in Coventry since moving to the city. Broad sections of the group advised that this was due to the plentiful provision of services and charities to support migrants’ varying needs. Those who had previously lived elsewhere in the UK also commented that they felt access to these networks was better than in other regions.

“I lived in Birmingham for nine years and then I moved to Coventry. I’ve found everything fine in Coventry and can get involved with a lot of community things which helps me stress wise.”

“I relocated to Coventry in 2010 and found it much better than other cities I’ve lived in, in the sense that I was able to get involved with voluntary work with a women’s group within the community. It means I don’t have to focus on the length of time I’ve been waiting for approval, in the sense that I’m connected to the community.”

A vast proportion of the panel members also highlighted their appreciation towards the UK for offering them sanctuary, with particular regard to safety and freedom.

“Where I lived, girls were not allowed to go out or to go to school. So the positive point for me is that my girls are going to school. I’m very happy that they are now going to English classes and are progressing. Also we are safe here. At home, there was gunfire every night and so it was very difficult for me to look after them. Here we have enough food and all the children are learning. We are also very free. No-one stops me on the street and asks me where I am going.”

However, there was disagreement between the panellists on their overall experience of living in Coventry, particularly with regard to the accessibility of support. A clear divide became apparent between people who had come to the UK on the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (SVPRS) and those who had sought asylum from in the UK. This created tension between those who had lived in the UK for many years but still lacked status, and Syrian refugees who had recently arrived and had better access to support. It became clear that there was no single experience of migration or of the Home Office, and that panellists believed an unjust ‘two-tier’ immigration system was in place. This was a regular theme that emerged consistently throughout the focus group, echoing the findings of an All Party Parliamentary Group on Refugees (APPG) report released in April 2017.

“I’ve never really had any support. There is no room for people like me to be supported. This is the inequality we are talking about. She has been treated fairly in her case because there is a process. For people like me if you’re on the other side, it’s worse than a physical wall. The community is fantastic, full of lovely people, but apart from this, the support and the system isn’t really working properly.”

“Division creates tension between minority groups. The more you keep some people captive, the more separation there is and the more you create depression and patients to add pressure to the NHS. When I came I was very healthy, now I’m taking a lot of medicines. I’m not allowed to work and I’m relying on benefits. What kind of logic is this?”

The issue of people who had been in the UK for many years but were still unable to work or secure status was a theme throughout the discussion. Panellists signalled their frustration at being unable to work despite wanting to, and their shame at having to claim benefits to
survive. They shared similar accounts of the mental health burden and an awareness of the financial strain placed on both the NHS and other public services. There was wide agreement that this made no sense.

A final key theme was that, while Coventry was a good place to live, a third of the focus group had experienced discrimination of varying degrees, particularly for people living in communities which wore the hijab.

“My friends have been abused in the street for wearing the hijab and on one occasion, this person tried to pull the hijab off my friend’s head while she was on her way to work.”

“When I was helping someone move into a property, a member of the public kept asking me who was coming to this property, saying that we’ve got all these people coming from abroad, but already have a housing crisis.”

“I have had several bad experiences since moving into my home. People tip rubbish into our garden, they have tried to break in once and also tried to burn my house down twice. We don’t know exactly who it is, but we are still trying hard.”

Housing and employment were the two areas where panellists advised they had received the most discrimination.

Integration

The group began by discussing what they understood integration to mean. Panel members reached a consensus on integration as a two-way process through which individuals would become part of their host community. They identified making positive contributions and working hard as vital components of this process.

“To play a positive role in building this country, this society and the people we live with. To do meaningful and positive things and to prove yourself as part of the fabric of the city and community here.”

“To integrate is learning the language and learning about other cultures. When you try your best and work hard, then you can congeal.”

The vast majority of panellists highlighted the ability to speak English as the main barrier to integration, with this particularly prevalent amongst new arrivals. Individuals emphasised that it hindered their ability to secure employment and interact with their new community. Again there were differences in opinion and experience depending on what route they had taken to the UK, with those resettled on the SVPRS portraying a more positive message compared to other new arrivals.

“English is like the master key for integration.”

“I was a teacher back home and I have been many places for jobs, not just as a teacher, but many other simple things too. Because my English is not that good, I am unable to get a job. I really want to work, because in my culture people feel ashamed to just get money and not work. My kids ask me how I get this money and it hurts me to tell them I don’t work for it.”
“Without English, how do you communicate with your neighbour? How can you integrate into society?

“Integration means how to communicate and to make your life easy. I’m a Syrian refugee and when I arrived in the UK at the airport, the faces that met me and also here in Coventry makes everything easier for me. It’s now my second home.”

However, there was some disagreement about English being the only barrier to securing employment, with other restrictions also emphasised. All of the group agreed that regardless of the restriction, it was current government policy which created these constraints.

“It depends on the work you want to do. I’ve seen a lot of Eastern European people who don’t speak English and they are working minimum wage, simple jobs. However, if you say that the system doesn’t allow you to reach your goals, then that’s different. If you can’t open a bank account or your qualifications are not recognised, that makes it difficult too. Even if you can’t speak English, you can usually find some sort of job. It’s just not good.”

The final common theme which emerged when speaking about integration centred on discrimination and government dispersal policy, and the negative effects emanating from this. Panel members said that they understood why members of host communities channelled this hostility towards them.

“Government policy just sends asylum seekers and refugees to specific areas that are already poor. I think this is completely wrong, because then further problems are created for the Government to deal with socially and financially. If people begin to integrate, speak the language and know their way around, they will begin to be productive for the society. They’ll be able to work and pay taxes.”

“I went to an interview and was told straightaway that this job wasn’t suitable for me because I wore a hijab. We’ve had a lot of bad experiences, but still keep trying to improve ourselves.”

Representation

Panel member discussions on representation focused on two key themes: the media and input into Government policy.

The vast majority of the panel did not consume any British media, with those that did disengaged at best or deciding to ignore due to what they perceived as an overwhelmingly negative discourse. Even those that didn’t engage with British media were aware of negative stories about migrants and believed this hindered integration.

“I think the media give an unfair representation of migrants. They do this because they’re an easy target and so when something is going wrong, they just blame the easy target.”

“I think the press play a big part in this society and the community. They have separated the British people from us with what they say. I stopped watching Sky News and BBC because they are very divisive with what they say and the things that they put forward are breaking down our society.”
“I think there is a lot of negativity about migrants. Of course there are bad people, but the vast majority aren’t and the stories portray lies.”

Following this, panel members also discussed coverage following key events such as terrorist attacks or Brexit, and a frustration about how these events would be described in the media. The group felt undue focus was given to attackers’ nationalities – even when factually incorrect – and that no other crimes would be reported in this way. Impacts of this were felt by several members of the group in the aftermath of such attacks.

“When Lee Rigby was killed, the attackers were described as Nigerian. Their parents were Nigerian, but they were born here and lived here and had never been to Nigeria, but the media focused on this. If anyone does any good that is in the same position, no-one bothers to say anything. However, as soon as someone commits a crime, they speak about it straight away. I think it is appalling and very divisive.”

“This language separates people. It makes people think they are not accepted and then we feel like we are not welcome in this country.”

The second key topic the panel discussed with regard to representation was an observed lack of input into the media or Government policy. The majority of the group expressed the opinion that it was difficult to feel like migrants’ opinions were listened to and that without the right to vote, it was hard to feed into the political process. They suggested that events like the National Conversation would begin to improve this.

“Governments distance themselves from the community. The only time people see them is at election. I think more events like this should happen and that this would help to improve policy and representation. The Government needs to work more closely with community and minority groups.”

**Fair immigration policy**

This element of the panel discussion was split into two sections. The first asked individuals to discuss their own personal experiences within the UK immigration system, and the latter asked panel members to provide their opinions on three stories which were given to them.

It became apparent immediately that there was a wide range of experiences and opinions about the Home Office and UK immigration system. Those who had come via the SVPRS had positive experiences – although there were still issues – whilst amongst people who had claimed asylum in the UK there was a high degree of frustration and negativity. Discussions focused on the lack of a clear and fair asylum process in the UK, continuing the theme of a ‘two-tier’ system.

“What I’ve experienced in my life is worse than war, but because of where I come from, I can’t get status. The Home Office policy is appalling.”

“If I went to the Home Office and said I’m from Syria, they know there is a war there; they have a process and so would make provision for me. I’m not, but what I’ve suffered is terrible psychologically, mentally and physically. There are people dying in this country, people like me, that don’t need benefits and that just want to work. We just need that little bit of support from the Home Office. I feel dead inside and like a caged animal.”
“The inequality I was talking about is even apparent in this room. This girl who has recently arrived has already got status, because there is a fair process in place. But there are some people they don’t do that for, even if they’ve got similar or worse experiences, just because the country isn’t the right one for the Government.”

Stemming from this was a perception that recent changes to the asylum system meant that there was a lack of clarity on how decisions were made for those that had claimed asylum in the UK. One panel member discussed how the rest of their family had status, but they did not. Elsewhere, they were several examples from individuals who felt they could not properly integrate or plan for a future, due to the uncertainty about their status.

“I’m destitute, but I’m able to work. This system forces you to become what you don’t want to be. I come here to work and all my siblings have status, but I’m the only one without it. What am I supposed to do?”

“My wife, she has a British passport. My son, he too has a British passport, but I was refused. I applied and it took about six years for them to make a decision. I had to go to the High Court and later I was finally granted. The new rule says I have to reapply in ten years, so I still don’t know what will happen in the future.”

“When I first came I received a letter saying we can’t offer you refugee status, but that you can stay here for four years and then we will decide. If you don’t know what will happen in the future, then you cannot plan your life. Eventually I was given status which I am thankful for, but for a long time my life was in limbo.”

Panellists agreed that there did need to be an immigration system in place to control migration, but that the current system was not working and required urgent changes. Experiences panel members had with the Home Office largely led to a perception of distrust towards the Government and Home Office.

The second element involved discussion around three areas of the UK immigration system, with examples and stories used to provide additional information. The first section focused on detention, particularly the financial implications and the fact the UK had no time limit for those that were detained. The second concentrated on deportation and the story of an Afghan national who was deported to Kabul before being returned home. The final element focused on the policy of a ‘hostile environment’ for undocumented migrants in the UK.

With regard to detention and deportation, the majority of the panellists felt that this was used as a political propaganda tool for the Government to look tough on immigration, with the negative financial and humanitarian consequences of these systems vastly outweighing any benefits. Individuals stated that they felt that these systems were illogical and led to a lack of faith in any decision-making process. Continuing a theme from earlier, panellists advised immigration needed to be controlled, but that current systems did not work.

“Detention criminalises people. If your first experience of being in the UK is being locked up, it creates untold damage which cannot be undone.”

“I pay taxes and my tax is unwisely spent on detention centres and deportations which are then overturned. There is no accountability and then you also create trauma by imprisoning people. This creates an extra burden then on the NHS. It makes no sense.”
"I’ve spoken to about ten lawyers since I’ve been in this country. They tell me, don’t go to the Home Office, you’re not from Afghanistan. You are from Nigeria and there is no war in your country. If you go there, they will detain you, lock you up and send you back to your country. I understand that the country wants to control migration, but the money spent on detention could be better spent on improving the process for legitimate people. Migrants are given no voice, while people are getting ill or dying in these centres, which then takes more money from the NHS. The policy is not working."

Discussions about a ‘hostile environment’ centred on the perception that migrants abuse the benefit system, and linking to this, the inability to secure employment or work. There was recognition that individuals do abuse the benefit system, but that they are in the minority. The implications of government policy to prevent these minority cases were felt to affect everyone. Similarly, there was a consistent theme of shame or embarrassment for those claiming benefits, but that employment was either unavailable or did not improve the individual’s financial situation. Particular attention was given to the changes in benefits once an individual secured work, and how this would then make people unable to afford accommodation.

"People who come to this country are not looking for benefits. Perhaps they need some small support initially, because we come with nothing, but we want to be independent and not to rely on benefits."

"I’ve lived here for ten years. I’m resilient, but I’ve not been able to reach my goals and start work. I’m not allowed to have a bank account or work, so how am I supposed to survive? I understand there are people who abuse the system, but there should be a system to assess what people need. To penalise all is very poor."

"Like many others here, I am ashamed to claim benefits. I was a fashion designer at home, and I really need a job, but can’t find anything that is suitable. I volunteer, but it isn’t enough. I can’t sleep well, I like awake thinking what I can do and I’m depressed. Even the jobs I can find won’t pay enough. I came to this country on my own and so won’t be able to earn enough to let me have somewhere to live."

"If you end up with a job, they then take support away and so you end up in the same position or worse position than you were before."

"At the moment, I get benefit to rent the house I stay in with my family. I really want to get a job, but any job I can get, it would change my benefit and I then I wouldn’t be able to afford a house to house my children."

**Recommendations**

The final part of the discussion asked panellists to provide recommendations on changes and improvements to immigration policy and systems. Most of the recommendations of the panel members built on themes that had emerged throughout the focus group conversation. The key recommendations of the panel members were:

- End the ‘two-tier’ system for immigration. Individuals who had come to the UK via the SVPRS overwhelmingly had a more positive experience of moving to the UK.
This showed that an immigration system could work, whereas current policy was creating division and inequality between different minority groups.

- The right to work should be granted, particularly to people who were waiting on a decision for an extremely long time. Current policy creates mental trauma and brings negative financial implications, both for the NHS and benefit system. It is important to ensure that working brings an improvement in financial circumstances, compared to being on benefits.

- Alternatives to detention should be considered, due to the financial and human impact and limited benefits of detention. Policy should be reconsidered in particular for people who are extremely vulnerable.

- There should be further funding for and provision of English language classes, which were highlighted as the cornerstone to integration.

- The provision of accommodation should be improved. The Government should consider changing the dispersal policy which currently sends newly arrived migrants to some of the most impoverished areas in Britain.

- The Home Office should revisit country guidance, as there was a perception that current guidance is inadequate with regard to situations in certain countries and thus affects the legitimacy of a claim.

**Conclusion**

In summary, panellists were positive about living in Coventry and understood that systems needed to be in place to control migration. However, the group also overwhelmingly felt that the current system was broken and needed to be urgently fixed.

The ‘two-tier’ system was seen as a key example of this, highlighting how a well-funded and planned process, the SVPRS, led to largely positive outcomes for individuals. While not perfect, opinions from these panellists were generally positive and criticisms about their experiences were similar to those of members of host communities, such as housing.

There was a clear emphasis on how current policy was impacting negatively on integration, health and employment prospects, with the adverse financial and humanitarian consequences of this clearly evident.

It was interesting that a number of the concerns individuals had about immigration and integration were linked to austerity, again largely linked to housing and access to other support services.

Finally, despite largely positive overall experiences, there was clear evidence that migrants experienced discrimination, particularly women who wore the hijab.

**About**

Coventry Refugee & Migrant Centre was formed in the back of a laundrette in Hillfields in 2000, aiming to support refugees, migrants and those seeking asylum in Coventry. From humble beginnings, we have grown exponentially during the past two decades and now support over 3,500 people a year, including unaccompanied children, destitute families and
the homeless. Our goal remains the same, and thanks to the kindness and dedication of over 80 volunteers and 30 members of staff, we welcome all refugees and migrants to help them rebuild their lives and achieve their potential.

Detention Action is a national charity established in 1993. We defend the rights and improve the welfare of people in detention by combining support for individuals with campaigning for policy change. We work in Harmondsworth and Colnbrook Immigration Removal Centres (IRCs), near Heathrow Airport in London, and the Verne IRC in Portland, Dorset. We also help people held under immigration powers in London prisons.

09 November 2017
## Appendix: Demographics of citizens’ panel

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Panel member</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Have you ever been detained?</th>
<th>Do you have leave to remain in the UK?</th>
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